

Search for wild owls leads to serenity

By Lisa Capone

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Last week, at the end of a day punctuated by homework hassles, too much pothole dodging, and a burned grilled cheese sandwich, I found temporary nirvana in the woods of Lynn.

Suburban Diary

Harried as I was, I nearly didn't make it to Ranger Dan Small's "In Search of Owls"

nighttime walk at Lynn Woods Reservation. A phone call delayed me at the last minute, but I hurried off from Melrose anyway, hoping for my first glimpse of a wild owl.

Soon, I was tramping through wet snow in the half light with a group of strangers. We were mainly silent except for snow crunching beneath our boots and Small's periodic attempts to attract

screech owls with recorded calls. Freed of my cellphone, car, and pocketbook, the stress of everyday life began to melt away like snow on a sunny roof. Ten minutes in, my feet sliding from under me as I crested a knoll, I realized that hearing or seeing an owl would be gravy. This was enough.

The contrast between my usual frazzled forays through suburbia and this hike up slippery slopes and alongside frozen pools was as stark as the outline of pines and oaks against the dusky sky. Smiling in the dark, I was almost giddy. I felt like I was 10.

As we hiked for an hour over hill and dale — more hills and dales than I knew Lynn had — I thought about how frequently I had driven past this place and never turned in. Even more, I considered how many times since Thanksgiving I had told people, "I

hate winter."

Punny, I was loving it now.

Maybe what I really disliked was carpooling on icy roads, wiping road salt off the kitchen floor, having my work routine disrupted by no-school announcements, and battling static electricity hair and itchy skin. Maybe I had forgotten about this brand of winter — with its perfect stillness, resting woods, and clear air. This, I decided, was great.

Small often leads walks through Lynn Woods Reservation, a 2,300-acre municipal park. As we traveled, he gave concise commentary on various aspects — a snow-covered vernal pool that will teem with tadpoles in the spring, a clearing frequented by eastern coyotes, a tree that held a Cooper's hawk nest last year, a swamp that in less enlightened days was a dumping ground for Lynn resi-

dents' yard waste. But mostly we were quiet as we walked, stopped, listened, scanned treetops, and walked again — dimly aware of Route 1's murmuring traffic and the glow cast into the sky by road signs and streetlights.

Small is usually lucky with owls. He has recorded two species in the park — great horned and screech owls — and suspects that barred owls live there, too. During one recent walk with a Boy Scout troop, his recorded calls drew three screech owls straight to the visitor's center parking lot. But on this mild February night, on the eve of a storm, we didn't find any.

But we did discover the beauty of silence and snow, the simple joy of wandering through frosty woods. So, really, I didn't care.

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