

12 months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

June – Three Elms River Access and Area

(<http://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Three-Elms-Area-and-Access.aspx>)

Directions: On Three Elms Park Rd just over .6 miles east of Hwy 150 in Independence.

If you go: Remember the park is a river park and is closed if water is high. Because it is near the river, there can be a lot of mosquitos in later spring and early summer. Poison Ivy and stinging nettles are abundant, but staying on trails will help avoid contact if you are unfamiliar with them.

June is National Rivers month; a great time to get out on the Wapsipinicon and enjoy the beauty of the parks that access it in Buchanan County. Although many locals know of Three Elms as a river access park, it is that and much more. Be sure to visit with your bow, bicycle or camera and enjoy other aspects of this multi-use park.

The parking area just below the entrance is a great spot for trail users as well as picnickers wanting to use the shelter, grill and/or firepit. For those unfamiliar with Poison ivy, the tree at the entrance side of the parking area is a great place to educate yourself. There is a large ivy plant growing up the tree and you can see the hairy vines clinging to the trunk as well as familiarize yourself with the shape and pattern of the leaves. Flowers were blooming and buzzing with pollinators. (It is not a plant that is “bad” and has connections to wildlife as food and shelter.) (Photo 1) If you are off trail at all at Three Elms, you



will want to be able to identify poison ivy as it is prevalent off the trails.

Across from the parking area is the sign at the multipurpose trailhead. This trail is a walking/archery/biking route that is designated as one way to facilitate safety. With puffs of cottonwood floating all around, I started along the

trail wondering if mosquitoes would be active in the wooded understory. Robins were searching for worms and woodpeckers were drumming as I began my walk.

This section of trail is quite diverse as it is on higher ground and floods less frequently than the later trail section. The archery course utilizes (and maintains) the stairways that go up and down the hillside for changing shooting angles; they are a great addition for increasing heartrate for those exercising, but are obviously not for bicycle use.

Opposite the stairs is the largest shallow water pond on the park. During high water, the pond recharges; during drier spells it slowly shrinks to leave just the deeper areas wet. Approaching the water's edge a flurry of frogs jump into the water; small cricket frogs to large bullfrogs. Nets would surely catch a bevy of tadpoles here as well.

The trail continues across a gulley and switches back a couple of times – again for safety during the archery shoot – before it emerges at the roadway. At the road crossing, a number of wild plum shrubs line the road. As long as weather conditions are suitable, the fruits will ripen in late July and make a great jam. Raccoons, opossums, butterflies and even turtles will feed on the ripening fruits.

After meandering for a while, the trail corners at a seemingly random set of stairs to nowhere that are part of the archery course and heads toward the river. From this point, it is a bit easier to wander off trail to the river sandbar – avoiding the stinging nettles and poison ivy by sticking to the areas scoured by high water with sparse vegetation. The sandbar is a regular visiting spot for deer, raccoon and Canada Geese and you can often find fresh tracks that show they have been there. The upstream side of the bar is often gravelly and is a great hunting spot for fossils – look for colony and horn corals as well as brachiopods (like clams). Mussel and snail shells, feathers and snakeskin were also among my finds as I walked the bar. (Photo 2)

Many river travelers begin at the Knott's Landing access just upstream from Three Elms, and this is the first sandbar on their downstream float. For those looking for a fast and easy float – maybe a first trip with younger children, the trip from Knott's Landing to Three Elms is just 1.5 river miles and takes less than an hour for most.

Walking back south to the trail, the first mosquito of the day bit me – I was comfortable without insect repellent this day, but many days this is not the case. Mosquitos are a valuable food source for tadpoles in the ephemeral ponds, but not all the larvae are eaten. Be sure to bring insect repellent to use if you visit in summer. The trail ends as it returns to the area near the picnic shelter and parking area – about a mile.





Prairie has been planted in a portion of this area and the flowers there are just starting to bloom. Spiderwort (photo 3), thimbleweed, and foxglove were among the flowers blooming. Look for gray coneflower, cup plant, and goldenrod among others as the summer progresses. Past the prairie on the way back to the parking lot, you may notice posts and ground markers; these are range finders for the practice archery target (currently not in place, but should be re-set soon). (Photo 4) During the 3-D archery shoot hosted by the Wapsie Bowhunters, this is the location to hone in your sight before starting on the course. This year's 3-D shoot is July 9. (visit Wapsie Bowhunters Facebook page for more information soon).

