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Perfect day on a brand-new trail
By Linda Brown-Kuhn

Most of us have heard of the Highlands, that great swath of land that goes from Connecticut, slices across New York through 1,300 square miles of New Jersey and into Pennsylvania.

But I'm betting that not nearly as many know about the Highlands Trail. Even fewer may be aware of the newly opened 15-plus miles of the trail that now snake through Hunterdon.

I had the opportunity to hike a six-mile chunk of it as part of the opening-day festivities on Oct. 25. It couldn't have been more convenient for me - the portion I hiked started in Alexandria Township's Sweet Hollow Preserve, a five-minute walk from my house.

The glorious weather banished memories of the previous night's soaking. A group of around 20 started in woodlands splendor, spotting a few remnants of an old hunting camp while watching for teal diamond blazes.

We trod on a mosaic of lemon, brown and green leaves with a dash of red foliage mixed in with plenty of acorns and other nuts.

After a while I tried to figure out our location since we were still in my neck of the woods. Abigail Wester, another hiker who also lived nearby, said, "This is my back yard that I never saw."

It's so true. We know that Hunterdon County is a beautiful place to live, but when you explore for the first time some of the pristine wild places right in our midst, that's very special.

Glenn Oleksak, a volunteer trail supervisor with the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, aptly said, "The Highlands Trail is a hidden gem in the most densely populated state."

He ought to know, having spent countless hours laying out proposed routes, getting permission to run the trail across land, and blazing the trail.

The extension of the Highlands Trail into our county has been a labor of love by a host of dedicated people. Oleksak and others have played an integral part as they worked together with the Musconetcong Mountain Conservancy. The MMC toiled diligently, totally through volunteer efforts. Suzanne Wilder, who heads the MMC, said, "The trail was built with zero cost to the taxpayers."

Wilder told me the wisps of this complex collaborative trail extension formed in the mid-to-late 1990s and gelled when the MMC was created around 2002.

The trail traverses local, county, state and private land. Agreements with a bevy of partners, combined with patience, and hard work, brought the segments together over the years. There are scattered road walks where pieces of land are not connected.

We walked on a couple of roads to our final destination at the Jugtown Mountain Preserve.

The new portion melds with the existing trail in Spruce Run Recreation Area and the Clinton Fish and Wildlife Management Area in Union Township, and cuts across several county- and township-owned parks through the Musconetcong Gorge Preserve in Holland Township.

Plans are under way to extend the trail into Pennsylvania as well as to chip away at eliminating the road-walk portions.

"The trail goes along ridge tops, abandoned railroad beds, through farmland, lowlands and highlands," said Oleksak. "There's something for everybody."

Maps are at highlands-trail.org.