

NEBC MEETING NEWS

February 2012. Dr. Patricia Swain, Natural Community Ecologist with the Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP), delivered a lecture titled “Unusual Natural Communities and Rare Plants of the Housatonic River Watershed.” The NHESP is Massachusetts’ state agency responsible for identifying, monitoring, and regulating rare species (elements); natural communities are not regulated, but occurrences of rare plants and animals within them are. If an occurrence has not been updated in 25 years or more, it becomes “historical” and ineligible for regulation. The current study focused on updating soon-to-expire records for many rare plants that had not been surveyed for at least a quarter century. Conducted in 2008 and 2009, the surveys targeted occurrences based on known localities, herbarium records, scientific literature, and predictive models for where they should occur in suitable habitats.

In 2007, NHESP received a grant to conduct surveys along the Housatonic River watershed, funded by mitigation funds paid by General Electric (GE) following PCB pollution of the river. The project was funded through the Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration (NRDAR) Programs of the MA Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and administered by the Housatonic River Trustee Council. Most pollution had occurred in the northern sector of the watershed where the GE plant was located, south to Woods Pond. Surveys focused on areas most impacted by the pollution, as well as tributaries, floodplains, and mitigation areas. Botanists Marybeth Hanley and William Moorhead, and ecologist Michael Batcher, were contracted to conduct extensive fieldwork, building upon prior research and field records by Paul Somers, Arthur Haines, Melissa Cullina, Jennifer Garrett, Bruce Sorrie, Pam Weatherbee, and many other botanists. Vertebrates, invertebrates, fish, and vernal pools were also surveyed. Altogether, about 50 people participated, involving almost 2500 site visits and 9000 person-hours during the two years of the project; this talk focused on the plant species and natural communities found.

The Housatonic Watershed lies in the marble valley ecoregion of the Berkshires of western Massachusetts. Botanists have known for many years that the Housatonic is a biodiversity “hotspot” in