

Organizing a Natural History Gathering: inspiration from the Northeast Warblers and Wildflowers Weekend

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The first annual Northeast Natural History Gathering was held in Craftsbury, Vermont, May 17-19, 2013. The gathering was the second such event organized in relationship with the Natural History Network. Our planning was guided by the philosophy that natural history at its best is an interdisciplinary, egalitarian practice that connects us with others and with the stories in our neighborhood. Forty-five people attended the gathering at a local summer camp, which provided food and lodging for overnight attendees. Participants chose from among eight three-hour field walks led by local and regional naturalists. At the end of the gathering, attendees said they felt “invigorated,” “renewed,” and “nourished.” We wrote this article to encourage others to organize gatherings in their own regions and to guide them through the process.

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The first annual Northeast Natural History Gathering: Warblers and Wildflowers Weekend was held at Hosmer Point Camp in Craftsbury, Vermont, May 17-19, 2013. The gathering was organized in partnership with the Natural History Network and Sterling College, a four-year undergraduate college emphasizing natural history education and environmental stewardship (Gilligan 2009). It was the second of its kind organized under the umbrella of the Natural History Network, the first being the High Sierra Natural History Celebration.

The Northeast Natural History Gathering was a resounding success. There were 45 attendees, including 9 field walk leaders. We heard participants use words like “invigorated,” “renewed,” and “nourished.” We, as the organizers of the gathering, felt the same way.

Because we feel so strongly about the value of local gatherings focused on a shared love of experiencing the natural world, we provide this description of how we went about organizing the event. Our hope is that others will see the potential for organizing similar gatherings in their own regions and the benefits that come from helping to foster a community of nature enthusiasts.

We began organizing in the fall of 2012, spending about an hour a week each, on average. Thanks to our

preparation, we were able to enjoy the event as much as the participants.

Above all, we wanted the gathering to be rejuvenating. Our planning was guided by the philosophy that natural history at its best is an interdisciplinary, egalitarian practice that connects us with others and with the stories in our neighborhood. We crafted the gathering so that all members were valued equally, regardless of their knowledge, experience, or approach to natural history. Put simply, we made decisions based on what would be the most fun and the most in keeping with the spirit of natural history as we see it.

Planning

Planning began in October 2012, when we agreed to organize a natural history gathering. We met for about an hour at a cafe in November to discuss what shape we thought the event should take and to split tasks. DSG took care of anything based in Craftsbury, such as organizing a venue and working with our co-sponsor, Sterling College. ADC opened a bank account and confirmed receipt of registration fees. Each of us solicited four field walk leaders and a fifth contacted us independently to volunteer for an evening moth walk.

Partnership with Hosmer Point Camp (<http://hosmerpoint.com/>) was a pleasure. The camp operates as an extension of the Craftsbury Outdoor Center, and central to the mission of the camp is providing a setting for meaningful connection with community and with the natural world of northern Vermont. They were enthusiastic about having us there and worked with us financially to keep costs down for participants. It worked particularly well for us to be there before the start of the summer camp season. Overall, Hosmer Point was a great fit for the gathering, and participants appreciated the nature of the setting.

Hosmer Point Camp provided five meals (dinner Friday through breakfast Sunday), a dining and gathering space, and cabins for overnight guests. They also gave us access to canoes, which allowed interested participants to explore Hosmer Pond. We had access to miles of trails running through northern hardwood forest.

Partnership with Sterling College was straightforward. Sterling provided the insurance umbrella for the event, a deposit towards the balance of renting the Hosmer Point Camp facility, and two 15-passenger vans for field trips. We set up a Sterling College table in the main gathering area, where viewbooks, program information, and packets of Sterling-grown sunflower seeds were made available.

Handling registration was relatively simple. In February, we emailed an announcement, schedule, and registration form to everyone in our own network who we thought might be interested. The event was announced on the Natural History Network and Sterling College websites, as well as by the Natural History Network in a mailing to all of its members, in a press release by Sterling College, through several local naturalist groups, and on the calendar of a regional online newspaper. ADC received registrations in the mail, emailed registration confirmations, and deposited checks weekly. Both organizers fielded email inquiries.

Hosmer Point Camp charged us a \$400 flat fee for the use of the facility for the weekend. We charged \$125 for all five meals and a bed in a cabin. We charged \$50 for commuters, which covered the cost of three meals. In all, we earned about \$2500 from the event, most of which was paid to Hosmer Point Camp. The rest, about 10 percent, went to the Natural History Network. We, the organizers, attended the event for free but were not compensated for our work in any other way. Field walk leaders were not compensated or given any discounts.

The Event

We arrived at Hosmer Point Camp midday on Friday to set up. We had tables showcasing books by participants; field guides to loan out; and Sterling College, Natural History Network, and Hosmer Point Camp paraphernalia. We set up a table with registration forms for people who had not registered in advance, maps of the camp, and field walk sign-up sheets.

The gathering began at 4 pm on Friday afternoon. Overnight participants arrived, signed in, received nametags, signed up for field walks, were shown to their cabins, and had some free time to explore and socialize. At 6 pm we had dinner, served by the camp cook, and at 7 pm the commuter participants arrived. At 7:30 pm we made a few announcements and John Anderson, professor of ecology at College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine, gave a talk on the history of natural history. After that folks dispersed for bed.

On Saturday morning, we ate breakfast from 6:15 to 7 am. At 7:30 am, we gathered in the main hall of the camp, made announcements, and dispersed for field walks. Sterling College provided two vans for field trips, although it transpired that we only used one. Through the morning there were two different birding field walks, a field sketching workshop, and a land-use history walk, each led by a person with expertise in the subject as well as a passion for guiding others. The morning field walks ended at 11 am, giving participants free time to explore and socialize before lunch at noon.

Afternoon field walks began at 1 pm and consisted of two wildflower walks, a reading-the-landscape walk, and another field sketching workshop. These walks ended at 4 pm and were followed by more free time until dinner at 6 pm. Steve Trombulak, professor of biology and environmental studies at Middlebury College, gave a presentation on the renaissance of natural history at 7 pm. This was followed by an engaging and earnest discussion on how to cultivate the practice of natural history in ourselves and others in a world full of wounds. We dispersed around 8:30 pm to a fire, live music, and fire-juggling. A moth expert led a moth field walk around 9 pm.

On Sunday morning we had breakfast at 8 am and a closing circle at 10 am. The closing circle, led by DSG, allowed participants to share highlights, appreciations, inspiration, and feedback on the event. After this, participants left and we cleaned up and settled the bill with Hosmer Point Camp.

Wrap-up tasks after the event were minor. We refunded fees to those who couldn't make it (we were fortunate in being able to refund the full fee) and wrote an email thanking participants and encouraging them to continue cultivating the practice of natural history.

Lessons Learned

Overall, the event was a huge success. We attribute this to the relaxed atmosphere, plentiful field time, and logistical support provided by Hosmer Point Camp. Free time was plentiful during the event; we would not change that. It contributed to a laid-back atmosphere that heightened the feeling of rejuvenation.

A goal of the event was to practice natural history and thereby experience the sense of nourishment that practice engenders. This commitment to being outside, immersed in natural history, was critical to our success. This is in contrast to many ecology and natural history events that focus on accumulating and sharing knowledge. Too many ecology and natural history conferences involve spending the day inside watching slideshows of natural wonders we would rather experience in person, outside.

Hosmer Point Camp's logistical support was critical to our success. They suggested registration fees, which were adequate to cover costs; provided food and lodging so that we did not have to coordinate those at all; and gave us access to their splendid natural environs, which was the focus of the event in the first place.

We received a number of requests for discounts, all of which we declined with the explanation that we were already offering the lowest fee we could. It would have been nice to offer a discount to field walk leaders—however, not doing so allowed us to choose leaders who were eager to lead for the fun of it. It was a challenge to communicate that the gathering was a cooperative investment, not a money-making scheme, and for that reason we could offer no discounts.

There were a couple eventualities for which we did not plan. We did not plan for including children in the event and so could not offer a lower fee. In the future, we hope to offer a less expensive rate. We made no plans for inclement weather and were fortunate to have sunny days with cool breezes.

We had many fewer overnighters (9) and many more commuters than we expected (36). As a result, many participants attended only for one day. We attribute this pattern to the large difference in price between the two

options and the lack of a less expensive camping option. Next year, we plan on offering four options for attending: a low commuter rate for those who live in the area, two moderately priced camping options (partial and full meals) for those who are comfortable sleeping in a tent, and a more expensive cabin option for those who would rather sleep in a bed and have electricity.

In the months following the gathering, many attendees have approached the organizers and reiterated how much they enjoyed it. One attendee called it a "religious experience." Another wrote that "I loved the gathering as a chance to be with other people who are passionate about nature.... I didn't have to explain myself once. We were all in this together."

As an organizer, I (ADC) expected to spend the event solving logistical problems and answering questions. I expected to come away from the gathering feeling a bit frazzled. Instead, at the end of the weekend I felt that I had just emerged from a Caribbean vacation: utterly relaxed and content. Few logistical problems arose, and though I did answer many questions during the event, they were easy enough to address. Not only did I feel more relaxed than I had felt all year, but my conversations with friends and acquaintances during the event led me to a positive change in my relationship with natural history. I now feel more comfortable in my own naturalist skin.

On Sunday morning after most everyone had left, we headed down to the waterfront to put away the canoes. We flipped over a boat, ready to carry it to its berth. At the bottom lay a dragonfly, soft and weak, emerging from its nymphal exoskeleton. We gathered round, quietly witnessing a rebirth.

Acknowledgements

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Literature Cited

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