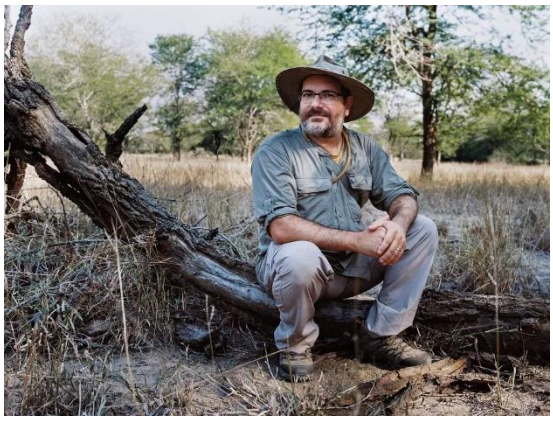
September 2026

* * * NATURE NEWS * * *

FLYING ANT SEASON

Certain environmental conditions in Hardwick on August 28th triggered a massive emergence of small winged ants called immigrant pavement ants - the tiny ones that build nests beneath cracks in sidewalks and asphalt driveways. It was a hot and humid day, and it's possible that temperature as well as decreasing amounts of daylight might have provided "cues" that told the ants it was time to take what's called their "nuptial flight."



Dr. Andy Suarez, an ant researcher at the University of Illinois, explains that ants are social organisms that live in colonies, headed by a queen and maintained by an army of female workers. For most of the season, the non-flying worker ants forage for food and protect the colony while the queen lays hundreds of eggs each day to increase the workforce she oversees. At certain times throughout the year, the queen's focus shifts toward laying eggs that grow up to be future queens and male ants that can mate with them, Suarez says. Unlike worker ants, queens and their male partners have wings and will emerge from the nests to mate while swarming in the air. "It's a switch from focusing on colony growth to colony reproduction," he says. "They fly, they find their partners, they mate and they start a new colony." It usually only takes ants a few days to fly around and find partners to mate with.

Mating swarms occur where numerous ants from different colonies congregate to mate. "The flights do tend to be coordinated within a species so that when the colonies do release their winged individuals they'll be able to find partners of the opposite sex from other

colonies who are flying at the same time," Suarez points out. The ants are only able to fly for short periods of time, so many of them die before they're able to mate.

After a queen mates with her partner in the sky, the male ant loses his wings and dies. The queen chews her wings off and then finds a comfortable hiding spot, usually underground, and begins laying eggs that will hatch a new colony of workers who can renovate her nest. "It's so cool to think about how an ant colony is this giant social organism with hundreds if not thousands of workers," says Suarez "But, each generation it's up to a single, very vulnerable individual to start another colony on her own."
The few queens who make it will likely hatch their first workers late in the fall. This allows the workers to start preparing the new colony's nest before it gets too cold. The colony "won't really take off" until the spring, when the queen will ramp up egg laying and "try to get her colony going in full force," Suarez explains.

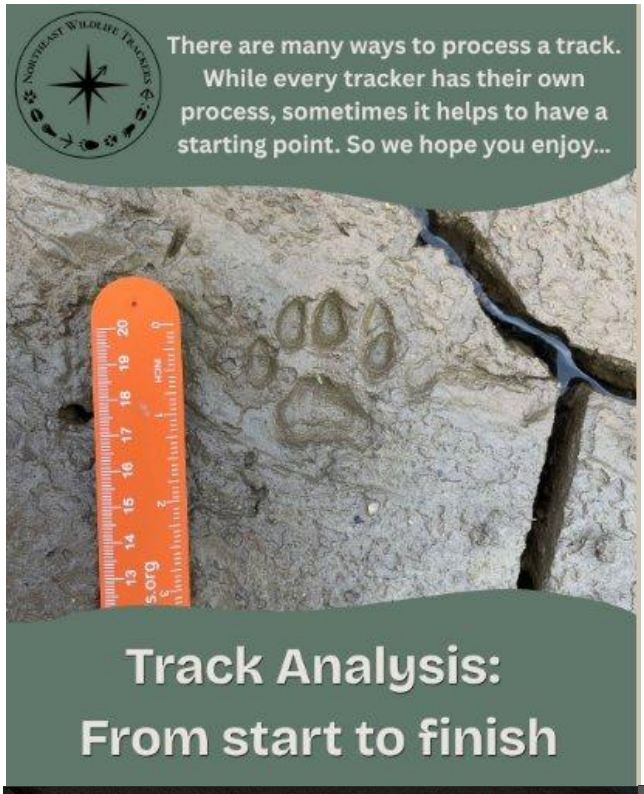
Although the main purpose of the ants' flight is to produce more ant colonies, their emergence provides a valuable food source for birds, rodents and insects ahead of the cold winter months. The migration of Common Nighthawks through New England coincides with the emergence of flying ants, and indeed large numbers of nighthawks were moving through our region during the last week of August.

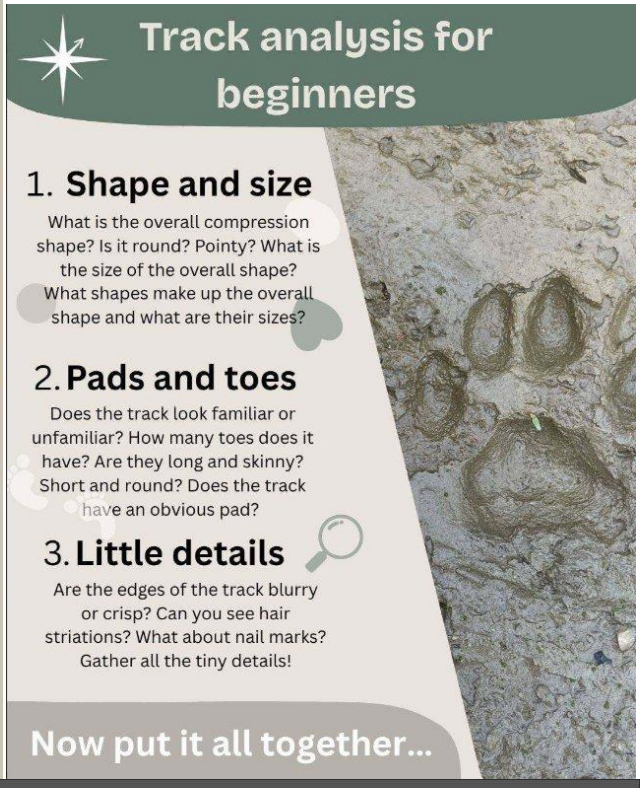
Suarez views the ant colony's life cycle as a "giant recycling of resources, because all season ants scavenge and bring resources underground to feed the larvae that turn into the queens who fly out into the air. Then other species will eat them, and they're very protein-rich and just a fantastic food source. It's a really important pulse of resources." The new colonies also help to aerate the soil and are great for gardens because the ants will eat other pests.

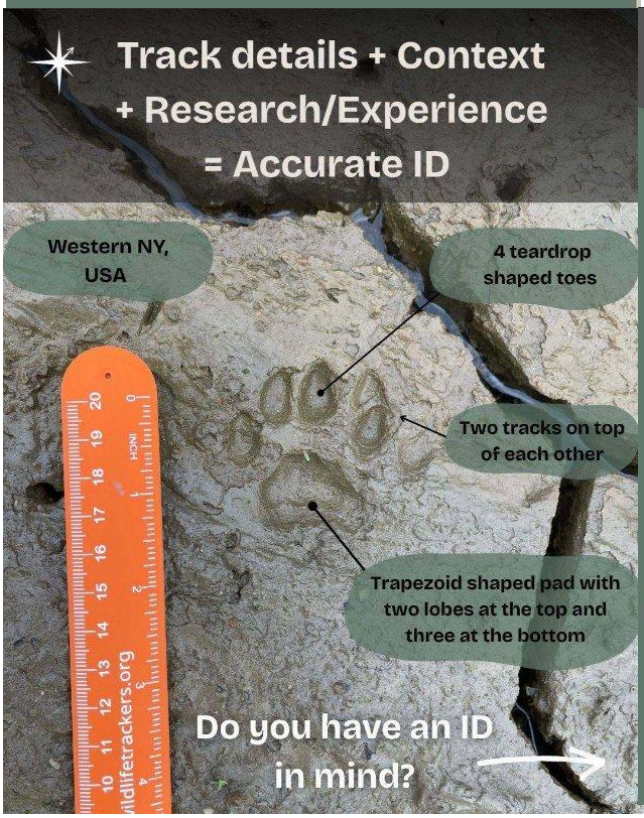
-Kayleigh Padar of Block Club Chicago was the primary contributor to this article.

Winged ants emerging in Hardwick, 8/28

Northeast Wildlife Trackers







https://northeastwildlifetrackers.org/

GRASSHOPPER SEASON, TOO

DIFFERENTIAL GRASSHOPPERS are fascinating insects known for their unique features and behaviors. An intriguing aspect of their life cycle is their mobility, which is evident in both nymphal and adult stages. Nymphs typically hatch from eggs concentrated in field borders and roadsides, then move into fields of barley, wheat, and alfalfa by crawling and hopping, forming cohesive bands in the process. Growth occurs in these mobile nymphs through instars. In some geographical locations, the differential grasshopper has been known to reach significant population densities, causing potential damage to rangeland and crops. Fortunately, this particular grasshopper was found where it isn't a threat to valuable crops, at Winumusset WMA in New Braintree. Polyphagous feeders, differential grasshoppers consume a wide variety of plants, having the ability to adapt to numerous food sources such as grasses, giant ragweed, prickly lettuce, and more. In places where they can become pests, it's important to encourage natural enemies like predators and parasites and maintain a diverse plant community to reduce the overall impact of grasshoppers on a single plant species.
https://www.whatsthatbug.com/differential-grasshopper-all-you-need-to-know-in-a-nutshell/

PHOTO QUIZ – Can you identify?
Answer at the end of the newsletter

* * * ANNOUNCEMENTS * * *

AVIAN OBSESSION

Birds in Nature of Central Massachusetts

Paintings & Handmade Frames by
EVAN LIPTON

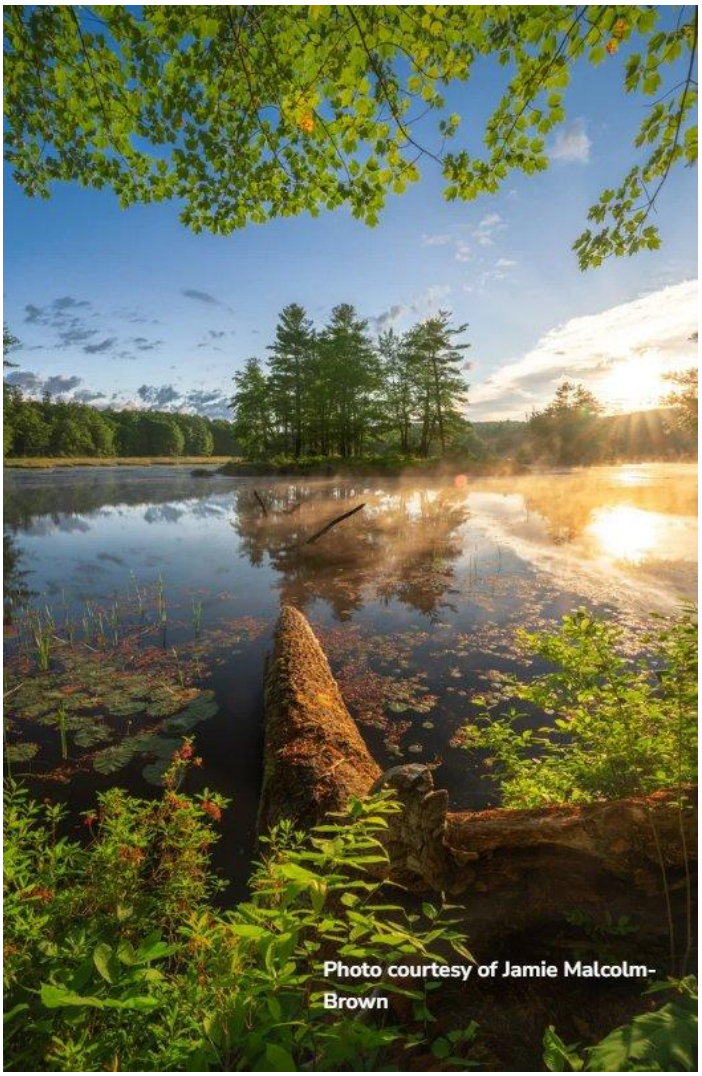
SEPTEMBER 2026

West Brookfield Art & Frame Gallery
10 East Main St
West Brookfield, MA 01585

RECEPTION
FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 5-7pm

www.instagram.com/avian.obsession

About Question 6:
the Protect Water and Nature Initiative

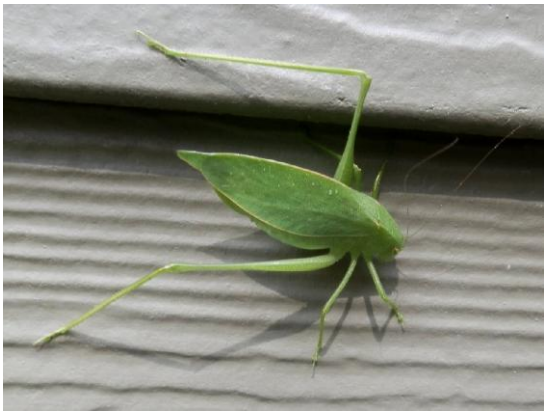


It's official: the Protect Water and Nature Ballot Initiative will be Question 6 on the November 2026 statewide ballot in Massachusetts. More than 122,000 signatures from voters across the Commonwealth were gathered in order to place the initiative on the ballot.

Question 6 is simple: it dedicates funds from the existing state sales tax on sporting goods to raise as much as $100 million every year for protecting and conserving water and nature — without raising taxes. It's time to protect the places we love — clean water, healthy forests, more trails and parks, and access to the outdoors and nature for everyone in Massachusetts.

Learn more here, or reach out to the ballot committee by emailing voteyesforwaterandnature@gmail.com

IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS THAT COUNT



Our next installment in the website's FROM THE FIELD section, which shares seasonal field notes and features great photographs, will highlight some of the "little things" seen in nature over the past few months. **Please send us your photos** of tiny creatures, nondescript little wildflowers, miniscule fungi, and other small treasures you've found while out exploring nature: warerivernatureclub@yahoo.com

Common ringlet Gardner 8.16.26
Photo by Dan Bisaccio

Milkweed beetle *Photo by Doug Wipf*

* * * UPCOMING EVENTS * * *

ATHOL BIRD & NATURE CLUB

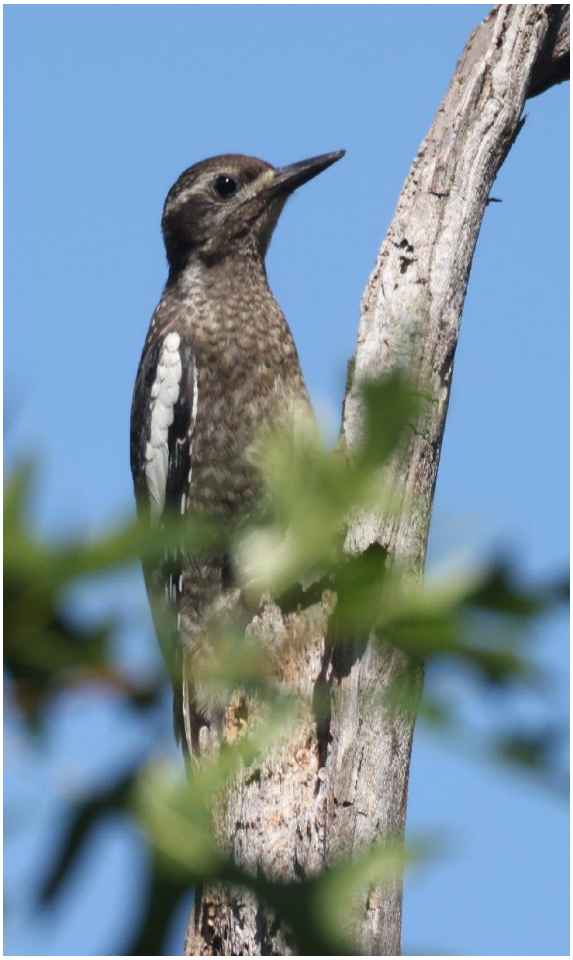
EARLY BIRD BIRDING

with Jeff Johnstone

Friday –

September 4th, 11th, 18th, & 25th

7:30 a.m.



Join Jeff Johnstone for the tradition of birding during the busy autumn migration season. After meeting at the Millers River Environmental Center, 100 Main Street, Athol, participants will head out to a favorite local birding spot. Call Jeff to reserve your spot: 978 249-9052.

WARE RIVER NATURE CLUB ~ FORBUSH BIRD CLUB

BIRDING THE MASS CENTRAL RAIL TRAIL, WARE

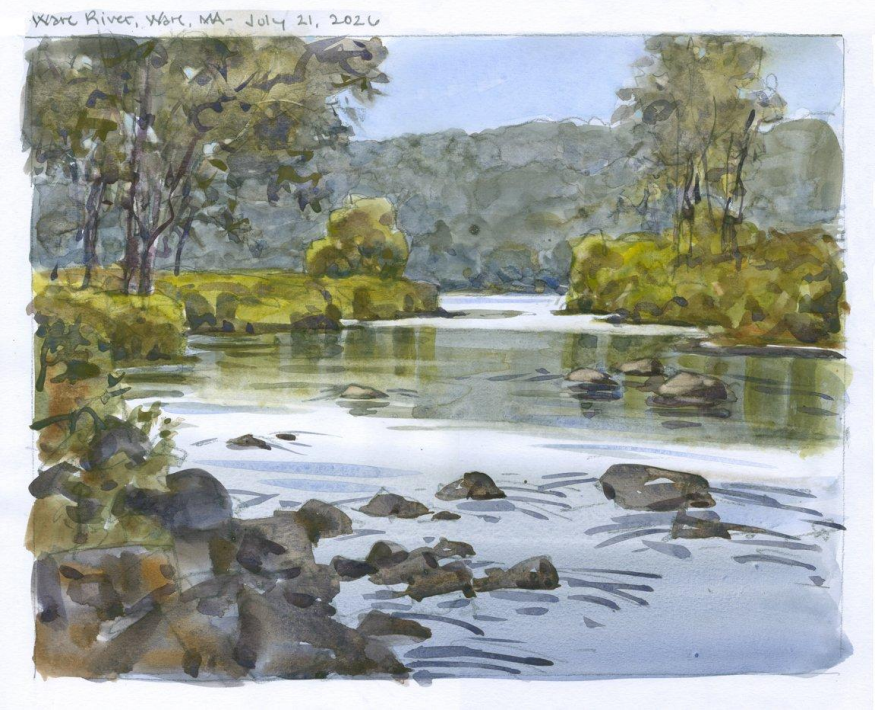
Monday September 7th

8 a.m. - late-morning

Leader: Wendy Howes

Just across the river from Gilbertville (Worcester County) is a lovely stretch of the Mass Central Rail Trail in Ware (Hampshire County). There are two segments along the river- one running north from Church Street (1.6 mile one way), the other heading south (1.2 mile one way). Each offers a variety of habitats accessed along even ground with easy walking. We'll look for lingering residents and early fall migrants, many of them taking advantage of the many fruiting trees and shrubs. We can expect to encounter considerate dog-walkers and occasional joggers, but few-to-no cyclists. The decision as to which segment to explore will depend on weather conditions and the preferences of participants.

Please pre-register for meet-up details and
possible schedule changes: warerivernatureclub@yahoo.com



Ware River, Ware *Watercolor by Barry Van Dusen*

PRINCETON OPEN SPACE COMMITTEE - PRINCETON HIKES!

HIKE THE WEST BOYLSTON BEAMAN STREET RAIL TRAIL

Wednesday September 9th
10 a.m.

This short, slow, and smooth walk takes us
along a new extension of the
Mass Central Rail Trail that connects to
the Stillwater Rail Trail.
It's an easy flat hike of about 2 miles.

Sophia Rodionov

HIKING THE MIDSTATE TRAIL RUTLAND TO SPENCER

Saturday
September 12th
9 a.m.

This is the fifth segment of the Midstate Trail for this group. The six-mile hike will start at Route 122 in Rutland and end at Route 31 in Spencer. It is easy hiking on forest paths with near-zero roadside walking.

For more information or to register: TrailaroundprincetonMA@gmail.com

ATHOL BIRD & NATURE CLUB

LAWN ALTERNATIVES

with Dan J. Wilder

Wednesday, Sept 9th

7 p.m.

Millers River
Environmental Center
100 Main Street Athol
or via ZOOM

Every house in America should be fronted with a non-native monoculture with the maintenance requirements of a golf course and the ecological value of a strip mine; a place where all flowers are called weeds and signs to the extent of 'keep off' are the norm.

Does the idea seem a bit odd to you? It's time to take a second look at this idea we call lawn. There are other ways to manage yards, from whole lawn replacement to strategies for reducing inputs and increasing ecological value. From well-known plants to new introductions, we will discuss various options that fit the needs of any lawn space.

Dan Jaffe Wilder is the co-author of *Native Plants for New England Gardens* (with Mark Richardson of the New England Wild Flower Society) and Director of Applied Ecology at Norcross Wildlife Foundation

Register for ZOOM

WARE RIVER NATURE CLUB

MUSHROOM WALK FOR BEGINNERS

Mass Central Rail Trail
Glenwood Road, Rutland
Saturday September 19th
9 a.m.

Leader: Lindsay Gwyther

Conditions for mushroom and fungi growth have been ideal, sparking our enthusiasm for a walk to look for, photograph, and/or identify these ephemeral woodland inhabitants. We should encounter a nice variety along this stretch of the rail trail. Walking distance will depend on how many specimens we stop to admire and examine. Lindsay has many years of experience and will enlighten us about basic identification features and growth habits. Note: This is *not* a field trip to learn about or collect edibles.

Meet at the Glenwood Road, Rutland Mass Central Rail Trail parking area.

Questions or information:
warerivernatureclub@yahoo.com

FORBUSH BIRD CLUB

BIRDING SHOLAN FARMS, LEOMINSTER

Sunday, September 20TH 7 – 11 a.m.

Leader: Jon Skinner jon@jonrisk.com 978-894-3698

Sholan Farms is a 169-acre farm owned by the City of Leominster that includes apple orchards, expansive fields, community gardens, and two reservoirs that are great habitats for fall migrating warblers, sparrows and waterfowl.

The walk will be in two parts, allowing anyone to leave early before we tackle the lengthier and more strenuous part of the walk. We'll first slowly walk through the community gardens on a mostly grassy surface before continuing for about 3 miles on grassy and wooded paths with a short steep hill included. Waterproof footwear is recommended.

Meet at 7:00 a.m. at Sholan Farms,
1125 Pleasant Street, Leominster.
Please park in the lot across the street from the farmstand. Port-a-potties are available at the parking lot behind the farmstand.

WARE RIVER NATURE CLUB

BIRD-BANDING: ITS ORIGINS, USES, AND FUTURE IN CONSERVATION

with Christian Fezatte

Wednesday September 23rd 7 p.m.

Rutland Public Library 280 Main Street Rutland

Please join us for an informative presentation about bird-banding. In a nutshell, it consists of capturing, measuring, and marking wild birds. Many people have heard of this widespread monitoring technique, but few get to experience it. Christian will cover the history of the practice, how it's done today in a worldwide collaborative effort, and what banding tells us about our feathered friends' futures.

Christian Fezatte has experience as a Wildlife Education Steward for the state of New Hampshire and has volunteered as an assistant on bird-banding projects. He lives in Bedford, NH with his wife and pets and enjoys snowboarding and photography in his spare time.

PRINCETON OPEN SPACE COMMITTEE - PRINCETON HIKES!

HIKE MT. WACHUSETT WEST SIDE

Wednesday September 23rd

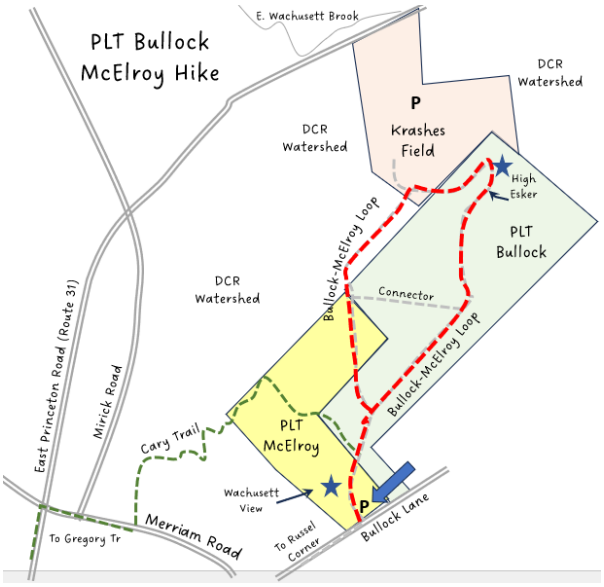
10 a.m.

This hike will set out from West Wachusett Street (Westminster Road) and take us along the mountain's West Road. We'll cross over on the Semuhenna Trail and return on North Road. This 3.3-mile moderate hike goes halfway up the mountain from the west side, mostly on gravel roads.

HIKING PRINCETON LAND TRUST TRAILS

Saturday September 26th

9 a.m.



Starting at Princeton Center, the group will hike down to the Bullock McElroy trails, continue to the Russell Corner Loop, then return uphill to the Town center. This is a moderately-difficult trek of 5 miles.

For more information or to register: TrailaroundprincetonMA@gmail.com

FORBUSH BIRD CLUB

BIRDING RAUSCHER FARM, CLINTON

Saturday, September 26th

7:30 - 11:30 a.m.

Leader: David Ammerman

ammsus@comcast.net

The diverse habitat of Rauscher Farm and adjacent DCR property includes Clamshell Pond, meadows, a small marsh, power-line cut, and mature oak and hemlock forests. It is an eBird hotspot, with 160 species recorded to date!

Please wear footwear appropriate for hiking over rocks and a couple of wet areas. Meet at 7:30 a.m. at the parking area, 29 Clamshell Road in Clinton. [GPS: 42.402529, -71.677860].

FORBUSH BIRD CLUB ~ WARE RIVER NATURE CLUB

BIRDING MUDDY BROOK WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

Sunday September 27th 8:30 -11:30 a.m.

Leader: Wendy Howes wareriverNatureclub@yahoo.com

This WMA is being actively managed as part of a large oak-pine restoration effort by Mass Wildlife. This past spring the Patrill Hollow Dam was removed, and the look of the landscape has been somewhat altered, adding some wet meadow where portions of the brook once flowed. At this time of year we can expect to find various raptors, some passage migrants, and an assortment of sparrows. Olive-sided Flycatcher and Merlin are possible.
Please pre-register for meet-up details and possible schedule changes.

CENTRAL MASS WILDLIFE TRACKING CLUB

ANIMAL TRACKS & SIGN IN THE QUABBIN REGION

Sunday September 27th

9 a.m. – 1 p.m.

Leader: Bryan DiFabio bryan@dfabio.com

Exact location TBA. Tracking enthusiasts of all experience levels welcome! Contact Bryan for more information/sign-up.

FORBUSH BIRD CLUB

BIRDING DCR KRISTOFF FARM, STERLING

Wednesday September 30th 6:30 – 8:30 a.m.

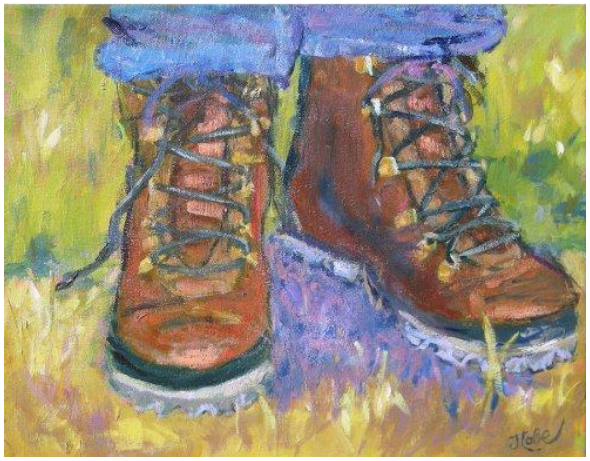
Leader: Bryan DiFabio bryan@dfabio.com

Explore this popular location in early fall when permanent resident birds mix with migrating species. We will walk along the old farm roads, check the field, and look overhead for southbound raptors. Meet at 6:30 a.m. at the end of Merrill Road, off Route 140, in Sterling (¼ mile north of the Route 190 intersection).

PRINCETON OPEN SPACE COMMITTEE - PRINCETON HIKES!

HIKE MT. WACHUSETT WEST SIDE

Wednesday September 30th
10 a.m.



Jude Lobe

We will hike from West Wachusett Street (Westminster Road) along the mountain West Road, cross on the Semuhenna trail, and return down on the North Road. This 3.3-mile moderate hike goes halfway up the mountain from the west side, mostly on gravel roads.

For more information or to register: TrailaroundprincetonMA@gmail.com

Photo quiz answer

Male Wood Duck in non-breeding plumage

Photos by Alan Rawle