

Featured Segment

Lodi Marsh: An Ice Age Trail Hike for All Seasons

by Paul G. Hayes Lodi Marsh is a subtle jewel even on its worst days. And five of us can prove it. Our first note of caution came from Drew Hanson, Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation geographer,

Photo by Paul G. Hayes



Bundled up and heads down, Christine Thisted, Bill Pielsticker, Tim Malzhan and Dr. Lyle Bohlman climb Center Bluff.

who said it just wasn't right to write about the Lodi Marsh Ice Age Trail segment in March and miss the spring flowers or the mature summer prairie.

My response to Drew was that when the article runs about the marsh in this issue of *Mammoth Tales*, our lyrical description of the marsh walk will attract folks to try it for themselves.

Our second note of caution came from the National Weather Service and television and radio meteorologists, who issued a winter

storm warning for southern Wisconsin for the Monday of our walk. They hammered away at the warning all weekend. But deadlines are deadlines, and if we didn't walk it



Monday, we wouldn't have this article finished for the summer issue of *Mammoth Tales*. I phoned Christine Thisted, Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation executive director. "It's on," I said, "rain or shine."

"Of course," she responded. "We won't melt."

The third warning came as I drove west on Highway 60 toward Lodi. A steady drizzle of mixed snow and rain threatened to ice the roads if the temperature fell another degree or two. I switched to four-wheel drive, reduced my speed by five miles an hour and drove on.

All of us met in the Lodi office of Tim Malzhan, the new south central field coordinator of the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation. Tim, Christine and I were joined by Dr. Lyle Bohlman, retired Lodi dentist, and Bill Pielsticker, both key members of the Friends of Scenic Lodi Valley, the active group that protects the charm of the whole community.

Tim said that three others might join us for the hike. They didn't show up. We surmised that they had listened to the weather forecast or, for that matter, looked out their front windows and judiciously decided that another day might be better for hiking.

I suggested that the five of us pull up chairs to a conference table and chat for

awhile. There were a couple of reasons for this. First, I could get some notes down on dry rather than soggy notebook paper. Second, if we stalled, maybe the weather would improve before we hiked.

My first question: "What would be seen out there if we were walking on balmy spring day or a summer's day?"

"Marsh marigolds," Bill said, "commonly called 'cowslips' where I come from, and other spring wildflowers such as wild geraniums."

"Bluebirds, buntings and sandhill cranes," he added.

The cowslips would line Spring Creek, which drains the marsh to the northeast, entering Lodi where it crosses Main Street. Here it is regionally famous as the resident stream for Susie and other spoiled mallards that hang out for handouts. Crossing Main Street, Spring Creek swings around to the northwest and heads for Okee Bay on Lake Wisconsin, now only three miles away.

Bill continued, when we're not walking through the marsh, we



Creek-sized springs flow from the base of Center Bluff to feed Spring Creek at Lodi Marsh. The creek is a valued trout stream.

Photo by Paul G. Hayes

would walk through restored oak savanna or in tall grass prairie, restorations that have been underway since 1979, with the help of the Department of Natural Resources, Dane County, Friends of Scenic Lodi Valley and the Dane County chapter of the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation. When we're not in marsh, oak savanna or restored prairie, we'd be in deep woods on the ridges.

None of this is to suggest that this place is pristine. The plant community still bears the marks of having been grazed by cattle years ago, and that is what prompts the corrective efforts, wherein local volunteers grub out invasive species and replace them with native forbs, grasses and sedges. Tim said that workdays were concentrating on grubbing out red cedar (see *Mammoth Tales*, Spring 1999, page 10).

Outdoors people have valued this area for decades. "I came here in 1947," said Dr. Bohlman, "and it was called a public hunting ground. The state may have owned it since the 1930s." It has been so popular as a pheasant hunting ground near Madison that "you had to have reservations on opening day," he joked.

Spring Creek is aptly named. It has long attracted trout aficionados, said Bill Pielsticker, who became president of the southern Wisconsin chapter of Trout Unlimited in April. The chapter, with 640 members in Dane and Jefferson County, is Wisconsin's largest.

"Spring Creek has a nice spring flow," he said.

"I think it's got 21 springs emptying in to it," said Tim.

"It's got more than that," said Bill.

"I can find 21 springs off Highway Y alone," added Doc.

That amounted to a challenge to go see for ourselves. Despite the weather, it couldn't be put off. We pulled on extra layers of pants, coats, hats and hoods. We slid into two vehicles and headed southwest out of Lodi on Riddle Road, with the marsh on our right and a high limestone ridge on our left.

Our plan was to climb Center Bluff and

hike the Ice Age Trail loop. The core of the bluff is dense dolomite that the Green Bay lobe of the Wisconsin Glacier encountered but couldn't obliterate thousands of years ago. But the glacier did smooth and round the hills and it filled the valleys with glacial debris.

From Center Bluff, we could see an esker trending to the west. Apparently, an under-ice river flowed seven miles to the west connecting to Crystal and Fish Lakes. When the glacier melted, it laid down the bed of the river as an esker.

Our climb of Center Bluff was made interesting by a strong, cold wind that hit us in the face. It made our eyes water, and since the climb was through old snow, we had our heads down to watch our feet.

"Who scheduled this?" Christine asked.

I kept my own counsel.

"Builds character," she concluded.

At least it wasn't raining and snowing. We trudged along, noticing that the

path had been used not only by deer and perhaps turkeys, but by other hardy hikers, some with dogs. At the top of the bluff we were among 150-year-old bur oaks, the restored savanna. Tim pointed out piles of brush between the oaks that had been grubbed out this winter by volunteers.

The Trail follows the north rim of the bluff, and here was a dramatic sight: Creek-sized springs flowing out of the dolomite to Spring Creek, creating a landscape against the snow that looked like a Victorian lace collar. Black, leafless oaks silhouetted on the bluff, white marsh landscape below, with beige and brown washes of marsh growth showing through the snow, and the quiet, dark water of the springs moving in silence, all of it receding into a hazy horizon.

We walked along the cul-de-sac loop and were heading back. Just as we realized that the wind was coming from the south

and the day was warming comfortably, we were greeted by the clear trumpeting of a pair of sandhill cranes in the marsh to the southeast.

"You can tell they're a pair because of the two different notes," Bill said.

"The Lord sure gave them a voice," said Doc.

On the way down the bluff, Doc noticed a bird's nest in some brush — a blackbird's, he thought — and his closer investigation turned up yet another sign of



Photo by Paul G. Hayes

Dr. Lyle Bohlman checks out a bird's nest from last summer. Its size and placement suggested a blackbird built it. Pussy willows were budding in the brush.

spring. The brush was just beginning to bud into pussy willows.

We returned to the vehicles, and now that the day had calmed, took some time to admire the trailhead kiosk. It had been built 18 months earlier by Ice Age Trail volunteers, the Friends of Scenic Lodi Valley and Lodi Eagle Scouts, using money supplied by the Department of Natural Resources.

At this juncture, Doctor Bohlman left us, and we four drove a short distance and hiked on the east side of the road to see two new bridges that cross over rock-strewn gulches to make the Trail more convenient.

At lunch, in the Spring Creek Inn, a building that is cantilevered over Spring Creek on South Main Street in downtown Lodi, with cups of coffee warming our hands, we agreed that Lodi Marsh is a hike for all seasons. 🦶