

## FINDING OWLS IN THE GRASS RIDES

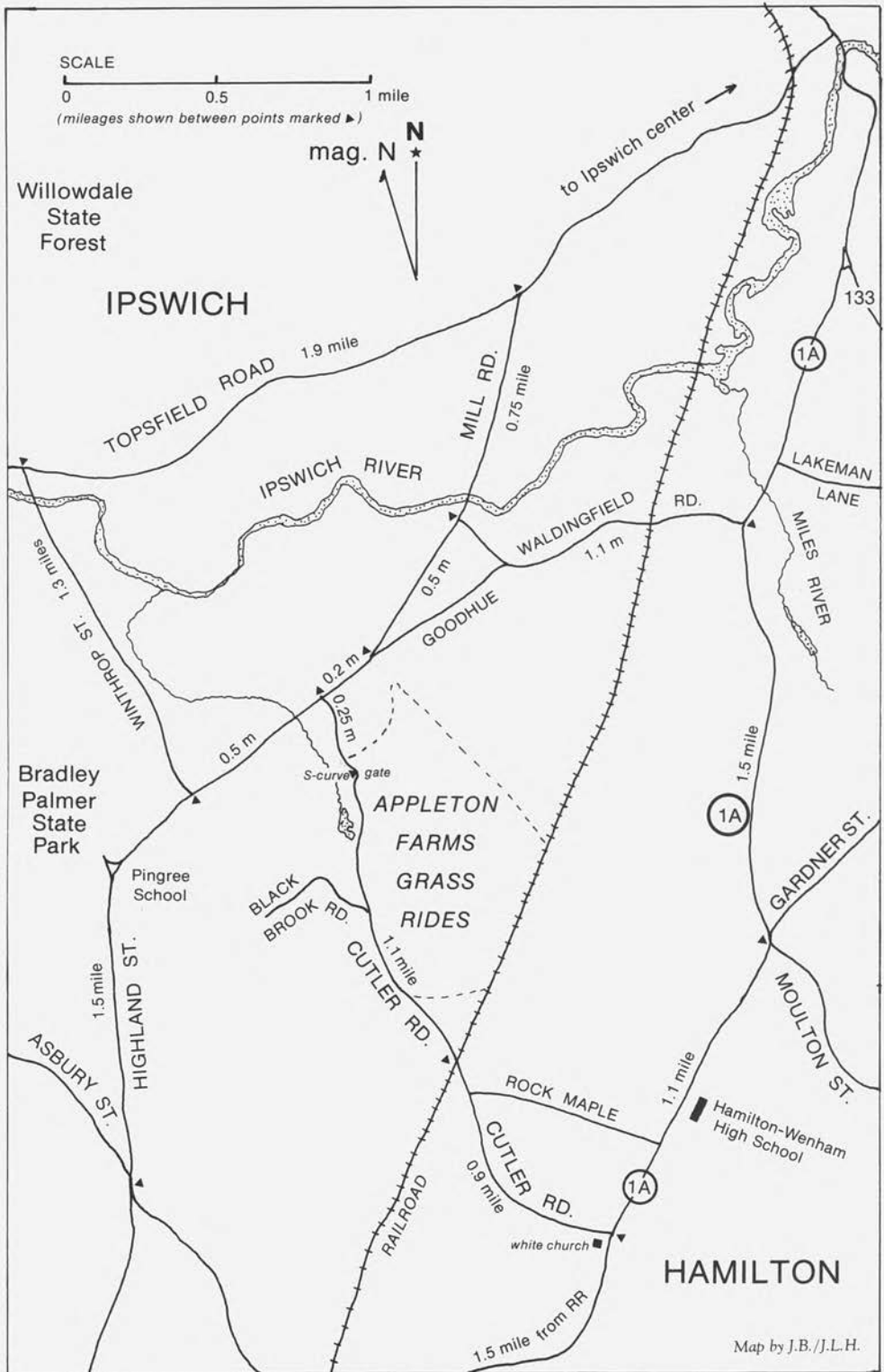
by Jim Berry, Ipswich

If the title of this article is mysterious, don't worry. I just found out myself what "Grass Rides" means. In old England, a "ride" was any grassy path or lane through the woods suitable for riding or walking, and that is the sense in which the Appleton family named the Appleton Farms Grass Rides in Hamilton. This 164-acre tract of mixed woodland was laid out with five miles of bridle trails around the turn of the century after the fashion in Europe and has since been maintained as a recreational area separate from the adjacent working dairy farm in Ipswich. (See "The Ipswich Cattle Egrets," *Bird Observer* 13: 258, October 1985.)

In 1970 Colonel and Mrs. Francis R. Appleton, Jr. donated the Grass Rides to The Trustees of Reservations (TTOR), and Mrs. Appleton has since donated additional land. TTOR is a privately administered charitable corporation maintaining about sixty-five properties throughout Massachusetts totaling more than 14,500 acres. Several of these properties are known to many birdwatchers: Crane Beach in Ipswich, Halibut Point Reservation in Rockport, Old Town Hill in Newbury, and World's End Reservation in Hingham.

The wide trails in the Grass Rides are mowed annually and thus facilitate bird-finding at any season, though in summer the mosquitoes are as pestilent as anywhere in New England. Horses as well as off-road vehicles are now precluded from the Grass Rides, which means serenity for the naturalist or hiker. In fact, the only activity that brings any number of people to the reservation is cross-country skiing. This suggests a potential conflict between skiers and birders, since winter is also the best time to look for owls. But there is no reason to fear. The skiers and the owls occupy different niches of the habitat, and I can guarantee that you will never find the two in the same place.

The Grass Rides are on Cutler Road, a back road 2.25 miles long that runs roughly northwest to southeast between Highland Street and Route 1A in Hamilton (see Map 1). If you approach from the south, take 1A north from Hamilton center to Cutler Road, which is 1.3 miles past Asbury Street or 1.5 miles north of the railroad crossing. Turn left on Cutler Road, which begins inconspicuously by a white church across the road from the Hamilton Cemetery. You will cross the railroad tracks about a mile up the road, and after another mile you will be at the S curve indicated on the map. If there is little or no snow on the ground, it is safe to park by the gate at the S curve, since the road is wide enough there, but if there is much snow, you must park another quarter-mile up the road at Nancy's Corner, where the road ends at Highland Street. Cross-country skiers flock to the Grass Rides



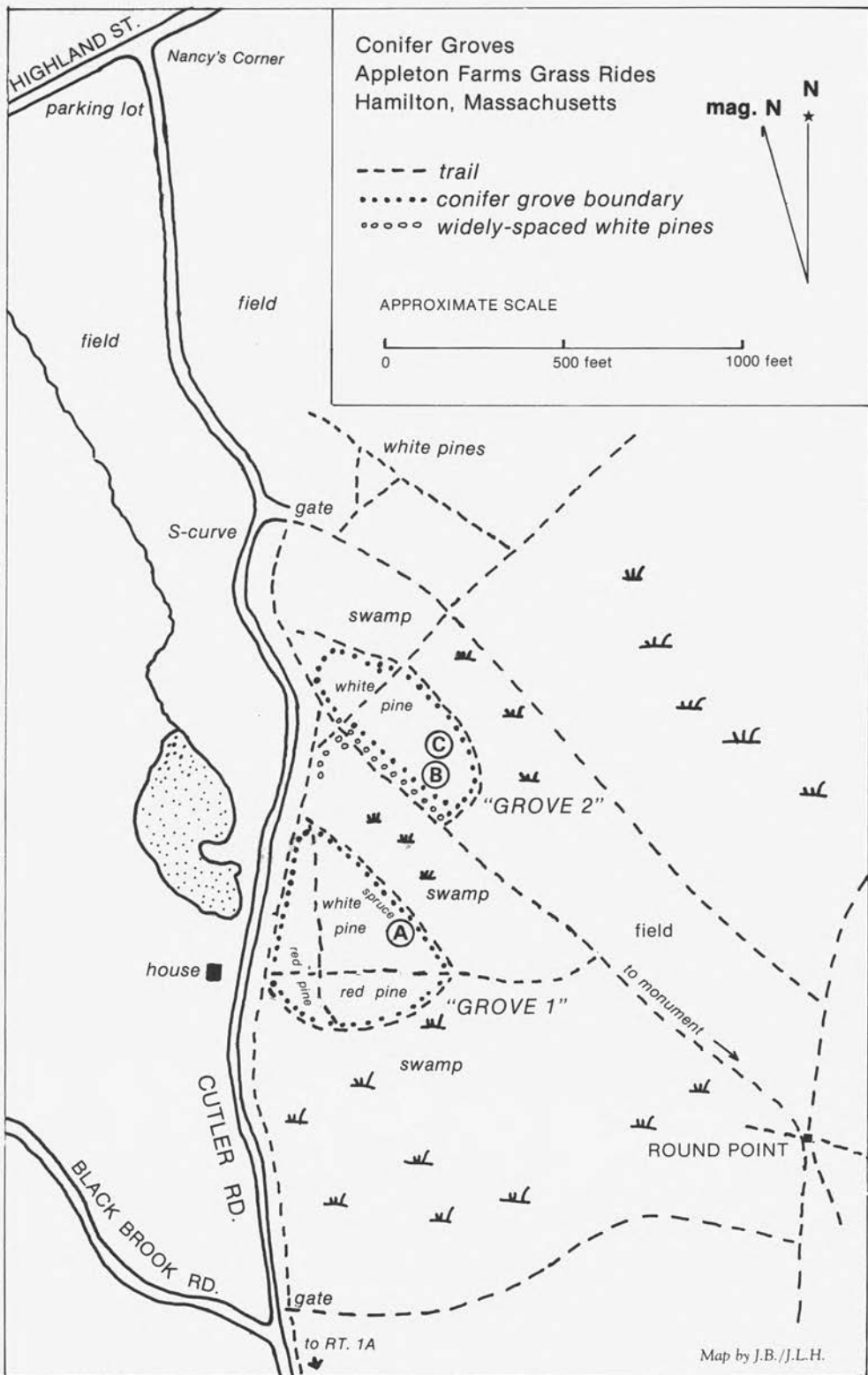
Map 1. Appleton Farms Grass Rides

when conditions are favorable, and the police will ticket cars parked along the road when the skiers are out and about.

If you are coming from Ipswich center, take Topsfield Road west from the railroad crossing for 1.2 miles to Mill Road. Turn left and follow Mill Road - it becomes Highland Street when it crosses the Ipswich River into Hamilton - 1.5 miles to Nancy's Corner, and park as described above. If you are coming from the west, take Ipswich Road off U. S. 1 in Topsfield. (This road becomes Topsfield Road in Ipswich: sometimes these changes in road names are actually made for sound reasons.) Take a shortcut to Cutler Road by turning right on Winthrop Street, which begins across the road from an animal clinic. Follow it to the end (1.3 miles), and turn left on Highland Street. Nancy's Corner is then a half-mile up the road.

Having parked, you are now ready to look for some owls. Although Great Horned Owls and Eastern Screech-Owls can be found just about anywhere in the neighborhood, the specialties of the house are Barred and Long-eared owls, and occasionally Saw-whet Owls. These species, but especially Barred Owls, can sometimes be found in either of two planted conifer groves close by the road. These groves, called "Grove 1" and "Grove 2" by members of the Brookline Bird Club (see Map 2), were planted by the Appletons in roughly circular fashion in the 1930s or 1940s to provide windbreaks for birds and other animals, to renew part of the forest, and for aesthetic reasons. They consist of evenly spaced rows of conifers in varying combinations of species. Grove 1 consists of mainly white pine in the center with red pine along much of the southern and western sides and thick spruces along the northeast side. Grove 2 is mostly white pine, with much eastern hemlock on the west side and red pines scattered throughout. There is virtually no undergrowth in either grove except for the red pine sections of Grove 1; so the groves are easy to canvass. Both groves are intersected by trails: Grove 1 is divided into four unequal parts by perpendicular trails and Grove 2 into two parts by one trail. Another feature of Grove 2 is that the southern edge consists of three rows of white pines much more widely spaced than the trees in the rest of the grove. These majestic trees suggest a boulevard, and if you look down the trail next to these trees to the east (away from the road), you can see in the distance a monument, taken from a former Harvard University library when it was demolished in World War I days and placed by the Appletons in the middle of the woods where several trails intersect. This is truly an unusual forest to walk in.

For the last several winters, one or more Barred Owls have been present in either grove. During the winter of 1985-86 there was a pair in attendance, and though I haven't been able to prove it, I think it is very likely that they are nesting in the vicinity. Though they can be seen almost anywhere in the groves, they seem to have a strong preference for red pines, perhaps because the thinner foliage allows them a clearer view. The



Map 2. Section of Appleton Farms Grass Rides

Map by J.B./J.L.H.

circle labeled C in Grove 2 (see Map 2) is where I saw one or both several times - there are several red pines together in that part of the grove. But I saw them in red pines elsewhere in Grove 2 and also in the red pine sections of Grove 1 just as frequently. Simply look for the lighter bark of these trees - they stand out like a sore thumb - and check the base of each for pellets. The presence of pellets won't guarantee an owl, but it will prove where one has roosted. However, the absence of pellets doesn't mean the absence of owls; several times I spotted a Barred Owl in a red pine and could not find a pellet beneath it. My inference from all this is that Barred Owls move around a lot and are not loyal to specific perches.

Long-eared Owls, on the other hand, seem to return to the same trees with greater regularity. John Andrews' comprehensive article on this species ("A Winter Roost of Long-eared Owls," *Bird Observer* 10: 12, February 1982) stated that individual owls tend to return to the same tree and even the same perch day after day. This was true of a Long-eared Owl I found in Grove 2 on January 18, 19, and 20, 1986, and again on February 2. The perch was about thirty feet up in a red pine on the southern edge of the grove (circle B on Map 2). Although the owl was not there every time I looked, it was there on enough occasions, including additional dates when it was seen by other people, to demonstrate loyalty to the perch. The large number of pellets at the base of the tree also indicated this. As with the Lexington owls described by Andrews, this bird favored a red pine with a southerly exposure. Interestingly, though, the perch was on a branch on the north side of the tree, which seems atypical in view of the findings cited in Andrews' article.

Another Long-eared Owl was found in Grove 1 by Bill Drummond on December 2, 1984 (circle A on Map 2). This bird was in the thick spruces along the northeast edge of that grove. Several people saw the bird and the tree was marked to make repeat searches possible, but I was not able to find the owl again, and I'm not aware of anyone else finding it either. However, it would not be safe to conclude that it left the area, because the trees there are so thick that the shift of a few yards in perch site could have meant peace for the owl as people gradually gave up looking. On the other hand, the disturbance could have caused the owl to relocate. My suspicion is that the bird probably stayed in the area if the food supply was adequate and if it did not become part of the food supply for one of the larger owls. The 1986 owl remained for several weeks at least, despite hordes of noisy observers and, on several occasions, the racing around of my dog, whom the owl barely deigned to notice. (The Barred Owls were similarly undisturbed by the dog's presence. Except for Great Horned Owls our local owls are remarkably tolerant birds.)

The only record of Saw-whet Owls I am aware of is that of Glenn d'Entremont who found not just one but a pair in the Grove 1 spruces on December 1, 1984. (It was while we were looking for

those owls the next day that Drummond found the aforesaid Long-eared Owl a few trees away!) The Saw-whets were not seen again, but in the winter of 1986 I found several small pellets under red pines in the western section of Grove 2 that may have come from this species. The habitat is certainly suitable, and, in fact, a Saw-whet spent the same winter in a similar red pine grove in another part of Hamilton, along Asbury Street.

There are, of course, many places to find owls, but the Grass Rides provide one of the best in view of the variety of species found there over the years. I hope this article will benefit those owl-seekers who have heard about the place but who find the labyrinth of trails confusing - that is, if they can find their way there in the first place. Visitors should keep in mind that as a mixed-forest swamp, the Grass Rides are also home for a number of other sought-after birds, such as Ruffed Grouse, Pileated Woodpeckers, and occasional Red-shouldered Hawks. In the spring of 1986, on May 31, I found an Acadian Flycatcher there and, on another occasion, a Carolina Wren. The combination of wildness and ease of access makes the Grass Rides one of the more appealing locations for nature study in Essex County.

Footnote. At dusk on October 11, 1986, just before this article went to press, I heard two Great Horned Owls and a Barred Owl calling in and around Grove 1. A few minutes later I heard a screech-owl at the S curve a few hundred yards away. You certainly don't have to wait for winter to listen for owls.

JIM BERRY has written several articles for *Bird Observer* dating back to 1976. His family's recent acquisition of a golden retriever has changed his birdwatching habits. Since the dog likes nothing better than long romps through whatever habitat is available and many natural areas are off-limit to dogs, Jim spends a lot of time in woodlands such as the Grass Rides and Willowdale State Forest. One side benefit of having a dog along is a marked increase in the number of Ruffed Grouse flushed. Jim's dream is to follow the dog through enough September salt marshes to flush a Yellow Rail.

