

Beyond the trees: farms, fields and slash in Hopkins Forest...

Say you decided to take a trek in Hopkins Forest, from the Hoosic River to the Taconic Range, what might you encounter along the way? Along with the thousands of maples and beeches; thickets of barberry and honeysuckle; lines of old stone walls and wood roads; and courses of streams and gullies, you might just happen upon some open areas, where the sky is visible, the plants low and the views long. These few treeless clearings, which amount to less than two percent of the land area in Hopkins Forest, are being managed to restrain the persistent forces of natural succession that are so much a part of our New England Landscape. These islands of openness give an insight into what much of this land and its fauna might have resembled during Colonel Hopkins' time.



Wire Bridge Farm looking north

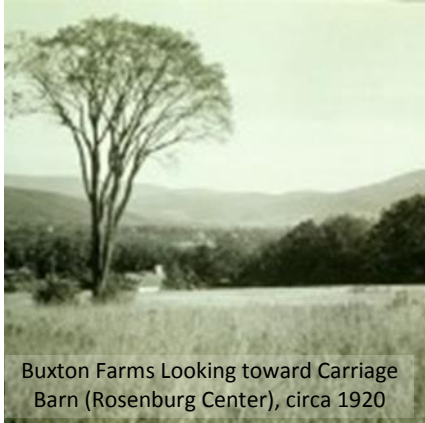
On the banks of the Hoosic River lies the Wire Bridge Farm, which became part of Hopkins Forest in 2004. There Joel Burrington can be seen on his tractor cutting hay to supply his Pownal, Vermont dairy farm. Though the bush hog has replaced the scythe with the advancement of cultivation technologies, hay has been grown as a source of winter forage for livestock since the founding of Williamstown and,



Wire Bridge Farm looking south

indeed, for centuries longer elsewhere. Before the liquidation of the Buxton Farms in 1924, many acres in what is now Hopkins Forest were devoted to his practice. Hayfields appear to be rather homogenous, supporting mostly timothy, orchard and other old world grasses accompanied by legumes, such as alfalfa. Occasionally other herbs and wildflowers dare to poke through this sea of green, but these are soon dispatched by one of the semi-annual hay cuttings. Meanwhile, the spring arriving animals – bobolinks, savannah sparrows, killdeer and wood turtles – quickly flee at the passing of the tractor.

A little higher up, surrounding the Forest's main weather station, is a three acre field that is partitioned into 24x24 meter plots with smaller, flagged subdivisions. Visit in late summer and you are certain to see an array of color featuring yellows of goldenrods and purples of meadow asters. A closer look reveals more variety: sedges and rushes amidst the grasses and the emergence of some woody seedlings and multi-flora rose bushes within the mix. Just above, the sky is filled with tree swallows chasing bugs, including abundant red-admiral butterflies, and broad winged hawks soaring in search of meadow voles. This modicum of biodiversity, a small upgrade over the hayfield below, demonstrates the effects that two or three years of benign neglect can have on field. However, the tractor will soon be back to mow certain plots and leave others, and return later to cut some of the remaining plots. The



goal here is to investigate the effects that various management regimens -- early versus late and annual versus biennial mowings -- have on the diversity and abundance of meadow wildflowers. In addition, Professor Joan Edwards and her student assistants will document how the insects that pollinate these flowers respond. Studies such as this could inform management guidelines for landowners who are interested in optimizing both diversity and open views on their properties.

High atop the crest of the Taconic Range, just into Vermont, the hiker enters an open swath where trees are strewn about as if a tornado has just blasted through. A closer look reveals clean cuts through the stumps that dot the site, indicating that these trees have been intentionally cut, though the logs have been left behind. This five acre swath of apparent destruction has drawn the attention of many hikers who wonder at the motives of such actions. What they may not realize is that, in the middle of the 20th century, much of the Taconic Crest was open and maintained in a largely treeless state by local residents. Some areas served as pastures for sheep, which could easily access the rocky rugged slopes. On other sites, locals periodically burned brush to promote the growth of blueberry bushes that thrive on the sunny, nutrient-poor slopes of the Taconics. Such practices left a legacy, still visible today, of open glades and savannahs dominated by ferns, sedges, steplebushes, chokeberries, blueberries and azaleas growing among widely scattered maples, oaks and cherries. Our goal in clearing this area (with support from the U.S. Department of Agriculture) is to restore some of those open conditions of the past and provide habitat for species that have largely disappeared or declined -- including the green snake, eastern towhee, mourning warbler and perhaps the elusive New England cottontail.

So the next time you approach a clearing in Hopkins Forest, stop and take a moment to look and listen for what might be about in this, a vestige of an earlier time in Hopkins Forest.

Drew Jones,

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Haying on Buxton Farms, early 20th century.