

12 more months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

November – Fairbank Fen <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Fairbank-Fen.aspx>

Directions: 1050 Dillon Ave, Just East of Fairbank off of Hwy 281 then south about ½ mile on Dillon Ave to park access.

If you go: Fairbank Fen is about ¼ mile down an access lane that is not maintained during snow. The 40 acre property features the unique geology of a Fen as well as prairie and a young grove of river birch. There are no maintained trails at Fairbank Fen, so dress to travel through prairie grasses and wet areas. Hunting is allowed at the Fen, so wear bright colors during hunting seasons. With only one access point, it is easy to see if others are there.

Late fall weather is fickle – nearly 60 degrees one day and wind chills in single digits the next. It can be a difficult time to want to be outdoors- the lure of our toasty home can be strong. But regardless of the temperature, being outdoors – and properly dressed to do so – can invigorate you, refresh you and refocus you.

As hunting season swings into full gear, it is important to feel safe when visiting Buchanan County natural areas. I suggest wearing bright colors that are easy to see and choosing our areas with single access entries or our nature preserves where there is not public hunting. One of these properties is the Fairbank Fen – there is an access lane of about a quarter mile that ends in a parking area and the property is open on all surrounding sides as bare fields this time of year. If there is no other vehicle in the lot, you can be pretty sure that you have the area to enjoy by yourself.

Every few years, there are firebreak trails mowed at Fairbank Fen, but this fall that is not the case. You might choose to follow double tracks of the ranger that was used sometime this fall to scout boundary markers or just head out on your own. Looking across the landscape, you might want to make note of the lighter colored and often denser canary grass (Photo 1) as an indicator of wet ground below. You may want to avoid crossing these areas if the ground is not frozen or you do not have waterproof footwear.

My recent visit ended with me taking away the following “Advice from a Fen Nature Walk”.

Follow the narrow path – it will help you get immersed in the Fen and tends to lead you north avoiding some of the wetter areas. But be sure to look all around you as you go for wildflower skeletons and wildlife signs like feathers and fur. And once into the Fen prairie – do step off the trail and explore!

Stand Tall and proud – but remember to bend with the wind – (Photo 2) The remnants of what I believe was tall coreopsis still emerge above all the surrounding vegetation. Surely when they were in their glorious yellow bloom they were irresistible to pollinators. Now they remain as a perfect perch for birds that may enjoy the seeds or just a good vantage point to survey their surroundings. On this visit, the difficulty was in getting a good image, as the wind kept blowing the stems about and out of focus for my camera.



Be outstanding in your field – (Photo 3) Every time I visit the Fairbank Fen, I make a point of stopping at this glacial erratic boulder. I climb up and spend some time taking in the surroundings: smells of damp earth (or nearby applications of manure on fields), the sound of the waving grasses and songbirds, the feel of the wind on my face and through my hair. This boulder will surely not remain forever, but it will be there long after you and I no longer visit, and that seems a great reason to visit it every time I go.



Scat happens! – (Photo 4) Many times scat is one of the easiest signs to find that indicates both what wildlife might be at a given area and why. Today it was laying there like a beacon on the boulder – and was probably meant as a beacon to other nearby raccoons that this boulder was part of the territory of the raccoon that left it. The main diet of this coon seemed to be seeds – including corn that it probably raided from the nearby fields. What might the same raccoon’s scat look like during other seasons? Maybe fruit seeds in summer and eggshells in spring as it feeds on what is plentiful each season.



Spread seeds of joy – (Photo 5) I was very pleased to see an abundance of milkweed at Fairbank Fen. I can’t help but wonder how many monarchs were raised from eggs laid on the leaves of these many plants during the past summer. Not only did I find the common milkweed that still was spreading its seeds on the windy November day, but also skeletons of swamp milkweed in the wetter areas. From my understanding, it is often the scattered milkweeds like these that are most successful in caterpillar survival – fewer predators find the scattered plants than the denser garden plantings. These seeds carry the hope of the next generation of monarch butterflies and our hope for the joy of seeing them fly about each summer.



Even faded flowers are beautiful – (Photo 6) By late fall the seeds of most wildflowers have been, are or will soon be scattered by the wind or fed on by wildlife. Left behind are the

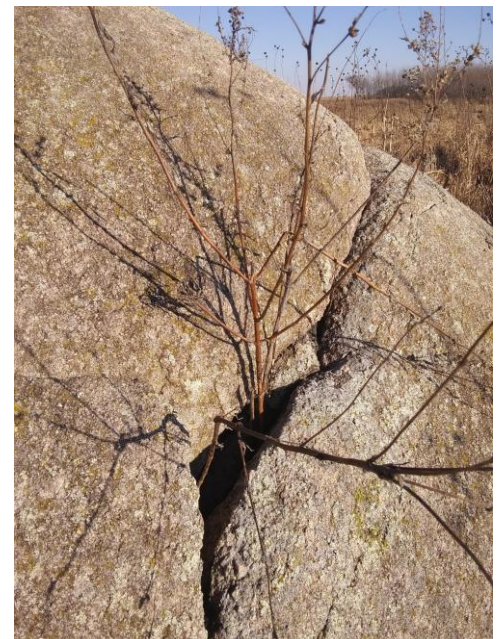


remnants of the seed structures. From the large creamy wing of the milkweed to the dainty daisy like pad of the aster seeds, what is left behind has a beauty all its own. Be sure to look for the small skeletons of these wildflowers as you enjoy your walk. Some even have amazing scents – the smell of the gray coneflower seeds is one of my favorite fall and winter aromas.

Hold tight to what moves you – (Photo 7) – After a walk in a wild place, it seems inevitable that you have seeds that will have come along for the ride. Take a close – really close – look at these amazing hitchhikers. Mother Nature has some amazing structural adaptations that these seeds utilize to hang on for the ride. Tiny hooks and barbs prevent many of them from falling off before they are picked off with our fingers or a grooming animal’s tongue or teeth. By that time, they are often far from the original plant and less likely to compete with that plant for the resources of sun, water and space. What a way to travel!



Don’t let hard times keep you from growing – (Photo 8) How much soil or space or sun is needed to grow? This is just one example of the fact that plants will utilize what is available. Somehow a seed made its way into the crevice in this boulder – maybe from an undigested seed in raccoon scat, a seed that blew in the wind, or one that was pulled off a grooming animal’s fur. In the crevice it found a bit of soil blown by the wind or eroded from the rock. With timely rain and temperatures that were not too extreme, it



managed to grow, bloom and produce its own seeds to spread on for another round of the cycle of life.

What advice will you glean from your own visit? My best advice to you is to go out, enjoy nature, and discover the positive effect it will surely have.