

Peterson Farm, off Woods Hole Road

Early pictures of Peterson Farm show rows of fruit trees and open fields, typical of a family farm. A llama would have been a surprise on this farm in historic times, but somehow, standing among the sheep he guards, Scamp seems to fit in today. It is the wide sky and the broad horizons of the open fields that look strange on modern Cape Cod. Two hundred years ago, however, those landscapes—sans llama—were the norm. In 1998 the town, with help from The 300 Committee and many generous individuals, acquired this 88-acre farm abutting Beebe Woods, to preserve the historic farm landscape and its many values as open space.

At first glance, the location seems odd for a successful farm: it sits on the rocky glacial moraine that stretches south from the Cape Cod Canal to Woods Hole. The moraine is generally too rough and full of rocks to plow; it was typically used as pasture or woodlot. Most farms sited on this unpromising terrain were abandoned long ago. But the Weeks family who settled the farm wisely chose a swale that was filled with a layer of easily-plowed windblown glacial silt. Surrounding the fields are the characteristic rock-strewn ridges of the moraine. Here the Weeks cut wood and put their animals to graze, but they did not plow the rocky hillsides.

A walk around Peterson Farm provides a glimpse of Cape Cod's rural past, and access to a rich and varied landscape. The fields are kept open by the combined efforts of the sheep, some mechanical mowing, and occasional work parties. The historic farm landscape is still being reclaimed from the invasive alien plants such as honeysuckle and bittersweet that had taken over fields, edges and the sites of outbuildings. The huge stems and twining branches of bittersweet helped to collapse the barn; a major clearing has brought the stone foundation back to light.

Old cart roads form many of the paths around the farm; one runs from Woods Hole Road on the east down to Ice House Pond and once extended to the salt marshes along Buzzards Bay. A stone dam, built across a narrow valley to provide water to the farm before there was a town water system, forms a pond where green frogs, spring peepers, and salamanders breed. The dam also keeps water in the marsh beyond. The high water prevents the growth of trees, and provides habitat for a variety of creatures, including river otters.

Peterson Farm is one of the most-visited pieces of open space in town. Its varied habitats are beautiful and interesting, and can provide some of the best birdwatching anywhere, especially during spring and fall migrations. When you visit, explore the open fields, walk the wooded paths on the surrounding ridges, check out the marsh, follow the cart path to Ice House Pond and enjoy the historic Cape Cod landscape. You also might want to take the path that connects to the 400 acres of Beebe Woods

The entrance to Peterson Farm is off Woods Hole Road at McCallum Drive. Take the immediate right, go over the hill and park at the entrance to the fields. A map that includes both Peterson Farm and Beebe Woods is available at the office of The 300 Committee at 157 Locust Street. Or a trail map can be downloaded from the website: www.300committee.org. While you are there check out the nature calendars for happenings in the natural world each month.