

## The Nature Trail



Most people have one spot in the world where they wish they could spend their entire life. For many people this is the beach, with warm weather and the constant sound of water lapping up on the sand calming and relaxing them. For nature enthusiasts, specifically birders, this could mean in the middle of a rainforest or a desert; extremes that many people would not desire. For me, I would have to say that my favorite place in the world is not as typical as a beach or as extreme as the rainforests of Brazil. Actually, it is somewhere right in the middle. It is a fifteen acre wooded lot at the end of my street that is known as The Nature Trail.

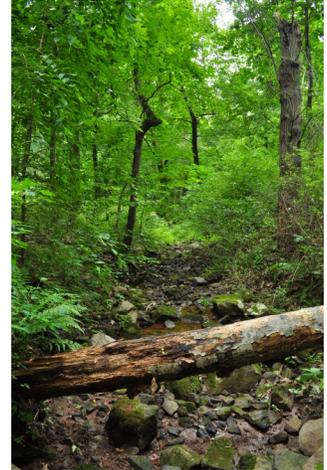
Because of its location, I am able to visit the Nature Trail quite often. Whenever I am at the trail I feel as if I am on vacation. That may sound odd, but each time I explore the Nature Trail there is something new to discover. When it comes to all of my interests - birds, plants, insects, fish, amphibians – something is always different or there is something that I have never seen before at the trail. It also provides a spot of complete solitude where I can be alone if I wish, accompanied only by the calls of birds and the gurgling of Pigeon Creek (the stream that runs through the area). Here are a few of the reasons why I love the Nature Trail so much:

One of the main things that makes the Nature Trail so great is that it teaches me some important lessons for the future. Because I am unable to drive myself to parks or other places out of the area to see a rare or new bird, I am forced to bird within a biking range (unless my parents are not busy). Sometimes, though, it is better to stay close to home.

It was early spring of 2012, around April. I directed my bike down a narrow path leading through a thick hedgerow into a field, the staging area before entering the Nature Trail. Luckily, some of the neighbors decided to take their 4-wheelers through the day before, making it very easy to travel down the steep decline of the hill without having rose bushes and other brambles in the way. I quickly reached my destination where I often park my bike – the area exactly

where the field meets the woods. I freed myself of my helmet and water bottle and started down the trail. I was about ten steps into my half-mile trek when I saw a large bird dart through the trees. My first thought was Cooper's or Sharp-shinned Hawk. But as I saw it alight in a nearby Tulip Poplar tree, I knew it was much more: a Great-horned Owl.

Over the next month or so, I continuously saw the Great-horned, often accompanied by a mate (or what I believed to be its mate) as well as over two dozen crows. This coming spring, I will watch to see if they are breeding in the park.



Another incredible experience I was able to have at the Nature Trail happened just around a month ago. I was sitting along the side of Pigeon Creek, the waterway that runs through the Nature Trail (which is another reason why there are so many birds that can be seen there), accompanied by a non-birder friend. I was admiring the spectacle of Gray Catbirds, American Robins, and Red-eyed Vireos passing above us while my friend told stories of the latest trades and acquisitions in the world of hockey (just as I am an avid birdwatcher, my friend is an avid hockey player). Just then, I saw a bee-like creature fly by at an incredibly fast speed, startling some foraging chickadees and titmice. I was able to relocate it darting in and out of Spotted Jewelweed, which, being in full bloom, was making the bank on the opposite side of the stream come alive with orange. I had my binoculars ready and trained them on the animal. It was a Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Many people look for a way to attract hummingbirds to their yards by using native plants but always stick to the few red-flowering plants. By making this observation at the Nature Trail, I am able to recommend another option for a hummingbird attracting plant that is native and beautiful, and at the same time, educate people about why the native wildflowers are so important to the ecosystem.

This next memory of the Nature Trail is probably my favorite yet. This was taken right out of my Nature Trail notebook, where I write down nearly every detail of each of my visits to the trail. "5/18/12. I'm at the pool watch spot with Justin [my friend] after school. I have already seen White-breasted Nuthatch, Great-horned Owl, and a possible Swainson's Thrush towards

the beginning of the trail, but it seems like there is more activity by the water. \*Note to self --- The following happens in about forty minutes, between approx. 4:10 and 4:50 pm\*. There is a Brown Thrasher bathing. Blue Jay and Gray Catbird bathing. Red-bellied Woodpecker is foraging in a tree above us, and two Baltimore Orioles are up higher in a neighboring tree. Song Sparrow bathing, and Carolina Wren vocalizing in somewhere nearby. Eastern Wood-Pewee lands directly above us and begins hawking insects and calling. Carolina Wren and House Finch made an appearance by the pool. Dozens of American Crows heard, most likely going after the Great-horned. A lightly colored - so maybe female - American Robin as well as a Northern Cardinal are bathing. MALE ORCHARD ORIOLE comes down and starts bathing! And now a Yellow Warbler! A larger looking woodpecker just flew to a tree straight across the stream. And it seems to be a Hairy Woodpecker! Comparison is easy because there is a smaller one behind it which seems to be a Downy. Chickadees, a White-eyed Vireo, and a Wood Thrush heard behind us. Two Chipping Sparrows land next to the fallen log and stay there for a bit. A female Mallard flew up the stream right past us. It is now 4:48, and activity has died down.”

That is a total of 24 species in the hour and fifteen minutes that I was at the 15-acre property and 20 species just at the one spot where my friend and I sat, unmoving, for forty minutes.

That is why I love the Nature Trail - because you can find birds that you may travel over thirty miles to see, you can see incredible bird-plant relationships, and for me, I can spend hours on end in the middle of a bird sanctuary at an area just a short bike ride away. There is so much I could tell about the Nature Trail, but I would not be able to fit everything into one short essay. I think the main lesson to be learned from the Nature Trail is that you do not have to go far from home to experience great bird and plant life. Even if you are right in your own backyard, you can always experience incredible wildlife.