

Haile Farm Preserve

Haile Farm's historical narrative is a common one for coastal Rhode Island. A European family settled along rich coastal marshlands and raised livestock with hay from the salt meadows, supplemented by English hay planted on their upland meadows. The farm endured changing times into the 20th century when development slowly surrounded it. But there is a happy ending to this farm's story because the Warren Land Conservation Trust has protected 61 acres of the original farm, including critically important estuarine and forested wetland habitats.

The preserve is off Route 136 in a busy commercial area, so a first-time visitor may need multiple GPS checks while weaving through warehouses and industrial construction to find the trailhead. The hike begins on a path rife with invasive plants: Bradford pear (*Pyrus calleryana*), Asian bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*), autumn-olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*), mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), and Morrow's honeysuckle (*Lonicera morrowii*). It's a familiar suite of desplicables. But, like human relationships, first impressions can hide deeper meaningful qualities, and there is much to admire at Haile Farm behind this front door.

The vegetation soon transitions to early successional woodland with a typical thicket of shrubs and pioneer trees such as quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) and gray birch (*Betula populifolia*). But the careful observer might notice an unusual species—a scattered stand of trees that are rogue to Rhode Island—boxelder (*Acer negundo*).

Boxelder is common almost everywhere in the Eastern U.S., except New England. Sometimes considered a weedy pest, it evolved as a flood plain



Hairy pine-sap. Photo by Doug McGrady

tree, stabilizing soil on stream banks alongside other fast-growing species—silver maple (*Acer saccharinum*) and green ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*). Once used for box-making, its leaf resembles that of our common elderberry, hence its name. Another common name is more appropriate—ash-leaf maple. It is indeed a maple tree, with typical helicopter-wing samara seeds, but with ash-like compound leaves.

Beyond the boxelder stand is a large pond on the right, residue from aborted development, but perhaps someday it will be a lovely aquatic system. A left turn at this point puts one on a green loop trail leading to the Palmer River estuary. This is where the upland woods change to a maritime shrubland transitional cover, then salt marsh. Like all ecotones, this one is rich in plant diversity, ideal for field botanists keying out species. Enter Doug McGrady, the Society's plant wizard. Doug has compiled a comprehensive inventory of Haile Farm Preserve plants, and many interesting ones are in this area—ragged thoroughwort (*Eupatorium pilosum*), bushy bluesiem (*Andropogon glomeratus*), yellow thistle (*Cirsium horridulum*), and white-fringed bog-orchid (*Platanthera blephariglossis*), the last two being state-threatened species.

The trail then winds through the shrubland to an opening where one's

vision is bathed in a wide-screen spectacle of birds winging across open skies over the salt marsh's tawny blanket. And, as if fashioned by an artist, a lovely backdrop is formed by a "peninsula" of trees reaching out to the shoreline. A spur trail on this spit of upland leads across the marsh where one can be in a dry, oak-hickory barren, but with salt marsh nearby on two sides. The spur ends at the water's edge where tidal zone plants can be explored, including maritime marsh-elder (*Iva frutescens*), American sea-rocket (*Cakile edentula*), sweet-scented camphorweed (*Pluchea odorata*), Carolina sea-lavender (*Limnium carolinianum*), and species glassworts (*Salicornia* spp.).

Backtracking to the green loop, it quickly intercepts a yellow mini-loop trail. This short sidetrack weaves under a power-line easement with another distinct plant community. Recent studies attribute significant environmental value to clear-cutting small areas within a mature forest. Resurgent growth in these "patch cuts" provides important habitat for many species under threat, notably woodland nesting neotropical songbirds. The studies consistently show that patch cutting in mature forests increases the number of woodland bird species, as well as the survival of their fledglings. Since

National Grid periodically cuts trees in this easement, it serves as a perpetual patch habitat.

This patch features plants adapted to open, dry forest clearings such as sheep-laurel (*Kalmia angustifolia*), sweet-fern (*Comptonia peregrina*), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), switch panicgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), black huckleberry (*Gaylussacta baccata*), and early successional trees such as eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), scrub oak (*Quercus dicotylifolia*), gray birch (*B. populifolia*), and pitch pine (*P. rigida*).

Returning to the green loop, it enters a mature conifer-hardwood forest that is a jewel of the preserve. It's also a splendid place to let one's mind wander back in time, imagining what could have been two hundred years ago. The terrain is flat, lush, and relatively free of surface stones, which probably were long ago put into stone walls now crisscrossing the woods. During the early days of Hatle Farm this area may have been a fresh meadow, a moist plain along a stream that was ideal for the European cool season grasses planted by settlers. One can imagine a harvest crew rhythmically swinging scythes, slowly mowing their way across this meadow, laying up English hay for winter forage.

Judging from the tree sizes, hayting or pasturing probably stopped about 100 years ago, after which natural succession slowly brought back a southern New England temperate forest. Henry David Thoreau was



White fringed bog orchid.
Photo by Doug McGrady

the first to observe and document this process, recording in his journal a pattern of changing vegetation on abandoned fields around Concord.

Successional dynamics have been exquisitely successful on this part of Hatle Farm, producing a handsome canopy of oaks, tupelos, sassafras, hickories, and swamp maples that cover a diverse, multi-layered understory—chest-high cinnamon fern (*Osmundastrum cinnamomeum*), thickets of aromatic coastal sweet pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*), eastern shadbush (*Amelanchier canadensis*), and hazelnut, both American (*Corylus americana*) and beaked (*C. cornuta*). Wildflowers on the forest floor add color, including brilliant red cardinal-flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) on a streamlet crossing the trail, soft hues of pink lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium acaule*), and a delicate yellow of sessile-leaved bellwort (*Uvularia sessilifolia*). Meandering in the shade of this beautiful woodland is the perfect ending to a walk at Hatle Farm.

As a newly preserved property, it is still rough around the edges. But progress is everywhere—removing invasive plants, installing bog bridges, and flagging new sections of trail. This should not deter you from sampling its varied habitats. Print the trail map from the website, as paper copies are not yet available at the trailhead kiosk. The trail described here is an easy 1.3-mile walk on flat terrain.

Like a well-written novel, Hatle Farm's drama builds slowly, but there is much to excite a broad range of interests, history, botany, ecology, or archeology. It's also a great place to just "slip into something comfortable," that is to say, be alone in the quiet of nature, gather thoughts, and recharge.



Photo by Anne Raser