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Environmentally Yours

Wall Township Environmental Advisory Committee

Volume 6

Self-Guided Nature Trail

<http://wallnj.com/323/Environmental-Advisory-Committee>

One of Wall Township's best kept secrets is the Community Park, "Old Nature Self-Guided Trail." Rather than reinvent the wheel, this article references the Environmental Advisory Committee's brochure, which explains why you would want to explore this trail. The trail is located across from the soccer field at Community Park, behind the Municipal Complex Building. A simple park bench signifies the entrance to the trail. Read about the trail's vegetation on the interpretive sign, just before entering the trail. The best part is walking the trail on a beautiful day - great exercise, free, fun, and educational for the whole family!



In 2007, the Wall Township Environmental Advisory Committee (WTEAC) selected this site as a designated self-guided nature. Naturalist, Bud Doyle provided the Environmental Committee with passages for the interpretive signs that line the trail. Due to a lack of manpower to construct the trail, it remained incomplete until 2012. Then, Eric Kosinski, a Wall High School student, assisted by Troop 82, chose this for his Eagle Scout project. He was awarded the highest advancement rank in Scouting for his work here. The trail is the first "self-guided nature trail" that was designated in Wall Township. It is maintained by Public Works. Dedication of the Nature Trail took place on Earth Day, April 22, 2012.

According to Naturalist Bud Doyle, walking this half mile long nature trail gives you a brief glimpse into Wall's rich rural past. The entire sports complex, municipal buildings, and even the Intermediate School were all formerly fields that were heavily farmed. Known as "The Eckman Farm" they used teams of horses rather than tractors, to plow the fields and harvest the crops, as late as the early 1970s.



Classes at the Intermediate School were regularly interrupted as the teams of horses passed along Allaire and Bailey's Corner Roads to get to nearby fields. Farmers managed their lands wisely. They were the first conservationists as it was in their best interest to keep the fields fertile and productive. It was relatively easy to build the soccer and football fields as the land was already cleared, flat, and level. Farmers were also aware of the need to protect wetlands as these water sources were used to irrigate their crops. This nature trail wanders downhill from the former farm fields to a small stream. Along the way are periodic stops to learn about the unique relationship between human history and natural history.

"Wall Township Living" residents can join us for a preview of our self-guided trail that can be downloaded from our environmental web site at <http://wallnj.com/323/Environmental-Advisory-Committee> under brochures to the left. Here's a sampling of what's you can find along Wall Township's Community Park, "Old Nature Self-Guided Trail."

Stop #1: Entering this woodland, you are actually passing through former pasture land. The types of trees growing here, red cedar, wild black cherry, and sassafras, tell us the area was a former field. When a field is abandoned, weeds replace the crops. Soon shrubs and small trees replace the weeds, and eventually larger trees replace the shrubs and smaller tree species. This natural process is called secondary succession.

Stop #2: We are rapidly proceeding downhill towards the stream. Looking back at the entrance, notice the abundance of plant life at the edge of the forest.

All kinds of trees, shrubs, and vines are competing for sunlight. That is quite a contrast to this part of the forest where the taller trees prevent sunlight from reaching the forest floor. There are considerable changes from the edge of the forest to here. As the vegetation changes, so do the animals. Near the field were rabbits and groundhogs. In this part of the forest where there are numerous white and scarlet oak trees, look for squirrels and their nests high up in the trees. Also look on the ground for deer tracks. Acorns are the food of choice for both gray squirrels and deer. Locate the large white oak tree to the right of the trail. This tree which has a split trunk is well over a hundred years old.

Stop #3: We are now at the edge of the wetlands. Look for clumps of cinnamon fern and the large, bright green leaves of skunk cabbage during spring and summer. The stream is a small tributary to Wreck Pond Brook which is the primary drainage for most of central Wall. It sometimes dries up during periods of drought. Look for frogs along the stream.

Stop #4: The trail now turns to the right and travels along the edge of the wetlands. Notice the differences between the drier oak forest and the wetter red maple forest that follows along the stream. Red maple trees are identified by their smooth gray bark. They are also called swamp maples as they can grow in wet soils by spreading their roots near the surface instead of growing down into the wet soil. The valley of a stream is called the floodplain and the actual stream is referred to as the floodway. Look for highbush blueberries in the wet woods during August.

Stop #5: Locate the mature holly tree. Try to estimate the diameter of the tree at your breast height (DBH, a forestry measurement). Each inch of diameter represents about ten years of growth. How old do you estimate the age of this tree? Actually this tree is as old as most of the larger nearby oak trees. Holly can survive in a shady forest as it does not lose its leaves in autumn which enables these trees to produce food (photosynthesize) year round.

Stop #6: Look up towards the treetops or forest canopy. Looking downward, locate the understory of smaller trees. Finally, look at the plants covering the ground. In addition to being horizontal, the forest is also vertical with the different levels attracting different kinds of plants and animals.

Stop #7: Wetlands overlook: The trail now turns to the right, away from the stream and wetlands, up towards the fields.

Stop #8: Take a moment to listen to the chatter of woodland birds such as catbirds, yellowthroats, wood peewees, and ovenbirds. Maybe you can hear the drumming of a woodpecker or the caw of a crow or cry of a hawk flying overhead. You might also mistake the shrill call of a chipmunk as that of a bird.

Stop #9: Mammals found in this forest include the gray fox, raccoons, opossums, gray squirrels, chipmunks, deer, skunks, groundhogs, and rabbits. The raccoons are usually found near the stream; squirrels and chipmunks in the oak forest. Groundhogs, rabbits, skunks, and opossums are usually found near the field edges. Deer and gray fox travel throughout the area. Other animals observed in this woodland are box turtles, frogs, toads, and an occasional snake. While there are many animals in this forest, they are usually difficult to locate unless you are quiet and patient.

Stop #10: Locate a few dead and dying trees that are still standing. These trees still serve important jobs as homes and resting spots for a number of animals, particularly birds. The parts of the dead trees lying on the ground are now rotting away, returning the vitamins, minerals, and nutrients that they borrowed when they were alive back to the soil to be used by other plants. Algae, moss, fungi, bacteria, and insects helping the wood to rot away are referred to as decomposers.

Stop #11: This is the final stop before you reenter the fields. You can tell we are approaching the fields as the types of trees are changing with smaller species such as red cedar, cherry, sassafras, and locust replacing the larger oaks. Along this trail you have seen many close interrelationships between human history and natural history. While many farms, forests, and open areas are rapidly becoming developed, we must not forget the importance of our natural environment and our heritage.

On a beautiful and balmy day, take a stroll at Wall Township's Community Park Old Nature Self-Guided Trail. When you exit, it is the hope of the Wall Township Environmental Advisory Committee that you will have enjoyed the trail, learned a bit about history along the way, and will again re-visit our wonderful trail.

Stay safe and be well!

Environmentally yours,
Wilma Morrissey, WTEAC Chair