

Heritage Trout and Undisturbed Wilds at **HEART OF TUG HILL**





Recent field investigations by the Tug Hill Chapter of Trout Unlimited have discovered unique strains of brook trout in headwaters streams in the Heart of the Tug Hill region, it's central or "core" forest of over 170,000 acres. At the same time new research from The Nature Conservancy concludes the same Heart of Tug Hill is home to wild habitats that are in critical danger of development.



Brook trout sampled were found to be more genetically distinct from hatchery raised or stocked trout than many wild brook trout populations found in the Adirondacks.

Genetically Distinct Trout Populations

In 2019, the Tug Hill Chapter of Trout Unlimited, using citizen science protocols developed by the New York-based not-for-profit, and Trout Power Inc., with technical support from the State University of New York at Albany, found that brook trout in portions of some Tug Hill headwaters streams are genetically distinct, showing little genetic evidence of introduction of non-native and/or hatchery-raised stock.

The sampled fish exhibit almost no sign of genetic mixing, so appear to be native strains well suited to their habitat and deserving of genetically distinct strain protections.

“The uniqueness of the sampled trout appears to be even more pure or distinct than other unique strains identified in the Adirondacks,” said Paul Miller a local member of Trout Unlimited. “This is significant, and means we should do all we can to avoid jeopardizing this genetically unique strain of brook trout. Protecting their habitat is the most important and effective means of ensuring their survival”



Last Chance Ecosystem

A new report from The Nature Conservancy identifies portions of the Heart of Tug Hill as one of just a few “Last Chance Ecosystems” in New York State, and worthy of protection.

The Last Chance Ecosystems mapping process uses the latest science to identify places which if conserved will help reduce extinction rates and protect the best examples of habitats important to species diversity.

Rivers whose headwaters are in the Heart of Tug Hill include the Salmon River, Deer River, the Sandy Creeks, and East and West Branches of Fish Creek.

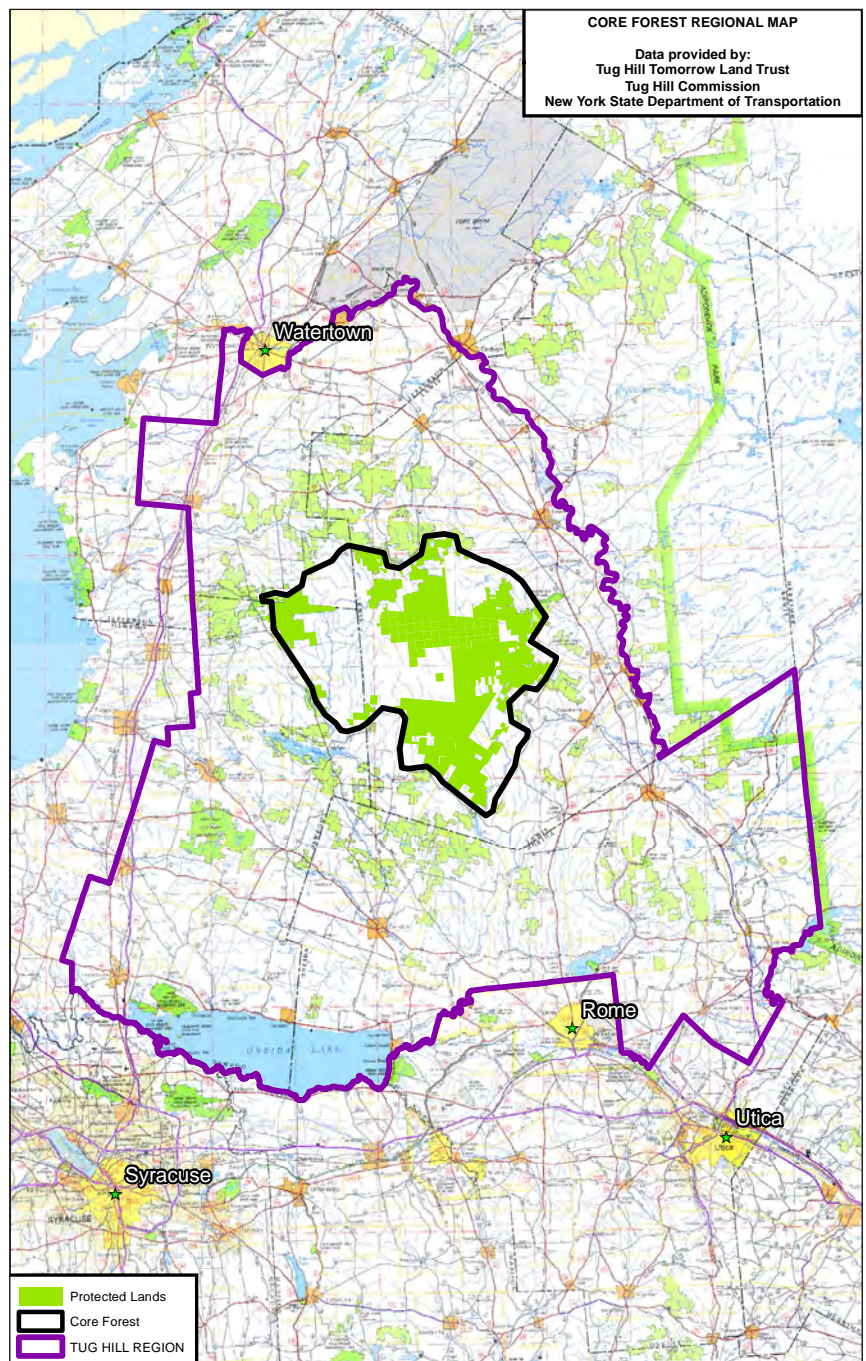
“These undisturbed wild lands in the Heart of the Tug Hill region give rise to the major river systems that provide world class fishing opportunities and drinking water in and near the Tug Hill region.”

– Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust
Executive Director Linda Garrett

Heart of Tug Hill

“At 170,000 acres, the Heart of Tug Hill is big,” said Garrett. “That is about 265 square miles, an area roughly 17 miles across, or an area more than 25 times that of Watertown, NY; 16 times that of Utica; 10 times the area of Syracuse, and almost as big as Manhattan plus all the other boroughs of New York City combined,” added Garrett.

The extent of Tug Hill’s core forest was first mapped by the New York State Tug Hill Commission, and then incorporated in the land use planning efforts of the towns that are home to the Heart of Tug Hill: Redfield (Oswego County), Worth (Jefferson County), Montague, Martinsburg, West Turin and Osceola (all in Lewis County).





A Mix of Working Forest and Wilderness

The Heart of Tug Hill is almost unbroken forest land, ponds and headwater streams. There are no communities, few people, more camps than homes, and mostly just minimal roads to link camps, hunting and fishing areas, and logging operations.

It is not wilderness, though the term “Lesser Wilderness” is sometimes used to compare the Heart of Tug Hill to the vaster wildernesses of the nearby Adirondacks. **But it is “the big woods” heart and soul of the Tug Hill region, vital to traditions of hunting, fishing, and recreating.**

Mature Forests, State Forests, Working Forests, Conservation and Wildlife Management Areas

Over 40% of the Heart of Tug Hill is already protected as State Forest Preserve (with mature stands of large, old trees), State Forest, State Wildlife Management Areas, State Conservation Easements, and The Nature Conservancy’s largest conservation area in New York State totaling about 17,000 acres.

State lands include Tug Hill and Littlejohn State Wildlife Management Areas, and thousands of acres of State Forest including the newest, East Branch of Fish Creek State Forest. Another 45,000 acres are protected by permanent, State-held conservation easements and conservation easements held by Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust.



© R. MCNAMARA

Recognition of the Heart of Tug Hill

Almost 50 years ago, NYS recognized the importance of the Tug Hill region in creation of the Tug Hill Commission, when development threatened the Heart of Tug Hill. People of the Tug Hill region were concerned development would threaten water quality, fishing, hunting and forest recreation that have been and are a crucial part of life in the region.

Since the early 1970s the importance of the Tug Hill region and the Heart of Tug Hill have been documented in many ways.

Several editions of the New York State Open Space Plan have given priority to protecting Tug Hill’s core forest and river headwaters, with the 2016 plan calling for use of a combination of conservation easement and fee acquisition of key parcels, and maintaining large tracts of private forest land for wildlife habitat, recreation and support of forest industry.

The Heart of Tug Hill also comprises an Audubon and State Important Bird Area, and is part of the program to limit introduction of non-native, invasive plants.

The U.S. Forest Service and the States of New York, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine have designated Tug Hill’s core forest as part of the Northern Forest, an effort to support keeping forest lands undeveloped and contributing to wildlife habitat, pure water, forest management, recreation, hunting and fishing. The Northern Forest includes the Heart of Tug Hill, the Adirondacks, and northernmost Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine.

Tug Hill is the western end of the Wildlife Connectivity project that spans the Northern Forest and into Canada, with a particular focus on wildlife travel corridors including one between Tug Hill and the Adirondacks.

The Cooperative Tug Hill Council (made up of the 16 towns in the central part of the Tug Hill region) identifies “core forest” as one of its special protection areas in its Planning Accord for Tug Hill, where it calls for member towns to limit development to forest management, logging, hunting and fishing camps, and recreation.

Discover Tug Hill Yourself

There are lots of ways to get to know Tug Hill. The best resource for exploring the region on foot, ski, snowshoe, canoe or fishing rod is the new **Tug Hill Recreation Guide (2020)**.

The Guide describes the Tug Hill core forest as the Heart of Tug Hill, known for traditions of hunting and forest management, with few roads, few permanent homes, and few people. The Recreation Guide is oriented toward non-motorized recreation, but the Heart of Tug Hill also provides lots of motorized recreation opportunities, especially snowmobiling.

The Heart of Tug Hill is a little more challenging to get to know, but getting easier with creation of the Tug Hill Traverse Trail. The Trail is for hiking, skiing, snowshoeing, and currently runs about 3 miles north from Michigan Mills Road to the G&W Road, both in the Town of West Turin.

When completed over the next few years the trail will stretch 20 miles from the West Leyden-Osceola Road in the Town of Osceola on the south of the core forest, to Tug Hill State Wild-life Management Area in the Town of Montague at the northern edge of the Heart of Tug Hill.

For more information on the Heart of Tug Hill and its heritage trout, contact:



Tug Hill Tomorrow Land Trust
PO Box 6063
1 Thompson Park
Watertown, NY 13601
(315) 779-8240
lgarrett@tughilltomorrow.org
TugHillTomorrowLandTrust.org



COVER PHOTO BY ZACHARY WAKEMAN.