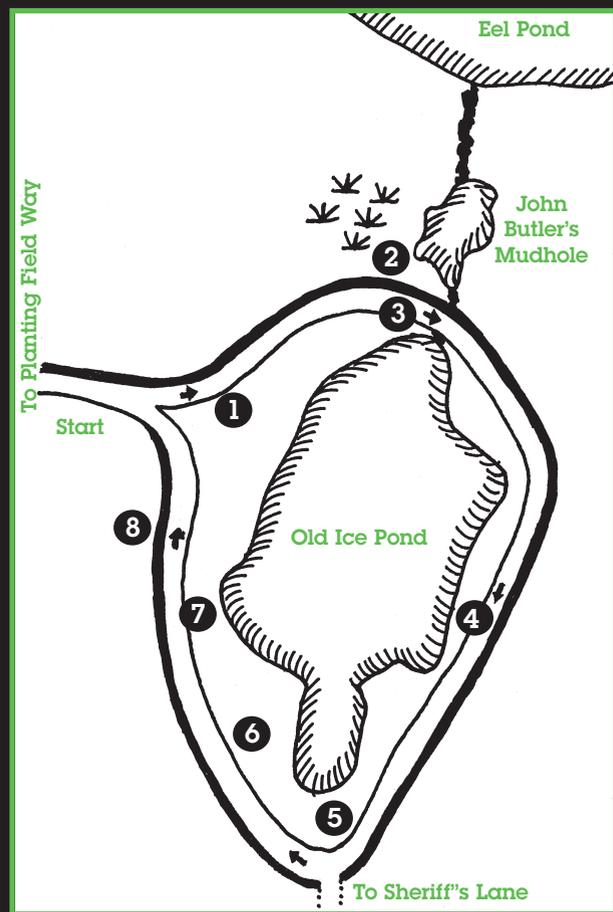


RUTH & ED BROOKS

# TRAIL GUIDE



## SHERIFF'S MEADOW SANCTUARY



### SHERIFF'S MEADOW FOUNDATION

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Early in his life Henry Beetle Hough began a love affair with Martha's Vineyard. In 1959, when questions arose about the preservation or development of Sheriff's Meadow Pond behind his home in Edgartown, Henry and his wife Betty purchased it to preserve forever one of the precious small places on this Island. Thus was Sheriff's Meadow Foundation born.

Sheriff's Meadow grew dramatically over the next two decades. The simplest explanation for this is that an increasing number of people who acquired property on the Vineyard shared Henry's concern to protect natural areas "to serve as a living museum." Although other, larger conservation organizations were readily available, Sheriff's Meadow was Island-based and had a brilliant spokesman in Henry Hough.

Today, Sheriff's Meadow Foundation, guided by Henry's vision, has preserved over 2600 acres in more than 150 parcels ranging in size from a half acre to 150 acres.

These properties span the Island from Chappaquiddick to Aquinnah, and are located in all six Vineyard towns. Several of the larger properties have walking trails which invite public use: Cedar Tree Neck Sanctuary (West Tisbury), Nat's Farm (West Tisbury), Brightwood Park (Tisbury), West Chop Woods (Tisbury), Middle Road Sanctuary (Chilmark) and the Caroline Tuthill Preserve (Edgartown). All offer the opportunity for walking or nature study in an unspoiled natural setting. These and other Sheriff's Meadow Foundation properties showcase Martha's Vineyard at its best, and we hope you will take the time to become better acquainted with one or many of them.

### SHERIFF'S MEADOW SANCTUARY

In the 1850s what is now the Sanctuary was a meadow belonging to Sheriff Isaiah Pease known as the Sheriff's meadow. In 1958, Henry Beetle Hough had just sold the magazine rights to his latest book, *Once More the Thunderer*, when he learned that the meadow was for sale and could be developed. He and Betty Hough used the magazine fee to purchase about 10 acres of land with the hope that it could be permanently conserved. However, the existing conservation groups were not interested in a sanctuary of that small size, so the Houghs decided to create a new Island-based land trust.

On April 2, 1959 Sheriff's Meadow Foundation was chartered, with Sheriff's Meadow as its first sanctuary. Over the years gifts from several neighbors, including Morton and Mary S. Fearey, Alida Carey Gulick, Marion M. Angevin and Edith G. Blake Hough, expanded the sanctuary to almost 20 acres.

Sheriff's Meadow Sanctuary represents a microcosm of the triumphs and challenges associated with conservation on Martha's Vineyard. Despite its relatively small size and proximity to the center of Edgartown, the sanctuary supports a variety of natural communities and several rare and unusual species of plants and animals. A walking trail around the old Ice Pond offers scenic views and a sense of wildness generally associated with much more remote areas.

However, the bittersweet, honeysuckle and multiflora rose, originally planted to provide food and shelter for wildlife, now have run riot and threaten to overwhelm many of the native plants, as well as the more benign ornamentals that the Houghs planted in the early years. Sheriff's Meadow Foundation has recently started an ambitious program to reduce these invasive species, and to restore the native communities occurring naturally in the sanctuary.

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Ruth and Ed Brooks

*Ruth and Ed Brooks brought their family to the Vineyard for the first time in the summer of 1956. They fell in love with the Island, became regular summer residents and in 1977, year-round Edgartown residents. They took vacation trips together every year. Their last trip was on July 17, 1996, on TWA flight 800.*

*The Brooks Trail is a permanent remembrance of two lively, loving people. Their concern for the quality of the Island's natural and human resources, and their sense of obligation to generations yet to come were an important part of their daily lives. Ruth was an active Director of the Sheriff's Meadow Foundation from 1989 until her death.*

*The Brooks Trail is a path that Ruth and Ed often walked. Every family gathering on the Island included a walk along this trail with their children and grandchildren so that they could learn to appreciate the natural wonders of this Island.*

*Their family hopes you will find as much pleasure and beauty along the Brooks Trail as Ruth and Ed did.*

**This guide describes some of the natural communities occurring in Sheriff's Meadow Sanctuary and the human history and ecological processes which influence these communities. A walk around the pond provides an opportunity to sample some of the rich natural diversity of the Vineyard.**

**MARKER****1**

The soil in this *upland meadow* is typical of the dry, sandy coastal sandplain soil created from sand and gravel deposited by meltwater from the receding glacier. Although the meadow is too small to support a full complement of sandplain species, a number of common grassland plants, including little bluestem, bayberry, sickle-leaved golden aster and butterflyweed, grow here.

Without some type of disturbance, the meadow would rapidly change to an old field community and then to pitch pine and oak woods, a natural process known as succession. We mow the area annually to mimic the effects of disturbances such as fire and salt spray which maintain coastal sandplain grasslands in an early stage of succession.

**MARKER****2**

The small tidal pond in front of you is John Butler's Mudhole. It is surrounded by a mix of fresh and saltwater marshes.

*Freshwater marshes* develop in areas that have standing fresh water most of the year, but are shallow enough that plants rooted in the mucky bottom emerge from the water. *Salt marsh* develops in areas that are inundated by salt water during high tides but are dry during low tides. Different plants grow in different areas depending on how long they are submerged at each tide. This zonation is obvious if you study the marsh carefully.

Moving water brings high levels of nutrients and oxygen to marshes. This helps make them among the most productive ecosystems on earth. Marshes provide important habitat for migrating and nesting waterfowl and other birds, small mammals, turtles, snakes and a variety of insects and other invertebrates.

Typical freshwater marsh vegetation includes cattails, sedges and rushes, which

help reduce pollution by absorbing excess nutrients and slowing water flow, allowing suspended sediments to settle out.

Cattails are an important source of food and shelter for wildlife. They also can be a nutritious food source for humans. Both the young greens and root stocks are edible, the unripe pollen spike can be boiled and eaten like corn on the cob, and the high protein pollen can be added to wheat flour.

**MARKER****3**

This *freshwater pond* is the old Ice Pond, created by diking and excavating a marsh. During cold winters great blocks of ice were cut from the pond and stored in what Henry Beetle Hough described as an "immense, high shouldered" ice house. Packed in straw, the ice would last through the summer.

The arrival of electric refrigerators doomed the ice business and shortly thereafter the ice house was torn down and the timbers used to build a neighborhood dwelling.

**MARKER****4**

The careful observer can see a variety of wildlife in, around and above Ice Pond. Sunfish and small minnows dart about in the shallows, pursued by kingfishers, ducks, cormorants and an occasional tern. Swallows feast on the insects hatching in great swarms from the still waters, and during the winter black-crowned night herons roost in the trees along the water's edge. Muskrats frequent the pond and marsh, and hidden away in the underbrush is a river otter den.

The otters' scat along the trail, full of fish scales and crab shells, hints at their travels around the pond. Painted turtles and garter snakes sun themselves on logs and along the edges of the pond, while snapping turtles glide silently through the brown water.

**MARKER****5**

The tangle in front of you is almost entirely oriental bittersweet, a viny shrub that was originally planted in the sanctuary as a source of food and shelter for wildlife. Unfortunately it is a highly invasive species which, as the name suggests, is not native to this part of the world. Since bittersweet has no natural enemies on the Vineyard to limit its growth, it has spread rapidly and is smothering other more desirable plants. Along with other invasive non-native species like honeysuckle, porcelain berry, Russian olive and multiflora rose, the bittersweet has dramatically changed the structure and composition of many of the sanctuary's plant communities. Ironically, the non-native species have proved to be of limited value to wildlife and are used primarily by common backyard birds while degrading native plant communities used by less common species already suffering from loss of habitat.

Foundation staff have been working to eradicate or at least minimize the damage caused by these invasive species. Problem species were cleared from the slope on your right during the winter of 1997. The twisted and broken trees and barren understory that remain indicate the extent to which bittersweet and other invasive species covered the slope. As you continue on the trail, watch on the left for bittersweet and other vines hanging from the trees. On your right you also will see conifers and apple trees in a field from which most of the invasive species have been removed. The diversity of species growing in the field is evidence of the resilience of some plant communities when problem species are controlled.

**MARKER****6**

As the name suggests, this *wet meadow* is wet much of the year, and even when the ground is dry, water just below the surface continues to influence the

plant community. The meadow beauties, purple gerardia and slender-leaved goldenrod that bloom here during the summer are often found around coastal plain ponds, since they are specially adapted to the unique habitat created by seasonal changes in water level. We help maintain this unusual plant community by mowing at carefully selected times to prevent the area from succeeding to shrub swamp.

**MARKER****7**

The mass of recurved stems directly in front of you is a small stand of water willow or swamp loosestrife, which bears numerous small magenta flowers in the leaf axils during July and August.

Water willow is best known among ecologists as the larval food plant for the decodon stem borer, a rare moth found only in southeastern Massachusetts and no where else in the world.

**MARKER****8**

As dead plant matter accumulates in marshes or wet meadows, it raises the ground level enough that shrubs can gain a foothold and initiate the transition to *shrub swamp*. The shrub swamps occur in areas that are seasonally flooded, but for shorter lengths of time than wet meadows. The area around you is generally dry, but during extremely wet periods there may be several inches of standing water.

High bush blueberry is the most common shrub in this area, but swamp azalea, sweet pepperbush and poison sumac are other common species growing in the acidic soils of these swamps.

Shrub swamps provide amphibians as well as a myriad of insects and other invertebrates. Of course, humans also enjoy blueberries and the fragrant scent of sweet pepperbush and swamp azalea.