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Next Subway Stop, the Wilderness

By JOSEPH BERGER

Who needs Yellowstone and Yosemite?

New York City boasts its own constellation of national parks - all right, natural parks - 48 preserves of emerald tidal marsh, bouldered shoreline, ancient woodlands, gurgling creeks and tranquil kettle ponds where ospreys dive from the sky to snatch unwary fish and shrews stow away for the day under rotting tree trunks.

A few of the sanctuaries are almost as pristine as they were when European explorers first gazed upon them in wonder, and, unlike those explorers, today's visitors can get there by subway.

Four years ago, the 48 preserves were designated "Forever Wild" by the Department of Parks and Recreation to keep them from being turned into ball fields, golf courses, playgrounds and marinas. But officials have realized that New Yorkers who have flown to Yosemite and Yellowstone scarcely know about the wilds of Pelham Bay Park or Marine Park and even a few undomesticated spots in Central Park. And they may not care enough to keep them wild.

So the department has decided to cultivate a constituency that will fight to safeguard its natural treasures.

"Promotion is the greatest protection," said Mike Feller, the department's chief naturalist. "If people know about and come out and use these areas, they will protect them."

On Oct. 16, the department will start a series of hikes and canoe trips through a few of the Forever Wild preserves. (Call 311 or consult www.nyc.gov/foreverwild.) Meanwhile, it has been running advertisements on buses and bus shelters inviting visitors to the preserves. "Wish You Were Here," one advertisement exults over a photograph of an idyllic marsh that looks like a Louisiana bayou, adding at the bottom: "WAIT! You ARE here!"

Getting the preserves known is a matter of survival, parks officials and advocates say. Many New Yorkers prefer ball fields and golf courses instead of terrain fit only for strolling and contemplation, said Maura Lout, research director for New Yorkers for Parks, an advocacy group. Such a conflict surfaced several years ago in southern Staten Island when borough officials wanted to create ball fields out of a chunk of Bloomingdale Park for residents of new homes sprouting nearby, recalled Henry Stern, a former parks commissioner. With the borough so critical to the mayoral victories of both Rudolph W. Giuliani and Michael R. Bloomberg, the Parks Department lost the preservationist argument and ball fields were built.

The 48 natural areas, which total 8,200 acres, almost a third of the city's 29,000 acres of parks, are protected by state law only as parkland, which can leave wiggle room for ball fields and playgrounds.

But city officials do not want to try to pass a more stringent law, fearing a gantlet of political scrapes and restrictions on their freedom in unforeseen circumstances.

"It has no legal force - it's a policy - and I suppose a future administration could undo it," said Adrian Benepe, the parks commissioner. "But in addition to a policy, you have a constituency."

Not all the protected natural areas are in their original state. Pretty as it is, Central Park is mostly a glorious fake -fabricated a century and a half ago from shantytowns and swampland. But nature has been allowed to take over some of the artificial handiworks, and now two places, the Hallett Nature Sanctuary and the North Woods ravine and "loch," have been designated Forever Wild.

Much of Marine Park in Brooklyn, a lush expanse of tidal marsh surrounding a saltwater creek, was once landfill, the failed product of a plan to turn the coast of Brooklyn into another port. Now osprey wheel overhead looking to seize the fish that multiply in the briny creek.

At least one preserve demonstrates how wild terrain wants to stay that way, defeating the best intentions to civilize it. In Forest Park in Queens, city officials four decades ago turned a swamp in a park hollow into a baseball field, but players found the field flooded regularly.

Four years ago, officials surrendered to the inevitable and the field has returned to woodland kettle pond, with floating hearts - pads with small yellow flowers - covering much of its surface. King birds swoop low over the pond and toads trill along its edges. It would be hard to know that busy Woodhaven Boulevard is just behind a screen of birch, hickory, oak and maple.

The other day, Mr. Benepe and Mr. Feller showed the pond off, then capered through the reeds like small boys, chasing a toad.

"This is the flip side of 'If you build it, they will come,' which was said about a ball field," Mr. Benepe said. "If you take out the ball field, then toads and dragonflies will come."

But Forever Wild does not mean entirely untamed. In Alley Pond Park in Queens, framed by three highways but rich with peat bogs and black locust forests, workers with buzz saws were cutting down Norway maples, intruders inhospitable to the park's insects and animals. They were also trimming away alien vines strangling native trees.

"You can create wilderness," Mr. Feller said.

Before the Forest Park visit, Mr. Feller took a reporter and photographer on a tour of the Hunter Island preserve in Pelham Bay Park. Peering through binoculars, he spotted an osprey riding a northwest wind.

"They're hugging the shoreline and they'll make a left-hand turn over Westchester and the Bronx," he said. "They have runs of fish over the lagoon and start forming a holding pattern. I don't know of another site on the East Coast that gets that concentration of ospreys in the fall migration."

Hunter Island, a former estate connected to Orchard Beach by landfill, is now largely a forest that slopes down to a shore strewn with boulders. Mr. Feller called it the southernmost example of rocky New England shoreline.

"There are parts of Hunter Island that look pretty much as they would have when Europeans first stepped on the island," Mr. Feller said.

Hiking through a mile-long woodland trail, Mr. Feller, a Brooklyn native who has become a spellbinding encyclopedia of natural facts, pointed out white snakeroot flowers, much like those some historians blame for the death of Lincoln's mother. (She may have died drinking milk from cows that grazed in patches of snakeroot.) He found pokeweed, whose purplish berries, he said, provided the ink for the United States Constitution.

Mr. Feller found clam shells that he said were probably used by Indians and shards of a rose-petaled porcelain teacup that he guessed came from the home of the Hunter family, which conveyed its estate to the city in 1866. He pointed out a forest on the north side of the island that dates to a period before settlers cleared the land for farming.

"Here's where we get roughly 200-year-old trees," Mr. Feller said. "They're very big wide trunks, evenly spaced trees, with a nice herb layer underneath. That's what existed here when there were only native Americans."

When Mr. Feller and company reached the waters of Long Island Sound, there was scarcely a ripple on the blue-gray water and a lone seagull glided overhead. Practically underfoot were luxuriant spreads of salt marsh cordgrass and a few inches higher up salt meadow cordgrass.

Mr. Feller beamed like a parent on graduation day.

"The other reason Hunter Island is much better than the Adirondacks or the Catskills is you can't walk there and come on this," he said.

Mr. Feller recalled the first time his wife, Margot Perron, then an urban park ranger like him, took him out to Hunter Island.

"I had a preconceived notion of a chain-link fence, blacktop and swing sets," he said. "So I was skipping, skipping and jumping, because this completely exceeded any expectations I had about a New York City park."

There were almost no people on the walk, save an immigrant from Ivory Coast sunning himself on a shoreline boulder. But the spot is so lovely that over the years resourceful New Yorkers have carved out redoubts - apparent picnic spots. Mr. Feller pointed out a fortlike alcove where one enchanted improviser had planted a patch of impatiens, and a bench built by an aging World War II steamfitter. The ruins of their labor are still there, protected now within the Forever Wild designation.

"Nothing is forever," Mr. Feller said of all 48 preserves. "But these are not the areas people should be thinking about for recreation. These are the sites whose greatest contribution to the city is leaving them as they are."