



**NEWTON
CONSERVATORS**

SPRING ISSUE

NEWSLETTER

Newton's land trust working to preserve open space since 1961

WWW.NEWTONCONSERVATORS.ORG • SPRING 2016

2016 Officers and Directors

Beth Wilkinson, *President*

George Mansfield,
Vice President

AnnaMaria Abernathy,
Secretary

Katherine Howard,
Treasurer

Board of Directors

Margaret Albright

David Backer

Dan Brody

Lalor Burdick

Mat Calabro

Bonnie Carter

Michael Clarke

Ann Dorfman

Margaret Doris

Henry Finch

Robert Fizek

Maurice Gilmore

Daniel Green

William Hagar

Chris Hepburn

Ted Kuklinski

Larry Smith

Willis Wang

Advisors

Lisle Baker

Rodney Barker

John Bliss

Octo Barnett

Lee Breckenridge

Lucy Caldwell-Stair

Michael Collora

Douglas Dickson

Bart Hague

Judith Hepburn

Duane Hillis

Peter Kastner

Alison Leary

William Leitch

Don Lubin

Eric Olson

Anne Pearson

Richard Primack

Eric Reenstierna

Jon Regosin

Patricia Robinson

Jane Sender

William Shaevel

Verne Vance

Brian Yates

Where is Woodcock Meadow? Why Does it Need to be Saved? How Can You Help?

By Jon Regosin, Chief of Conservation Science for the National Heritage & Endangered Species Program of Massachusetts, and Beth Wilkinson



MAP: SUZETTE BARBIER

Where is Woodcock Meadow?

Woodcock Meadow is located on a small hilltop in the city-owned Nahanton Park, overlooking the Charles River and near the Newton Community Farm.

Why Does the Meadow Need to be Saved?

The meadow is important in itself because it is the only grassland of its type, a warm-season grassland, left in Newton. It is dominated by Little Bluestem grass interspersed with other native plants such as bush clover, asters, and goldenrods.

Grassland environment, so important to many creatures — especially birds, is increasingly rare throughout the United States. The State of the Birds 2014, co-authored by the nation's top bird science and conservation groups, reports that grasslands have declined by 40% in the United States since 1968 as formerly open space has been developed into residential and commercial properties.

Our little piece of grassland is not under attack by developers. Instead, Woodcock Meadow is being threatened by encroaching trees (the invasive black locust as well as a group of native white pine trees) and invasive shrubs and brambles, such as dewberry. The photos at right illustrate how much of the meadow has been invaded in the past fifteen years.



Aerial photographs showing meadow habitat loss over time. Note woody vegetation intruding into the center of the meadow, as well as encroachment at the edges.

Ideally, the meadow would have only 15 to 20% native shrub and small tree cover, including red cedar, scrub oak, blueberry, gray birch, and sumac. Instead, the larger trees are beginning to fill the meadow, thus, reducing its function as a meadow.

Continued on page 2

Like all meadows, Woodcock Meadow (along with all the shrubs surrounding it) has been home to migratory songbirds, wildflowers, bees and other pollinators, and many butterflies. As the grassland is diminished, so, too, will the population of those valued inhabitants, among them the American Woodcock.



American Woodcock

The Meadow is named for the American Woodcock, the only member of the sandpiper family that is adapted to woodlands and meadows rather than shoreline habitats.

They are listed as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife. Woodcocks winter in the southeastern United States and arrive back in Massachusetts by at least the middle of March and even as early as February and begin their courtship activities soon after. Woodcocks have been shown to return to the same area year after year. (Mass Audubon reports a study in Quabbin in which 80% of 84 banded males returned within a mile of their capture site.)

Many local birders eagerly await the annual return of the woodcocks. The male begins the show at dusk with an aerial display, rocketing into the sky and back down again, with an unmistakable sound that's a combination of high-pitched vocal chirps and the noise made by air rushing through notches in outer feathers. Once the male lands, he struts around the ground and first calls "took-oo" and then makes a mechanical-sounding "peent." Each session lasts up to an hour and includes ten to twenty flights.

The dominant male in control of any territory mates with several females, who nest in slight depressions in the ground. Most nests are found within short range of the singing grounds in abandoned fields or open mixed forest and brush-land just like that surrounding our Woodcock Meadow. The male aggressively protects his singing grounds from other males through migration time from mid-October through mid-November. He does not help with the rearing of the young. The continuing presence of the woodcock makes our meadow even more valuable.

In 2011, the Conservators hired Mass Audubon to create the 2011 Nahanton Park Management Plan. Their plan lists

the restoration and management of Woodcock Meadow as a high priority.

Although the City has supported past volunteer management efforts by the Newton Conservators and Friends of Nahanton Park, available funds are scarce, and such efforts have not been able to keep up with the need, and urgent action is now required to save the Woodcock Meadow.

How Can the Meadow Be Saved?



Woodcock Meadow

With the help of a team of advisors whose professional experience includes designing, executing, and reviewing restoration

plans for similar projects, the Conservators have joined with the Friends of Nahanton park to create a two-phase project followed by a third phase of ongoing maintenance to preserve the meadow.

Phase 1 will include the removal of larger trees that have become established in the middle of the meadow. As has been approved by the City in the past, this phase will also involve volunteers selectively removing smaller saplings and shrubs. This phase will include a licensed herbicide applicator directly applying very small quantities of herbicide to some of the freshly cut stumps (particularly Black Locust) to prevent re-sprouting.

In Phase 2, approximately 40 trees (primarily invasive black locust and some overgrown red cedar), most relatively small, would be removed as well as the aggressive groundcover that harms the native bluestem grass. This phase will include continued volunteer-based monitoring and management of shrubs and small saplings.

Phase 3 is the maintenance phase, which will require occasional mowing of the field, perhaps every two to three years in the fall. Continued volunteer monitoring, along with woody-plant control using hand tools, will supplement the mowing. Introduction of appropriate native plants such as sweet fern, juniper, alder, and dogwood will be done as funding allows, as will York raking or other techniques to limit the buildup of thatch and organic material.

How Can You Help?

There are three ways that concerned citizens can help.

① Volunteer: Watch for announcements from the Conservators and Friends of Nahanton Park, who will be sponsoring volunteer work days to help clear and remove brush. Check future newsletters or both websites: www.NewtonConservators.org and www.NahantonPark.org.

② Donate: Some of the work is too big for volunteers, and services of a contractor will be needed. Our Conservation Advisor and an officer of the Friends of Nahanton Park

have joined together to issue a challenge grant. They will donate \$1000 if there are matching grants from within the community. Already, we have the first \$100 of matching funds. It will be a great start for Phase 1 if we can raise the remaining amount to receive the challenge funds!

③ Voice your support for this important project: Tell your friends and neighbors — in hopes that they will help make the restoration possible. Notify your City Councillors and the Mayor's office that you care about this project.

With all of us working together, we will be able to watch the flight of the American Woodcock for many decades to come! ■

A Conservation Partnership



Friends of Nahanton Park,



Please Donate Now!

Your donation via Newton Conservators is tax deductible.

Online secure: Go to <http://newtonconservators.org/donate.htm>, and put "Woodcock Meadow" in comment field on the donation form.

Or mail check payable to Newton Conservators, with "Woodcock Meadow" on memo line, to
P.O. Box 590011, Newton MA 02459

The History of Woodcock Meadow

Starting in the late 1890s, the land that we now call "Woodcock Meadow" was owned by the Xaverian Brothers, a religious institute dedicated to Roman Catholic education, who ran the Working Boys Home. The Working Boys Home, an imposing brick building that now houses the offices of the Leventhal-Sidman Jewish Community Center, was home to boys who had lost their parents. The boys would work for half of each year and attend school for the other half.

(The Working Boys Home was not far from the Winchester Street Newton City Infirmary, formerly the city's almshouse. For more on the history of the city's almshouses, see NC

board member Michael Clarke's article on them: http://newtonconservators.org/miscbackupfiles/almshouse_history_2012.pdf)

In 1951, the US Army leased the land to house an Anti Aircraft Artillery (AAA) Battalion. With the decreased need for air defense after World War II, there was only one AAA battalion left by 1949. However, with the advent of the Korean War and the escalation of the Cold War, air defense became a primary concern again. In 1951, two active-duty battalions were stationed in the Boston area, one of them at the site of our Woodcock Meadow. In all, there were twelve firing sites in a circle around Boston.

Continued on page 4

The Army occupied the land in Newton through June 1958. The site included an access road, command post, mess hall, latrine, gun platforms, searchlights and an ammunition magazine. It had sewer, electrical, telephone and water services. Also on site were a radar and two above-ground 1500-gallon oil storage tanks.

In 1958, the Army cancelled their lease and returned control of the land to the Xaverian Brothers, who continued to run

the Boys Home until the 1970s. In 1980, the city purchased the land to create Nahanton Park.

The next time you enter Nahanton Park, take a few seconds to imagine how it must have looked in the early 1950s...

✿ Beth Wilkinson

Woodcocks at Nahanton Park

Every spring, small groups of people gather in the half-open meadow above the soccer fields in Nahanton Park as the sun goes down. They are waiting for the unusual mating displays of the American Woodcock.

Woodcocks are landlocked shorebirds with big eyes, oversized beaks and chunky bodies. They probe for earthworms and similar organisms in the earth with their long beaks. Their eyes are set back in their head, providing good stereoscopic vision while they have their long sensitive beaks buried in the earth. They have such unusual and droll appearances that they have several nicknames, which include “bog sucker” and “timberdoodle.” They nest in the northeast and winter in the southeastern United States.

They are classified in the same family as many of our ordinary sandpipers, the family Scolopacidae. It is interesting to muse about how a sandpiper evolved to such a position in life, far from any ocean.

After our monster snow cover last spring, the woodcocks showed up to begin courting on about April Fools Day. My records over the past ten years show that more often they come in the middle of March. They want the snow mostly gone and the ground thawed out so they can probe for worms and other bugs with their flexible upper mandible.

Their courtship display begins shortly after the sun goes down. You wait until all the robins, cardinals, grackles and catbirds fall silent. Dusk is deepening, but it is still light. You do not want a rainy night, both for your comfort and because the woodcocks don't seem to like raw, rainy evenings any more than we do.

The attraction for most people is the courtship flight. A



American Woodcock

male woodcock will stand in one spot and give a loud call, “PEEENT!” It sounds like someone holding their nose firmly and calling “Pete!” The peenting male will usually turn after a couple of calls and then sound as though he is much farther away. He might be very close to you but may be hard to see. His plumage is a mottled brown and black that blends in with dead leaves very well, as you see in the photo. At Nahanton Park there are often several competing males. As you stand in the middle of the meadow they may chase

each other, zooming right past you, chittering and cackling angrily. But soon one woodcock will have voiced enough peents and will begin flying up over your head. They defend the area where they peent, but not the overhead flying area.

When you have listened to extended peenting you need to listen carefully for the sound of twittering wings, as a male woodcock spirals upwards over your head. This will happen quite suddenly and with no warning. They go quite high and can be a challenge to keep in sight. Usually you can

spot them as they spiral upwards. The twittering wings can be used to help locate the bird. When they reach the peak of the spiraling flight the twittering ceases. The bird then begins an erratic spiral downwards, making a whimpering, chirpy sound. If you can keep the bird located during this erratic flight, it will tolerate being looked at, even with a flashlight, after it lands in its peenting area.

Woodcock mating is completely without bonding. Males will mate with any female who allows it to happen, usually right after a display flight. Females will visit several different display areas and mate with different males. Males take no part in rearing the young.

The female scrapes out a spot on the ground in an area with a lot of dead leaves. This takes place in woods or brushy fields. She lines the scrape with dead leaves. The whole family fits well into this sort of camouflage. As with many sandpipers, the downy young are mobile very quickly. They can start foraging after just a few days. The mother feeds them at first and keeps them close to her. The chicks become independent of the mother after about five weeks.

Woodcocks migrate to the southeastern United States for the winter. They fly at night. During migration they can turn up in odd places and will attract attention because of their odd appearance.



American Woodcock

The habit of nesting on the ground may cause population problems as we continue to develop more and more areas and bring along our cats and dogs. Woodcocks are a unique part of our world.

The displaying grounds in Nahanton Park are a treasure that the citizens of Newton should preserve. The wet woodlands along the adjacent Charles River provide a corridor of woodlands that will not be developed for stores and

housing. This conjunction may allow the woodcocks to continue their courtship and to rear their young successfully for years to come.

The Newton Conservators encourage you to get out of doors this spring and experience something new in the natural world. Woodcocks might fill that bill.

Photographer Bob Stymeist, who took the woodcock photos for this article has a photo gallery at the following link: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mountauburncemetery/galleries/72157626386819448/>.

✿ Pete Gilmore

Donate to the Newton Conservators When Shopping on Amazon.com



Amazon Smile is a program through which Amazon donates .5% of most purchases (yes, \$5 of every \$1000) to a nonprofit (501c3) organization of your choice.

How do you use Amazon Smile? Instead of going to Amazon.com, you go to Smile.amazon.com. On your first visit, you will be asked to choose a nonprofit organization to receive the bonus donation. Enter "Newton Conservators," and you are ready to go. The rest of your shopping proceeds exactly the same as if you had logged in to Amazon.com initially. You will not need to log in again each time you return.

Some Conservators board members have been using Smile.Amazon.com for almost a year, and it has worked smoothly. We've received regular quarterly payments for eligible purchases by a transfer to the Conservators bank account.

If you have any further questions about the program, check the FAQ page: <http://smile.amazon.com/about>.

We are not encouraging members to abandon local shopping (and, in fact, offered our local booksellers a listing on our website to support them). However, if people do make purchases on Amazon, it would be nice to have them benefit us.

Collectively, the donations will add up over time. Our first bonus check was \$40. With more members participating, the proceeds will be significant, possibly covering some of the costs of maintenance at our properties.