



Stow Conservation Commission Family Spring Nature Exploration Ramble #1



Whitney Fields Conservation Restriction (Stow Conservation Trust) & Captain Sargent Conservation Area (Town of Stow)

Description

This spring ramble will take you on a footpath along Heath Hen Meadow Brook and through fields and woods where you can see the impacts of beaver activity as well as abundant bird life. The trail is flat and mostly easy walking. It is a simple out and back walk so you are unlikely to get misplaced and can hike for whatever distance you choose. Your well-behaved dog may join you off leash. You will be on privately owned land that is protected by a Conservation Restriction held by Stow Conservation Trust, and then on Town Conservation Land managed by the Stow Conservation Commission. The walk includes two optional extensions. Please stay on the trail!

Directions to the Trail Head

Park at the Town's Flagg Hill Conservation Area Parking Lot on West Acton Road. This is a gravel parking lot with a large garage at the back of it. If using GPS, look for 240 West Acton Road, which should put you in the vicinity. After parking, cross West Acton Road and you will see a grass footpath leading into the woods. This is the beginning of the walk.

Nature Ramble Directions and Learning Guide

Follow the trail across the field and into the woods where it makes a series of turns. You will pass a small pond on your left and then the trail bears left and goes around the side of the pond. A small hill will be visible on the right. This first section of trail can be a little muddy if it has rained recently.

STOP 1 -- Almost immediately you will come to a narrow gravel causeway crossing Heath Hen Meadow Brook. This is your first stop. Spend a little time here – there is much to see! This causeway is an old road that was used by the former owner of the property to pasture livestock in the field ahead of you.

- Several culverts carry Heath Hen Meadow Brook under the middle of the causeway. After heavy rains, sometimes the Brook overtops the causeway. Look for flowing water on the downstream side of the causeway at the culverts.
- Listen and watch for red-winged blackbirds here. The males are black, with highly visible red and yellow wing bars. Their melodious “conk-la-LEE” song is one of the first signs of spring. The red-wings will perch around the marsh and seem to be calling to one another.
- The water in the Brook is currently high because beavers have built a large dam out of sight downstream which has raised the water here. At night beavers are often seen traveling back and forth across the causeway. Look carefully and you may see areas without vegetation where they have come over the causeway.
- On the upstream side of the causeway (right side) in the far distance you can see a huge beaver lodge made out of sticks. The lodge is where the beavers live and raise their young, entering below the water line.
- All around the causeway are cattails – a plant that loves living in wetlands. The brown “hot dog” like flower heads of the cattails provide nesting material for many birds.
- Another plant that grows along the edge of the causeway is alder – these shrubby trees have tiny male and female catkins and cones. Look for them above your head along the causeway.
- This causeway is an important wildlife corridor – by day it is used by hikers, bikes, and dogs, but at night it is used by coyote, fox, fisher, deer, raccoons, beavers, otters and more. It is a busy place at all hours!
- *You can check off the beaver, beaver lodge, cat tail, alder, and red winged blackbird boxes on the Scavenger Hunt Card at the first stop.*



After talking in the sights along the causeway, continue across the Brook and down the trail until you come to a field where there is a brown signboard. At the field, turn left and follow the trail along the edge of the field.



STOP 2 – After you turn, you will see Oriental bittersweet growing abundantly. It is recognizable in winter by the bright red and orange berries on the vines. The berries are poisonous to humans! Oriental bittersweet is a nasty invasive plant that grows in field and woods and winds its way around tree trunks in an effort to grow upward. Look for bittersweet growing along the trail. *And check off the box on the Scavenger Hunt Card when you find it.*

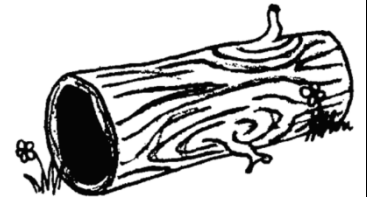
Continue along the edge of the field. You will see horse pasture areas and jumps here that belong to the property owner. You may also be lucky and spot a hawk in a tree top or circling above. Hawks are drawn to fields like this to hunt for field mice and other small rodents. In the distance you will see a stone wall along the field edge. These walls were built by farmers in the mid-1800s to contain cattle in the fields. Remnants of them can be seen in the woods and even at the edges of the beaver pond in the next section of the trail.



Pass through an opening in the stone wall, continuing on the trail. Here the trail has recently been relocated about 20' from the shoreline. Why? Along the shoreline of the pond, otters or muskrats have been making den holes in the bank and these holes have made the old trail dangerous. *You aren't likely to see one, but you can check off the otter box on your Scavenger Hunt card here.*

STOP 3 – As you return to the shoreline of the pond, there is much to see. There are also two smaller beaver lodges in this section of the Brook that are now inactive. They have started to disintegrate and look more like little hills of mud than the pile of sticks you saw at the causeway. Canada Geese can often be seen in this area of the Brook and sometimes they will nest on these old beaver lodges. *If you see one (or hear their honking) check the Canada Goose box on your Scavenger Hunt card.*

Continue along the trail. Here the trail is close to the water and you can see several places where trees are sitting on little hummocks or threatening to fall. The beavers have raised the water level here and the trees will eventually fall as their roots are being drowned. A short ways down the trail you can see a very large white pine that has recently fallen next to the trail and the entire root mass is visible. Take a look at this root mass – you can see the whole underground structure of the tree! The horizontal trunk of this and other trees in the woods are great spots for wildlife – they will often travel along the trunks and sometime live inside them! *Don't forget to cross off the Horizontal Tree box on the Scavenger Hunt Card.*



The trail continues across a small section that is often muddy due to the presence of a small stream/wetland area. After this section the trail is dry and continues through uplands and across an old stone wall until it returns to the edge of the beaver swamp again.

STOP 4 – This is the final stop on this hike -- Standing at the edge of the beaver pond listen carefully for the sound of running water. This is the brook traveling across an old stone wall and heading toward Acton. This is also the result of the increased water level from the beaver dam.

OPTIONAL HIKE EXTENSION – From this point, you can head uphill cross a low stone wall, and head uphill on the Red Trail in Captain Sargent Conservation Area which will take you through beautiful mixed woodland and eventually to South Acton Road. This is a great place to get a workout on some modest hills. You can turn around at any point and return to the field and causeway and back to the beginning.

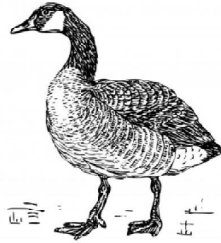
OPTIONAL VERNAL POOL EXTENSION – Once you return to the brown signboard in the field near the causeway, you can pass the turnoff to the causeway and continue straight along the edge of the field. Leaving the field, you will come to a three way trail intersection. Turn left and immediately begin listening for spring peepers and wood frogs which are abundant in this area. **Shhh, tread quietly here**, because if the frogs hear you, they will stop singing. Return to the field, the causeway and back to the beginning.

Family Nature Walk Scavenger Hunt

Try to find them all!



Red Winged Black Bird



Canada Goose



**Alder Cones
(male and female)**



Beaver Lodge



Beaver Signs



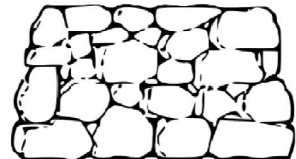
Cattails



Bittersweet Berries



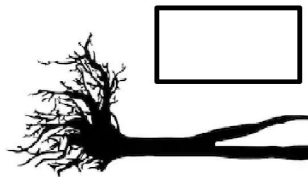
Hawk Soaring



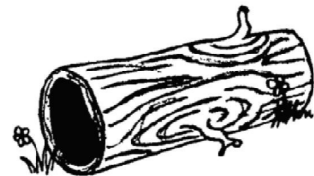
Stonewall



River Otter



**Root Ball of a
Fallen Tree**



Horizontal Log

Captain Sargent Conservation Area & Shepherd Memorial Woodlands Trail Map

