



Brewster's Woods Wildlife Sanctuary Self-Guided Walking Tour

"For, lo, the winter is past, the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of the birds is come."
-Inscription on William Brewster's gravestone at Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge MA

Brewster's Woods Wildlife Sanctuary is a 130-acre property along the banks of the Concord River. This historic site was formerly part of the country homestead of William Brewster (1851-1919), an early leader in American ornithology and curator at Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology—and the first President of Mass Audubon. In 1891, Brewster purchased the 300-acre October Farm in Concord as a respite from his city life in Cambridge. Here he embarked on extensive field work taking full advantage of the forest, meadows, and extensive wetlands on the banks of the Concord River.

The sanctuary is predominantly forested with extensive wetlands on the eastern side and smaller wetlands throughout. Two sizeable meadows provide some open habitat, while the floodplain forest along the Concord River hosts the most abundant natural diversity found on the property.

Brewster's Woods has 1.6 miles of trails to explore, with easy to rugged terrain that leads you through the shade of mature woodlands into open fields and along the edges of the Concord River floodplain. One favorite route recommended by our staff is below (approximately one hour of easy walking), but feel free to explore on your own!

Driving Directions

Address: Balls Hill Road, Concord MA

From Monument Street: Turn onto Balls Hill Road and proceed straight for approximately 0.4 miles. You will pass a set of three mailboxes on the left (#165/203/221) - proceed on Balls Hill road past this point, and then you will come to a driveway on your left. Turn left into this driveway and park in the small lot to the left of the gate. The sanctuary's visitor parking area is located before you get to the October Farm Riverfront parking area. Follow signs to access the entrance to the Fisher Trail approximately 100 yards further on Balls Hill Road.

Parking is extremely limited. There is only space for 4 vehicles at a time. As a courtesy to our conservation neighbors, please do not park in the October Farm Riverfront parking area unless you also plan to enjoy that property's trails during your visit.

Fisher Trail

Length: 0.26 miles

Details: The Fisher Trail is located approximately 100 yards down Balls Hill Road from our parking area. **Walk left out of the parking area onto Balls Hill Road and the start of the Fisher Trail will be on the left.** The trail slopes downward from the road and then follows the edge of the wetland. This large riverside marsh, known as an impoundment, was apparently created by Brewster to provide habitat for ducks and other water birds. Mallards, Wood Ducks, and Great Blue Herons are often seen. Native shrubs like peppercorn form thickets along the waterline that are also great hiding spots for birds and small mammals. As you walk



along, look for wooden nesting boxes placed in the impoundment – these are for Wood Ducks, placed and monitored for decades along the Concord River and beyond by the US Fish and Wildlife service.

When the Fisher Trail joins the main carriage path, turn right. A short, unmarked spur trail immediately on the right leads to a bench, a great place to view the marsh. On sunny days, turtles can often be seen basking on the logs. Mass Audubon also participates in radio-tracking of Blanding’s turtles, a threatened species in Massachusetts that is finding new habitat opportunity here at Brewster’s Woods.

After enjoying the view, return to the main trail and turn right to continue to the River Loop.

River Loop

Length: 0.5 miles

Details: The River Loop provides a peaceful walk along the Concord River. **You will first cross a short dam at the north end of the impoundment.** To your left is the Concord River; to the right is Brewster’s impoundment. This transitional habitat between forest, wetland, and river is a place rich with wildlife. Look for birds flying above and resting in the marsh plants.

Continue straight past the retaining wall and you will find a small boat landing that makes a great viewing spot on the banks of the Concord River. Across the river lies Great Meadows Wildlife Refuge. Brewster’s Woods is part of 2,000 acres of connected open space, providing protected habitat for a wide variety of wildlife including fox, fisher, bobcat, muskrat, and deer. Look for an interesting scooped-out area on the hillside above you, Brewster’s possible excavation site for soil to create the dam.



The River Loop turns to the right and then continues straight along the river for a short distance along the base of Davis Hill. At the far south end of the hill, you will find a gate that designates the boundary between Brewster’s Woods and the adjacent October Farm Riverfront property, owned jointly by the Town of Concord and the Concord Land Conservation Trust. This wonderful trail network is worth exploring during your visit or on another trip.

If you have time, continue straight through the gate into October Farm Riverfront and follow the trail along the river. After about 5 to 8 minutes’ walk, you will come to the stone foundations of William Brewster’s cabins. From his journal entries, we know that these cabins were Brewster’s home base for exploration of the property and study of its wildlife, often accompanied by friends from Cambridge and beyond. The arched stone “boathouse,” marked by Brewster’s initials and “Sept. 1910,” was the storage space for the sailing canoe he used to explore the river.

Turn around and return to the gate, and then proceed uphill on the River Loop. Your short, steep climb will be rewarded with a lovely beech grove and stunning river views from the top of Davis Hill.



After his passing in 1919, Brewster’s land was divided and sold to different owners. His obituary, written by Henry Wetherbee Henshaw for *The Auk* Vol XXXVII (no 1): 1-23, noted how much his Concord estate meant to him. In fact, he worried that “all the interest in his Concord place was destined to lapse when he was

through with it.” It also noted that he often “discussed its availability for a duck or game breeding place, or for a bird refuge.”

Decades later, Concord resident Charlene Engelhard began piecing together as much of October Farm as she could and reestablished trails through the riverfront portion of the land. Meanwhile, nearby neighbor Nancy Beeuwkes shared Engelhard's vision for returning to Brewster's roots; she and her husband, Reinier, were living next door in the very home in which Brewster once lived. When the time came for Engelhard to sell her 131-acre property in 2018, the Beeuwkeses saw the opportunity to protect the land forever. Wanting everyone to experience the beauty of Brewster's landscape, they approached Mass Audubon with the most generous offer in the organization's 125-year history: Nancy and Reinier would purchase the Engelhard land and donate it to Mass Audubon, leave their own home and 12 acres to Mass Audubon through a life estate, and provide a robust endowment to care for it all. An inscribed rock at the top of David Hill honors Nancy's donation of Brewster's Woods to Mass Audubon, protecting the property from residential development to ensure that Brewster's own vision of conserving the land would be possible.



Proceed through the beech grove and downhill back to the dam. Signs of beaver and muskrat are frequently seen; look for their worn paths down to the water's edge. Brewster made extensive records of the wildlife that he saw on the property. His legacy of conservation was greatly influenced by his time in Concord, a period in which he purposefully chose to put down his rifle (the common means at the time for obtaining bird specimens for study) and pick up his binoculars. This time also aligned with his role as President of Mass Audubon from 1896 to 1913, working with founders Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall to enact legislation prohibiting the taking of song birds for ornamental purposes. Brewster, along with his field assistant Robert Gilbert, was also an accomplished landscape photographer. More than 2,000 of his glass plate negatives reside in Mass Audubon's collection, including this view of Davis Hill.



Bluebird Field Loop

Length: 0.84 miles

Details: **After crossing the dam, take the Bluebird Field trail on the right.** The Bluebird Field Loop explores a variety of habitats along the floodplain of the Concord River and through mixed forest uplands. After traveling through the forest, you will enter a former horse pasture (historically known as “Green's Field”) which is being restored as a meadow for bird and pollinator habitat. As the trail name suggests, Eastern Bluebirds are often present, along with a variety of songbirds, Pileated Woodpeckers, soaring hawks, and owls.



Follow the trail along the west and south sides of the meadow and then onto the carriage road leading down the hill. The grassy bowl area is a nice spot for a picnic or snack

during your hike. In the distance, you will see some of the buildings that are under design/renovation as we work to bring the sanctuary into full operation (currently staff-only area). As part of the transition of Brewster's Woods from a private residence enjoyed by few to a place for all, our plans include repurposing the main house as a nature center to welcome visitors, allow space for scientists and scholars to collaborate, share the life of William Brewster and his role in the conservation movement, and showcase our world-class American bird art collection. The renovation of the residence will ensure that it is ADA-accessible and a model for climate-friendly buildings, along with serving as an inspirational home for the community and conservation experts to explore solutions to the biggest environmental challenges of our time.

Mass Audubon is incredibly grateful to bring to life Brewster's dream of protecting this land more than 100 years later. Thank you for sharing it with us.

At the bottom of the hill, take the Fisher Trail on your right to return to the parking area. Please reach out to us at brewsterswoods@massaudubon.org with any questions or to share a photo from your visit. We hope you will return soon.

Brewster's Woods Wildlife Sanctuary

