

Pocket Places

Steele Farm, Boxborough

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I continue to try to find new places to bird locally. On March 8 on the way home from work I tried Steele Farm in Boxborough for the first time, mostly to see whether it held any woodcock and maybe to owl a little bit as it grew dark.

As soon as I reached the farm road, I saw a Northern Shrike in the lone tree located in the middle of the field between the pine grove and the stone wall. I milled around in the pines for a bit and headed off into the deciduous woods at the end of the field. There were a couple of hundred robins and many Red-winged Blackbirds flitting from tree to tree, and a Red-tailed Hawk higher up in the opposite direction.

I walked fairly far into the woods and at that point the sun was down, but it was still light enough and I heard a Great Horned Owl. I couldn't see the owl so I headed out of the woods to plant myself at the edge to see, as it got darker, whether the owl would come out to perch adjacent to the field. I got a little distracted because the woodcock started peenting and performing their nuptial flights fairly early. It was still light enough to get really good sightings. I counted about five woodcock.

I then tucked myself in the edge of the pine grove facing the woods and started scanning the edges. In the meantime, the woodcock were peenting and whirring all around me, and then a very dark shape emerged about 30 feet on my left from the grove I was standing in, swooped low across the field, and perched about 60 feet from me in the same tree that the shrike had been in an hour earlier. It was a Great Horned Owl. I marveled at the owl until it swooped across the field to hunt. By that time it was very dark and hard to see. Although it may have lacked in numbers, this evening rated pretty high. Alone in the quiet, getting these great birds in a place that I tried for the first time, I am filled with wonder at the potential a new place can hold.

Steele Farm is about 30 acres and about half is forested. It is contiguous to another 30 acres of conservation land called Beaver Brook Meadows. It is a rather small parcel of accessible public conservation land. However, the land has several edges that create nice habitat diversity for such a small area. There is a large open field — some of which, on the southern end and along the fringes of a small stream, consists of wet meadow. In addition to the stream, there are some small farm ponds, low lying multiflora rose and juniper along an adjacent upland hillside, rock walls, a small stand of spruces and scotch pine (which is basically the remnant of an old Christmas tree farm), upland white pine and oak forest, and a fairly large red maple swamp.

Directions to Steele Farm: Take exit 28 (Route 111) off of Interstate 495. Head east on Route 111 toward Boxborough (you should immediately pass an Exxon station on your left). Continue 1.7 miles until you reach Middle Road and a white church on your left. Turn left onto Middle Road, and drive about one mile. Slow down when you see Picnic Street (on your right). As you go down the hill to your immediate left, you will see an abandoned white farmhouse, a white barn, and other smaller structures with a large field in the background. That's it, and it's okay to park in the farmhouse driveway. ↗