



OAKLAND
COUNTY PARKS

The Wilder Side of Oakland County

by Jonathan Schechter

West Bloomfield Woods Nature Preserve Revisited

More than three decades have passed since I was employed by West Bloomfield Township as its naturalist. During those years I successfully worked to have the West Bloomfield Woods Nature Preserve receive national recognition as an Urban Wildlife Sanctuary from the former National Institute for Urban Wildlife. That was a significant event with the site being the first preserve in Michigan to be so honored.

It's been about four years since I last meandered the preserve's rather hilly glacially sculpted trails and that was on a blustery winter day. Last Monday I ignored the light drizzle and returned to the preserve. In many ways it felt like I was visiting with an old welcoming friend.

The mood for a great hike was set by encountering wild turkeys strutting across the yard of a home just a few hundred yards from the park's entrance. Their nonchalant behavior told me they are rather accustomed to humans in their habitat. A few deer appeared as well next to that home but would not pose for a photo. (a)

My first surprise upon arrival was the new larger parking area that now has modern restrooms; a welcome addition for hikers who use the adjacent West Bloomfield Trail that passes by the northern section of the preserve. There is also an array of bat houses overlooking the field on the north side of the lot. That fact brought back another memory of guiding special event evening hikes at the preserve in search of bats and owls. (b)

There's excellent information rich signage at the trailhead that sets the mood for a hike and gives visitors a sense of place. If you are new to the preserve, take the time to read them; it will add to the pleasure of your exploration.

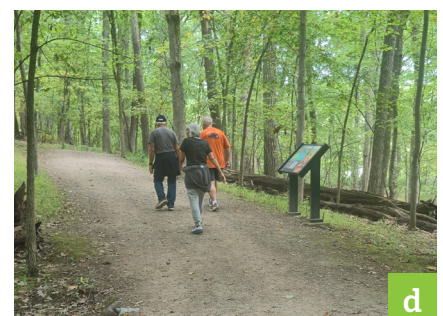
There are several overlooks along the trail. They are excellent locations to pause on your hike, read the adjacent interpretive signage and just take in the views. One of my favorite overlooks gave excellent views of wood ducks.

Another smaller sign in several locations reminds visitors that it's a nature preserve and pets must be kept on leash that is no more than six feet long. I'll add if you want to see wildlife your best bet is an early morning visit and don't bring a pet.

West Bloomfield Parks states; "The 162-acre preserve is frequented by over 100 bird species as well as white-tail deer, red fox, coyote, weasel, mink and salamanders. Great carpets of white trillium and yellow trout lilies thrive under mature oak and hickory trees. Large black walnuts and wild dogwoods can also be found within the preserve." I will definitely return in the spring when the woodland wildflowers show their colors!

If after reading this far you are ready for a hike take note that the hike will be hilly and the trails are not conducive for regular strollers and baby buggies. I did encounter one gentleman on the trail with an all-terrain stroller.

Your trek will take you both adjacent to and over a now nearly dry tributary of the Rouge River. The interior of the woodlands has an overlook under a canopy of mature hardwoods; another good location to pause and see what's going on in nature's world. I recall that during my last winter hike there, I watched deer hunkered in the shelter of the ravine. (d)





There are several vernal ponds that can be noticed from the trail. These critical ponds, also known as ephemeral ponds, are usually dry in the summer and autumn but refill in spring from snow melt and rain. They are a critical part of the habitat and provide safe fishless breeding areas for salamanders and frogs. I still recall back when I worked for West Bloomfield leading an evening hike in the spring in hopes of hearing screech owls and being met by a chorus of spring peepers. (e)

I am not much of birder, but the preserve's diverse habitat attracts a wealth of bird life. I listened to a Piliated Woodpecker pounding away on a large dead tree and also took pleasure in watching a green heron near the shoreline in the stealth mode waiting for a fish or frog to come into "catch and eat" range. (f)

I wrapped up my exploration by heading east a few hundred yards on the almost seven mile long West Bloomfield Trail to the overlook that once provided an excellent view of an active Great Blue Heron Rookery. Sadly, ice storms and high winds felled those trees years ago but a telescope is still at the overlook that lets visitors scan the horizon.

If you want to explore the preserve the address is 4655 Arrowhead Road, West Bloomfield. It's open to the public without charge from 8 am to sunset. If you bring a dog it must be on a leash at all times and that is enforced. Bikes are not allowed in the nature preserve. I also suggest if you want to see wildlife hike early in the morning and not during the busier weekends. There are numerous trail side benches to take a break on. Happy hiking! (g)

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.