

Guide to Harris Creek Trail

By Doug Raasch

The Harris Creek Trail sits right on the south entrance to the refuge, literally in the front yard of the Visitor Center. An information kiosk and wood rail fence defines the small parking area.

The Harris Creek hike has two parts, the lower being the wetland area and the upper consisting of a dryer, more open "Prairie Walk." The lower loop is approximately 1¼ miles and the upper loop is 2¼ miles. The trail can take on a new personality after a heavy rain. When the lower area floods, the hike becomes a kayak adventure.

The new ADA accessible trail begins at the parking lot and completes a 1/2 mile loop back to the trail head. As you begin the walk, look up into the large trees along the creek. A variety of birds is normally evident, busy with their daily search for food.

Never underestimate nature's capacity for surprise. Walking Harris Creek twenty years ago with my wife and two young children, we spotted a gathering of about twenty barn owls contentedly perched in these same trees. Communal roosting is rare for barn owls, but I have never again walked Harris Creek without hope that those owls with the haunting face have returned.

Bring your camera because after about 100 yards there is an observation blind that allows a view of "Duck Pond," the first of six ponds along the walk. Wading birds are sometimes available for photo ops. If you missed the shot from the blind, there is another chance at an overlook 200 feet ahead. When viewing wildlife, don't forget to look down as well as up. Harris Creek is one of the best spots on the refuge to study tracks. On a good day with soft ground, the trail surface looks like a stampede from Noah's Ark.

You will soon notice that the trail is outlined by large, sturdy bluebird houses. This lengthy bluebird trail has been very successful in increasing the number of bluebirds on the refuge.

Leave the hard surface trail and take the path that leads to Crawfish Pond. At less than a mile, you will find several benches allowing you to rest and observe.

After leaving the benches, your walk will take you to a three way intersection where you decide if you will return to the parking lot or hike the "Prairie Walk." Turn left here for a 1/2 mile walk back. If you choose to take the upland "Prairie Walk", you will sample a different animal habitat. As you move up the small grade, look right and see the wooded east/west ridgeline, the western end being Crow Hill. Turkey and deer are common in this area. As you walk east, you will notice the abundance of dove. Stirred by your presence, they produce a soft, staccato whistle as they leap into the air. Your walk takes you to an intersection, where you turn left (north), then after about 200 yards, take the trail to the left to rejoin the refuge pond system. You will follow the ponds until reaching Frog Pond and another bench on the right. Rest a bit, then head off to the right for the trailhead. A unique wetland along the way on the right side is a great place to look and listen for frogs. Keep bearing right ahead at the split and you will connect to the hard-surfaced path which leads to the parking area.