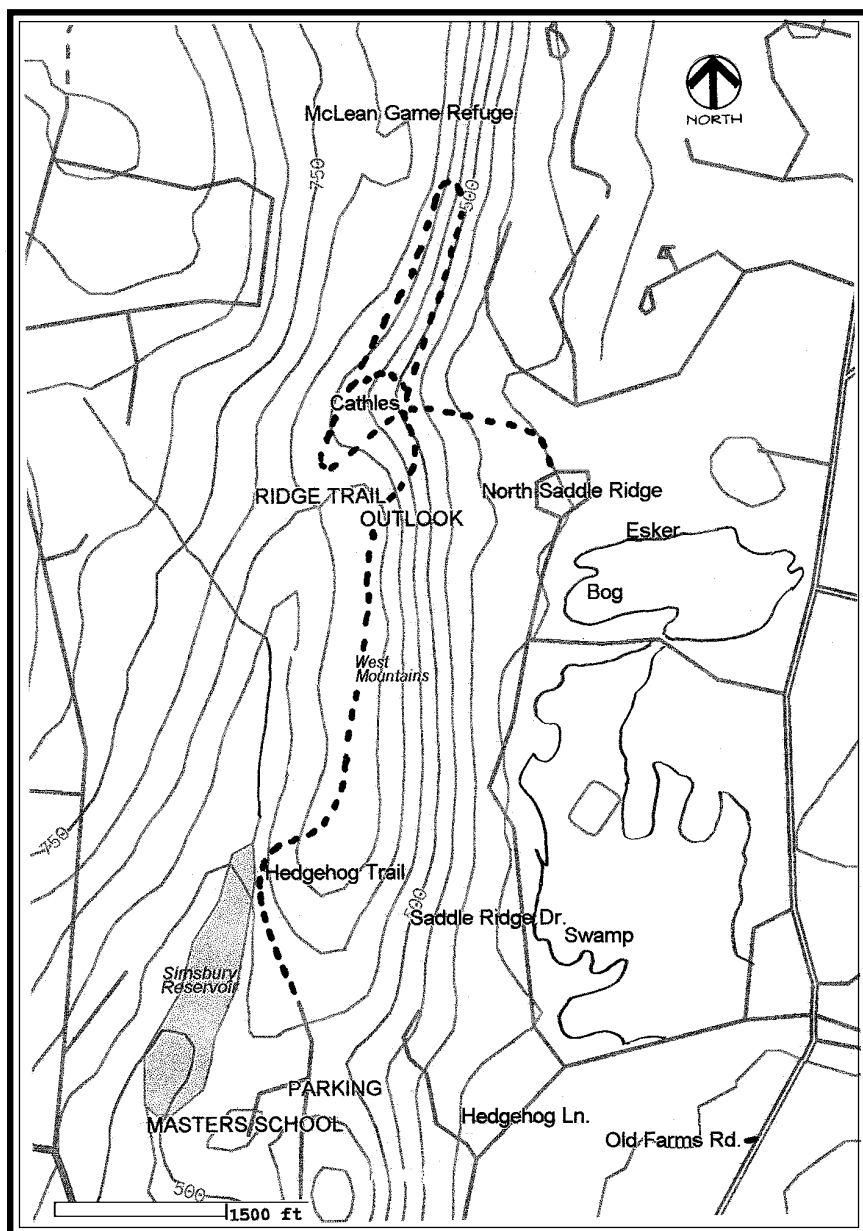


THE WESTERN HIGHLANDS



THE WESTERN HIGHLANDS

The eastern ridge of West Mountain, largely undisturbed, provides the hiker with a rich and varied look into the natural history of a very unique section of town. Trails here include The Hedgehog Trail, the Land Trust's Cathles property, The McLean Game Refuge, and the Town's trails on and around Onion Mountain. These trails are typically 2 to 3 miles long, involve some climbing but are generally appropriate for all age groups. Several of these provide excellent views of the town. Although each is described in greater detail in the following pages a few general comments at this point may be of interest.

Each of these locations provides at least some exposure to trap rock ridge habitat. As noted, trap rock ridges consist of hard, gray-green basalt rock created as volcanic extrusions along geologic faultlines. This faultline can be most easily seen at the Cathles property, where a steep ravine separates the very old metamorphic bedrock of West Mountain from the much newer igneous rock of the mountain's eastern ridge.

Typically these traprock ridges have a steep, nearly vertical western face with a steep but somewhat more gradual eastern slope that garners more exposure to the sun. The ridgeline is rocky and windblown and the western face is cool and moist. These distinctive features, along with the characteristic chemistry of the igneous soil, contribute to an unusual mix of several distinct habitats within close proximity to one another.

In precolonial days Native Americans may have traveled an ancient trail along the lower ridge of West Mountain. The soil and terrain of these hills was poorly suited for crops. As trees were removed from the more fertile flatlands and river bottoms, settlers harvested the ridges first for firewood and then, in the early 1700s to mid 1800s, for charcoal for local industry. Charcoal pits and early cart paths can still be seen from that period. Eventually this area was stripped of trees, and by the 1800s and into the 1900s sheep and cattle grazed on the open hillsides. Over the past fifty years the hills have become reforested. Today isolated stone fences and bits of barbed wire remain to point the way to the past.

