

June 24, 2012

Bakers Meadow and Sakowich reservations make for a great walk in the woods

Weekly Walks

Bill Kirk

It's just minutes from car-clogged Interstate 495; a few miles from stop-and-go traffic on Route 114; and it's surrounded by big homes that front on neighboring streets.

But once on the trails of Baker's Meadow Reservation and the Sakowich Reservation off Oriole Drive in Andover, instead of honking cars and rumbling trucks, the only sounds to be heard are birdcalls in the trees and a gentle breeze rustling the leaves.

Rather than the stress of road rage, the only drama to be found is the battle being waged between a family of swans and a pair of geese in the middle of the pond that makes up the centerpiece of the 53-acre Baker Meadow Reservation owned by the Andover Village Improvement Society, also known as AVIS.

During a recent hike around the pond with Mike Timko and John Hess, president and vice president, respectively, of AVIS, I not only got in a solid, hour-long walk, but I observed some wildlife, learned a little about the natural history of the place, and ran into a group of enthusiastic bird watchers.

The hike

I met Mike and John at the gated entrance to the newly acquired 9-acre Sakowich Reservation, located at 26 Oriole Drive. The address is the original site of the Sakowich's home. The couple had purchased the property in 1961, and built a home on the slope overlooking the pond.

The Sakowiches, now living in an assisted living facility in North Andover, donated their homestead to AVIS with the caveat that their house be torn down and the property, including the driveway and grounds, be restored to its original, pristine state. AVIS went along with that wish, and now all that remains are a gravel driveway, a shed (which AVIS will eventually use to store trail-clearing equipment) and a low, brick wall that once went around the outside of the house.

Other than those features — and a plaque on a boulder honoring the Sakowiches for their donation — the land has been restored to its pre-1961 condition. Remarkably, it is the second time the Sakowiches have saved the land: Before they purchased it in 1961, it had been slated to become an eight-home subdivision.

The trail connecting the new reservation to Baker's Meadow starts just to the right of the plaque and heads downhill toward the pond, where a cacophony of bird calls was erupting the day of our visit.

My tour guides explained that a family of mute swans have made their home in the pond, and have a half-dozen or so singlets, as the young ones are called. While the mother swan guarded them, the male warded off the geese by making threatening sounds and flapping his considerable wings.

Two geese, which may have a nest of their own somewhere on the pond, were also making a racket but beat a hasty retreat as the powerful, white bird approached.

The conflict between swans and geese is nothing new, particularly around nesting season. But conservationists have been complaining for years that mute swans, which are not really mute and are a non-native bird species imported from Europe, are highly aggressive and are in danger of driving native bird species out of their habitat.

In some places around the country, the birds have been hunted, trapped or euthanized. In other places, their eggs have been 'addled' — or shaken to kill the embryo inside — by conservation-minded people in an attempt to control their population, much to the chagrin of animal rights folks and some bird-watchers.

Muskrat love

About midway through the 2-mile walk we crossed an earthen dam with a concrete spillway, a remnant of a 1920s-era muskrat farm.

Baker's Meadow was named for Dr. Symonds Baker, who owned the area during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, according to a writeup in the indispensable Andover Trails Guide, available at the Andover Bookstore and other locations in town for around \$15.

In the 1920s, the property was owned by Alexander Henderson, who dammed a stream running through the meadow to create what is now the pond. The pond was used to raise muskrats, which were valued for their furs. During the Depression, however, the market for furs plummeted and Henderson gave up on muskrats.

Henderson maintained the pond for years as a habitat for songbirds and other wildlife, donating the property to AVIS in 1958.

Timko and Hess weren't sure if any muskrats still remained, but they said it seems likely they do. It also seemed likely that they share the pond with beavers, as we noticed several trees had been gnawed on by the toothy rodents. Speaking of furs, beavers were at one time trapped nearly to extinction for their pelts, but that practice has been all but outlawed in Massachusetts, leading to a resurgence in beaver population — and more conflicts with people.

Indian Ridge

The correct way to hike Baker's Meadow, according to the guide book, is to cross Reservation Road and hike into the Indian Ridge Reservation. The oldest reservation in the AVIS portfolio, Indian Ridge is a high, narrow park that runs parallel to Reservation Road and comes out on the far side of Andover High School on Shawsheen Road. Since I didn't have enough time, however, we decided to shorten the hike and walk along Reservation Road until we got to the home of Al and Evelyn Retelle, who live on the pond and were hosting a gathering of the Merrimack Valley Bird Club.

In addition to being avid birdwatchers, the Retelles are wardens of Bakers Meadow. AVIS has wisely appointed wardens, who usually live near the reservation they are charged with keeping an eye on. The

Retelles allowed us to cut through their property to meet up with the trail that encircles the pond, but not before they and others in their bird-watching group offered us a bounty of baked goods from the breakfast buffet that serves as a reward for their morning bird-viewing walks.

The trail continued around the pond for about a half-mile and returned to the Sakowich Reservation. We chose a steep trail that took us up to the top of the hill where the Sakowiches' house once stood.

• • •

Editor's Note: First in a series of articles on easy and short walks and hikes in the Merrimack Valley area.

Baker's Meadow/Sakowich Reservations

Access: Trail from Oriole Drive leads to Sakowich Reservation and Baker's Meadow.

Parking: on Oriole Drive, look for Avis sign indicating 'Sakowich Reservation'

Difficulty level: Easy to moderate (steep hill climb at the end is optional)

Duration: 5 minutes to an hour. Hike in, look around, and go home, or, go all the way around the pond. Requires some walking on Reservation Road, or cross the road into Indian Ridge Reservation.

Maps: Available on AVIS Web site, avisandover.org, and in the Andover Trails Guide, published by AVIS and the Andover Trails Committee.

Showing 2 comments

Sort by [Subscribe by email](#) [Subscribe by RSS](#)

sky Today 12:49 PM

Just a reminder - remember to check for ticks when you get home - My daughter got lyme disease from a tic bite walking these trails.. AVIS trails are hidden jewels of MV, I just hope people who use them, are mindful and dispose their trash the proper way... Otherwise, stay home!

Like

Reply

Factory_Hag Today 11:55 AM

Looking forward to the rest of this series!

Like

Reply

comments powered by [Disqus](#)