



OAKLAND
COUNTY PARKS

The Wilder Side of Oakland County

by Jonathan Schechter

Orchard Lake's Wildland Gem

About 10 years have passed since I last explored the Orchard Lake Nature Sanctuary; a 50 acre heavily wooded tract of land owned by the City of Orchard Lake Village. I returned last week for a causal nature embracing exploration. I was not disappointed.

The entrance to the small parking area for this almost hidden protected wildland gem is located at 4700 Pontiac Trail Road. It's on the north side of the road and very easy to miss if you are not driving slowly and looking for it. I was delighted that with the dry weather we had been having there were no mosquitos to greet me!

The sanctuary was acquired from the Cranbrook Schools in 1991 and includes woodland, meadow and wetland habitat. Some of the towering oak trees on the site are more than 250 years old and the fallen ones are left in place for wildlife habitat. The terrain, which was shaped by glaciers, is composed of small rolling hills and has a primitive but easy to follow walking trail system that meanders through the sanctuary. Bird life is abundant and I took pleasure in listening to the pounding of a woodpecker. I suspect spring birding would be awesome and I already marked my calendar to return in April or May.

The sanctuary is open from dawn to dusk and no entry pass is needed. However, dogs, bikes and fires are not permitted. A sign near the entrance also reminds visitors of "No Hunting", and a portable potty is near the edge of the nature sanctuary parking lot.

Shortly after starting my trek, I passed near extremely large vines one of which seemed to serve as tree climbing aid for a chipmunk that had been perched on the ground near me. Although I was not able to make a positive ID of the vine species a gentleman I encountered in the preserve told me they are "Riverbank Grapes"; one of the most widespread native grape species in our county. (a)

If you are searching for a real wildland for your exploration, this is not the place; but the sanctuary is a what I would call a nature-embracing gem even though sounds of the city and traffic can be heard during much of your trek. The preserve includes several different biotic communities with the mature hardwood forest and small marshes with a boardwalk are most notable. Suburban lawns with manicured landscapes dominate much of the neighboring landscape that abuts the preserve where nature still sets the stage. (b)

My meandering trek took me to a small pavilion near the center of the preserve. I suspect it is used for organized programs, but for me it was just a scenic rest stop to listen to the birds and much to my surprise and pleasure no mosquitoes were encountered during my trail trekking or pavilion rest stop.

A helpful map is displayed at a trail junction location and it's not a long walk to different locations where you can have views of Orchard Lake and Upper Straits Lake. The main loop trail will take you to both sites. (c)

I had the opportunity to swing in my interpretive naturalist role when I stopped to photograph an eye-catching burl on a tree and another hiker asked me what it was. A burl is almost a tumor-like woody growth that forms as a protective response to an injury, insect attack or bacterial infection. (d)



As to be expected the marshy areas of the sanctuary were rather dry now, but I'm confident in spring they will be teeming with amphibians and most likely mosquitoes. During my trek I took pleasure in just listening to the melodies of nature; birds singing, leaves rustling and although I did not get a clear view of it I heard the distinctive pounding of a Pileated Woodpecker. Perhaps my next visit will be in the dawn's early light.

Oakland County Parks staffer Jonathan Schechter is an avid "nature-embracing" hiker who follows phenology - the study of natural cycles of nature's way - to inspire his blogs.

