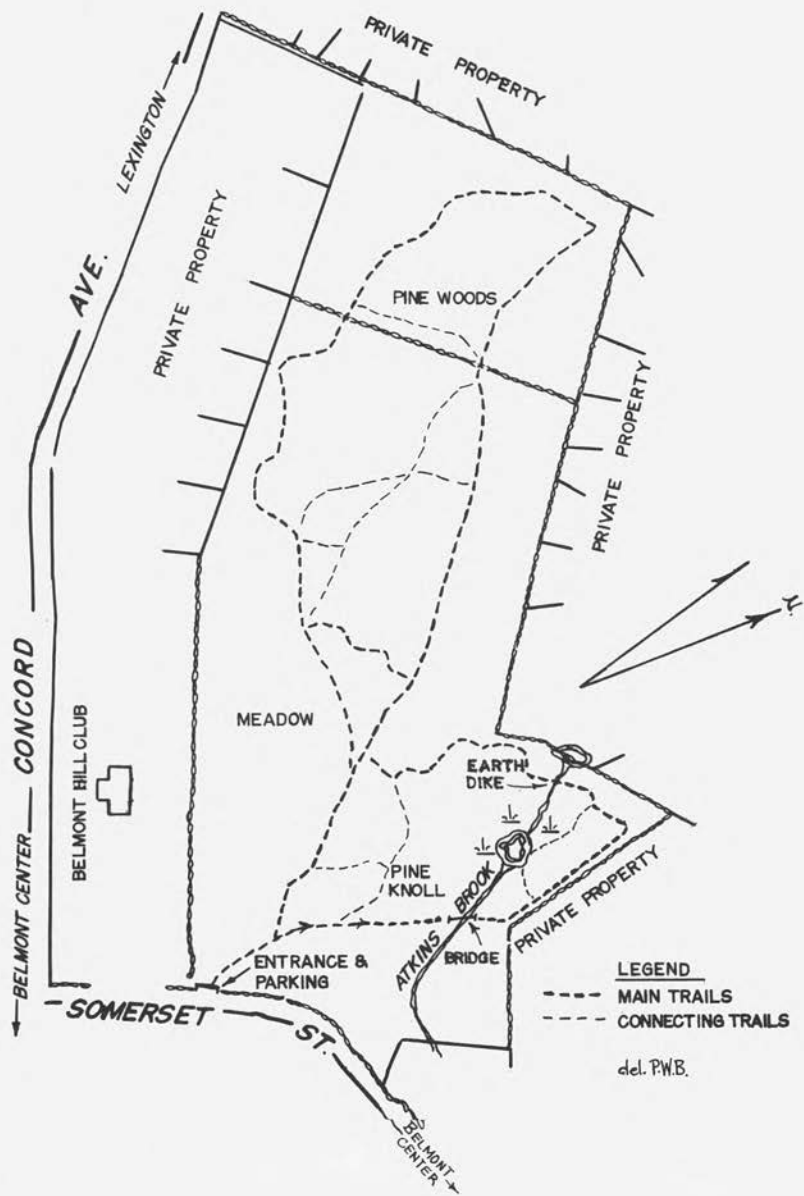


HIGHLAND FARM WILDLIFE SANCTUARY



URBAN BIRDING AT HIGHLAND FARM

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With gas a precious commodity nowadays, birders should look toward likely spots close to home. At the right time of year, urban habitats can provide a surprising variety of birdlife, as evidenced by a local Mecca, Mt. Auburn Cemetery (BIRD OBSERVER, Vol.1, No. 2). But why is Mt. Auburn so good during spring migration? First, and most obvious, it lies along the Atlantic Flyway. Second, and more significant, it offers a diversified and predictable bit of greenery along the eastern megalopolis -- an absolute invitation to migrants after a long night's flight.

Yet, Mt. Auburn is not alone! Probably within a few blocks of your home is a woodland patch that holds more migrant warblers, thrushes, and the like than you have ever imagined. This coming spring, don't forget Mt. Auburn, but don't neglect some nearby areas that you've never birded seriously before -- you might be surprised! Highland Farm is one of my favorite alternatives, a place that I've birded for a dozen years. In this article we will look beyond its winter and spring offerings, for these 44 acres offer something all year long.

Located at the top of Belmont Hill about a half mile from Belmont Center, Highland Farm includes an abandoned meadow, deciduous woods, and pine forests. Early in the year small brooks and springs form a temporary pond that provides an added attraction for spring migrants and permanent residents. Persons interested in mycology will find a good variety of mushrooms, including Cepe (Boletus edulus), Shaggy Manes (Coprinus commatus), and Sulphur Tuft (Polyporus sulphureus). Among the wildflowers you will find: near the footbridge, Partridgeberry (Mitchella repens); in the pine woods, Indian Pipe (Monotropa uniflora) and Jewelweed (Impatiens pallida), an antidote for Poison Ivy that grows very near the offender; in the field, Yarrow (Achillea millefolium), Common St. Johnswort (Hypericum perforatum), and White Sweet Clover (Melilotus alba).

Part of this Massachusetts Audubon Society sanctuary has historical interest, since it was the first American center for breeding Holstein cattle; Yorkshire swine; Lincoln, Texel, and Caramen sheep; and Asiatic fleece-bearing goats. At the present parking area off Somerset Street, the retaining wall of the Highland Farm Race Track is still visible. Between 1874 and 1903 the United States trotter record for a mile was 2:14; today it stands at only 1:54.6 (fittingly by a horse named Albatross!), indicating that the Highland Farm track must have been a fast one. In 1907, when the Belmont Railroad Station was built (now the Belmont Lions Club), about 365 tons of field stone were dragged by horses from the site of the old farm. In 1965, 22 acres of the present sanctuary were given to MAS by Mr. and Mrs. William H. Claflin while an equal adjoining parcel was purchased by contributions from citizens.

In the winter, when the snow is deep, one can combine snowshoeing or cross-country skiing with birding. However, if you decide to walk, the paths are well defined and well traveled, since Highland Farm is one of the major varied open land areas in urban Boston. I usually choose the path to the right of the parking area, but if the crows and jays are calling frantically from the pine woods in back of the meadow, go there quickly for the birds are probably harassing an owl. The pine knoll, pine woods, and cedars along the paths are well known to birders as the favorite haunts of Great Horned, Long-eared, Barred, Screech, and Saw-whet Owls. William Brewster documented these owls in his classic Birds of the Cambridge Region, where there is also an exciting account of the discovery and collection of a Great Gray Owl on a nearby hill.

Though owls highlight the winter fare, many other species can be observed. If you go down the path to the right toward the pine knoll, Fox Sparrows and a wintering Towhee might be found. After crossing the wooden foot bridge and bearing left alongside the stone wall, you will come to a spot favored by Brown Creepers, Golden-crowned Kinglets, and both nuthatches. This trail turns left again, passing over an earth dike, and brings you to an area preferred by woodpeckers, Dark-eyed Juncos, and White-throated Sparrows. A few years ago, before the sanctuary became so heavily used, you might have found Ruffed Grouse. After you complete the loop back to the meadow, check for other sparrows, American Kestrels, and wintering Red-tailed Hawks. For those with limited time, this loop takes 45 minutes or less.

A spring walk should be more leisurely. While standing at the sanctuary entrance, you will probably hear House Wren, Field Sparrow, Mockingbird, Eastern Meadowlark, Red-winged Blackbird, Rufous-sided Towhee, and maybe a cuckoo in the distance. In April, if you visit at dusk, Woodcock may be heard. (Another 6/10 of a mile westward on Concord Avenue is the Belmont Incinerator; the adjacent wetlands are especially favored by these birds.) Taking the path to the right again, Hermit Thrushes and American Robins will pace you. Though you may stop to admire the profuse blossoms on the very old cherry trees, be alert for orioles and hummingbirds. Broad-winged Hawks also frequent the sanctuary in spring.

As you approach the bridge area, known locally as "Warbler Way," you should hear Northern Parula, Black-and-White, Blackpoll, Tennessee, Magnolia, Northern Yellowthroats, and Chestnut-sided Warblers. Although you may identify their songs, to observe these birds you should cross the bridge and follow the trail to the left. About 50 feet down the path you will see a large oak tree on the right with a stone marker at its base. The plaque is in memory of George Drew, Jr., who used to lunch at this spot and take notes on the spring arrivals, whose songs he knew so well. His best count was 22 species of warblers, including a Cerulean. The temporary pond is opposite the oak and provides the best vantage for warbler watching. As the pond recedes, Spotted Sandpipers can be found and Ovenbirds seem particularly vocal.

Upon returning to the trail leading down the center of the meadow, stay alert but don't expect much more than the summer residents. When the red pines appear on your right, stop and check for Pine Warblers. Though these Red Pine woods are a delight to walk through, scientists are unable to explain why more species are not attracted to them.

Summer is not my favorite season at Highland Farm. The grass in the meadow is high, and I suspect ticks live there. The paths seem to become overgrown, and mosquitoes cloud about your head. With the end of the nesting season, the woods fall silent, except for the summer residents feeding their young or starting a new family.

I've birded Highland Farm a few times in the fall, when southward-bound warblers seem to come in pockets. Again, one of the best places is the bridge, although if it has been a dry summer, there is little there to attract birds. Other good places are the trees and brush along the right-hand side of the meadow. Fall provides a great opportunity to test your knowledge of immature plumages.

It is interesting that as many as 15 Mockingbirds have been counted in the meadow during the summer, but only one or two stay during the winter. I suspect some of the other birds go down hill to the Winn Brook area, where there are many fruit-bearing ornamental trees and shrubs.

Highland Farm is reached by MBTA most easily from Belmont Center via Harvard Square. Ride to the end of the line (Filene's) where the distance to Highland Farm gate is 8/10 of a mile, and then walk up Alexander Avenue to where you cross Pleasant Street. Somerset Street will be diagonally across the road. Though it is a steep walk, yard feeders, tangles, and brooks provide attractions along the way.



Highland Farm Wildlife Sanctuary