



A Walk in the Woods

45-60 minutes

(depending on pace and how often stops/observations are made)

By: Phil White

at Indian Creek Nature Center

This is a narrative designed to cause a hiker to think about the woodland environment. A worksheet is attached that can be used as a scavenger hunt. In order to follow along with this, take the trail leaving just past (north) of the Tipi platform. It will take you across the ridge behind the Amazing Space building. Your route will have a few T intersections, but in any case **always turn right if you have a choice** and it will bring you to the prairie by the labyrinth.

- A. As you head up the trail, be observant of your surroundings. Think about the woods as one big living thing that you are walking inside of. Likewise, as you hike observe: is it fully “dressed”?
- Does it have “shoes” (grasses, seedlings)?
 - Does it have “pants” (shrubs, young trees)?
 - Does it have a “jacket” (smaller trees)?
 - Does it have a “hat” (crown or tops of tall trees)?

You will notice different areas are “dressed” very differently. Why is this? As you first go up the hill you are going from the prairie edge into a forest. There are tall trees and shorter ones, notice that the smaller trees are just not young versions of the larger, but some are totally different. Some trees reach for the sun and create the canopy, while others have adapted to life with less sun and don’t grow as tall. Also, notice the underbrush, this area has good shoes and pants, but maybe not much of a jacket.

- B. Once you have gotten to the first tight left turn in the trail, where there is a bench, take a break. You should be able to look out over the building to your right (SE). If you look past the Amazing Space building past the road you will see a couple of tree lines.

The farther tree line is along the banks of the **Cedar River**. You are now standing on the “old” banks of the Cedar River. The Cedar River is called a **misfit river** because the amount of water that flows through it now could not have cut the valley it runs in.

Reach down and take a look at the soil. Is it dirt as you expect? Or sand? How would sand get up on this hill side, and what would have been here that would have caused the Cedar River to have been much larger? The answer is Glaciers.

During the last few hundred thousand years glaciers came and went just north of this area. Glaciers brought sand and silt and large rocks (see glacial erratics trail by parking lot) down from Canada. And as they melted (think hundreds of feet thick ice sheets) they cut the **Cedar River basin** that you are now looking down upon.

- C. Head up the hill the rest of the way. You will come to a grove of pine trees at the top on your left (**remember to stay right as you progress through the intersection**).

These are **White Pine trees, the only pine species native to Iowa**. The needle bundles generally have 5 needles per bundle and are about 3 inches long.

- Pick some up some needles and take a look.
- Find some pine cones.
- This is a good place to close your eyes, and listen quietly. You should hear some wind in the pines, birds and other forest sounds. Notice that the pines are all pretty close together and are not vigorous looking. They were all planted on this hill at the same time. Which means they are likely going to die around the same time, leaving the hilltop exposed. This is what happens when there isn't diversity in environments.

- D. Continue on the trail just a bit farther. On your left (to the N side of the trail) again you will see more pine trees. If you look at them from a distance you will notice they have a dark reddish color to the bark. These are **Red Pines**. Their needles should be in bundles of 2 with the needles being about 5 inches long.

- Pick some up some needles and take a look.
- Find some pine cones.
- How is this cone different from the White Pine cone you picked up earlier?

E. Continue hiking. Look at the diversity of plants on the ground and the different types of trees. As you go along you will find some plants with thorns on them.

- If they are long canes and the thorns are straight, these are some type of raspberry, if the time is right they have fruit on them, yum very good. Who else might eat these?
- Another thorn bush you might see is one that comes more from a bunch at the base and spreads outward with long branches. Take a look at the thorns on this, if they are very sharp and point backwards like a fish hook, this is a Multi-Flora rose. This is an **invasive species**. That means that they are not native here and they tend to out compete the native plants for light and space in the habitat. Because of the thorns the deer and rabbits won't eat them, and the birds love to eat the rose hips and spread the seeds. So, as they get thick they starve out other plants around them.
- Look at the standing or fallen dead trees, they should have interesting mushrooms and mosses on them.

F. Soon you will go down some steps and cross a small bridge. Look for wild flowers here; if it is spring there will be quite a variety. Later, the trees shade the ground so the flowers go dormant again.

G. As you head uphill again, you will come to a sharp right turn in the trail, and a bench. If you look to your left (NE) you will be looking into an **upland deciduous forest**. These are trees that lose their leaves every fall. You will notice that this area is fully "dressed" with plant life from its feet to the top of the head. **What different animals, insects, or other creatures will live at different layers in the woods?**

Now turn around and look to your right (SW) out into the prairie. **What is different?** This area is not fully "dressed" with the middle plants missing. It is dominated by large oak trees. See how they are kind of gnarly, I think of them as spooky trees. They shade the ground and all the leaves that fall kind of make a mat making it hard for other plants to grow. This is an **Oak, Hickory savannah**. It is a transition area from the prairie into the forest.

H. Head down the trail, and again observe the very different plants that grow along the trail. There are almost always green plants on the trail, as the trail opening provides some light coming down. **Look also for acorns, which are oak seeds**, and other seeds on the ground. Once down the curving trail you will hit the T intersection, turn right and go out into the prairie. There will be a small forest finger on your left as you exit the savannah. **How is the plant life different here than the rest of the trail?**

- I. Follow the forest finger all the way down, prairie on your right, trees on your left. You will come to another intersection and a big rock (J), turn right to go back to the building. You should be able to see the solar field and building ahead. This ends my narrative, I hope you enjoyed your walk in the woods and learned something. I also hope you have more questions than when you started. Continue walking the prairie or head back as you wish. By the way **how many different types of bark did you see on the trees?**

Name: _____

Hike in the Woods Activity sheet: Draw a picture of the items as you see them on the hike.

Mushroom	Teardrop shaped leaf	Pine Cone	Ground Plant
Pine Needle	Something smooth	Thorn	Moss
Animal track	Seed pod	Something weird	Flower
Leaf with points on it	Rock	Bark of a tree	Something rough