



Wood Duck Way Loop

May 2021 v1.1

Created by ICNC Teacher Naturalist Phil White

This level, 1.2 mile loop leaves from Amazing Space, going south to the Lynch Wetland parking lot onto Wood Duck Way. The loop takes you from Indian Creek to the prairie and back to the building.

Head towards Otis Road with a restored prairie on the left and Bena Brook on the right. Once over 80% of Iowa was covered by prairie, now maybe around .1% remains. There might be over 200 types of plants in a prairie.

There is a chain gate at Otis Road. The spot you are standing on provided many artifacts from ancient inhabitants of the land. **Why would they live here?**

After carefully crossing the road, go to the small parking lot. The small bushy tree on the right is a **Swamp White Oak**. The leaves have rounded edges and no deep grooves compared to other oak trees.

Starting down the trail, **notice the cattails on the right** which are part of the wetland and may have Red Winged Blackbird nests woven in. They are protective of their nests.

Follow the trail and turn left near a wooden platform. A large tree is down and cut. This is a Cottonwood tree. **Can you count the rings?** These are fast growing, tall trees that are a favorite nesting spot for the American Bald Eagle.

You are now entering what is called a **Riparian zone** - a woodland that makes up the river bank. **While hiking, stop, look and listen.** Birds, deer and other wildlife are abundant here, in addition to many species of trees and plants.

A native plant growing thick and low to the ground is **Bed Straw**. It is light green, has a central stalk with a small circle of leaves every few inches. If you touch some it will stick to you! This plant was used in bedding since it binds to itself.

The trail will curve close to Otis Road up a steep bank. A lot of small **Hackberry trees** - native trees with a unique bark pattern - are in this area. The trunk looks like it is covered with small pieces of cork sticking straight out.

You are approaching a floodplain with many **Silver Maple trees** growing. Silver Maples are tall, have a silvery flaky looking bark, and leaves with five-tips that are green on top and silver on the bottom. They often grow in clumps of 2 or 3.

There is a large, uprooted Silver Maple almost parallel to the path. **Look at the tree pan it made and the root pattern.** The shallow roots that spread out in all directions are good for life in a floodplain. How long will it take the huge tree pans to fill in?

Do you see a large depression in the ground? It might be filled with water. This is an **ephemeral pond** - it is sometimes here, sometimes not. Look for where the water enters or leaves. **This area is connected to the Cedar River via underground aquifers.**

Turn left as you leave the boardwalk, cross Otis Road and go back down the bank onto the Sac and Fox Trail. You will pick up the ICNC trail again on the left across from the footbridge over Indian Creek and head back towards the building.

This floodplain is home to **Stinging Nettle**, a non-native plant. **Be careful as this plant stings. Examine the plant without touching it.** It is covered in delicate and hollow thorns containing a tiny dose of itchy histamine.

An Elm tree on the right about halfway up the trail has small leaves and a trunk with buttress roots at the base, spreading out to support the tree. Notice the grape vines along the path. They climb up the trunk and form large hanging vines.

Leaving the floodplain, Honey Locust trees edge both sides of the path. They are native trees, but **why does the tree have thorns?** Maybe the tree evolved to protect itself from Giant Sloths or Mammoths, which went extinct in our area around 9,500 years ago?

Follow the prairie back to the building. **What types of plants do you see? Do you see animal tracks or scat?** There should be birds flitting around and, of course, insects.

