

Great Meadows

Wethersfield, East Harford, Glastonbury, Rocky Hill
Hartford County

N 41.70088°

W -72.63185°

Status: state level, landscape scale Important Bird Area

Ownership: The land ownership patterns in the Great Meadows reflect the ancient ownership of narrow strips often including river access. Modern ownership and use reflects not only the parcels "preserved" by the Great Meadows Conservation Trust, Town governments, and The Nature Conservancy, but also the hunting groups from each respective town (Glastonbury Sportsmen Association, Wethersfield Game Club, and Rocky Hill Fish and Game Club) and, of course, the large agricultural interests. In addition, Goodwin College owns sizable holdings in East Hartford north of Route 3/Putnam Bridge and in Wethersfield including most of Crow Point.

Site Description: South of Hartford, the Connecticut River winds through 5000 acres of open land, the Great Meadows of Wethersfield, East Harford, Rocky Hill and Glastonbury. This floodplain contains rich farmland and a variety of habitat for wildlife. It is an oasis of green in the urban sprawl of Greater Hartford.

Cultivated since prehistoric times, the farmland within Great Meadows, with its plentiful water supply, is some of the most valued in the world. The area also includes nearly 2000 acres of floodplain forest, a "key habitats of greatest conservation need" identified in the Connecticut's Wildlife Action Plan. Much of Great Meadows is just 4 to 5 feet above the normal river level. During annual spring floods, when river water is generally 10 to 15 higher than the normal, the area is mostly underwater. The mosaic of habitats and crops contributes to the great diversity of birds, as does the location along the CT River, which creates temporary large pools and puddles that hold substantial numbers of waterfowl for much of the spring, and provide excellent shorebird habitat as they slowly drain and dry up.

Note to visitors: As much of Great Meadows is privately owned, please respect private property and stick to roads while birdwatching in the area. A great way to explore Great Meadows is via the Great Meadows Conservation Trust's Brisk Winter Walks (<http://www.gmct.org/programs.htm>). Also before visiting, check hunting season dates (http://www.ct.gov/deep/cwp/view.asp?a=2700&q=584944&deepNav_GID=1633). It is advisable to wear brightly-colored clothing, a fluorescent orange vest and/or hat is recommended, during hunting season.

IBA Criteria met:

- 1) Site important to species of global concern.** While the number of Buff-breasted Sandpiper that use the agricultural fields of Rocky Hill Meadows as stopover habitat during fall migration is not large (range 1- 6 birds annually), this may be the most regularly used site in the state for the species.
- 2) Site important to species of continental or regional concern.** American Black Ducks use the location in good numbers in late winter – spring (max. 225 birds). Bobolink may nest at Rocky Hill Meadows and are seen across Great Meadows (max 250 birds) during spring and fall migration.
- 3) Site important to endangered or threatened species in Connecticut.** A number of state listed species can be found at Great Meadows. Hundreds of Horned Lark and

Savannah Sparrow can be seen during migration and in winter. There are two active Bald Eagle nests within Great Meadows and Peregrine Falcon's nesting in Hartford frequently use the northern sections of the meadows for hunting. Northern Harrier, a grassland associated raptor, use the meadows in winter.

4) Site where significant numbers of birds concentrate for breeding, during migration, or in winter.

The Connecticut River watershed is a major migration corridor. The lower portion of the watershed (CT and MA) receives higher use by migrants, with this use concentrated in habitats along the Connecticut River main stem. Situated on the Connecticut River, the forested habitats, wetlands, and open fields of Great Meadows provide very important stopover habitat for waterfowl, landbirds, and shorebirds.

Waterfowl - The freshwater marshes, hardwood swamps, and open water of the Connecticut River provide important stopover areas for migrating and wintering waterfowl. Large concentrations of Canada Geese (max. 10,000), Green-winged Teal (max. 800), American Black Duck (see above), and Mallard (max. 150) use Great Meadows. Other species include Wood Duck (max. 169), Ringed-neck Duck (max. 65), and Common Mergansers (max. 116).

Landbirds – This location can be a hotspot for migrating songbirds. In fall, species found in large numbers include: Northern Flicker (max. reported 25 birds), Eastern Phoebe (max. 25), Blue Jay (max. 145), Tree Swallow (max. 3500), Ruby-crowned Kinglet (max. 20), Swainson's Thrush (max. 14), American Pipit (max. 300), Cedar Waxwing (max. 45), Common Yellowthroat (max. 21), Palm Warbler (max. 50), Yellow-rumped Warbler (max. 200), Chipping Sparrow (max. 20), White-crowned Sparrow (max. 35), Lincoln's Sparrow (max. 25), Swamp Sparrow (max. 50), Indigo Bunting (max. 30), and Red-winged Blackbird (max. 4000).

Shorebirds – While not enough shorebirds use this site to meet IBA criteria, the following species use the site regularly: Killdeer (max. 200), Spotted Sandpiper (max. 11), Solitary Sandpiper (max. 10), Greater Yellowlegs (max. 41), Lesser Yellowlegs (max. 20), Least Sandpiper (max. 24), and Wilson's Snipe (max. 61 at Glastonbury Meadows). The largest numbers of shorebirds occur when the site floods in the fall (ex. hurricane).

5) Site that contains rare or unique habitat within the state/region or an exceptional representative of a natural habitat, and that holds important species or species assemblages largely restricted to a distinctive habitat type. Large portions of Keeney Cove (569 ac), Wethersfield Meadows (315 ac), Rocky Hill Meadows (894 acres), and Glastonbury Meadows (219 acres) have been identified by the DEEP as Floodplain forest, one of the key habitats of greatest conservation need" in Connecticut's Wildlife Action Plan. There are also a few acres of rivine beachshore and freshwater marsh. These habitat types have a long history of conservation interest and have been documented and studied as being among the most rare, unique, and threatened, habitats in the state.

Additional Bird Information: In winter, Great Meadows can host good numbers of sparrows and icterids including Snow Bunting, American Tree Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, White-throated Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Common Grackle, and Brown-headed Cowbird. In summer, the area is loaded with Warbling Vireo. The marshes of Glastonbury Meadows support Marsh Wren,

Virginia Rail and a large number of Sora. Wild rice growing in the marsh makes it particularly attractive to migrating Bobolink. On Big Sits, conducted by Andrew Dasinger and Bill Asteriades, usually in a weedy vegetable patch close to a field edge at Glastonbury Meadows, up to 70 species (2011 and 2012) have been recorded, which would be a great day pretty much anywhere in CT!

Non-avian Resources: This section of the Connecticut River is important migratory and over-wintering habitat for the federally listed shortnose sturgeon. American eel, a species petitioned for federal listing, also occurs along this section of the river.

Habitats: Primary – Agricultural fields, deciduous forest; **Secondary** – cattail/sedge marsh, coniferous forest. Most of the forested areas are low spots that flood extensively in the spring, which is why they are not farmed. The large cattail and sedge marsh (also wild rice) of Glastonbury Meadows is a highlight of that area.

Land Use: Primary – Agriculture (mostly corn, bean, hay, and sod fields, some areas used for growing vegetables), hunting, and conservation.

Threats: Major - Development; **Minor** – Invasive plants (mile a minute vine, giant ragweed) and animals (Mute Swans, cats), vandalism, dumping; **Potential** - Changes in hydrology, water pollution, and soil compaction.

Existing Conservation Measures: Local organizations and municipalities have made great efforts to protect large areas of Great Meadows through purchase and conservation easements. Also, much of the area is within the Pyquag Conservation Focus Area of the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge Final Comprehensive Conservation Plan – Environmental Impact Statement.

Sources of Information:

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