

Robert Bartelt
4/17/2019
(updated, 6/4/2022)

A Neighbor's View of the Spring Creek Preserve

I have lived next to what is now the Spring Creek Preserve for nearly 30 years. During that time, being immersed in this natural world has been a great joy. I have walked the land in all seasons and have been constantly surprised and thrilled by what I have encountered. I have learned a lot, taken pictures of what I could, and done my best to help preserve and protect the richness of the area. I have watched the land transition from private ownership into a public park, and I have watched as visitors experience its beauty and solitude for the first time. I hope the park can retain its high quality for future generations to enjoy. This will continue to require a lot of work, especially regarding invasive species. Here are some notes and photos:

History

The park area, being so rich in resources and so near the Illinois River, was home to Native Americans for many centuries. The park's best evidence of this occupation are burial mounds (p. 4), which were likely constructed by the Late Woodland people at least 1000 years ago. Further evidence of Native American settlements is that previous owners of the park land have found numerous arrowheads and other artifacts over the years. There is some written history from this era: During the War of 1812 there was a skirmish near the park between troops under Gov. Ninian Edwards and local Native Americans. But there is still much to be learned and documented about the pre-settlement history of the park.

Settlers with European roots began to farm and use the land in the mid 1800's. Properties changed hands numerous times over the years, and there is a patchwork of old fences, roads, trails, and structures scattered throughout the area. One easily seen example is the old root cellar and building foundation visible along the Woodland Loop trail (p. 4). At one point there must have been an iron making facility, for many pieces of old smelting crucibles have been found along the creek (p. 5). Farming on park land continued until recently. Corn and soybeans were grown in bottomland fields and also up on top, along Grosenbach Road, as late as the year 2000.

The Fondulac Park District acquired the first 38 acres of the present park in 1964, as a donation. An additional 88 acres was added in 1979, and former Park District Directors Jim Coutts and Brad Smith continued to enlarge Spring Creek over the ensuing years. The Harold Crumley farm was added in 2002, and this key addition conveniently connected the previously acquired land to a major road (Spring Creek Road). In 2003, acquisition of the Fey property along Grosenbach Road increased the park's final size to 262 acres.

Although the park was accessible to the public in 2002, it remained essentially a "secret" for another decade. Real development began when the parking lot along Spring Creek Road was built late in 2013. A trail system evolved from farm field edges and historical access roads, and Park District personnel worked to mow and maintain the trails. In 2017, Garrett Starling, a Boy Scout working toward his Eagle rank, installed most of the current trail signs as part of his final project, and he and his troop also completed the far end of the Woodland Loop trail. The trail system was expanded further in 2020 with the addition of the Mounds Trail, the Valley View, and a second parking lot along Grosenbach Road. This was largely through the vision and

efforts of volunteer Lynn Carl and park employee Glen Auerswald. There are now over 5 miles of hiking trails in the park (p. 15), and more and more visitors enjoy using them each year.

I live on the edge of the Spring Creek Preserve. After retiring, I began to work with the Peoria Park District on removal of invasive plants from some of their properties. In 2012, I decided to use what I had learned closer to home and began similar work at Spring Creek, with the encouragement of the Park District. One important task has been to clear out invasives from the old farm fields as they transition back to forest. The Park District provided materials and timely help, and many additional volunteers pitched in over the years. Maintaining the park in a high quality natural state continues to be a management priority.

In 2018, about three quarters of the park's land became a State Land and Water Reserve. IDNR Resource Specialist Tom Lerczak was largely responsible for making this happen. The state designation adds an important layer of protection that will help keep the park in a natural condition. In addition to being a tranquil, secluded refuge in an increasingly busy metropolitan area, Spring Creek has become a popular birding destination. And people are learning that the park also has much to offer in the way of interesting plants, butterflies, and other wildlife.

Biological assets

The park has a very rich flora. Many of the common Central Illinois spring wildflowers are here in abundance. Usually the first to emerge in spring is the snow trillium, typically in March (p. 11). Later come the hepatica, spring beauty, wild ginger, toothwort, wake robin, jack-in-the-pulpit, buttercups, and many others (pp. 6-7). It is a pleasure to walk the woodlands in April and May especially. Then there are species that are less often seen in other places. These include goldenseal, wild stonecrop, wild senna, green violet, showy orchis, ginseng, wild petunia, (pp 8-11) and others. For those willing to look carefully there are abundant surprises. Later in summer the open fields and field edges come alive with milkweed, goldenrod, asters, wingstem, brown-eyed susan, woodland sunflower, bellflower, lobelia, figwort, and others.

The park has many different shrubs and small trees. In addition to the very common gray dogwood, one can find alternate-leaved dogwood, prickly ash, wafer ash, bladdernut, wahoo, pawpaw, black haw, redbud, witch hazel, sassafras, red cedar, hop hornbeam, and Juneberry, for example. An especially interesting shrub is leatherwood (p. 8), which is common in the park but is rarely encountered elsewhere in Illinois. The main forest trees are sugar maple, seven species of oaks, black walnut, wild black cherry, basswood, hackberry, cottonwood, bigtooth aspen, black locust, honey locust, several hickories, sycamore, and several ash species. Trees present in smaller numbers include Kentucky coffee tree, Ohio buckeye, catalpa, and tulip tree.

Spring Creek has become a birding hotspot. It has a variety of habitats and easy access for birders. Over 100 species have been so far reported there. My favorites include the American woodcock, which does its courtship displays in the fields at dusk during March; the large and noisy pileated woodpecker; and the attractive wild turkey (p. 12).

The park also has an abundance of interesting insects. The flowers in the open fields attract numerous butterfly species during July and August. Other kinds of butterflies prefer being in deep shade or sipping moisture from streambanks. The day-flying white-lined sphinx moth is abundant in some years (see p. 13). The black-winged damselfly is very common along the creek in summer. The fascinating insects are too numerous to list (p. 14). One just needs to go out and explore--slowly, with a keen eye and open mind. (Lists of the plant, bird, and butterfly species reported from the park so far are available upon request.)

Biological problems

To me, the biggest threat to the park is from invasive plant species. Amur honeysuckle, autumn olive, and multiflora rose are the worst, as far as I am concerned. All three of these can become dense thickets quite quickly and destroy the plant diversity that makes Spring Creek special. Other invasive plants of lesser significance include tree-of-heaven, Japanese barberry, European privet, ornamental burning bush, and garlic mustard. Since 2012, volunteers have worked through most of the park's area, removing these species wherever they were found, which was essentially everywhere. What we didn't realize at first is that this task is not simply "one and done". The situation is dynamic. Birds consume the fruits of invasives but don't digest the seeds; these pass through as the birds travel around, and areas easily get reinfested. Or, tiny plants were missed the first time through and grew big when no one was watching. Bottom line: It takes a persistent effort to keep the invasives in check and the park in good shape.

Some serious forest problems do not have solutions. One old example is Dutch elm disease, a fungus that is spread by a small bark beetle. There are still some American elms in the park, but they are slowly dying off, presumably because of the disease. Similarly, we have lost essentially all of the butternuts to a fungal disease. When I first moved to the area in the early 1990's, butternut trees were common in the bottomland.

Black locust trees have been a management problem in the park. This species is not native here but was likely brought in by early farmers for timber and fuel. Most of these trees are mature or over-mature and are found near the edges of the old fields. These are slowly dying out. They produce seeds, but the young trees don't grow well in the shade of their parents. Neither do they thrive in fields that have a good growth of goldenrod, grasses, and other perennials. However, they rapidly take over disturbed (e.g., mowed) open fields, creating dense, thorny thickets. This happened in the old agricultural field along Grosenbach Road. But after two years of difficult removal work, the locusts are essentially gone, and a natural mix of forest trees is returning to the field.

A more recent problem is the emerald ash borer, a beetle accidentally introduced into the US from China. At this point, the beetle has killed essentially all of the mature green and white ash trees in the Spring Creek forest. Presumably the beetle population is far smaller now than it was because the beetles no longer have suitable hosts in which to breed. But there are still thousands of young ash trees in the park which are presently too small for beetle reproduction. Will these grow large enough to produce seeds before the few remaining beetles find them? Is it possible that the ash species will not be exterminated but that the future tree population will consist only of small individuals? Will some sort of a balance between the beetles and trees be established so that both survive? Interestingly, the blue ash, which is present in the park in small numbers, is largely immune to the emerald ash borer. Maybe this offers some hope for the future. There are many questions yet to be answered about ash trees in the park.

So, the park is a complicated place, with numerous interactions among species. There is a lot going on that is likely unnoticed by the casual park visitor! I hope you enjoy your time in the park.

From Before Spring Creek Became a Park:

Indian mound in the southwest part of the park. Likely built by the Late Woodland people.



Old root cellar and building foundation along the Woodland Loop Trail. It is not known who built these or how they made a living.



(Except where otherwise noted, all photos in this document are mine).



Pieces of iron-making crucibles are sometimes found along the creek.



One intact crucible was also found. It is still unclear exactly where or when smelting was done or who did it. (Fondulac Park District photo).

Sampler of Favorite Spring Creek Wildflowers

Spring Beauty (*Claytonia virginica*). Everywhere in the woods.



Hepatica (*Hepatica nobilis*). Especially on edges of bluffs.



Wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) in bloom. Common on hillsides.



Leatherwood (*Dirca palustris*). This shrub species is uncommon to rare in Illinois but is encountered often in the bottomlands and on the hillsides of Spring Creek. Flowers appear in April, before the leaves expand.



Wild Senna (*Senna obtusifolia*). A tall perennial herb that occurs in several patches in one of the open fields at Spring Creek. It is a native plant that is found occasionally throughout Illinois. It begins to bloom in June.





Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*). Found throughout the Reserve in rich woods, but the plants are scattered. Abundance has been decreased by ginseng hunters. Ginseng is a high quality forest plant in Illinois.



Woodland Stonecrop (*Sedum ternatum*). Found occasionally throughout Illinois. In Spring Creek, it is common on sandy banks along the creek. It blooms in May.

Goldenseal (*Hydrastis canadensis*). The species is common in the wooded bottomlands of Spring Creek, but it is generally found only sparingly throughout Illinois. It is one of the spring ephemerals, blooming in April.



Green Violet (*Hybanthus concolor*). This inconspicuous wildflower is widespread in the bottomlands of Spring Creek. It blooms in May. In the northern part of Illinois it is considered rare and scattered.



Showy Orchid (*Galearis spectabilis*). This beautiful orchid is found sparingly on the rich wooded hillsides of Spring Creek during the month of May. The species is not common in Illinois.

Wild Petunia (*Ruellia humilis*). It occurs in scattered clumps at the edges of the open fields in Spring Creek. It is a native species that is found throughout Illinois, but it is not very common. It blooms in June.



Snow Trillium (*Trillium nivale*). This species is widespread throughout the wooded bottomlands and sometimes on the hillsides of Spring Creek. It is one of the earliest spring wildflowers, usually starting in March. In Illinois, it occurs occasionally in the northern three fifths of the state.



A Favorite Bird: The Wild Turkey

Hen on nest



Some Lepidoptera Found in the Park

Giant- and two tiger swallowtails



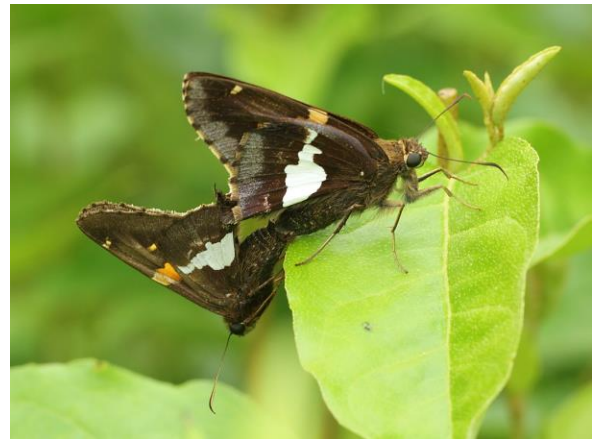
Pipevine swallowtail



American snout butterfly



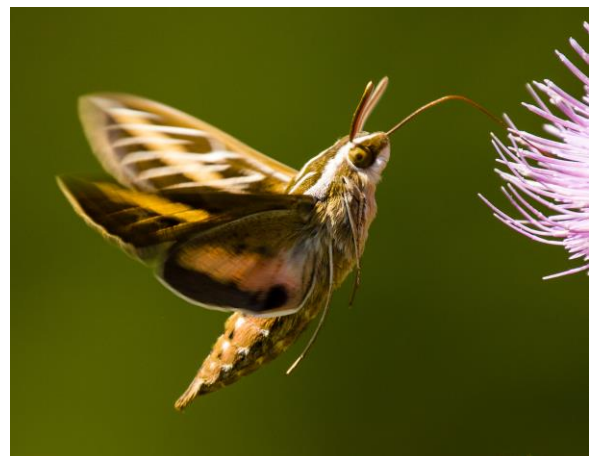
Mating silver-spotted skippers



Eastern comma



White-lined sphinx moth (often a day flier)



Other Insects (and a spider). Be Alert As You Walk the Park!

Robber fly eating a beetle.
The fly is a bumblebee
mimic and a predator.



Eye to eye with a jumping
spider.



Tree katydid. Males make
endless, shrill calls on hot
summer nights.



Mating golden-backed snipe flies



Black-winged damselflies laying eggs



Metallic wood borer (a beetle)



Mating six-spotted tiger beetles



Spring Creek Preserve Trail Map

