

Nature Trails Still Open, Busy In Winter

Have you taken a winter nature hike along any of the park trails of the Huron-Canton Metropolitan Authority? "Winter is a good time," says William F. Hopkins, chief naturalist for HCMA. He said that although these trails are not as busy with either human or wildlife traffic as they were in the summer or fall, they are far from deserted in the winter months.

Persons who have walked the shorter trails in summer may want to explore the longer trails such as Habitat Trail (2.15 miles) in Stony Creek Metropolitan Park near Ulica or Deer Run Trail (1.7 miles) in Kensington Metropolitan Park near Milford.

HOPKINS POINTS out that the exercise is invigorating, the scenery "when snow covered" superb, and those pesky mosquitoes and deer flies of summer are gone.

Winter hikers are advised to first stop at the Nature Centers at Stony Creek or Kensington Park to view the special winter exhibits and find out what birds have been observed recently along the trails.

Once on the trails, visitors should stop at one of the winter bird feeding stations. They will have an opportunity to check on the well-fed and nearly tame cardinals, chickadees, nuthatches, juncos and woodpeckers. Hopkins mentioned that the feeding station is a good place to see the antics of red squirrels as "they solve" the problem of the "squirrel proof" bird feeders.

SPRING-FED STREAMS in the nature study area flow all winter long, sparkling in the snow, while the quieter waters of the ponds and swamps have frozen with the ice protecting

hibernating frogs and turtles that have burrowed in the frost-free mud for the winter. "Winter is the season for tracking. The snow mantle traces the night-time activities of deer mice, muskrats, raccoons, foxes, deer and cotton-tail rabbits. Daylight travelers, such as the ruffed grouse, pheasants and squirrels, leave their footprints in the snow, reminding us that life in the wild continues all winter.

Trees in winter exchange their green summer raiment for white crystals of snow. The "branching" characteristics of different species of trees are more apparent in the winter with the fine-textured branches of ironwood trees contrasting with the rugged branches of the hickories.

It is a good time to examine the buds of the trees, such as the red buds of the basswood, the yellow of the bitternut hickory and the pointed "cigar-like" buds of the American beech.

WHERE NATURE TRAILS go through old fields, the winter hiker can see how last summer's wildflowers look now that the stalks and leaves have turned brown and the blossoms have become seed capsules. Covered with sparkling frost crystals many of these wild plants have a second season of beauty.

Tree cavities that were once hidden by leaves, reveal dwelling places for squirrels or raccoons. And on marsh edges the custom-built lodges of the muskrats are apparent, while on sandy ridges persons may see possum or skunk tracks or red fox tracks identifying the users of dens excavated in the soil.

Hopkins advises winter trail hikers to dress warmly. "Put on warm socks and overshoes, don a cap that can be pulled down over the ears, and button up your warmest jacket or "mail coat" and you'll feel a bit more comfortable as you explore the nature trails.

These year-around trails can be found at Stony Creek Metropolitan Park near Ulica and Kensington Metropolitan Park near Milford — which each have a nature center — or

Hudson Mills Metropolitan Park near Ann Arbor and Lower Huron Metropolitan Park.

THE TRAILS are open daily from 9 a.m. to dusk, except for Stony Creek, where the trails

and nature center are closed on Mondays.

The nature centers are open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday and New Year's Day.

Creek which is closed on Mondays. Both areas are closed Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

Mornings Tuesday through Friday, the Nature Centers are reserved during the school year for school group use by advance appointments, which are available by contacting the Huron-Canton Metropolitan Authority, 1750 Guardian Building, Detroit 48226 or phoning 961-5865.



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