

12 months in Buchanan County Parks and Natural Areas

October – Cortright Wildlife Area and Hookanliner Addition

<http://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Buchanan/Park/Cortright-Wildlife-Area.aspx>

Directions: Near Littleton, IA; One mile southeast of Littleton on River Road Blvd

If you go: Cortright Wildlife Area has multiple habitat types including river sandbars, river bottom forest, upland forest, restored prairie, ponds, and shelter belts. There are numerous walnut, oak and hickories and the mast (nut) crop was heavy – walking among fallen nuts that may be covered with leaves can make tricky footing. Poison ivy is prevalent in wooded areas. During warm weather, mosquitoes and flies may make insect repellent useful. Hunting is allowed – Wear bright colors during open seasons and perhaps avoid shotgun deer season if not hunting. Several mowed trails are here – most are destination trails, but the River sandbar trail loops to the prairie and the trail there will take you back north to the parking area without doubling back.

Fall is not only the season for fall colors, but also the season to harvest seeds from prairie flowers. As I visited parks to collect seed from plants, I was looking for a colorful candidate for this October edition of 12 months in Buchanan County Parks. Fall flowers bloomed early with the dry conditions and since we do not have a large maple forest property, the color search yielded mostly the yellows and golds of hickories, walnuts, ashes and cottonwoods as well as the silver maples lining the Wapsipinicon River. Only those who take the time for a closer look, listen and smell beneath the sweeping vistas to the individual leaves and plants, tracks and animals below will notice the subtle beauty of the season at our parks and natural areas.



Rain last week kept many from getting outdoors, but I was at Cortright when a

light rain began and was amazed at the saturation that the cloudy sky gave to the deep scarlet of a dripping Virginia creeper (Photo 1). And it was the sunlight on another visit that highlighted the multicolored hues on a single maple leaf (Photo 2) and backlit the colors in the oak making it pop out from the forest backdrop (Photo 3).



Cortright Wildlife Area is a perfect choice for getting the most of an October visit. While there are several trails, I enjoy parking at the pine windbreak and taking the River Sandbar Trail. Follow the sign for the Riverside Walking trail, into the open space by the first of several small ponds and to one of our most statuesque natural features in Buchanan County.

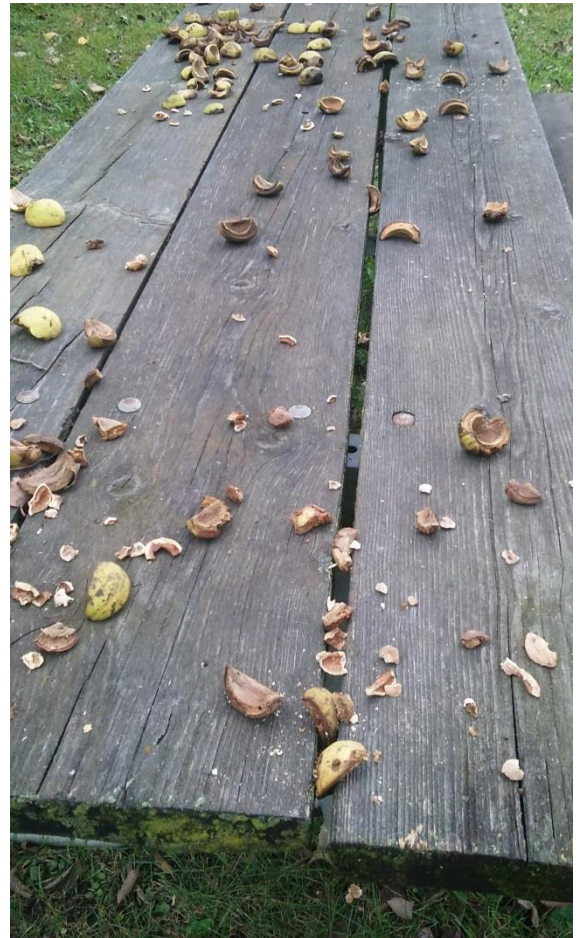


Standing at the fork in the trail with an intriguing opening visible as you approach, an enormous tree calls out to visitors. From the other direction is a much larger opening that invites young and old alike to step inside and back in time (Photo 4). Easily more than 100 years old, the majestic cottonwood could certainly share a story or more of all it has witnessed. Listen closely – how does the wind sound from inside? Can you hear any animals? What about the heartbeat of the tree itself. Evidence of a more recent injury on the tree’s west side reminds us that even such a forest giant is not invincible and that gravity will one day win the battle and another Goliath will fall.

Continue south on the River Sandbar Trail past the second of the small floodwater ponds. This is a favorite fishing spot for great blue herons – they squawked loudly at me at both recent visits before flying off

at my disturbance. Walnuts line the shore here and have littered the trail. It seems there may be so many nuts this fall that the squirrels are overwhelmed as I saw no evidence of feeding on the walnuts. Or maybe the hickories are just more flavorful this year – seems the squirrels were enjoying them right on the picnic table with only their chewed open shells left as litter (Photo 5).

Left of the trail along this section is a young tree planting of oaks and evergreens; behind them an older windbreak planting of evergreens. Come out this winter and follow the amazing diversity and abundance of tracks through these sheltering trees. Shelter from wind and snow can be lifesaving for wildlife



that remains through the winter. Birds and mammals that use both the prairie and forest utilize the shelterbelt – as is evidenced by the trails in all directions as they venture out for food.

Past the shelterbelt, the trail opens to the restored prairie on the left. Sun and wind combined on my recent visit to reveal a plant I had not seen at Cortright before – Whorled Milkweed. Like all milkweeds, the seeds of whorled milkweed are dispersed by wind on amazing fluffs of white (Photo 6). Each gust of wind grabs a few more seeds and blows them out to their future. I stepped in and harvested a few for our milkweed seed give away (begins this weekend) and butterfly garden seed packets that will be sold at the Fontana Park Gift shop (hopefully next weekend).



Turning back to the right I followed the trail past another pond – this one with a small island that begs to be explored. Wood ducks exploded up as I approached the fourth pond; they will likely head south soon but return to raise young in one of the nest

boxes next spring. Several trees have fallen into the pond – a perfect place to look for turtles catching the last warming rays of the sun as fall days get cooler – or the first warm rays next spring. Leaving the ponds, the trail leads back uphill to the prairie.

Follow the trail straight north between the prairie and the woodland – a perfect place to encounter some of our edge residents like bluebirds and deer. Tracks in the mole tunnels indicate both deer and raccoon have been here recently. A quick right staying along the edge and then a left into the prairie and you are on the home stretch of the 1.5 mile loop.

No longer the explosion of color that was the prairie in August, browns and rusts now prevail. Textures make up for the lack of color diversity as prairie forbs prepare to disperse their seeds. Picking just a sample of the various seed capsules and pods, I created a fall bouquet and planted it in the soft sand of a ground squirrel mound along the prairie trail (Photo 7). Compass plant remains a bit green, wild white indigo has nearly black bean shaped pods, stiff goldenrod's white mini parachutes stand where the yellow flowers were just weeks ago. Gray coneflowers pearl gray oval heads are one of my favorite fall smells – break it open and sniff.



The trail opens back near a second parking area

on River Road Blvd and it is a short walk back to your car at the first parking area. Other trails at Cortright and Hookanliner provide routes directly to the Wapsipinicon, through the bottomland forest and completely around the prairie – come back often and experience all this diverse 190 acre area has to offer.