

## 12 more months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

October – Putty Root Preserve ( <https://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Putty-Root-Preserve.aspx> )

Directions: 2408-2 262nd St., Independence, IA 50644 Southeast of Independence on Quasqueton Diagonal then south on Parrish Ave and follow brown directional signs.

If you go: The access lane to the preserve is a narrow gravel drive and has had some washing due to all of the recent rain. There is a small parking area for 3-4 vehicles. Putty Root Preserve (PRP) is a forested 17 acres with a diversity of trees. The property is rectangular, but with a 3 acre inholding on the east central side (marked with park boundary signs, but they are spaced some distance apart – please check the aerial map on the website for more precise location). There are no maintained trails at this site. PRP is NOT a public hunting area. I did not notice poison ivy, but it may have already lost leaves and is likely present. Management of garlic mustard has eliminated much of it here, but there are still pockets where the invasive is present. Songbird migration is ongoing and binoculars and field guide are helpful for bird observations. As always, take your camera and visit PRP or one of our other parks and perhaps snap the winning photo for one of next year's Buchanan County Natural Areas Photo Contest categories.

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The most common comment heard lately has something to do with when will this incessant rain stop. The heavy rains and high water levels in September kept me from getting an article out, but I took advantage of the sunny morning last week to get to one of our higher ground parks to enjoy the brisk day and fall colors. All the moisture and the warmer temps have resulted in quite a diversity of fall fungus to go with the beginning fall foliage. While the ground was soft and sometimes squishy underfoot, my shoes were not caked in mud nor did I get wet feet. Sounds like the sun will return for a while now – go out and enjoy fall.



I began my wandering at PRP by following a heavily used deer trail west from the parking area. As I turned back to the east, the sun peeked over the hillside and gleamed through the bright yellow, green and golds of several smaller hickories – a positive harbinger for the morning walk (Photo 1). Few birds were calling, but a turkey vulture took flight silently as I approached; it was enjoying the sun on its outstretched wings before my disruption. Other than my footsteps, the only other sound this peaceful morning was the chatter of a couple of squirrels.



It did not take me long to realize that they had quite the location – several different types of hickory and oak trees littered the ground with the nuts (Photo 2). One hollow branch that lay on the ground was an obvious sheltered dining “table” for a chipmunk or mouse. These smaller rodents don’t chew the nuts completely open,



but rather chew holes in several locations to get to the nutmeats inside and they left their empty “dishes” right where they ate (Photo 3). Evidence of hickory nuts buried and not recovered was also abundant – baby hickory trees were very common throughout the woodland.



I was pleased to notice a diversity of wildflower skeletons and seeds along with the baby trees. On my last visit here, the understory was dominated by garlic mustard. Garlic mustard is a non-native that grows well in our woodland areas and produces hundreds of seeds per plant. The seeds begin growing in mid-summer, producing a rosette of round wavy edged leaves (photo 4) that absorb the filtered sunlight and feed a taproot that will overwinter. The following spring, this root provides a quick start for the new leaves that out-compete the native wildflowers for the limited sunlight. Dense stands of solid garlic mustard can result. With our 4 field staff, Buchanan County Conservation does what we can to control invasive species, but it is time consuming and impossible to get to all of our properties. Pulling garlic mustard is the best means of controlling it, and it is a task that is easy to learn and do. We encourage volunteers to get trained on identifying and help with pulling in next May. The return of the native wildflowers is evidence that PRP is one area where the control is working – but continued vigilance is still needed here.

I had been on the lookout since leaving my car for the namesake putty root. The leaves of the orchid are persistent through very late fall and many times will remain green beneath a blanket of snow. The leaves are easily identifiable; usually single or double, a wide oval on a very short stem, darker green with distinct whitish veins that run nearly parallel up the leaf (Photo 5). It was not until I started heading downhill a bit that I started seeing them – and then I noticed them for much of the remainder of my visit. As the other vegetation dies back in the next few weeks, the putty root leaves will become even more visible. If you know where the larger plants with 2-3 leaves are, then you know where to go in mid may – early June to search for the flowers. The flowers are a more camouflaged reddish brown with the distinct orchid shape, but on a stalk only 6-12 inches from the ground.







Fall color was my goal in selecting a park for October as wildflowers are no longer blooming. PRP has a diversity of trees, including oak, hickory, basswood, elm and walnut. A variety of vines climb those trees, including grape, poison ivy, Virginia creeper and greenbrier. Oftentimes, early fall color occurs in those climbing vines as both poison ivy and Virginia creeper (Photo 6) display brilliant reds and grapes will turn a striking gold. Unseasonable fall weather has meant fewer cool nights – one trigger for the brighter fall colors – but the hickories were beginning to reach their peak. If the storms have not stripped them off their branches, golden yellow should greet you as you look into the canopy. If the rain and wind have taken a toll, the ground should be where you look for the color. Don't be

too disappointed if the leaves have blown off; the smell and crunch of autumn underfoot is an unmatched outdoor experience.



All the moisture we have had – along with the warmer temps – has resulted in another flash of fall color – in the many mushrooms popping up. From a stereotypical toadstool (Photo 7) to the oceanic coral mushroom (Photo 8); from camouflaged to hunter orange, the mushrooms are making one last stand. Look for them clinging to trees, dangling from dead branches, and poking through the leaf litter on the ground. Try looking beneath the fungus for a peek at

their underside. You may see rows of gills, a spongy-looking surface, or creamy smoothness. Mushroom undersides are the spore producers of the usually much larger and much less obvious fungus that is feeding on and decomposing the dead plant materials of the forest.



Nearing the end of my visit, I nearly tripped over the scattered remains of a deer skeleton (Photo 9). It too was being decomposed and recycled. Most of the edges of the bones showed obvious teeth marks where rodents had been gnawing on them. Calcium from the bones of dead animals is a precious resource for rabbits, squirrels and mice and most bones and antlers on the surface of the ground will be consumed by them within months.

If only the remains we leave behind were as easily recycled... Always bring something to make the area a better place than when you came – I picked up a number of non-natural items on my visit, so I hope it is cleaner when you come and cleaner still when you leave.