

11-25-11 Take the Walk, Not The Ticks

A friend has been eager to show me her pride and joy: a hoped for, worked for and recently approved donation to the town allowing access to a beautiful piece of wooded property already owned by the town, including the highest point in Plympton, known as Cato's Ridge. The many acres of woods, hills and ancient cranberry bogs still have useable carriage trails and walking paths. The area is rich with history of the former inhabitants and activities, such as growing cranberries, with nearby sand and gravel removal for the bogs. High up, along the series of ridges, there's a sweet little stone foundation, about ten x ten feet. It has an entryway (or would that have been the fireplace?) and is just big enough for a bed, table and chair and a few essential items, such as a few tools and clothes. Did we find the shell of the home for whom the ridge is named? I don't know if it belonged to Cato but it is old, as witnessed by the layers of lichen, pre-dating the newer moss and it is very precious.

I've wanted to see the place I had heard about for so many months but my friend thought I would be reluctant to walk just now because there are so many ticks this fall! Have you noticed? I've seen people walk fifty feet into the woods, turn around and come back, only to find their pants legs have about thirty ticks on them, both deer ticks and dog ticks

So, when my friend said, "I know there are a lot of ticks out there right now, but when it gets a little colder and there aren't so many, would you like to see Cato's Ridge?" She was surprised that I saw no need to postpone that walk. Yes, I was aware of the bumper crop of ticks, including tiny and much-dreaded deer ticks. "I'll take precautions!" I told her. "I'll wear permethrin treated socks lifted over the bottom of my pants. My boots and jacket will also have permethrin sprayed onto them. When I get home, I'll shake and comb my hair over the sink, I'll put my jacket and scarf and hat in the dryer, and wash my permethrin-soaked pants and socks in a cold water wash. After a shower, I'll check again for ticks."

She was happy to be able to conduct another tour and exploration of Cato's Ridge, maybe even win over another supporter and enthusiast for this wonderful gift Plympton has, now that we have access to it. And, so, off we went! We think we saw owl scat, full of tiny regurgitated bones. We talked about bird watching and envisioned cross-country skiing, horse wagon rides and ice skating.

Here and there, there was a bit of green briar, but mostly not. I never did spot my other enemy, poison ivy and I did not notice a single tick. Whew! It appeared that we had enjoyed nature while escaping its pitfalls. But, shortly after arriving home, I received a call. "I just want you to know that I never saw so many ticks! I must have had about thirty of them! They were even in my turtle neck! How about you?"

"Me? I didn't find any. I checked my scarf, hat and jacket. I didn't see any but I put those things in the dryer, just in case. I combed my hair over the sink but did not see any. I took a shower and did not see any. I am a big believer in treating clothes, socks, and shoes with permethrin." I think she became a believer, too.

Now, it is important to understand that permethrin was first developed for military use and was intended for clothing offering protection against mosquitoes, mites, lice, chiggers and ticks. It is not intended for the skin. According to EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) "With regard to the treatment of fabrics, permethrin is the only pesticide registered to pre-treat fabric... as a method of preventing many diseases that might afflict military personnel in the field."

Repellants on our skin are handy for mosquitoes but not very effective for ticks. So, in order to prevent the several diseases carried by ticks such as Lyme disease, babesiosis, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, Ehrlichiosis, tick paralysis, anaplasmosis, and tularemia, isn't it best if we prevent the bite in the first place? We can do that by forever staying indoors, (and even that is not guarantee, especially if you have pets) or we can take the precautions championed by the University of Rhode Island entomologist, Dr. Mathers. He calls his website TickEncounter because his thinking is that if you can prevent the encounter, then you have prevented disease transmission. Check out his amazing, fun, interactive site at <http://www.tickencounter.org/faq>

If you can't prevent the encounter, then take quick action to prevent transmission of disease. Conduct a tick check and remove any attached tick with pointed tweezers. If the tick was not there yesterday and you removed it today, you're okay. If the tick is still crawling on you, you are okay, also, for it did not even attach itself.

Not sure of the time period? Save the tick, go to the doctor and know that you can have the tick tested as well your body.

I've had Lyme disease three separate times. They were all before I knew about pre-treating clothing with permethrin. That knowledge has allowed me to enjoy nature, once again.

Protect yourself. Protect your family. Enjoy nature as much as you can.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for Halifax, MA. She welcomes your questions, stories and pictures at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us