

# **SITE GUIDE: ROCKY HILL MEADOWS**

## **Rocky Hill**

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Rocky Hill Meadows is an expansive area of agricultural and wetland habitat situated along the Connecticut River east of the Town's center and immediately north of the Rocky Hill-Glastonbury Ferry Landing. Habitats within this flood plain consist of approximately 850 acres of agricultural land, mainly sod, corn, bean, and hay fields; riverine woodlands, and patches of shrub swamps. The Connecticut River forms the eastern border of the meadows and a thin sliver of the agricultural land juts north parallel to the river into the town of Wethersfield. Besides farming, the meadows complex contains a motorcycle motocross and model airplane flying field. The motocross area is on private property along North Meadow Lane, while the model airplane flying area rotates regularly between several fields on Great Meadow Road depending on current farming practices

Within the past decade the meadows has become a prime inland shorebird site and an important late summer and fall birding locale for Connecticut's birding community. The main attraction is the diverse assortment of "grassland" shorebirds found within the extensive sod and agricultural fields. Specialties of the meadows include American Golden Plover, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, the occasional Upland Sandpiper, and a variety of other shorebirds. Spring (May) migration does not bring the same diversity and abundance of shorebirds as the late summer-fall (August – October) migration. Fall songbird migration (September into November) also brings an excellent assortment of sparrows including the Connecticut endangered Vesper Sparrow as well as Horned Lark and American Pipit. The Vesper Sparrow is not known to nest here, however. Bald Eagle breeds locally, while Bobolink and Savannah Sparrow are migrants and nest sporadically from year to year depending on the acreage devoted to hay and/or other grassland vegetation. Short-eared Owl and Snow Bunting have occurred during the winter months.

The Rocky Hill-Glastonbury Ferry is a State Historical Landmark and is the oldest running ferry service in the United States, operating since 1655. Ferry service is offered from May 1 through October 31, and the operating hours are Tuesday – Friday, 07:00 – 18:45 hrs and from 10:30 – 17:00 hrs on Saturday and Sunday. No ferry service is available on Monday. A fee of \$3.00 is charged per vehicle, including passengers, and \$1.00 for pedestrians and bicycle riders. Near the ferry landing is a snack bar and also the town-owned Ferry Park --with picnic area-- thus providing a relaxing location to eat or rest while visiting the meadows.

## **Directions**

From I-91 take Exit 24 (99, Wethersfield/Rocky Hill) turn right onto the Silas Deane Highway (SR-99) heading southbound or left heading northbound and continue to the traffic light at the intersection of Elm Street/SR-160 (1.2 miles). At this intersection turn left and stay to the right onto Glastonbury Avenue/SR-160. Follow Glastonbury Avenue to a stop sign at the railroad crossing (0.5 mile). The road turns sharply to the left after crossing the railroad track and becomes Meadow Road. Follow Meadow Road beyond the ferry landing and Ferry Park to a bar-gate (0.2 mile) leading to Rocky Hill Meadows. At the bar-gate the road becomes Great Meadow Road.

An alternate route if traveling from the south is to take I-91 to Exit 23 (West Street, Rocky Hill), turn right and travel east on West Street for 0.4 mile to a traffic light at the intersection of Gilbert Avenue. Turn left at Gilbert Avenue and continue to Elm Street/SR-160 (0.4 mile) at the stop sign/blinking traffic light. Turn right and follow Elm Street for 1.4 miles through the traffic light on the Silas Deane Highway (SR-99). Bear to the right after crossing SR-99, staying on SR-160 which now becomes Glastonbury Avenue as described above.

Great Meadow Road and North Meadow Lane are town roads and can be legally driven; all other lanes and side spurs are privately owned and permission must be obtained from the property owner(s) to access these areas. The road and lane are primarily dirt and can be very dusty from July through September, and during other seasons wet and muddy, especially after rainstorms and in early spring. The road and lane are not open after dark; access is only allowed during daylight hours.

**Note:** The gate is occasionally closed in spring and other times of the year when the Connecticut River crests and/or approaches flood stage. During such times, the meadows area can be partially or completely flooded.

## **Birding**

The meadows can be birded in one to two hours by driving along the town road and lane. It will take longer however, if you spend more time on foot and survey Ferry Park and the woodland edges. After entering the meadows the best birding strategy is to drive slowly along Great Meadow Road and North Meadow Lane stopping periodically to check the fields and hedgerows. A scope is recommended here as many shorebirds can be a considerable distance from roadside.

On the way into the meadows, scan along the Connecticut River near the ferry landing where waterfowl, cormorants, herons, and gulls are regularly observed in spring and fall. Bald Eagles may be encountered here any time of the year as they nest and winter in the area. After passing the bar-gate and crossing Goff Brook (0.2 mile) the meadows opens to field habitat on the right and then the B Lane (private road) veers off to the left (0.2 mile). This is one place to park your vehicle well off the road to view several fields on both sides of the road. Look for the Buff-breasted, Baird's, and Pectoral Sandpipers, and American Golden Plovers on the sod or the recently furrowed fields. Other shorebirds may occur on the same fields, especially if rain pools are present.

**Cautionary Note: Rocky Hill Meadows is an active farming operation. Large farm vehicles and equipment regularly move between fields and travel along the roadways. To complicate matters, some stretches of Great Meadow Road and North Meadow Lane are narrow. Therefore, it's important to be courteous and always park well off the road to allow for the unrestricted movement of these farm vehicles. Don't block any lanes or gates unless you can quickly move the vehicle.**

After checking the fields near B Lane continue along Great Meadow Road to where the road makes a sharp left turn (0.2 mile) followed by a sudden right turn at C Lane. Normally there is enough room to park the car somewhere in this section. This location is surrounded by fields and provides a fine vantage point to survey for birds. Afterward, continue along the road to the "T" intersection (0.3 mile) where Great Meadow Road turns left and a bar-gate is on the right. Park on the right near, but not blocking, the bar-gate, and scan the surrounding fields. Several fields containing sod and crops are visible from this location and two wet depressions near the roadway commonly attract shorebirds.

Scan the sod and furrowed fields for the Buff-breasted, Baird's, and Pectoral Sandpipers, and American Golden Plovers; closely check areas where farmers are harvesting sod as several of these species seem to prefer such areas. Upland Sandpiper has occurred several times, always in August. Shorebirds regularly observed include Killdeers, Black-bellied Plovers, Least, Semipalmated, and Spotted Sandpipers, and both yellowlegs. Other less common species include Semipalmated Plover, Short-billed Dowitcher, Stilt Sandpiper, White-rumped Sandpiper, Solitary Sandpiper, and Dunlin. These species are frequently associated with rain pools and/or puddles formed from irrigation runoff. A Hudsonian Godwit was recorded here in October 2005, an unusual inland sighting.

From the "T" intersection continue along Great Meadow Road, which is now bearing north, to North Meadow Lane (0.6 mile). Approximately mid-way between the "T" and North Meadow Lane is another location—near the woodlot on the left-- to park and check the nearby fields. Two additional spots to search for specialty shorebirds here are the sod and furrowed fields east

of North Meadow Lane, and the last stretch of Great Meadow Road before it approaches and then parallels the Connecticut River (0.3 mile). This part of Great Meadow Road from the junction of North Meadow Lane to the river where it turns left entering Wethersfield and becoming Elm Street Extension is quite narrow. To search this area, you should park near the intersection of North Meadow Lane or at the corner near the river.

Due to the open landscape of the meadows an outing can usually yield several species of raptors. Beside Bald Eagle, Red-tailed, Red Shouldered, and Cooper's Hawks nest in the area, while Northern Harriers are frequently spotted during fall and spring. Peregrine Falcon and Short-eared Owl have occurred in the winter.

Several areas along North Meadow Lane are worth checking unless the motocross area is lively. When active--especially on weekends--the motocross can be very loud and dusty. Park near the bar-gate on the left at the junction of C Lane (0.2 mile) and view the sod and other fields on both sides of the road. The next best pullover is where the B Lane meets North Meadow Lane (0.3 mile) followed closely by another parking area toward the last field on the left before the brook (0.2). In the fall, the fields and edges on both sides of the road between the last two parking spots can be productive for a variety of sparrows including Field, Savannah, Song, Chipping, Swamp, White-Crowned and occasionally Vesper. Sparrows and shorebirds, nevertheless, can occur almost anywhere along Great Meadow Road and North Meadow Lane.

Unless time is limited we suggest retracing your route through the meadows to double check for shorebirds which regularly move throughout the field complex---a second pass could be worthwhile. However, you can exit the meadows by continuing along North Meadow Lane which crosses and then parallels Goff Brook before making a sharp left turn becoming Goff Brook Lane at the Rocky Hill Water Pollution Control Facility and eventually ending at Old Main Street (1.0 mile). Turn left and follow Old Main Street to Marshall Road on the right. Marshall Road ends at the Silas Deane Highway (SR-99), turn right to access I-91 at Exit 24.

