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October 2022
Vol. 50, No. 5

Birding Heald Street Orchard, Pepperell, Massachusetts, and Nearby Conservation Lands

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The Nashua River watershed is a tangle of Merrimack River tributaries that support lush riparian habitat in north-central Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire. What is now the town of Pepperell lies at the confluence of the Nashua and Nissitissit rivers. Indigenous people have lived in this region for at least 8,000 years, and Nipmuc, Pennacook, and Nashaway tribes valued the area for hunting, fishing, and berries. European settlers arrived in 1720 and began to farm, turning forests into field.

During the industrial revolution, paper mills and other industries grew to dominate the watershed and contributed to increased deforestation and water pollution. The runoff from factories and mills, combined with the effects of dams and culverts, reshaped and degraded the land. By the 1960s, the Nashua River was ranked by government agencies as one of the nation's ten most polluted rivers.

It is hard to overstate how polluted the river was. An Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) report from the 1960s details the gallons of industrial dyes, discharges associated with leather tanning, tons of raw sewage, catalogs of highly toxic chemicals, and biochemical oxygen demand affecting the river. According to locals, the stink was detectable more than a mile away.

Area resident Marion Stoddart decided she had had enough. She organized the Nashua River Clean-Up Committee, which pushed for regulation, remediation, and conservation. Stoddart also founded the Nashua River Watershed Association. The achievements of the local community in cleaning up the watershed offer a remarkable story of reclamation, one that has produced an astonishing result. Some of these waterways today are among the cleanest and purest in the state. Stoddart's achievements were honored by the United Nations, chronicled in murals, described in a widely read children's book, *A River Ran Wild* by Lynne Cherry, and presented in an award-winning documentary, *Marion Stoddart: The Work of 1000*. One of Pepperell's loveliest spots today is named in her honor.

The town of Pepperell and the Nashoba Conservation Trust protect 3,000-plus acres of this land today. An additional 5,300 acres are protected by other public and private entities. Much of this is former farmland or riparian—a type of habitat adjacent to rivers and waterways that hosts unique plants and animals. On a recent visit, I met a volunteer removing buckthorn and honeysuckle from a spot along Sucker Brook where flycatchers had nested. It was inspiring to learn how local people continue Stoddart's legacy and give their time to protect these areas with enthusiasm.

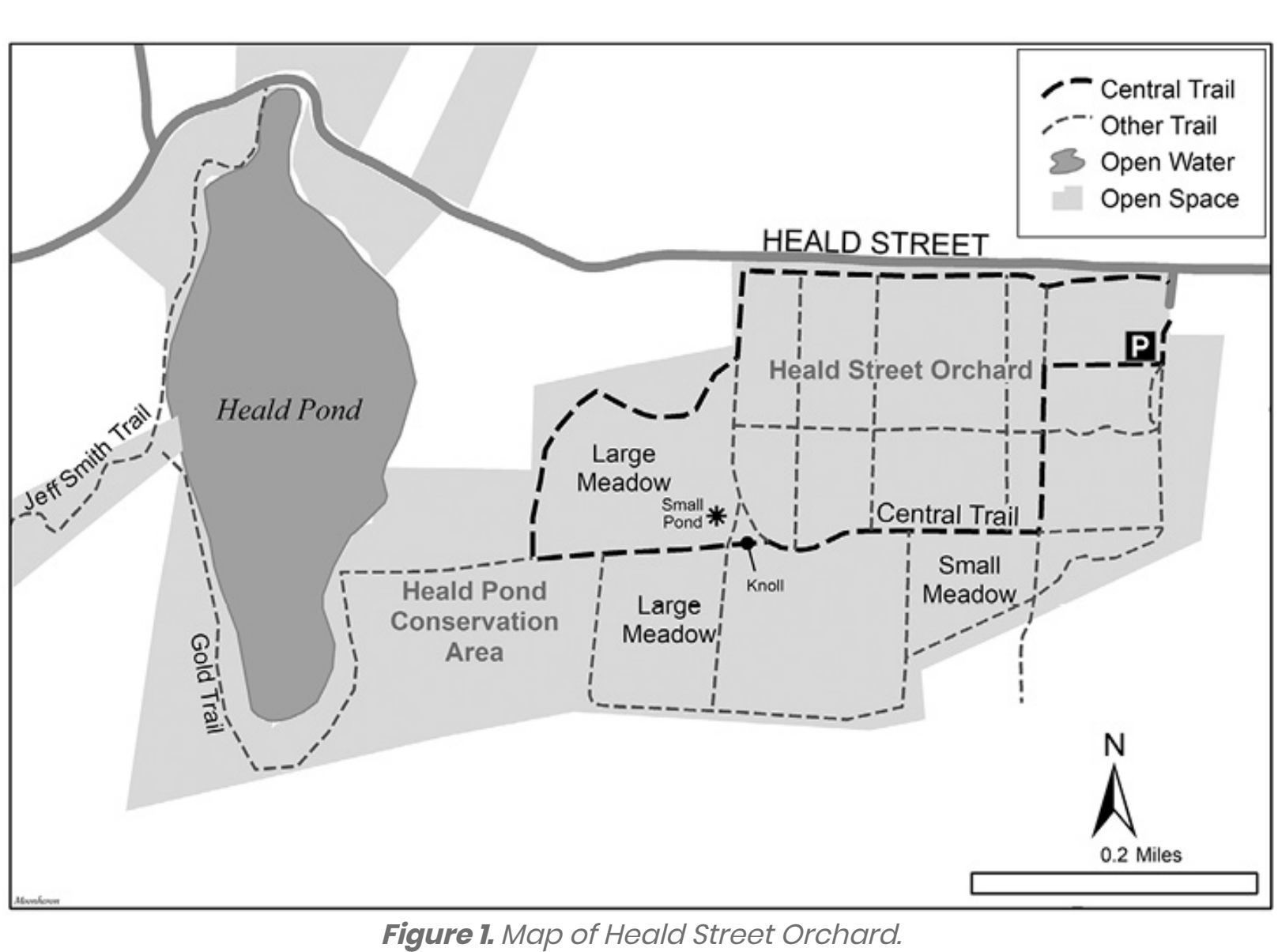

Figure 1. *Map of Heald Street Orchard.*

I made my first birding trip to Pepperell about 10 years ago after reading a Massbird entry about Heald (pronounced *heeled*) Orchard from local birder Alan Bostick. Ever since, Pepperell has kept drawing me back. I now try to bird the area at least a couple of times a year. Pepperell's eBird hotspots—Nissitissit Meadow (73 species; local birder Scott Wilson added nine species on a single day in the spring of 2022), Keyes-Parker Conservation Area (118 species), Heald Street Orchard (159 species), Westside Trail/ Marion Stoddart Conservation Area (89 species)—rarely disappoint. After all, these hot spots are located in Massachusetts's second-most commonly used migration flyway after Plum Island (cf. Nashua River Wild & Scenic River Study Committee) with a combined list of 230 species of birds—half of them nesting.

Heald Street Orchard

The crown jewel is Pepperell's 80-acre Heald Street Orchard. (See Figure 1. Map of Heald Street Orchard.) The town purchased this property in 1979 and leased the land to local apple farmers until farming was no longer sustainable. In 2008, the town introduced a detailed conservation plan for the orchard with the goals of protecting the water supply, preserving biodiversity, and supporting recreational use. Today the orchard is a lively successional habitat, but perhaps not a typical one. Though I have birded here mostly in the spring for the warbler show, it is a delight in all seasons, offering a great variety of species and impressive numbers of birds.

Indigo Bunting. All photographs by the author.

Heald Street Orchard is easy to find. From Pepperell Town Hall, drive north on Park Street, and take the first left onto Heald Street. Follow Heald Street for 1.5 miles; the dirt parking area is on the left at the northeast corner of the orchard. There is a second, smaller lot just down the road in the northwest corner. The GPS coordinates for the northeast corner parking area are Latitude 42.67099; Longitude -71.62231. Other entrances are available but require hiking through rugged conditions.

There are no facilities nearby, and the location is not easily accessible to people with disabilities without specialized outdoor equipment such as an all-terrain wheelchair. It is also hilly and unfriendly to hinky knees. But even the parking lot can be impressively birdy and is worth checking out if you are driving by. I have seen Indigo Bunting, Northern Parula, and Cape May, Bay-breasted, Magnolia, Black-throated Blue, Blue-winged, and Wilson's warblers even before turning the engine off.

Beginning birders and those who struggle with warbler neck will find Heald Street Orchard quite accommodating. Fruit trees are not towering trees, and their canopy is not very thick. Add to this the sheer number of birds, and you have favorable conditions to observe birds you may otherwise only hear or glimpse through leaves. The hills also make it easy to look down from a high point, not up. Photographers, too, will find it easier to photograph birds at Heald because of the shorter trees. If you enjoy recording birds, the lack of traffic in the area is a benefit. The only drawback is a nearby chicken coop—a rooster is often audible in the mornings.

Heald Street Orchard slopes from the north along Heald Street down to woodland on the perimeter in the south and west, with a shrubby margin in the east. Most of the apple trees are past their prime, but when the remaining few of these twisted gray branches are in bloom, the pale blossoms welcome plenty of bees and Orchard Orioles. Unmarked mowed paths crisscross the orchard in a mostly even grid. In spring, the orchard is easy to navigate, but by mid-June tall grasses and wildflowers filled with insects take over, and you are at the mercy of the mowing. Because the orchard is home to ground-nesting birds such as Bobolink and Field Sparrow, staying on paths is vital.

From the dirt lot, walk through the gate and enter the orchard by way of a shady bower, often filled with the songs of Wood Thrushes and the buzzy notes of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. If you are lucky to be there just before dawn on a spring morning, the chorus can be overwhelming.

Heald Street Orchard.

Most birders meander along the apple trees on the right at first. Take a left at the first T junction and head down the slope, then make a dogleg onto a wide mowed path—the Central Trail. This path runs along the field through the center of the orchard to its western edge. The Central Trail is unmarked, though easily navigated if you bring a map.

This is the first of two fields you will encounter. A recently installed kestrel box has caught the attention of local falcons, but reportedly no pair has yet chosen to call it home. As you walk along the Central Trail, listen for warblers, orioles, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, House Wrens, and sparrows in the trees on your right. Scan the field on your left for Eastern Bluebirds, American Kestrels, and swallows. It is possible to see Northern Rough-winged, Tree, Barn, and Bank swallows here.

Instead of heading to the right along the trees, take a detour straight down the eastern edge of the orchard. I have always enjoyed this edge that goes down the hill into the southeast corner because it often holds a surprise or two. This part of the orchard is muddy and includes deep froggy puddles surrounded by thick tangles, tall grasses and sedges, sumac, and bushy vegetation—ideal for skulkers such as Nashville Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Winter Wren, Warbling Vireo, Swamp Sparrow, and Wilson's Snipe, as well as birds such as Canada Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Black-and-White Warbler, and American Redstart, which can sometimes be seen up close and down low. I keep hoping for a Mourning Warbler here, though I have not found one yet. When you get to the bottom, scan the treetops along the margin for Scarlet Tanager, woodpeckers, and high-tree warblers such as Northern Parula and Blackburnian, Black-throated Green, Blackpoll, and Tennessee warblers. Listen for Eastern Wood Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, and Red-eyed Vireo, as well as the other vireos. You may also find a flycatcher or two along with Eastern Kingbirds. Heald Street Orchard has historically offered a nice variety of flycatchers.

Blue-winged Warbler.

Walk back up through the field to reach the Central Trail. There is no need to be orderly or follow anything but your own ears. Tracking the unusual chip note can produce anything from a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher to an Orange-crowned Warbler if you are lucky. Any mowed path here can be good birding, and you can always orient yourself by going north toward the road.

The showstoppers here are the Blue-winged Warblers. You will find them in abundance, *bee-buzz*-ing themselves silly. Their numbers make Heald a wonderful place to compare this warbler's pre-dawn and post-dawn songs. Wherever there are Blue-winged Warblers in such numbers, there is also the tantalizing possibility of a Golden-winged Warbler—an unexpected lifer for me here a few years ago. In the recent past, Heald Street Orchard has drawn several Blue-winged x Golden-winged hybrids in addition to the spectacular numbers of Blue-winged Warblers. During the spring of 2019, Heald Street Orchard hosted a Brewster's warbler.

While the Blue-wings with their overdone eyeliner are the stars, that does not mean these charmers do not have stiff competition. Indigo Buntings often show up in terrific numbers, and you can find large flocks of Cedar Waxwings in the blossoms. Their numbers, as well as those of Eastern Bluebirds, can be quite astonishing.

Once you have had a taste of the Orchard's most colorful denizens, you may start to wonder about the habitat around you. In rapidly reforesting natural areas and in suburban Massachusetts, with its penchant for tree-free housing developments and expansive sterile lawns, grassland birds' breeding habitat is in decline. In typical succession, grasslands are overtaken by woody species and develop into shrublands and then young trees. The tree species spread and the landscape returns to forest. Heald Street Orchard is a managed habitat—succession happens, but not in the ways one might expect. The town approaches the orchard as a managed mosaic and aims to preserve a patchwork of habitats for critical species by slowing down some aspects of succession. A good example is a large meadow in the west of the orchard. Old fruit trees were cleared from a section in the west of the orchard in 2008, which the town has maintained as a meadow, mowing it once every two years in the late fall or early winter to ensure some grassland habitat is preserved. This meadow hosts Field Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Bobolinks, swallows, and raptors. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds zip between trees. Listen carefully for Grasshopper Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark, and Prairie Warbler.

The large meadow, looking west.

The meadow is managed not only for birds, but also for pollinators. The summer butterfly and dragonfly show can be as impressive as the warblers. Still, as one local birder remarked to me, the dying apple trees and the increasing presence of bittersweet, multiflora rose, and poison ivy are having an impact on pollinators and bird numbers. There is still work to be done to preserve the diversity of species here.

On the east side of the meadow, you will find a bare knoll, a good spot for sunning snakes that draw the interest of kestrels. This hilltop with its inviting bench is the place to listen to the spring chittering of Chimney Swifts overhead and to scan for birds of prey: Broad-winged, Red-Shouldered, Cooper's, and Sharp-shinned hawks, as well as vultures, Common Ravens, Bald Eagles, Peregrine Falcons, and Merlins, depending on the season. Looking out from this spot one spring morning, I saw a gray fox. Many mammals are possible here year-round; reports of deer, mink, otters, foxes, and coyotes are common. Locals report a resident bobcat. Bears, porcupines, and moose are occasional.

The small meadow.

Just north of the knoll, a small pond with a hem of low shrubs and willows attracts different species. This little gem hosts Yellow Warblers, Wilson's Warblers, Eastern Phoebes, Eastern Kingbirds, and Least and Willow flycatchers, as well as other warbler species and mammals coming in for a drink.

At the southwest corner of the orchard, you can enter the cool shade of the woods to explore the adjacent Heald Pond Conservation area (discussed below). Otherwise, turn right up the hill toward the road to bird along the western edge of the orchard. Listen for the *chick-burr* of Scarlet Tanagers, the entertaining song of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, and the eerie sounds of cuckoos. You have a reasonable chance of encountering at least four species of vireos as well as courting owls, depending on the season and time of day. When you come to the top, walk east along the northern edge of the orchard, meandering up and down the slope to explore the drier and sunnier environment around these trees, eventually coming back to the parking area in the northeast corner.

At the end of the day, Heald's warblers settle down. Swallows and swifts and other twilight birds take over. You can hear American Woodcocks, Eastern Whip-poor-wills, Common Nighthawks, and owls. Owls can be active year-round, and locals who snowshoe here in winter report impressive owl and raptor shows, with eagles setting on pond ice to consume their catch. Fall and winter birds include Pine Siskin, Common Redpoll, Dark-Eyed Junco, American Tree Sparrow, and Lincoln's, Fox, White-crowned, and White-throated sparrows. A recent Christmas Bird Count logged 81 species in Pepperell, including Lesser Scaup, Common Loon, and American Pipit, many of them in the orchard.

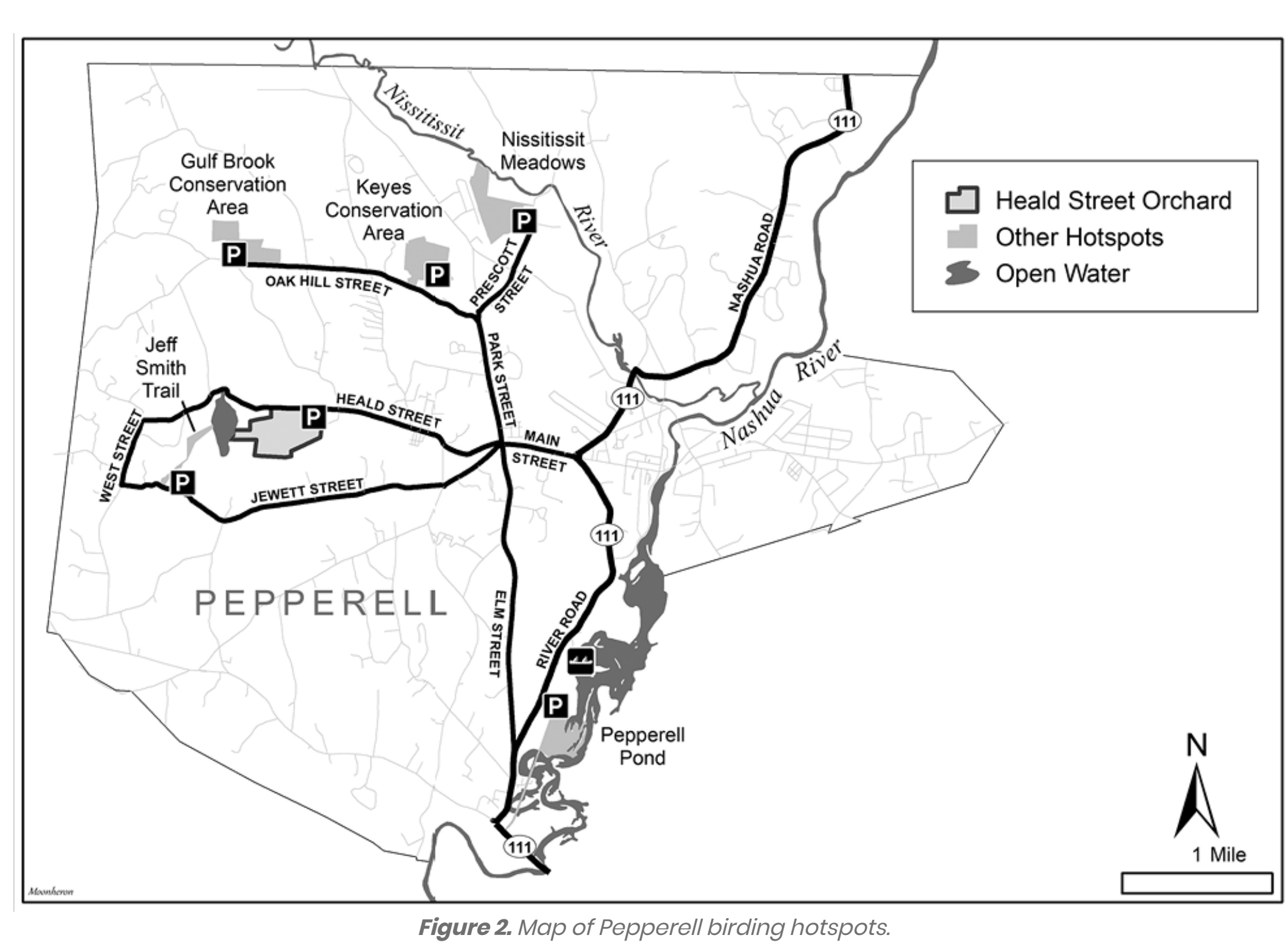

Figure 2. *Map of Pepperell birding hotspots.*

A few warnings—Heald Street Orchard is popular among dog walkers. Mostly, I have encountered dogs that are well-behaved and well under control. Unfortunately, stepping in dog feces is much too common here (or maybe I am unlucky). Deer ticks can also be a problem, so take reasonable precautions. Beware, too, of drenching rain. Rocky trails and grassy paths can be slippery when wet, and some patches of tall grass can be knee-deep and muddy enough to pull off your shoe. In summer, there can be a lot of poison ivy along paths, so closed-toed shoes and long pants are advisable.

TOWN OF PEPPERELL
HEALD POND

Heald Pond, viewed from the road.

While it is hard not to want to spend half a day at the Heald Street Orchard, you can also string together a few of Pepperell's other locations for a productive day in almost any season. Some particularly rewarding and scenic areas nearby include those listed below (see Figure 2. Map of Pepperell birding hotspots.), but this list is by no means comprehensive, and most of these spots seem underbirded to me, at least by eBird standards.

Heald Pond Conservation Area

Many visitors to the Heald Street Orchard also explore the cool shade of Heald Pond Conservation Area, a 32-acre mixed woodland that surrounds a beautiful pond at the southwest corner of the orchard (see Figure 1). Several species of woodpeckers are common, as well as Black-capped Chickadees, Eastern Towhees, Brown Creepers, Ovenbirds, Carolina Wrens, Pine Warblers, and both nuthatches. Look for signs of Pileated Woodpecker excavations and trees stripped of bark just past the entrance. The pond may also offer a few ducks, a Common Loon, Hooded Mergansers, Belted Kingfishers, Spotted and Solitary sandpipers, and the occasional Osprey. The pond's edges are visited by Green and Great Blue herons, Black-crowned Night-Herons, and other waders. This area hosts hawks, owls, turtles, salamanders, frogs, and beavers.

Jeff Smith Trail

The trail around the west side of the pond —known as the Gold Trail—intersects the Jeff Smith Trail, but it is better to enter this trail south of the orchard at Jewett Street (Latitude 42.6638; Longitude -71.6425). There is a small lot here for parking.

The seven-mile Jeff Smith Trail runs all the way to the New Hampshire border through a 10-acre strip of microclimates glittering with condensation and full of mosses and fungi, creating a protected corridor for plants, wildlife, and hikers. The southern section of the trail from Jewett Street to the Gold Trail intersection is often wet, but it offers excellent birding. Underbirded and underappreciated, perhaps because of the complicated terrain, this ramble runs through the dramatic Blood Brook Ravine, which is not named for its color or a murderous history, but for the local Blood family. It includes wet thickets with clearings and woodlands as well as an old dam. It is an incredibly birdy spot, with Brown Thrashers, Gray Catbirds, Warbling Vireos, Northern Mockingbirds, both waterthrush species, Nashville, Magnolia, and Wilson's warblers, wrens, and various flycatchers. I suspect you can find much more here.

Northwest of the pond, the trail is extremely steep and often slippery as it winds through a thick grove of oak, maple, beech, and hemlock with a rich understory. This challenging trail follows a geologic fault line along a high ridge that overlooks a deep canyon with fantastic views of the pond. It then crosses the road into other conservation areas: first Pepperell Springs, and then the Gulf Brook Conservation Area. In 1780, local resident Joseph Heald believed that there was gold and silver in the rock formations and tried to mine them. The effort failed and was repeated by others, but all anyone ever found was slate.

Nissitissit Meadow

Nissitissit Meadow is an eBird hotspot. Less than a mile of walking takes you through a beautiful wetland with trails along the Nissitissit River, a fast-flowing, cold water river that provides critical habitat for species of concern such as American and Least bitterns, water shrews, spotted and wood turtles, the spine-crowned clubtail dragonfly, and five of the state's six freshwater mussel species (one of the most endangered animal groups in North America).

A short loop to the south leads to a marsh, and the north trail loops you through a meadow that connects to additional trails in the Nissitissit River Wildlife Management Area. Managed by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, it is a parcel that includes hundreds of additional acres of woodland to explore. This is a magnificent riparian habitat where you can find both Northern and Louisiana waterthrushes, Spotted Sandpipers, Baltimore Orioles, woodpeckers, flycatchers, vireos, and many of the high-tree wood warblers. The small lot is on Prescott Street. The GPS coordinates for the parking area are Latitude 42.68937; Longitude -71.59395.

Keyes-Parker Conservation Area

Another eBird hotspot, the Keyes-Parker Conservation Area, consists of 70 acres of open fields, forests, ponds, and wetlands. The area surrounds Sucker Brook, which is one of the highest quality cold water brooks in eastern Massachusetts and a breeding area for brown trout and the endangered brook floater mussel. A small dam was removed a few years ago, and a culvert was improved to allow the brook to flow more freely. The landscape is still adapting, but it is spectacular. The woodlands here feature beautiful and healthy eastern hemlock and shagbark hickory. The grassy meadows are filled with wildflowers and pollinators. Bird species include Red-tailed Hawks, Barred Owls, Pileated Woodpeckers, Black-capped Chickadees, Eastern Bluebirds, Cedar Waxwings, Common Nighthawks, Solitary Sandpipers, Cliff Swallows, Rusty Blackbirds, and a nice variety of ducks, warblers, and flycatchers during migration.

Gulf Brook Conservation Area

This 208-acre town-owned parcel includes mixed woodland, wetland, old-growth trees, a steep gorge, and a beaver pond. The Gulf Brook wends its way through these woodlands, and thanks to a project done in partnership with the state, volunteers, and private funders that involved the replacement of two decaying culverts, the brook now provides high-quality breeding habitat for brown trout and other species of concern. The area was also protected with Northern Saw-whet Owls in mind.

Gulf Brook is an excellent place to seek marsh birds, woodpeckers, and songbirds as well as gray foxes, white-tailed deer, porcupines, beavers, otters, and mink. Salamanders and frogs are abundant. There is an entrance on Oak Hill Street. A small parking area is located across the street from the trail on Chestnut Street. The GPS coordinates for the parking area are Latitude 42.68533; Longitude -71.63252.

Pepperell Pond/Marion Stoddart Conservation Area/Westside Trail

The Pepperell Pond area of the Nashua River is a migratory stopover for waterfowl. The Westside Trail runs on a railbed through spectacular scenery where views of the river are to your east. Bald Eagles are common in this area. This eBird hotspot is an out-and-back trail that provides great looks at the river and its wetlands. A scope or a kayak will be useful here to see birds on the west bank. Because the trail runs along the west side of the river, you will be looking into the sun in the morning; afternoon birding here is more enjoyable. The GPS coordinates for the canoe and kayak launch and parking area are Latitude 42.64666; Longitude -71.58916. The GPS coordinates for the Walent parking area are Latitude 42.64190; Longitude -71.59108.

The eBird lists for Pepperell's treasured areas may not tell the whole story. Some of these natural places are filled not only with a chorus of songbirds, but also with the prospect of something unusual, something rare. Heald Street Orchard and its environs certainly seem like those kinds of places.

Special thanks to local birders Alan Bostick and Scott Wilson for sharing their stories and comments on birding in this area with me, and to Paula Terrasi, Conservation Administrator for the Town of Pepperell.

Mari Badger *is a Hopkinton birder, formerly of Cambridge, working on a birding festival for greater Boston. This is her second article for* Bird Observer.

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