
Vischer Ferry Nature & Historic

The Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve site is a 740-acre site situated in the Town of Clifton Park along the banks of the Mohawk River. There is an extensive trail system maintained by the town that features approximately four miles of hard-packed trail. The area is known for its bird conservation area as well as historical sites including remnants of Erie Canal Lock 19 and the Whipple Truss Bridge. Our assessment covered approximately 4,000 feet going east from the Ferry Drive parking area on the stone dust trail and just over 4,000 feet traveling west on the natural surface trail.

Directions: A large parking area, with enough room for about a dozen cars, is located at the river end of Ferry Drive, on the western edge of the village of Vischer Ferry. Take Exit 8 on the Northway (I-87) to Crescent Road heading west. After 3.9 miles, continue on Crescent Road as it becomes Vischer Ferry Road. After 0.4 miles, continue onto Riverview Road. Take your first left onto Ferry Drive and proceed to the parking lot.

Parking: Paved parking lot at the end of Ferry Drive.

Distance: Heading east: 3,379 feet to intersection assessed and 1,102 feet beyond traveling left at the fork. Heading west: 4,219 feet assessed from trailhead.

Trailhead: Blue posts create a vehicle barrier at the eastern trailhead. The western trailhead is in the right corner of parking lot.

Surface: Heading east: Packed stone dust for entire distance. Heading west: Although the trail surface is firm and stable soil, there is one section that may be muddy depending. This section occurred at 180 feet from the trailhead and lasted for about 20 feet. In another section at 50 feet from the trailhead, roots raise up across the trail tread. There are two sections where small rocks across the trail tread may present as an obstacle for some travelers. These occur at 350 feet and 500 feet from the trailhead.

Width: Heading east: The trail is at least five feet wide for the entire length assessed. Heading west: First 100 feet of trail heading west is only three feet wide and then opens up to over five feet for the majority of the route with the exception of a section of 40

inches of clear trail width at 1,815 feet lasting until 2,232 feet from the trailhead.

Slope: Trail heading east is under 4% for the entire distance. The trail slope heading west is under 3% for the entire distance.

Cross slope: Heading east, the cross slope is under 2% with the following exceptions; 4% for 113 feet at 1,520 feet from the trailhead, 5% for 200 feet at 2,041 feet from the trailhead and traveling left for 300 feet past the intersection which occurs at 3,379 feet from the trailhead, there is a section of 5% cross slope for 250 feet. Heading west, the majority of the trail is under 2%.

Features: A three-sided kiosk at the parking area gives much information about the hamlet of Vischer Ferry, the Vischer family, and the Vischer Ferry Bridge. Visitors can take a cellphone audio tour of the area (dial 518-649-9990). Heading west, the trail offers a bench with no arms at 2,253 feet from the trailhead.

Cautions and prohibitions: The preserve is open from dawn to dusk. Visitors may bring dogs but leashes are required. There are no motorized vehicles allowed on the trails.

Description: Before you begin your walk, take a few moments to enjoy the excellent exhibits or sit on the big blocks of fossiliferous limestone, remnants of the old Erie Canal and boat-building and repairing structures that stood here before the canal was moved into the river, about 1918.

The trail leading to the east is the Vischer Ferry Preserve Nature Extension Trail and is firm crushed stone. At the entrance of the

trail heading east, there is a 40-inch high barrier to prevent motorized vehicles from accessing the trail. There is a 36-inch gap of path in between barrier post and where the path and grass meet. The trail itself is approximately 8-to-10-feet wide and the grass on the trail edges is cut short back all the way to rows of large trees.

The first 0.5 miles of the trail have water in the Old Erie Canal clearing to your left as you are walking. This remnant of the Erie Canal is absent for the next 0.25 miles until you reach an intersection in the trail at 0.75 miles. Stay left at this intersection to stay on the flat and well-maintained trail. This section of trail is now Vischer Ferry preserve.

Continuing east on the upper trail, a Clifton Park trail marker will quickly become visible. In less than a tenth of a mile, the well-preserved Lock 19 appears. Efforts in recent years have improved the display of Lock 19 for the public, however there is a section of grass to be traversed in order to get close to the lock itself.

There were 72 double locks used on the Erie Canal and Lock 19 in Vischer Ferry is one of the best preserved locks remaining. Lock 19 was originally constructed as a double chamber lock in 1842 to replace the original single chamber lock in use. Renovations in 1885 were made that further expanded the size of Lock 19. With the expansion the size was large enough to allow two boats to pass through the lock simultaneously in opposite directions or three boats to proceed in the same direction at one time. Stone used to build the lock was quarried in Rotterdam Junction and

helped to raise and lower canal boats the 216-foot difference in elevation between sea-level at the Albany boat basin and Schenectady. In 1875 an average of 95 boats passed through Lock 19 each day the canal was open.

The space between the canal and Mohawk River is now a grassy, marshy area that contains a dredging pool. The result is very fertile soil that supports lush vegetation of nettles and impatiens as well as willows and locusts. The stone used in the lock is limestone which contains fossils. However, many years of exposure to the elements have obscured many of the surface features. The limestone is also covered in places with colonies of mosses and ferns. A bridge can be crossed and provides better access to and visibility of the lock. The bridge is made of closely spaced wood-mix boards, laid cross wise, and is 80 inches wide, 54 inches high to the railing, and

includes two inches of edging. There is a two-inch rise from the gravel slightly rising to approach the bridge.

The path continues uninterrupted for approximately one mile until it reaches the historic Whipple Bridge entrance to the preserve off Riverview Road. The area between the trail and Mohawk River contains the 700 acres of wetland, floodplain, and bird and amphibian habitat that comprise the Vischer Ferry

preserve. The site is designated as a Bird Conservation Area by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation. The New York Audubon society also recognizes the area as an Important Bird Area. There are over 200 bird species that can be viewed within the preserve. There are picnic areas



where you can stop to rest or eat and enjoy a view of the flora and fauna of the preserve as well as picturesque views of the Mohawk River.

A different trail experience awaits you if you should choose to begin your walk west from the parking lot. The Mohawk River will be to your left and the marshy water to your right is the old Erie Canal. The trail leading west from the parking lot is the Towpath Connector Trail and is slightly overgrown for a short section in the beginning. The trail is hard-packed dirt with chopped-up shale added to the surface to increase its durability.

At about 4,000 feet (0.75 mile) from the trailhead, a slightly sloping grassy area leads to the river and a view of the dam. Nearby, a power line crosses the river.

Around World War I, the new Erie Canal was built, mostly using the river. To make the Mohawk River navigable, dams had to be built to control the depth of water. Where there are dams, there must be locks to lift or lower the boats from one level to another. At the dam you see ahead of you, advantage is taken of the potential power of falling water to make electricity.

Note the shale outcrops along the trail. Here the usually flat-lying bedrock is tipped about 90 degrees from the horizontal. The mud that became compressed into shale rock, was deposited about 400 million years ago and later disturbed by forces coming from the east. The farther east you travel the more "upset" the rocks will be.

Continue just a little farther if you wish, but you are advised to turn around for a return trip when the trail goes downhill. There is always debris from the river at the lower level and then there is a steep paved uphill to the power plant parking lot at the end of Sugar Hill Road.

On the walk back to your car, note the variety of trees: cottonwood, elm, basswood, cherry, large tooth aspen, juniper. Many of them are large enough to make a seasonal canopy to provide shade at midday. Many shrubs and vines may be decorated with colorful berries. Asian honeysuckles bear red and orange berries. Our native grey-stem dogwood has white fruit on red stems. Look for smooth and staghorn sumac. You will see non-woody plants like impatiens and touch-me-not, whose ripe pods explode when you touch them and thus distribute their seeds. Hog peanut, a common vine that climbs over other vegetation, may be still offering white flowers as well as young fruits. Late summer perennials like asters, goldenrods and sunflowers add to the colorful landscape. Birding is a favorite activity along the river. Binoculars might be good to bring along.

Owner: Joint project with ownership by the New York State Canal Corporation and management by the Town of Clifton Park Recreation.

For more information: Contact the Town of Clifton Park at (518) 371-6054, www.cliftonparkopenspaces.org.

TRAILS FOR ALL IN SARATOGA COUNTY

This trail report is part of a series of documents describing outdoor spaces with accessible features in Saratoga County. It was created by ECOS: The Environmental Clearinghouse, a regional environmental organization. For more information, or to find more descriptions of trails for users of different ability levels, go to ecosny.org. ECOS also publishes a series of guides describing natural areas in Albany, Rensselaer, Saratoga and Schenectady counties.