

12 more months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

May – Wehner Woods (<https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Wehner-Woods.aspx>)

Directions: Turn east onto Pine Street from Hwy 187 at the BP station in Lamont. Turn north onto Jackson St then again east onto Worth and finally north on East St which turns into North St which dead ends at the parking lot.

If you go: Remember the park is a hunting area as well as a nature enjoyment area. Wear bright colors during spring turkey season and come mid-day to avoid most hunters. There is a well-maintained trail that winds through the park; but if you plan to venture off trail, long pants are recommended as stinging nettle, poison ivy and patches of wild parsnip are common. Binoculars can help you spot some of the many migratory songbirds that use the river corridor here.

This continuing series of the next 12 months in Buchanan County Parks is starting with May rather than April. Two things kept me from issuing an April article: The first part of April was unseasonably cold and snowy and like most of you I was tired of the snow and ready for signs of spring that seemed reluctant to appear. I could not seem to find any inspiration to share. Then from April 15 – 25, I chose to spend much of the last days of my mom's time on Earth with her.

Thus, May 2018 begins this second 12 months in Buchanan County Parks.

Buchanan County has some amazing natural places – many of these belong to all residents of the county as public lands managed by the Buchanan County Conservation Board. The diversity of these areas and the subtle to breathtaking beauty and peace to be found there can be a healing balm that we are blessed to have available.

Wehner Woods' 30 acres of woodland and river bottom are nestled along the northeast corner of Lamont and cut by the narrow Maquoketa River that continues toward Backbone State Park after leaving the park. Arriving at the small parking area at the southwest corner of the rectangular property,



you need only step from your car to be immersed in the wild.

Like many of our natural areas, this wild includes not only native plants and wildlife, but species introduced to the US from other areas as well. Along the first part of the trail you will encounter native violets (Photo1) and introduced dandelions. There

are native Jack-in-the-Pulpit (Photo 1A) blooming alongside the introduced garlic mustard. Native gooseberry shrubs compete with the introduced honeysuckle. Native catbird, cardinal and woodpecker calls are interrupted by the squalling mating call of introduced pheasants. Some of these non-natives are considered



invasive because of their aggressive adaptations that allow them to outcompete natives. Dandelions are prolific, but because of their low growth, do not eliminate the native species. Garlic mustard and honeysuckle grow in densities and heights that do shade and eliminate natives and staff and volunteers work each year to remove these invasive non-natives.

One afternoon visit does not provide enough time to make a significant impact on reducing the garlic mustard population, but as the trail moves deeper into the woodland, the density of the invasives decreases and I stop to pull a patch that is more isolated. As I pull, bud covers from the ash above fall like raindrops and the woodpeckers scold from the trees. A buzzing from somewhere nearby brings a smile to my face as I recognize the whir of wings and the soft twitter as a hummingbird – I don't see this one, but it is my first of the spring.

Taking a brief detour from the established trail, I follow along another trail that is much narrower (Photo2) as it was made by dainty deer feet. Deer trails are usually easy to follow as they tend to wind around thorny brambles, and I take this one a way to see if the recent warmth and rain have caused the morels to emerge. I look in a few likely areas without any luck and return to the main trail.



Moving along the trail in a counterclockwise direction, I began to hear the chorus frogs and toads singing and began looking for the source of the sound. As expected, I found a little vernal pool (Photo 3) – a low area that likely filled with water when the river level was high and was holding that water. These pools

are great breeding ground for mosquitoes since they do not usually contain fish. That makes the pools good for frogs as well, as the mosquito larvae then become the food for the tadpoles. My approach triggered mass jumping into the water – and a brief silence. Only one brave green frog male (notice the tympanum circle behind the eye is bigger than the eye) stayed to be photographed (Photo 4).

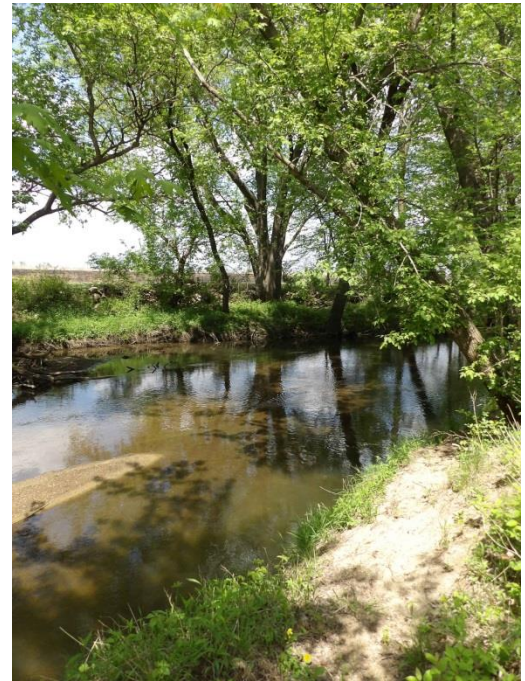




Leaving the pool on a tangent to rejoin the trail, I notice a large cream-colored mushroom growing from a nearby log and risk taking the route through the stinging nettle to check it out more closely (Photo 5). The temporary sting of 2 brushes against my legs was worth the trip. The mushroom ended up being a rather large and aptly named pheasant's back mushroom – a tasty variety of spring edible that gets tough when large like these. I did some further research on this species and learned that in addition to being a decomposer of hardwood (often elm) logs, this

mushroom species is also a parasite on living trees; a character not very common among fungi. Before eating any fungus, be sure of your identification skills.

Finally back on the trail, the gurgle of water over an obstacle announced that I was approaching the Maquoketa River. The river is not much bigger than a creek here (Photo 6), you could easily wade across on most days. I found a small trail down to a rock bar and sat just listening and watching the tiny minnows dart away from shadows. Colorful pebbles caught my eye – red, orange, yellow, black and maroon – all within inches of each other (Photo 7).



Before the lullaby of the water could put me to sleep in the warm spring sun, I wandered back to the trail for the last leg back to the car. The path led along a row of planted pines and between the “Cheer” calls of the cardinals and the “Cheerily – Cheer-up” song of the robin, it seemed this little trail was saying come back any time.