

Outdoor Classrooms ...
let nature speak for herself



Photography by David Kelly

Our Trails

Our nearly five miles of Interpretive Trails, and our Nature Study Areas, contain pristine examples of forested backdune and interdunal pond habitats. Depending on the trails you visit, you will discover native flora and fauna living in harmony with glacial ravines and valleys, streams, wet meadows, emergent marshes, interdunal ponds, forested dunes or a wet flatwoods filled with hummocks, vernal pools and rivulets. We call them “*Habitats for Wildlife*,” biodiversity at its finest!

The trails are maintained by students & staff, volunteers, and most of the structures have been added by local scouts earning their Eagle Rank. The exception is the Friendship Circle Pavilion, a joint effort between our PTO, GRBI and many volunteers, which provides us with shelter, an outdoor classroom and an awesome gathering place for trail users.

The **Nature Study Loop (1.6mi)** is a series of rural, semi-primitive and primitive trails. This moderately difficult nature walk connects you with trails that pass through our Nature Study Areas and onto community greenways. *The wetland trails are teeming with spring wildflowers, but are extremely wet late winter through early summer, so dress your feet appropriately.*

The **Bison Nature Trail (0.4mi)**, our easiest trail, is located behind the school playgrounds with over 40 varieties of trees, shrubs and vines identified. This self-guided nature tour includes several scenic viewpoints and benches along the way. The trail earned Ed Hatton, Jr. his Eagle Scout rank. Most of the trail structures have survived over 20 years of our Michigan weather. ^[1] *Due to the age of this trail, some of the flora associated with the markers has changed.*

Our **Nature Study Areas (1.2mi)** have trails with varying degrees of difficulty and pass through hardwood forests, pine groves and flatwoods; along marshes, vernal

pools, rivulets and creeks. A future Marsh & Creek Trail will be physically demanding but brimming with nature.

Nearby Trails

The **Turtle Pond Hiking Connector (0.1mi)** conveniently connects trail users with the New Buffalo Turtle Pond Nature Preserve. In the future, this connection will also serve as a walk only section of the proposed 10K Pere Marquette Railside Greenway Hike & Bike Trail. ^[2]

The **New Buffalo Turtle Pond Nature Preserve (0.15mi)** is a walking trail with boardwalks, a bridge and on site parking. The trail meanders through vernal areas and over an interdunal pond which hosts a wide variety of wetland wildlife. This preserve is only one block away from city-side trail connections (see map).

The **Harbor Country Hike & Bike Trail** project is a long-term comprehensive project designed to bring a network of interconnected non-motorized vehicle trails to the corner of Southwest Michigan known as Harbor Country. A marked leg of this 36 mile system passes right through the NBAS Nature Study Trails. ^[3]

Holbrook Creek Watershed

All of our trails lie in the Holbrook Creek Watershed. Holbrook (or Lighthouse) Creek is located within the coastal dunes of Lake Michigan and currently drains directly into Lake Michigan. Its channel is composed of sand and clay and has no gravel or larger particles except near Lake Michigan. ^[4] Its wide valley and creek located just behind the school, the connecting ravines and streams, and our flatwoods located east of Lubke Road were created as Proglacial Lake Baroda drained over the adjacent Lake Border Moraine some 14,000 years ago. ^[5]

A longtime resident shared with us that the creek and one of the original New Buffalo Township schoolhouses was named after Festus A. Holbrook, who served as one of the first Commissioners of Schools and School Inspectors. An original settler, his homestead was located at the headwaters of Holbrook Creek. ^[6]

Lake Michigan's Wetlands

Habitat types found in these coastal areas include marshes, fens, bogs, freshwater estuaries, forested dune and swale complexes, lake plain prairie and many others. Each of these habitat types supports unique array of plant and animal species. Development of habitat in coastal wetlands depends on a variety of factors, including shoreline configuration, glacial and bedrock geology, climate and human land use. Fluctuating water levels also play an important role in the ecology of these systems, and are necessary to maintain biodiversity in coastal wetlands. ^[7]

So remember that wetland habitats are fragile and easily damaged by human activity. It is best to visit them in small groups, and to avoid wading through areas of soft muck soils and shallows where sensitive plants may occur. Boardwalks traversing the wetlands, observation decks and stairways will be added to improve access, and to reduce human impact.

References

1. [The Bison Nature trail, New Buffalo Elementary School, 1992](#), Edward J. Hatton, Jr., May 28, 1992
2. [City of New Buffalo Community Parks, Recreation, Open Space, and Greenway Plan 2012-2017](#), City Boards and Committees, 2012
3. [Harbor Country Hike & Bike Plan](#), Friends of Harbor Country Trails, 2010
4. [Lighthouse Creek Flooding Evaluation](#), Christopher B. Burke Engineering, Ltd., June 2010
5. [Correspondence with Kevin Kincare](#), USGS, 2014
6. [History of Berrien and Van Buren Counties](#), Franklin Ellis, 1880
7. [DEQ – Great Lakes Costal Wetlands](#), Michigan.gov, 2013

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