

The Northland Nature Trail **Thorpe Park**

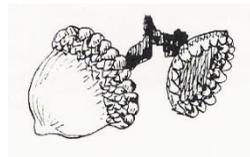
This trail will lead you on a journey back to a time when this area was a mosaic of prairies and marshes, when wildlife was abundant, and when the scenery you'll see along the trail stretched from horizon to horizon. This 18-point loop takes about 45-60 minutes to complete. Leisurely follow the numbered posts and read about each feature. And, as you walk, be sure to notice the many sights and sounds of nature all around you. After all—they're part of the trail, too!

1) Smooth Sumac

Sumac plants are probably best known for their flaming red autumn colors. They are commonly found along roadsides, in clearings, or throughout abandoned farm sites. In winter, deer and rabbits often feast upon the twigs and branches. In earlier times, though, Indians and pioneers used sumac bark tea for medicinal purposes. In addition, sumac juice, high in tannic acid, can be used to tan leather and the red-brown fruits can be used to make a drink sometimes called "Indian lemonade."

2) Oak Trees

In North America, there are over 60 species of oak trees and, here in Iowa, the oak tree is so common that it is our state tree. The acorns of oak trees provide valuable food for many wildlife species, including deer, wood ducks, squirrels, raccoons, and even some songbirds. Indians would grind acorns for flour and, later, the watertight wood of many oak species was used for shipbuilding and coopering (barrel-making). Today, the strong wood is used mostly for furniture.



3) An Iowa Marsh

North-central Iowa was, at one time, dotted with thousands of marshes. These areas contained a mix of water and vegetation, providing important nesting areas and migration stops for

millions of ducks, geese, and songbirds, and serving as homes for countless other animals. People also benefited from these areas, for marshes cleanse the water, control floods, and provide recreation. Unfortunately, over 98% of Iowa's original marshes have been drained.

4) Edge Effect

In 1933, famed Iowa conservationist Aldo Leopold discovered the importance of edges in an environment. Edges are areas where two or more plant communities meet, such as the area to the right of the trail where the trees and grasses meet. These areas tend to have more wildlife because the animals living there have access to a wider variety of habitats in which to find food, water, and shelter. This concept of diversity is very important in wildlife management.



5) Weeping Willow

Although this tree fell many years ago, the long, graceful "weeping" branches of this tree make it easy to identify. A native of China, the weeping willow was first introduced into the U.S. during colonial times and since then has been used mostly as a decorative tree.

6) Park Office

At the top of the hill, you will see the headquarters of the Winnebago County Conservation Board. Outside the office are several birdfeeders that attract many songbirds throughout the year.

7) Wildlife Habitat

Wildlife managers continually strive to conserve and improve wildlife habitat. An animal's habitat is an area that provides that animal with everything it needs to survive—food, water, and shelter. Here at Thorpe Park, you can see forest, grassland, and aquatic habitats. Many animals,

though, like deer, often use more than one habitat, one, for food and shelter, for instance, and one to find water. Habitat edges are important to these animals.

8) Oaks and Cottonwoods

Different trees are adapted, or designed, to live in different areas. Oak trees (like the ones up the hill) are called "upland" trees because they tend to live on higher, drier ground, away from the water. But cottonwoods are "bottomland" trees that grow in moist soil, closer to the water. As you look down the hill, you can see some of these trees. Differences in the soil have caused these two types of trees to sprout and grow where they do.

9) Listening Post

As you sit here, listen to the many subtle sounds of nature. Also, notice the trees and grasses around you and relax as you view the marsh below. And, as the gentle breeze circles around you, you may want to remember the words of naturalist Sigurd Olson: "Man needs beauty as he needs food... Artists spend their lives creating it but, for the vast majority, it lies in the simplicities of natural things."

10) Red Pines

These trees are generally found farther north, around the Great Lakes, where the soil is poorer. Although they are not native to Iowa, they can be found scattered in local areas. The wood is often used for construction, crates, pulpwood, and ornamentation. The red pine can be identified by its long, flexible, paired needles and its red, scaly bark.

11) Farmland and Wind Turbines

We often think of parks as being "islands," areas unaffected by what lies outside. But, the land surrounding parks, such as the farmland to the right, can have a dramatic effect on nearby parks. Properly managed, it can provide additional food and cover for wildlife, as well as keep the water

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that flows into the park clean. Improperly managed land, though, provides little wildlife habitat and can cause siltation, which fills in wetlands and pollutes water. The effects of the wind turbines have yet to be determined, but they are a constant reminder that we need to harness energy in environmentally responsible ways.

12) Prairie and Native Grasses

Throughout the Thorpe complex, you will see many stands of native prairie grasses. These grasses covered 85% of Iowa when the first settlers arrived. For over 10,000 years, their sinuous roots had grown deep, making it difficult for those first pioneers to break the prairie sod. Not until John Deere invented the steel plow were the pioneers able to take advantage of the prairie's fertile soil. Today, we still have those prairies to thank for the rich topsoil that nourishes our farms. And the native grasses that still remain help to keep our water clean, prevent erosion, and provide essential habitat for countless species of wildlife.



13) Trumpeter Swans

Trumpeter swans nested in Iowa in the 1800's, but habitat loss and unregulated hunting drove them out of the state by the turn of the century. In the 1990's the Iowa DNR began a restoration project to bring the swans back to Iowa. Thorpe Park was one of the first trumpeter swan release sites and, since then, trumpeters have regularly nested here. They are the largest waterfowl in North America, so they are quite an impressive sight to see. They have nested both in the Thorpe marsh (to the left of the trail), as well as in the Russ marsh (to the right), so you may want to take a few extra minutes to look for them!

14) Wood Ducks

At one time, the wood duck was close to extinction. Unregulated hunting, the draining of wetlands, and the clearing of wooded areas all

contributed to this cavity-nesting ducks decline.

Finally, in 1918, wood duck hunting was banned. Then, in the 1930's, a biologist names Frank Bellrose developed a wood duck nesting box to replace the tree cavities that had been lost. Wood duck numbers soon began to increase and, by 1941, restricted hunting was once again allowed.

Today, the colorful wood duck is one of Iowa's most common nesting ducks and can often be seen in this part of the park.



15) Bluebirds

In addition to wood duck houses, you will also see smaller bluebird houses throughout the park, including along this fence. That's because, like wood ducks, bluebirds traditionally nest in tree cavities. Today, though, few dead, hollow trees are left standing; most are torn down soon after they die. As a result, bluebirds (and other cavity-nesters) have declined in number. These boxes, though, act as artificial tree cavities, giving the birds places to live.

16) American Basswood (Linden)

The trees lining the left side of the trail and the road are basswood trees. The basswood is a bottomland tree, growing most often in moist soil. Today, it is used by woodcarvers and for pulpwood, as well as for landscaping. Native Americans, though, used the strong bark for toboggans and the bark's tough, inner fibers to make cloth and rope. Some tribes also used the tree's flowers for medicinal teas. The basswood can easily be identified by its heart-shaped leaves and, often, by its multiple trunks. (Carefully, continue on along the road straight ahead.)

17) Lake Catherine

Lake Catherine is a 10-acre lake that reaches depths of over 15 feet in normal years. As a result, bass and catfish call the lake home, as do bluegill and

crappie. In the winter, an aerator in the lake keeps the water from completely freezing over and preventing extensive fish kills. Across the lake, you will see the Lake Catherine Cabin, a cozy rental cabin that provides a relaxing way to enjoy Thorpe Park. On the other side of the lake is the Thorpe Park campground, popular with people who don't mind "roughing it" just a little!

18) White Pines and Shagbark Hickories

The tallest pine species in North America, the white pine is easily identified by its needles which come in bundles of five (one for each letter in the word "white"). Native Americans used the bark to relieve coughs and the British often used the straight trunks for ship masts. Farther past the shelterhouse are some shagbark hickory trees, their "shaggy" bark quite obvious. Many animals favor the nuts of these trees and the wood is often used to smoke meat or to make strong, lightweight tool handles.

We hope you have enjoyed your walk!
We leave you now
with a famous quote by
Chief Seattle of the Nez Perce Tribe:

"Teach your children what we have taught our children—that the earth is our mother; whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth. If we spit on the ground, we spit upon ourselves. This we know—the earth does not belong to us, we belong to the earth."

We need your help in keeping this park and others like it enjoyable and meaningful places for people to visit. Please respect the park, this trail, and the natural resources of all such areas.

Trail Map

