

Officials want Mt. A visitors to stay safe, respect land



YWD/YPD Watershed Patrol Gary Stevens

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YORK — As cooler weather approaches and area visitors move from the beaches to the hiking trails, officials are welcoming visitors to the Mount Agamenticus region to enjoy themselves but are cautioning them to stay safe and respect the outdoors.

Gary Stevens is the police patrol officer and water resource protection manager for the more than 4,500 acres of natural resource that encompasses Mount Agamenticus and the York/Kittery Water District properties.

Stevens can often be found any time day or night on an all-terrain vehicle patrolling the vast woodland area he was hired to watch 28 years ago.

He said he knows it better than anyone.

"I remember when I was 5 years old 'blueberrying' around Folly Pond reservoir with my parents. Today, what I like to see most is kids out there with their dads," Stevens said on July 23.

York Parks and Recreation Conservation Coordinator Robin Kerr said the fall foliage brings more than 30,000 people annually to Mount Agamenticus for hiking, biking, all-terrain vehicle riding and seasonal hunting. When people are injured or lost and need help getting out of the woods, Stevens is called to "talk them out," Kerr said on July 23.

Stevens' skills are invaluable, because often, people who have lost their way have not been able to explain where they are to rescue crews.

"Every trail looks identical and after a few turns it is easy to get confused," she said.

People need to be observant when visiting the area.

"You have to give me something to work with," Stevens said.

Visitors need to be aware of where they parked, make sure they are properly dressed and carry a cell phone, he said.

"Know which road you came in on. Was it a red, yellow or orange gate?" he said.

Stevens said there are 15 gates between the water departments and the mountain. People can park their vehicles at any one of them before heading into the woods. Each gate is equipped with trail boxes and maps of the area. Trail signs or colored tree markings denote which recreational uses are permitted on each trail.

Kerr warned hikers should be aware enough of their surroundings to notice when signs indicate the trails are not marked beyond a certain point.

"Sometimes people still miss those and go beyond. They are looking down and not really looking up and around," Kerr said.

People who want to go outside the marked trails, need to plan for it and should consider looking at a topographical map and packing a first aid kit, a compass they know how to use, and enough food and water for everyone.

"We have seen an increase in the last few years of more people coming out to explore areas that are not well marked and relying maybe too much on cell phones and GPS units," Kerr said.

Stevens encouraged people to explore random trails "systematically" as he did, to get to know the area.

"Keep taking rights or lefts until you're uncomfortable and head back the way you came," he said.

Stevens stops to talk to everyone he encounters in the area. On July 23, he came upon mountain biker Chris Weismann, 58, of Alfred, who was wearing a three-quart hydration backpack to allow for hands-free drinking.

"Do you like it here? It's uphill in both directions," Stevens joked.

Weismann said he tries to bike the mountain weekly for "its challenging terrain."

"There are challenging obstacles which I will never be able to get over which is great," he said.

One of Weismann's previous experiences in the region underscored the significance of Kerr's and Stevens' warnings: Weismann tore one of his Achilles tendons while biking around Folly Pond.

He said it took him an hour or so to get back to his car.

"I had to coast with one foot not engaged," he said.

"Hobbling along using your bike as a crutch," Stevens said knowingly. "That's great."

At the time of the accident, Weismann did not have a cell phone but now said he always carries one.

Lastly, visitors need to be mindful that they are coming into a conservation area and to treat the land respectfully. This means picking up and carrying out any trash they see, Kerr said.

"One of the things we are trying to promote is carry-in, carry-out and leave no trace. Part of leave no trace is planning ahead," she said.

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