



# The Wilder Side of Oakland County

by Jonathan Schechter

## Trekking the Trails of the E.L. Johnson Nature Center

More than a decade has passed since I last trekked the trails of the E.L. Johnson Nature Center in Bloomfield Hills. Last week, I received an inquiry about hiking and “nature exploring with little children” at this center that included critical questions about trail conditions and what wildlife might be seen there.

Instead of guessing at answers, I headed to the center on Monday morning. I am very glad I did. It was a most pleasant morning meandering the trails, sitting on benches to watch waterfowl and is often the case when I’m exploring, chatting with others.

The center describes itself this way: “The Johnson Nature Center is a beautiful natural 40-acre site that offers visitors myriad visual pleasures and a plethora of learning opportunities. It features a scenic; four-acre inland pond that is home to an assortment of fish; a large variety of trees including stands of pine, hardwoods, and a sugar bush; and many native plants and wildflowers that decorate the rolling terrain left by the prehistoric melting glaciers. A tributary of the Rouge River flows through the park-like area”.

Wildlife species that have been confirmed include red fox, eastern coyote, deer, and mink along with an abundance of birds, amphibians and reptiles. With that information in mind, I will need to explore early one morning and find a place to sit, look and listen; the best way to view wildlife.

I’ve discovered that when I am wearing my Oakland County Parks cap, I am more approachable with visitors at any park. As soon as I stopped to photograph a red bud tree another visitor asked me about the species of the tree. A few minutes later I climbed up one of the viewing platform towers and once again questions came my way. I am not much of a birder, but was pleased I was able to identify for a family that the “big blueish gray bird” was a Great Blue Heron. There were several warblers flitting about near the base of the tower that drew attention but only one I could clearly identify as a Yellow Warbler.

Shortly after that encounter a pair of wild turkeys crossed the trail in front of other visitors and me. The nonchalant behavior of the turkeys tells me they are very accustomed to human visitors. I was surprised to see them there since other visitors told me coyotes are occasionally seen and turkey eggs and turkey poult would certainly be very much on a coyote’s menu.

The E.L. Johnson Nature Center building was closed during my exploratory visit however excellently worded colorful interpretive signs along the trail system answered most question I might have asked. Although it will be another month or so before their restored prairie habitat comes to life, I was pleased to see a brilliant blue Eastern Bluebird flitting about near the sign. His behavior tells me he was hunting insects on the ground.



I hiked down behind the building to access a trail that meanders around the lake and presents excellent shoreline views and quiet spots to sit and reflect. I noticed many visitors took the opportunity to pause, sit and just enjoy the day.

The center encompasses 40 acres of mostly rolling terrain and a small tributary of the Rouge River and about two miles of trails. There are about two miles of mulched trails that meander in both flat areas and what the center calls “gently rolling hills”. The hills are small and easily navigated but would be difficult with most baby buggies. As is often the case I am drawn to the water’s edge for that’s often a ‘hot zone’ for wildlife viewing.

I found an excellent location to be a stationary observer and in less than an hour I watched turtles basking, a muskrat swimming, mallard ducks paddling and geese waddling. When I turned around noticed deer about 30 feet away watching me. The fact that the deer watching me so very casually told me that they are very accustomed to humans hiking the meandering trails

The nature center and trails are located at 3325 Franklin Road in Bloomfield Township. Restrooms are available during the normal hours. Trails are open to the public 8 a.m. to sunset every daily except for holidays.

For more information, visit their website. And the best news; it’s free admission. Be aware dogs are not permitted.



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