

## 'Goshen Ocean,' or Gunnison Lake, a hidden gem with many fans



The giant boulders that surround Gunnison Lake in Goshen make for a good jumping-off point for any number of activities. MELANIE PLEND

Revan Schandler stood behind her 9-year-old niece in a clearing of knee-high grass dotted with Brown-eyed Susans. Looking official in her bright yellow life jacket, the girl, Olive Hodgson, peered through a pair of binoculars, intently spying the water splayed out before her.

By MELANIE PLEND

Special to the Sunday News

GOSHEN - Revan Schandler stood behind her 9-year-old niece in a clearing of knee-high grass dotted with Brown-eyed Susans. Looking official in her bright yellow life jacket, the girl, Olive Hodgson, peered through a pair of binoculars, intently spying the water splayed out before her.

"She's waiting for her turn," Schandler said, pointing across the placid waters of Gunnison Lake where an approaching kayak appeared as a sliver of color gliding toward the shore.

Schandler is from Massachusetts, but her mother, Gigi, lives in Goshen, allowing Schandler to become a semi-regular on the "Goshen Ocean," as Gunnison Lake is locally known.

"I love this spot," Schandler said. "I love that there are no motorboats and everybody is sharing the lake. You can see the top of Mount Sunapee - the side without the ski slopes. And during the week, it's really a very quiet, peaceful spot."

Tucked away along the backside of Mount Sunapee, this 60-acre man-made lake - located off Route 31 and accessible by way of either Gunnison Lake Road or Four Corners Road - is something of a hidden gem, where locals have been swimming, kayaking, canoeing, picnicking and birding since its creation in 1983.

Take Four Corners Road, and the lake access is across from an old cemetery ripe for exploration. At the crest of a short embankment, where an expanse of scenery includes sprawling meadows, the dam and the whole of the southern end of the lake opens up before you. To the left is the lake, to the right, one of two trailheads for the 3-mile Ruth LeClair Memorial Trail.

Take the Gunnison Lake Road entrance at the western edge of the lake, and you are flanked on either side by flower-packed meadows that end at some impressive boulders just begging to be climbed. The LeClair trail - a gently winding path through woods filled with hemlock, maples, beech and ferns, and over the fields that surround the lake - can be accessed this way, too.

"There's nothing much else like it around," said Beatrice Jillette, chairman of the Goshen Conservation Commission. "You know if you go to Pillsbury (State Park) you have to pay. This is accessible and free with a nice 3-mile trail around the lake. And people find it's the perfect length to walk their dog."

Gunnison Lake was created in the Sugar River Watershed area as part of a federal dam and flood-control project. The lake was formed by damming Blood Brook and Baker Brook, both of which are visible along the LeClair trail.

The lake was named for John Williams Gunnison, an American explorer born in Goshen in 1812. Gunnison attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and was assigned to the Corps of Topographical Engineers as a surveyor of a young United States.

But in 1853, as he was doing some survey work for the trans-continental railroad in Utah, he and seven others in his party were killed in a skirmish with Native Americans that came to be known as the Gunnison Massacre.

When it became clear the lake would come to fruition, locals decided it should bear the name of the one of the area's most famous adventurers.

How it got its nickname is another matter, said Jillette.

"One of the neighbors - he is a complete nut - put lobster buoys in the lake, and people actually thought they were traps of some kind, which they were not," Jillette said, chuckling. "I believe because of that, he was the one who started calling it the 'Goshen Ocean.'?"

More than 30 years later, the name sticks.

While no one hunts for lobsters in the lake, many do venture there in search of fish to catch and birds to watch.

The lake is absolutely loaded with loons, geese, ducks and even a few beavers.

And it is a lovely swimming hole, said Jillette. The water is invitingly clear, seemingly bereft of the discoloration and murkiness that can plague a dammed-up lake.

Jillette said most swimmers enter from the Four Corners side of the lake using the rocks as stepping stones into the water. The Gunnison Lake entrance, however, has had some leech sightings, so most people avoid swimming in that area, Jillette said.

Gunnison also has become a popular spot for geocaching, the activity of hunting for and finding hidden objects with the help of GPS coordinates posted on a website.

"It's become a very beloved spot," Jillette said. "We've just all sort of adopted it as our own."