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Newsletter June 2006 – July 2006

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A Visit to the Breen and Champion Federal Tracts

This is the sixth article in an occasional series on lesser known ParkLands tracts.

The woods has been called “the most studied” in Illinois because of its repeated visits over the years by ISU students directed by biologists who happened to be ParkLands leaders. But the 38 acres that make up the Breen and Champion Federal tracts on the east side of Lake Bloomington can hold surprises for visitors, and even a mystery.

Both tracts were donated — by Thelma Breen (10 acres in 1979) and by Champion Federal (28 acres in 1991). Although contiguous, they are quite different, for the latter was once a Christmas tree farm and Scotch pine still dominates, the low branches making for tough hiking despite several winding pathways favored by deer.

In an early-April visit, we found that the Breen tract quickly lived up to its reputation as “a good woodpecker woods”. Red-headed Woodpecker seems to predominate, but Red-bellied Woodpecker as well as Northern Flicker and Downy Woodpecker greet visitors with their knocking and calls.

The site has long been popular with bird watchers who spot White-breasted Nuthatch, Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Carolina Wren, as well as a veritable squadron of Cardinals and Blue Jays. We found the above as well as Red-breasted Nuthatches, Hermit Thrushes and both species of kinglets. Summertime visitors include the Eastern Wood Peewee with its plaintive “peeee-weeee,” and the Great Crested Flycatcher adding to the chorus (or ruckus) with its “wheep! wheep!”

Early spring flowers poking through the dry leaves on this trip included Spring Beauty, Toothwort, Dutchman’s Breeches, Red Trillium (quite abundant this year) and Trout Lily. It is nice to report that our old nemesis Garlic Mustard is still uncommon here.

The Breen mystery centers on the fact of uniformity; nearly all of the White Oaks rise tall, straight, and seem to be about a century old. They lack the lower branches that a savanna would have encouraged. Lesser abundant species include Red Oak, some smaller Black Cherry, and at the south end of the woods, an understory of Eastern Hophornbeam (Ironwood). This creates a wood that is nearly perfect for walking; no trails are needed, for most of the ten acres is quite open.

What caused such uniformity in tree species, size, and age? Grazing long ago? Use as cropland? Deer did not become a ubiquitous pest until just a few decades ago, so their browsing cannot be blamed. No, it is one of ParkLand’s enduring mysteries.

DIRECTIONS; From I-39, turn east to Lake Bloomington. At Green Gables, turn left and go around the north side of the lake on the Keller Highway to County Hwy. 63 (Ron Smith Hwy.) Head south 3/4 mile on 63, past East Bay Camp, past the Three Bears gate, until you see the ParkLands sign for Breen Woods on your left. Or continue a bit farther as Hwy 63 bends south by the former tree farm, guarded by a large rock on the east side of the road bearing the legend: “Presented to ParkLands Foundation by Champion Federal.”

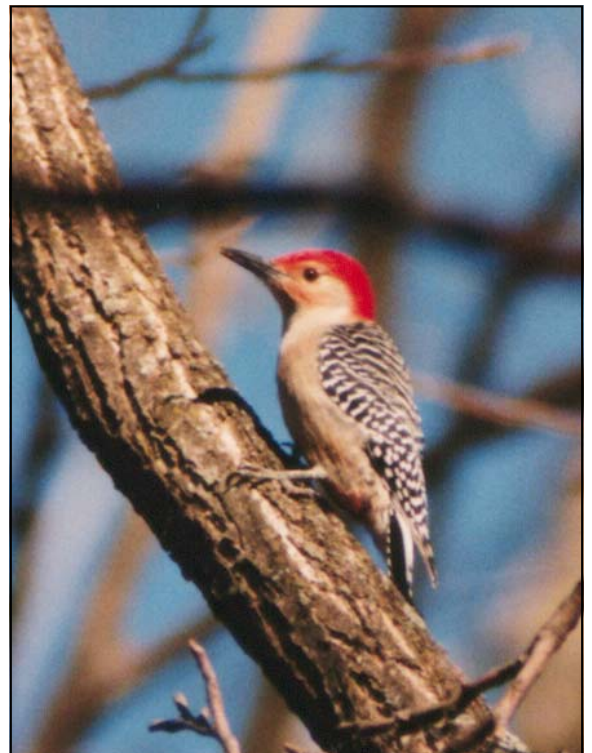


Photo by Tim Lindenbaum

Mark Wyman with the assistance of Dale Birkenholz

WOODFORD COUNTY LANDS

With the purchase of the Letcher Basin Preserve, the ParkLands Board has recognized the need to improve the access to our other Woodford County properties for passive nature recreation. To that end we have started an initiative to improve signs and boundary markings, improve management plans, and scout future trails.

We also would like to encourage our members who live close to these properties to join our volunteer list for workdays by emailing our Land Steward Tim Lindenbaum (tlindenbaum@prairieinet.net). With only one paid staff member, we still depend substantially on volunteers.

Our holdings in Woodford County include Kenyon Nature Preserve (131 acres), Woodrum Hidden Hills Nature Preserve (54 acres), and Hazle Nature Preserve (40 acres). In addition, our Wyatts Ford Nature Preserve (58 acres) includes a canoe launch and Ridgetop Hill Prairie (17 acres) is designated as an official Illinois Nature Preserve due to its significant botanical features.

*Angelo Capparella
ParkLands President*

BREEDING BIRD SURVEY

Board member Eric Smith has arranged for a breeding bird survey to be done on the Merwin Nature Preserve this summer. That Preserve has benefited from years of ecological restoration to return it to pre-settlement oak-savanna conditions, and we expect that this is encouraging breeding by savanna-dependent birds. With our plans to dedicate a portion as an Illinois Nature Preserve and the rest as an Illinois Land and Water Reserve, this data will help ParkLands in that registration process.

Angelo Capparella

IN MEMORIAM

Elizabeth Stein, Bloomington art teacher, photographer and ParkLands devotee, died May 5 in Chicago, where she had lived for the past ten years. She was 99. Lischa, as she was known to many of her friends, was an ardent supporter of ParkLands and served on the board in the early 80s. In the late 70s and 80s she regularly took her many friends and visitors to the area to sell them on the virtues of studying and just enjoying nature. The south trail to the river is named the Stein Trail in her honor.

Dale Birkenholz

EVENT CALENDAR

Summer 2006

Volunteer Workdays

Sweet Clover Control

Sat., June 3, 9:00 AM
Merwin, West Gate
Leader - Mary Horgan
309-527-5636

General Maintenance

Sat., July 1, 9:00 AM
Merwin, West Gate
Leader - Tim Lindenbaum
309-531-7065

General Maintenance

Sat., Aug. 5, 9:00 AM
Merwin, West Gate
Leader - Tim Lindenbaum
309-531-7065

Note:

Dates of Volunteer Workdays are subject to change. To receive up-to-date information, ask Tim Lindenbaum to put you on the e-mail contact list. Tim can be reached at tlindenbaum@dtinspeed.net or 309-531-7065.

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