

NEBRASKA NATURE TRAILS

"Hast thou named all the birds without a gun?
Loved the wood rose and left it on the stalk?"

INTRODUCTION

Trails have played an important role in the development of civilization. Although modern man usually knows of trails and their many uses through books, primitive man learned to identify and follow them as a matter of necessity for along these trails would be found the raw material for his food, clothing and shelter. Animals, birds and insects, in fact all living things, make trails, each one characteristic of its maker. The trails of animals even, played a part in laying out cities, as it is said that some Boston streets follow cow paths.

The perching songster leaves hop footprints and the ground bird makes tell-tale walking prints. The muskrat swimming at the bottom of a stream leaves a wake trail of water, like a small submarine. The whirl-i-gig bug leaves a circle, and the water boatman bug a straight path. The snake marks out a wavy line, the bear the entire footprint, the horse only his toe prints and even birds in flock formation suggest a trail, for the poet sings, "The wild goose trails his harrow across the sky." Thus it is that everywhere the universal wonders of nature are being performed and countless hours of richly satisfying experience may be had if helps and suggestions are provided along the way.

According to Reynold Carlson of the National Recreation Association, there are six objectives for nature activities:

1. To create a genuine interest in nature and a love for the beautiful.
2. To teach close observation of natural phenomena.
3. To teach practical information about all functions of the world.
4. To preserve the wild life.
5. To assist in increasing the natural beauty of home and country.
6. To enrich the life of the individual.

C. F. Hodge says, "Nature study is learning those things which are best worth knowing to the end of doing those things that make life most worth living."

One of the best programs for stimulating interest in the realm of nature may be built around the laying and enjoying of a marked trail in the woods or across the prairie.

It is a well known fact that the illustrated page or the motion picture has more realistic meaning than the printed page. In a similar manner life in action along the trail gives the ultimate in enjoyment and satisfying experience. To watch the cardinals feeding their gros-beak family or the luna moth breaking its cocoon cannot help but urge one on to see more and to learn more. To track insects and birds on a sandy road or the beaver on the muddy banks of a river is one of the rare pleasures of life, appealing to the young and old alike.

The naturalist seemingly gets more enjoyment from the woodland path than the aimless stroller. The aimless stroller, however, may, by having his observation and learning directed, experience the delightful sense of the deep appreciation which comes only through knowing. The labels on the trail serve the purpose of a friendly naturalist on the way.

These nature walks are all important in that they provide not only the best facilities for nature observation but they also provide an opportunity for the integration of the various activities in a leisure program. Physical activities with interpretative dancing; drama with its plays; music inspired by bird calls and the rustle of leaves; craft with its costuming and stage - craft and social occasions with their games, alluring invitations and warmth of welcome to guests -- all could be correlated into a beautiful pageant, such as "Sanctuary, the Bird Masque" by Percy McKaye.

The most interesting garden is the one which is never finished; the trail likewise is never finished, but is always exciting new interests. So, hopeful of learning, enjoying and preserving the life on these trails, Nebraska is beginning to mark the paths which take one through interesting segments of areas where plant and animal life flourish.

WHAT IS A NATURE TRAIL

The trailers of Buffalo City Parks define trails thus - "In its simplest and most effective form, a nature trail is a narrow path leading through sections of a park or woodland chosen for its richness and the variety of Natural History material flanking it, and one made alluring by a succession of well written, non-technical labels which name the specimens and give important information regarding them. A Nature Trail is a roofless museum, the width of a footpath a mile or so long."

Wm. Wordsworth has said "Natural History is taught in infant schools by pictures stuck up against the walls, and such like mummary. A moment's notice of a red breast picking at a winters hearth is worth it all."

Wm. Durant agrees with our English poet in these words: "I should wish my children to be sensitive to all those aspects of earth and sky that can move the soul with loveliness or sublimity - certainly I should like them to be at home with Nature's infinite variety; to love not merely her verdure and blossoming but her mystic mists and yellow decay - I think I should have a course in Nature running pleasantly through my children's years, and ranging from a recognition of the Pleiades to the art of making a garden grow." These labelled trails would surely offer such a course.

Other poets suggest that a walk on quiet trails is a retreat from nagging cares, and a place where all might learn the meaning of "The Peace of God."

A nature trail may be many trails beginning at a general entrance, branching off into paths of specific interests, and again returning through, if possible, a museum or rustic building containing a nature laboratory or craft shop with an exhibit of local material found on the trail.

Many acute observers say the leaves are the tongues of the forests, the flowers are the lips of the clods and the birds are the heralds of the seasons' news. In Munsey's Magazine, we find this advice to the lovers:

"Leave the toiling and the stir of things,
The rush of hurrying feet,
And seek the downy meadows with
Its violets scented sweet;
Take your gentle sweetheart's hand in yours,
Dear lad, and far away
To where the wild is calling, calling to
Your heart today."

These paths are breathing spaces and foot paths of the wilderness.

In this recreational nature activity, one must steer away from any duty or responsibility to a class or study. The appeal is to be through wood craft and nature lore. A Scotch poet has said "There is nae profit, where there is nae pleasure ta'en." Really all this wildness is a heritage to all to enjoy and understand.

NEBRASKA RICH IN BIOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL MATERIAL

If one doubts that the woodland and prairies of Nebraska possess walks and drives sufficiently rich in biological and historical material, he should take Gypsy jaunts over the sandhills beginning at Alliance and ending at Scottsbluff, Pine Ridge or Long Pine; or try a Bird Census Trek on the prairies at Hastings, Kearney, Grand Island, North Platte, McCook, Harvard, Nelson and Superior, or visit parks at Columbus, Norfolk, Fremont and York; or follow the historical and fossil trails as planned at Plattsmouth, Falls City and Hebron. If any of these trips are impossible, secure the "Outdoor Nebraska Map" and "Magazine", or the book "Nebraska, Beautiful", by Dr. Condra, and follow the possible trails by picture and descriptions.

PREPARING TO MARK A TRAIL

In the successful trails of the east and west coast, the trail markers took a course of study in the classroom, in the craft laboratory and on field trips over the trails. The study of specimens on the field trips and in the library suggested the labels for the paths. In the craft laboratory, the trail markers are made such as the rustic entrances, bulletin boards, master signs, trail and specimen labels, bird houses, feeding stations, insect and animal zoo homes and other devices to create and sustain interest.

Since the trails are often laid in State or National Parks or on personal property, it is necessary that the different park commissions or owners of the land give the trail markers permission to lay this trail. Sad experience has taught that even the laborers in the park should know that a planned bird retreat or Sanctuary must not be cleared of its underbrush or bird seed and berry plants. Any local club, interested in conservation of wild life, would contact the owners of the proposed trail site and advise the trail markers as to the

choice of the path. Then, with all concerned, there should be a thorough understanding of where the trail is being laid and that none of this area be molested, cleared or changed by owners or park workers.

After the area has been chosen and the narrow path made, then signs should be placed to mark the general direction of the trail. These may be arrows interspersed with occasional "NATURE TRAIL" signs.

In order to make these trails permanent, used and enjoyed by the greatest number of people, the trail markers should call a meeting of representatives of schools, churches, parks, and nature clubs to make plans for the marking and using of this trail. Committees should be appointed and assigned to their definite duties such as: publicity, advisory, program, facility and upkeep of the nature trail. If this trail is a real success, this group should be organized into a permanent sponsoring body, which represents the affiliated clubs, organizations and commission.

The builder of the Nature Trail at Bear Mountain, New York, suggests that the building of a trail is something like the building of a fire. The more carefully the kindling is laid, the more readily the wood will burn, when once the match has been struck. In the instance of the Nature Trail, nature herself has provided the kindling and it remains for the trail builder to use that kindling in such a way that he for whom the work has been done, may apply the match of interest and see the flame of knowledge. The lack of fuel is never a worry. One can not tag or label trees, flowers and rocks in the open as one would in a museum. The problem is all its own. Signs along the trail are invitations. Quests, observations, and activities should be suggested by these labels, - thus directing the thoughts of our trail visitors into channels of real research.

SIGNS IN GENERAL

The bulletin board at the entrance of the trail might contain some suggestions as to who laid the trail and that it was laid for the enjoyment of all visitors.

As to labels

1. Labels not to forbid or antagonize.

Signs that forbid activity often suggest the wrong doing, and cynical labels often arouse antagonism. So positive suggestions of what would be interesting to do or observe will create a better cooperative feeling among those frequenting the nature walks.

2. Labels to inform

It is probably true that if nature were better understood it would be less disturbed. Labels to inform often arrest lawless acts such as the picking of rare flowers or the carving of initials on trees.

LOST, CHILDREN OF A RARE FLOWER

used as a label posted beside the withered stem of a blue gentian, may suggest practical conservation. Also this sign -

CARVING INITIALS IN THE BARK

CUTS THE LINE OF FOOD SUPPLY

may save the life of trees.

3. Labels to explain origin.

Often information giving origin of rock, and what to observe, add much to the appreciation of a ledge of many rock layers.

4. Labels to encourage conservation.

To satisfy the urge of most hikers to leave their carved names somewhere, the Boy Scouts of Fremont suggested peeling a dead log and labelling thus:

ALL VISITORS ARE REQUESTED TO SIGN HERE

Conservation and tree anatomy can be taught in many ways. On a girdled tree this sign was suggested by trail markers of New York.

THIS IS WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE PEOPLE KNEW

THAT GIRDLING A TREE CUT OFF ALL FOOD

SUPPLY AND KILLS THE TREE

Right here would be the opportune location for a cross-section of a log with labels on bark, cambium, sap and heartwood with use of each to the tree. It might suggest comparing the annual rainfall and temperature charts with the width of the annual rings of the log. The date of the death of the tree from which the cross-section had been cut, should be posted near.

5. Labels to create a mood.

Some labels might create a speculative mood upon the distance of the stars and what holds them on their orbit, or how insects and birds choose the diet for their young or how delicate is this "Balance of life" and what causes bird migration.

6. Labels with a sprinkle of wit or humor.

A sprinkle of wit or humor often nails a fact down. This was suggested by the trail markers of Thayer County, Nebraska. A label on a tree clinging to a rocky ledge with most of its roots exposed, was to bear this inscription:

YOU ARE NOT THE ONLY ONE HAVING A HARD TIME TO LIVE

7. Labels to suggest and encourage hard tasks.

Some of the visitors may wish for suggestions of what they may do. They may wish to perform some strenuous feat to gain a beautiful view of a hidden treasure. There may be a training and a testing trail. For instance, on the geologic or fossil trail, signs tell how you can distinguish kinds of rock formation, then on the return trail, it might be suggested that each could have a sample of all rocks identified. Likewise names and pictures of birds to be found in the area are posted on the entrance bulletin board, then a box is placed at the exit of trail for each bird student to deposit his list of birds seen in the area. This could be a feature for each type of trail.

8. Labels to help develop all senses.

In order to develop all senses, labels should request the listening for sounds; voices and calls; the feeling; the smelling and even the tasting of some of what nature offers. Quiet games could be suggested to develop keener senses. A group of Girl Scouts, after a few trips in the woods, were blindfolded and still by the sense of touch could identify 25 trees by the feeling of the leaves. A group of Camp Fire girls distinguish many flowers by their odors.

9. Labels to suggest watching for welcome and unwelcome guests.

Between all animal and plant life there is a relationship sometimes of mutual benefit and sometimes harmful to one of the associates. For example a lichen is a happy living together of a tiny green algae and fungus thread; the former offers food and the latter the home. Figures II and III illustrates how the morning glory allows only large insects such as the bee to have the nectar because this visitor brings pollen from other morning glories to pollenate its pistil.

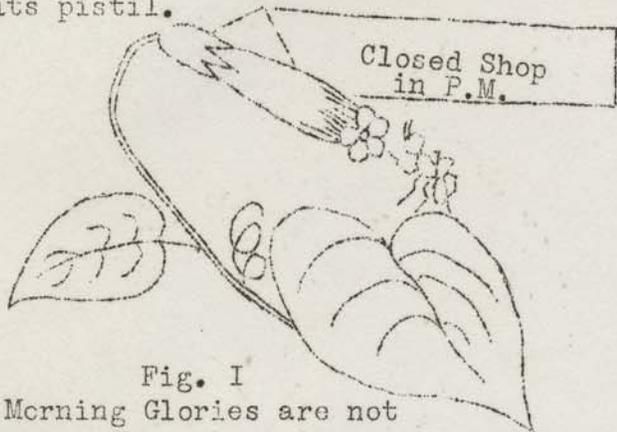


Fig. I
Morning Glories are not open for ant visitors



Fig. II
But they invite the early bees, whose fuzzy heads carry pollen

As to Types of Signs, Entrances and Bulletin Boards

First the trail may be laid out by small wooden signs with an arrow or Nature Trail inscribed with a pyro-pen or an ink brush. Figure V. Rustic entrance signs may be made from large logs with twig letters strung on chicken wire as in Figure III. A huge rock slab with inscribed plate would be very suitable for the entrance of a historical trail. At the Roosevelt Bird Sanctuary, a metal sign is used. It is like Figure IV.

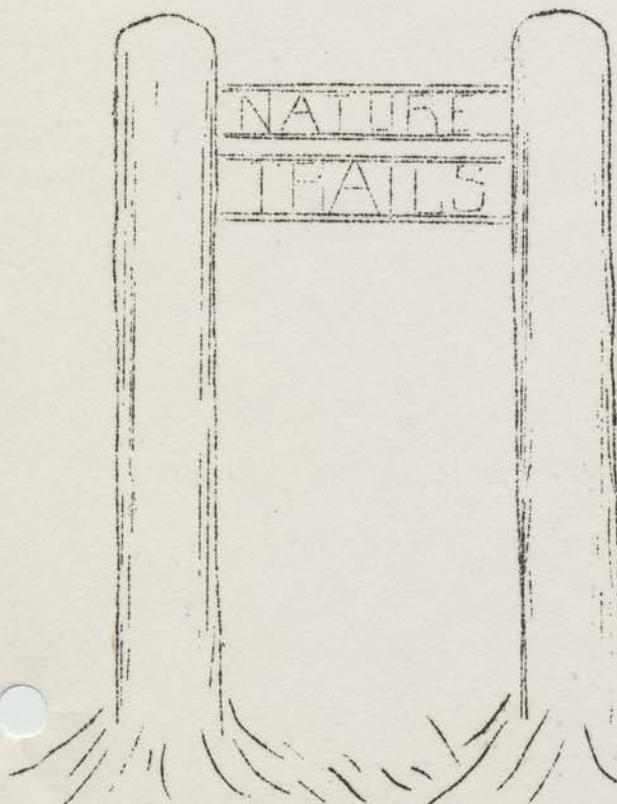


Fig. III

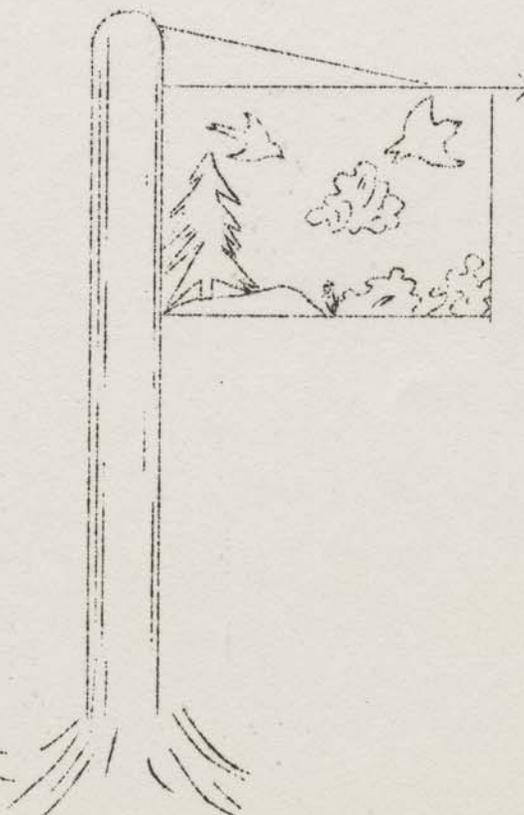


Fig. IV

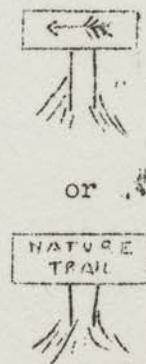


Fig. V

Up to Date Bulletin Board and Signs.

Upon the bulletin board a small map could be posted and upon this map, the location of outstanding current events. In fact, carbon copies of a skeleton map of your trail could be made and each month a new map could be filled in and posted. There are ever new interests with the change of seasons, with each advancing month, and even with each advancing day and hour. For instance, winter attractions are centered around buds, bark of trees, seeds of plants, winter birds and animals and the sleep of the living. Then March gives us back our blue birds, cardinals and first blossoms of the Hepatica. The early hours of the day gives us the morning glory blossom, while the later afternoon and evening hours are best to watch the four o'clocks, evening primroses and jimson weed. Thus the local news is to be about the "doings" of the living along the trail. This news could be for the Trail newspaper, the bulletin board or for the Nature column of the local city newspaper.

A sheltered bulletin board such as Figure VI, could be used near the entrance. Pictures and maps could be changed to fit the season by removing the old and inserting the new cards from the side.

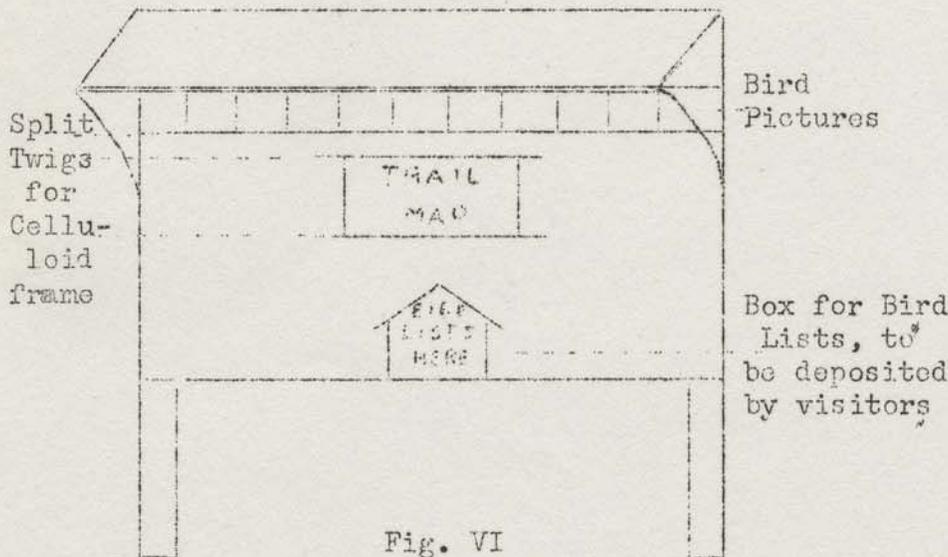


Fig. VI

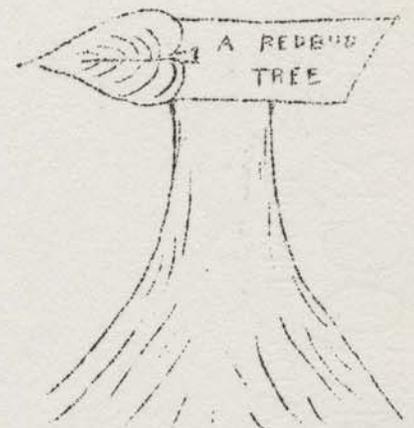
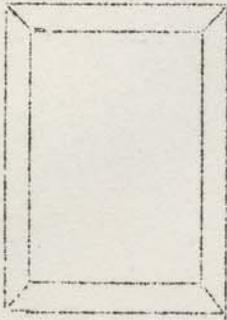


Fig. VII

Type of specimen sign used in Fontonelle Forest near Omaha

Many smaller sign boards can be permanent also, being made of a metal frame with a celluloid face as Figure VIII. Diagonal slices of a dead tree could be mounted on rustic posts along the way, and some permanent information could be inscribed with an electric needle such as Figure IX. A shaped block of wood like Figure X can be screwed to the tree without injury to the tree. Then the sign can be fastened to the block of wood. Dead branches of trees can be used as posts upon which to place signs. They can also be used to make tripods for cages for temporary zoos of animals and insects. If a long story is to be told on one sign, a windmill type could be used, or it could be a horizontal sign on a tripod. Either of these must be rotated to be able to read the labels. All bulletin boards and signs should be made waterproof by a coat of varnish or shellac. For temporary interest signs, shipping tags, and the metal frame type could be used.



Metal Frame
Fig. VIII

Celluloid
Face

Insert label
here

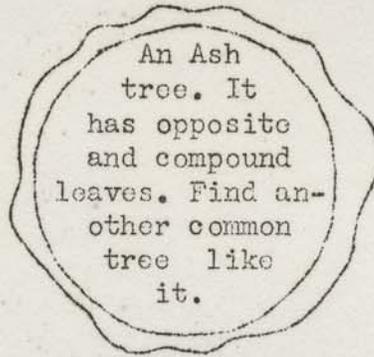


Fig. X

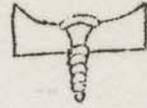


Fig. X