1Q-2026

The NATURALISTS' CLUB NEWSLETTER

Springfield Science Museum at the Quadrangle, Springfield, Massachusetts

January to March CALENDAR *of* EVENTS

January

11 Sunday, **Knightville Dam Wildlife Management Area Hike or Snowshoe**, *Huntington*
21 Wednesday, **JANUARY MEETING: Ruffed Grouse Ecology and Life History**
24 Saturday, **Mount Tom State Reservation**, *Holyoke*

February

1 Sunday, **Owl Prowl,** *Russell*
7 Saturday, **Mount Warner,** *Hadley*
18 Wednesday, **FEBRUARY MEETING: Magnificence, Mysteries and Death: Geostories from Western Massachusetts**
21 Saturday, **Cold Winter Draw Day**, *Northampton*
22 Sunday, **Winter Animal Tracking, Quabbin Reservoir,** *Belchertown*
28 Saturday, **Beneski Museum of Natural History,** *Amherst*

March

7 Saturday, **Rock House Reservation,** *Brookfield*
8 Sunday, **How Sweet It Is! Sugaring Time at Maple Corner Farm**, *West Granville*
18 Wednesday, **MARCH MEETING: The First Four Years of Conservation Science at Berkshire Bird Observatory: Partnerships, Projects, and Tales from the Field**
21 Saturday, **Mass Central Rail Trail,** *location TBD*
22 Sunday, **Keystone Arches Hike,** *Chester*

The Naturalists' Club – Dept. of Biology
Westfield State University
P.O. Box 1630
Westfield, MA 01086-1630

NATURALIST'S CORNER

Nature in Winter

It's January, the heart of winter. We keep warm in our homes and dress for the cold. But what about the animals and birds of the New England forest?

The beaver starts to prepare for winter in late summer or early fall, cutting saplings and storing them underwater near its lodge. The lodge has lower and upper chambers. Beavers use the upper chamber as a living space; the lower is their exit to the pond. In winter, when the pond freezes over, beavers can exit under the ice and use the cache of saplings to survive.

Most mammals grow a winter coat to keep them warm during winter. The coat of the white tail deer changes color through the seasons, transitioining from reddish brown in summer to gray in winter. Their summer coat consists of short fur. The winter coat is longer with grayish fur, and its hollow strands provide insulation during the cold winter months.

There are many other species that prepare for winter's cold. The animals that change how they look in winter from brown to white are some of the most interesting. The snowshoe hare is built for winter. Its large feet, especially the rear ones, are adapted for travel on snow, enabling the hare to run without sinking to escape predators. It, too, changes from brown to white as winter approaches. The hare's color changes begin in late fall, with patches of white that help it to blend in with dried leaves and other vegetation on the forest floor. By the time winter arrives, the hare's coat is all white. I remember tracking snowshoe hare in winter at Noble View. These days, we rarely see its tracks.

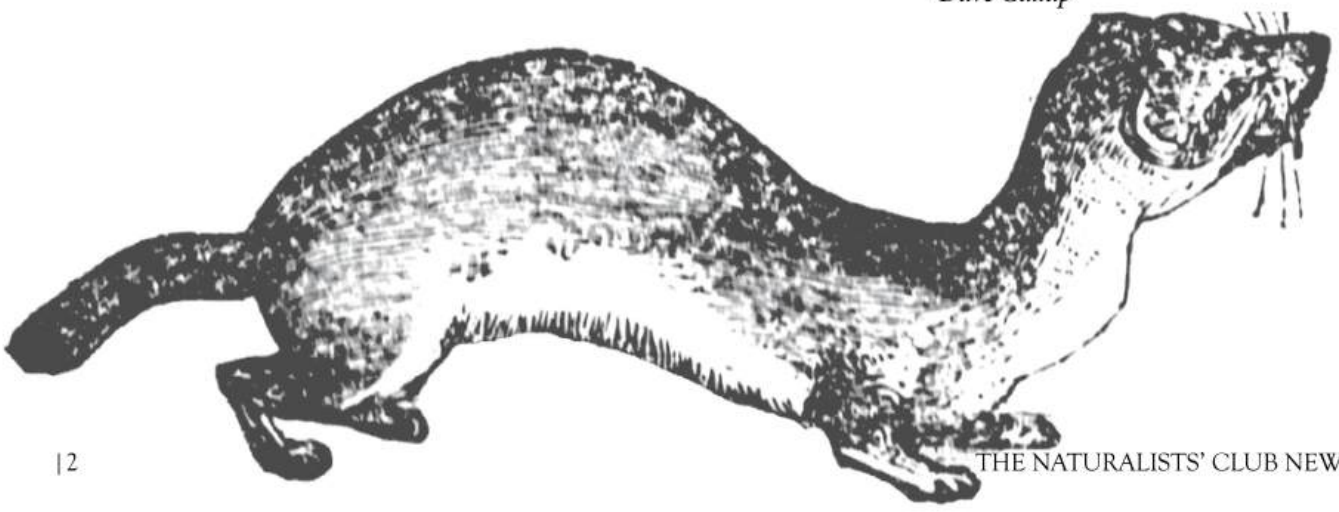
One of my favorite animals in winter is the long tail weasel, the shark of the forest. It is a very energetic and effective hunter. The weasel changes its brown coat as winter approaches. Decreasing daylight triggers the autumn molt. As nights grow longer and days shorter, the weasel's pineal gland secretes melatonin which alerts the central nervous system to stop producing melanin, a dark pigment found in hair follicles. Thus, new hair turns white. This same process underlies the seasonal color change of the snowshoe hare.

When the snowshoe hare and the weasel are white, they are "invisible" in a snowy forest. Weasels are known in winter for their white fur with a black tip at the end of the tail. The black tip tricks predators such as hawks, owls, and foxes by keeping them focused on the tip and so away from its vital parts. I hope you get a chance to see this ghost of the winter forest. It is a rare sight!

One of the most interesting birds of the New England winter forest is the ruffed grouse. It prepares for winter by growing snowshoes. Yes, snowshoes! Its feet are adapted for traveling on snow. In the fall, small comb-like projections grow on either side of the toes, doubling the surface area of its feet, creating mini snowshoes that provide support on the snow. The combs are shed in the spring. Grouse take advantage of deep snow conditions by burrowing in for the night. The insulating qualities of snow provide warmth. Perhaps you have been startled by flushing grouse during a morning snowshoe hike, or have seen their tracks and wing imprints in the snow.

Exploring nature in winter can be a rewarding experience, especially the silence of a winter forest filled with snow. Enjoy nature in winter!

~Dave Gallup

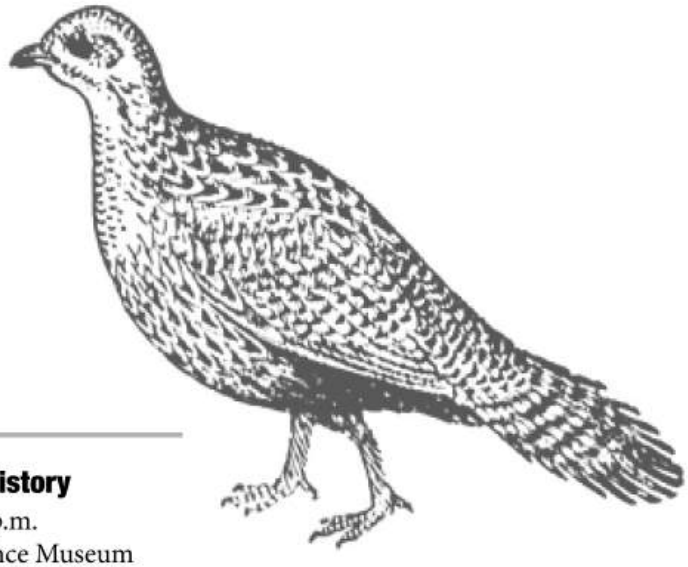


Knightville Dam Wildlife Management Area Hike or Snowshoe, *Huntington*
Sunday, January 11, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Leaders: Tom and Nancy Condon
Registration: Please contact Tom (413-454-2331; or science@condon.net)
Meeting Place: Hilltown Community Health Center, 73 Russell Road, Huntington

At first, the quiet road threads its way through a hushed forest, shadowing the winding course of the Little River. Before long, it meets the East Branch of the Westfield River, and the landscape opens into a broad floodplain—a place where you can find wildlife signs everywhere, so long as you know how to look. We'll walk or snowshoe this scenic stretch, searching for tracks in the snow, scat, feathers, and other clues left behind by the Valley's wild residents. Deer, coyotes, otters—who knows what stories the trail will reveal? Expect an easy three-mile roundtrip on flat terrain. Much of the route is exposed, so dress in layers. Pack a snack and water, and join us afterwards, if you wish, for lunch in Huntington.

He who marvels at the beauty of the world in summer will find equal cause for wonder and admiration in winter.

~John Burroughs



JAN. Meeting

Ruffed Grouse Ecology and Life History
Wednesday, January 21, starting at 7 p.m.
Tolman Auditorium, Springfield Science Museum
Speaker: Dr. John McDonald

The ruffed grouse is native to New England. Valued by hunters and naturalists, it is found in young forests across its range but can persist even in areas with little young forest. However, it is threatened across its range by the decline of key habitats and relatively novel diseases. This evening's talk will discuss the ecology of the ruffed grouse, its population trends, and ongoing work to secure its future.

John McDonald is Professor and Chair of the Environmental Science Department at Westfield State University. He has also served as President and Fellow of The Wildlife Society. John did his Master's research on ruffed grouse in Pennsylvania. At the time, he expected to be a grouse biologist for the rest of his career. Fate had other plans for him and he has worked with black bears, deer, moose, beavers, and a few other critters over the years, but he still loves to hear a grouse drumming in the spring or to flush one during a hike or a hunt with his dogs.

Mount Tom State Reservation, *Holyoke*
Saturday, January 24, starting at 10 a.m.
Leader: Dori Dittmer
Registration: Please text or call Dori (917-346-0969)
Meeting Place: We will carpool from the parking lot of Stop & Shop on Route 5 in West Springfield.

Our easy walk along the beautiful out-and-back Quarry Trail will pass murmuring little Bray Brook. Just beyond the fence at the end of the trail, one can glimpse an old rock quarry.

Since there is no barrier to protect visitors from falling into the quarry, we will stop just before the fence. We will also explore the New England Trail. It's more moderate than easy but, fortunately, there are a couple of benches where we can take a break. Wear sturdy hiking boots, bring cleats for icy conditions, dress for the weather and bring hiking poles, insect repellent (ticks are active year-round), binoculars, camera, water, and snack/lunch.

Owl Prowl, *Russell*
Sunday, February 1, from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.
Leaders: Nancy and Tom Condon
Registration: Contact Tom (413 454-2331; or science@condon.net)
Meeting Place: Noble View Outdoor Center, in the parking lot just off South Quarter Road.

When the daylight fades and the winter woods fall silent, another world awakens. Join us for an owl prowl as we step into the crisp night air at Noble View, where great horned, barred, and screech owls may be calling from the shadows. Wrapped in scarves and starlight, we'll walk along the gravel road lit by the full moon, listening for hoots and learning how these remarkable birds survive the harshest season of the year. We'll even teach you how to hoot and whistle like an owl. With luck and a little patience, we may hear a pair calling back and forth across the icy hills.

This is a slow-paced, level, easy walk covering about one mile. Wear warm layers, cozy boots, and a sense of winter wonder. Bring a flashlight with red illumination if you have one. This will be a wonderful opportunity to experience the woods at their most mysterious. Space is limited—please be sure to register.

Mount Warner, *Hadley*
Saturday February 7, starting at 10 a.m.
Leader: Dori Dittmer
Registration: Please text or call Dori (917-346-0969)
Meeting place: We will carpool from the parking lot of Stop & Shop on Route 5 in West Springfield.

The Salamander Loop Trail of this Trustees of Reservations property leads us along gentle slopes, making this an easy-to-moderate two-mile hike. Mt. Warner is a 500-foot hill and offers great views of the Connecticut River Valley, along with informational signs explaining various plants and animals to be found here.

Wear sturdy hiking boots, and bring cleats for icy conditions hiking poles, insect repellent (ticks are active year-round), binoculars, camera, water, and snack/lunch.

FEB. Meeting

Magnificence, Mysteries and Death: Geostories from Western Massachusetts
Wednesday, February 18, starting at 7 p.m.
Tolman Auditorium, Springfield Science Museum
Speaker: Richard Little, Professor Emeritus, Greenfield Community College

Western Massachusetts is the best place in the world to study geology! Professor Little will discuss its many mysteries, including deep holes in the Connecticut Riverbed, weird post-glacial river directions, how the Connecticut River cut through the Holyoke Range, and why the Glacial Potholes can't be glacial. Our local geology can kill you, and Professor Little will tell you how to save your life (really!). This evening's presentation is based on his book, Exploring Franklin County; copies will be available.

About the Speaker: A geologist and an educator, Professor Little is a long-time resident of Western Massachusetts. He has taught at Greenfield Community College and Holyoke Community College, as well as at Deerfield Academy. His talk will convince you that Western Massachusetts is the best place in the world to study geology. Professor Little has written several books and created geology videos. He leads excursions around our area and is championing an initiative to designate armored mud balls—which he describes as intriguing, amusing, and photogenic Mesozoic rarities—as the state sedimentary structure.

Cold Winter Draw Day, *Northampton*
Saturday, February 21, starting at 10 a.m.
Leader: Dori Dittmer
Registration: Please call or text Dori (917-346-0969)
Meeting place: Entrance to Lyman Conservatory at Smith College

Join us at Smith College's Lyman Conservatory for an afternoon combining nature and art. We'll enjoy the peaceful, meditative beauty of plants from all over the world and draw some as we see fit. Prefer writing to drawing?

Bring a drawing pad and/or journal, and your favorite drawing materials that will be easy to use in a tight space. Colored pencils, markers, oil pastels, etc. will all work well. I will also have items available for your use, including drawing pads, if you need them. No experience required! Dress in layers, as different rooms have different climates. Don't forget to bring water. Please note, the Conservatory asks for a small donation at the door to support their important work.

Winter Animal Tracking, Quabbin Reservoir, *Belchertown*
Sunday, February 22, starting at 10:30 a.m.
Leaders: Dave and Suzy Gallup
Registration: Please call us (413-525-4697)
Meeting Place: CVS Plaza near junction of Routes 9 and 202, Belchertown

Join us for a snowshoe (or a hike if there is no snow) in the Quabbin Park area. Dave has extra pairs of snowshoes, so let us know if you need a pair. We will explore an upland hardwood forest. If there is snow, we may see tracks of deer, coyote, ruffed grouse, weasel, fisher, and many other of species of animals and birds. Learn how these creatures survive in a cold, snow-covered landscape. We will see stone walls and foundations of farms long abandoned. Dress for the conditions; don't forget binocks! Rain or bad weather cancels.

Beneski Museum of Natural History, *Amherst*
Saturday, February 28, starting at 10 a.m.
Leader: Sonya Vickers
Registration Please call Sonya (413-218-7742)
Meeting Place: We'll carpool from Table and Vine in West Springfield.

Join us for a great adventure during cold weather! The Beneski Museum of Natural History at Amherst College houses the deep history of the Connecticut Valley, with fossils from trilobites to a woolly mammoth skeleton, and so much else. Edward Hitchcock's work is also here. Hitchcock (1793-1864) was once the president of Amherst College. He initiated geologic studies of Western Massachusetts and interpreted the huge tracks found here as belonging to dinosaurs. Our Valley is one of the few places in the world where dinosaur tracks can be found. We'll get to see Hitchcock's geology work starting from the mid-1800s, as well as a dinosaur skeleton found here much more recently. Spanning three floors, the Beneski Museum is a treasure trove of geology and paleontology. Collections here serve as research materials for scientists today.

We will carpool from Table and Vine in West Springfield and carpool up to Amherst. If you prefer, we can meet you at the Museum. Please be sure to call me to register so that I can tell the museum how large our group will be.

Rock House Reservation, *Brookfield*
Saturday, March 7, starting at 10 a.m.
Leader: Dori Dittmer
Registration: Please text or call Dori (917-346-0969)
Meeting Place: We will carpool from the parking lot of Stop & Shop on Route 5 in West Springfield.

As we reach the end of a short entrance trail, we will be met by a massive boulder outcropping which was used by ancient Native hunters as a temporary shelter. From there, we'll walk a moderate, three-mile trail that circles the spring-fed Carter Pond, the centerpiece of this Trustees of Reservations property. We'll pass other large boulders and sheer cliff formations. Please be aware that some sections of the trail are a bit steep and could be a little strenuous. We'll stop for lunch at a cliff crowned by a rustic pavilion. From there, we'll have beautiful view of the pond, which provides a habitat for various creatures such as beavers, fishes, dragonflies and amphibians. We return on the easy fire road.

Wear sturdy hiking boots, bring cleats for icy conditions, dress for the weather and bring hiking poles, insect repellent (ticks are active year-round), binoculars, camera, water, and snack/lunch.

Autumn arrives in early morning,
but spring at the close of a winter day.

~Elizabeth Bowen

How Sweet It Is! Sugaring Time at Maple Corner Farm, *West Granville*
Sunday, March 8, starting at 11 a.m.
Leaders: Dave and Suzy Gallup
Registration: Please call us (413-525-4697)
Meeting Place: Commuter parking lot at Westfield State University

It is once again time for our visit to Maple Corner Farm in West Granville. This visit has become a Naturalists' Club tradition! The Ripley Farm has been in the family for over 100 years. Enjoy breakfast or brunch with maple syrup from the farm's maple forest. After eating, we will learn about the process and history of maple syrup production. Then, conditions permitting, we will hike to the maple sugar bush, about one-mile round trip, to see how the sap is harvested. For ages 8 and up. Bad weather cancels.

MAR. Meeting

The First Four Years of Conservation Science at Berkshire Bird Observatory: Partnerships, Projects, and Tales from the Field

Wednesday, March 18, starting at 7 p.m.
Tolman Auditorium, Springfield Science Museum
Speaker: Ben Nickley, Berkshire Bird Observatory

Ben Nickley of the Berkshire Bird Observatory (BBO) will present the work of this remarkable organization. BBO is a nonprofit dedicated to the conservation of wild birds through science, partnerships, and education. A small organization with a local focus, BBO is having a big impact in the Berkshires. BBO is contributing data to large-scale conservation efforts. Tandem to this scientific work, BBO is building community and connecting people to nature through up-close experiences with wild birds.

About the Speaker: Ben Nickley is a scientist with a passion for birds and the ecosystems to which they are integral. Always fascinated by nature, he got his start in science at The Ohio State University. Since then, Ben has travelled across North America pursuing avian field studies for nonprofits, universities, and state governments, picking up his master's in biology along the way. He is the author of several peer-reviewed articles and has presented his work at international conferences. Helping others connect with the natural world through birds is his *forte* and his mission. Ben feels privileged to have landed in the Berkshires and could not think of a better place to do the work he loves.

Mass Central Rail Trail, *location TBD*
Saturday, March 21, starting 10 a.m.
Leader: Carole Dupont
Registration: Please contact Carole (413-896-0124; or carole0136@gmail.com)

We will hike at a leisurely pace on a flat section of the Mass Central Rail Trail, crossing the Ware River on sturdy bridges with lovely views. Early signs of the first sproutings will be exciting on this second day of spring! I will fine tune the distance to the needs of our group. Bring water, binoculars, snacks, hiking poles & warm boots as well appropriate attire for a fun visit.

The stormy March is come at last,
With wind, and cloud, and changing skies,
I hear the rushing of the blast,
That through the snowy valley flies.

~William Cullen Bryant

Keystone Arches Hike, *Chester*
Sunday, March 22, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Leaders: Nancy & Tom Condon
Registration: Please contact Tom (413-454-2331; or science@condon.net)
Meeting Place: Chester Elementary School, Middlefield Road

In the early 19th century, George Washington Whistler, father of the famed artist James McNeill Whistler, set out to build what locals jokingly called the "Railroad to the Moon." This wasn't a voyage to outer space, but in the 1800s the idea of sending a railroad over the Berkshires seemed all but impossible. Using ingenious switchbacks, daring grades, and elegant stone bridges, Whistler engineered the first mountain rail crossing in North America. Today, those once-marvelous bridges lie hidden in the deep forests along the Westfield River, cloaked in moss, mystery, and history. Join us as we venture into that forest, tracing the old railbed and uncovering the extraordinary craftsmanship of Whistler's father.

This hike is 4.7 miles up and back, gaining 488 feet with easy-to-moderate ups and downs. Be sure to dress for the weather and pack a snack or lunch to enjoy on the trail. Registration is required. Heavy rain or snow cancels.

Naturalists' Club Donations in 2025

These donations are from the Phyllis Wheat Smith Fund, which we established years ago through the Community Foundation. This fund enables The Naturalists' Club to continue our mission of promoting knowledge, appreciation and preservation of our natural environment.

Museum Grant

The Springfield Science Museum Director approached Tom Condon with an exciting proposal: to create a new film for the planetarium. This planetarium program aims to depict the remarkable qualities and inhabitants of watersheds, as well as challenges faced, with a special focus on the Connecticut River. Production will take place over the next two years, with the film slated for release in late 2027. This project's mission aligns perfectly with the values of The Naturalists' Club, which focus on fostering a deeper appreciation for the natural world and educating audiences about the outdoors. The Naturalists' Club has committed $8,000 to the Museum to support the development of this 40-minute feature film.

Greening the Gateway Cities Grant

The Naturalists' Club is proud to support Greening the Gateway Cities Program (GGCP) with a $1,000 donation. This program's purpose is to increase the tree canopy in historically industrial cities that have been gateways for job seekers arriving from the world over. Re-greening cities that are reimagining new futures fosters better air quality, noise reduction, beautification, energy use reduction, wildlife habitat, heat island mitigation, and more benefits. Our donation will allow for the purchase and planting of trees in Western Massachusetts cities such as Westfield, Holyoke, Springfield and Chicopee.

Kestrel Land Trust Grant

The Naturalists' Club is donating $3,000 to the Kestrel Land Trust in support of their ongoing land acquisitions aimed at conserving farms, forests, and wildlands.

Mass Wildlife's Wildlands Fund

Recently we invited two Mass Wildlife scientists, Meghan Crawford and Jason Carmignani, to share their knowledge with the Club. In their honor, the Naturalists' Club has donated $1,000 to the Mass Wildlife's Wildland Fund. Donations to this fund are used to purchase land for both hunting, fishing, and passive recreational activities including paddling, hiking, and bird watching. The fund has preserved nearly ¼ million acres in Massachusetts. These protected lands offer vital spaces for wildlife to thrive, support ecosystem health, and provide carbon storage.

Spring Flower Shows

The Amherst Orchid Society Annual Show, *Northampton*
Saturday and Sunday, February 21 and 22
Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School, 80 Locust Street, next to the Cooley Dickson Hospital.
https://www. amherstorchidsociety.org

Smith College Bulb Show, *Northampton*
Lyman Conservatory, 16 College Lane
Saturday, March 7 to Sunday, March 22
http://www.smith.edu/garden/Home/events.html

Mount Holyoke Spring Flower Show, *South Hadley*
Saturday, March 7 to Sunday, March 22
Talcott Greenhouse, MHC Botanic Garden
https://www.mtholyoke.edu/botanic/flower_show
Talcott Greenhouse at (413-538-2116)

The NATURALISTS' CLUB

FROM THE TREASURER

Those with a date of "25-26" on your newsletter mailing label have paid for this year. Otherwise, your dues are owed for the year that started in September 2025. You may renew by sending a check (payable to The Naturalists' Club), to

Tom Condon
80 General Knox Road
Russell MA 01071

Note: If your contact information has not changed, the form below need not be completed. We would, however, like to have your email address if you haven't sent it previously.

Please direct changes or inquiries to Tom Condon, who maintains our mailing list. And please let Tom know if you would like to receive your newsletter electronically.

MEMBERSHIP LEVELS

$20 per year for Individual or Family Membership

$30 per year for Supporting Membership

$50 per year for Sustaining Membership
$300 for Lifetime Membership

The NATURALISTS' CLUB was founded in 1969 for the purpose of actively promoting knowledge, appreciation, and preservation of our natural environment.
It is an all-volunteer non-profit organization.

Education is a main focus of The NATURALISTS' CLUB. Programming, with an emphasis on local natural history, is designed to create camaraderie among people of diverse interests through experiences deepening their appreciation of nature. Activities are geared to acquaint the layperson with the natural world, mostly through field trips. Monthly meetings are held at the Science Museum at the Quadrangle in Springfield, Mass. Most field trips and programs are free.

Renew your membership

Name

Address

Phone Number Email

Do you opt for electronic delivery of the Naturalists' Club Newsletter? Yes_____ No_____

Please send to: Club Treasurer, Tom Condon, 80 General Knox Road, Russell, MA 01071

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