COME ALONG AND SEE SOME OF MILWAUKEE AREA’S MANY FIELDS OF GREEN.

Story and photos by Ron Schaefer

Look around you, those of you who are city dwellers, and see where urban civilization fades away and the primitive landscape creeps in — and I don’t mean the weeds that spring up in your flower pots or squeeze between the gaps in your sidewalk.

We who have grown up amid asphalt and concrete, manicured lawns and rows of street lamps too often forget there once was a wilderness here upon which we’ve imposed ourselves. So it does some good for our memories and our souls to recall where we came from and just who is in charge of things.

You don’t need to go far to reach into the wild, nor wait for a tornado to blow through to realize nature is still the driving force on Earth and not us. Look around, urbanites, and you might find wilderness right inside your own municipal limits, allowed to remain there by thoughtful predecessors.

That’s what I did. Years ago, I made a documentary film about the wild spaces in Wisconsin through the four seasons. I included my hometown of Milwaukee and was surprised to find just how many undeveloped places there were. In the daily routine of work, family activities, errands and other time commitments, one can forget such spots exist.

Recently, I decided to revisit such spaces in Milwaukee and the surrounding area and found there were even more than I remembered when doing the film. Some places remain untouched as nature reserves; others have been incorporated into city parks. Still others are reclaimed lots originally set aside as farmland, federal institution or factory backlot.
Begin in the middle

Starting at approximately the city’s geographic center, the first place we come to is the Menomonee River Valley, once the home of dozens of factories, some of which remain. Miller Park baseball stadium is here, and Three Bridges Park.

The two spots are linked by the Hank Aaron State Trail, largely a renovated railroad line with bridges that span the Menomonee River, which merges with the Milwaukee River before emptying into the city’s harbor. Thoughtful work has made this route mostly green. Also along the trail is Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory, the county-run site often known as The Domes.

Just north in the central city is Hawthorn Glen, an aside that industrialization somehow missed. To the south, Honey Creek Parkway wanders through Wauwatosa’s old town and works to attach itself to the bigger downtown tributaries, notably the Kinnickinnic. This third main waterway heading to the harbor includes a green stretch of Kinnickinnic River Parkway, with the 113-acre Jackson Park and lagoon.

Traveling southeast adjacent to General Mitchell Airport, visitors will find the Cudahy Nature Preserve, and not far from that is Falk Park. Both are essentially forests that seem to be cut into the landscape near freeways and airport runways, and both are basically accessed by footpaths. Falk has a bike path through its southern extension.

East to the shore of Lake Michigan is the 381-acre Grant Park, which includes an 18-hole golf course along with picnic area, tennis courts and soccer fields on the north end. But keep going south and you are into deep forest where it couples with Oak Creek Parkway.

Farther south also on the lakeshore is Bender Park, which like Grant Park caters to tourists with boat launches, beaches and fishing piers. But the greater amount of the 303-acre landscape is a mix of wetlands, forest and prairie with only trails available for access. The south tip is accessed by a side street whose eastern end is closed to traffic, allowing the forest and prairie to eat right through the asphalt, reclaiming what was once a service road.

Public garden and preserves

Head west and the Root River Parkway seems to follow you everywhere as it snakes down from its origins near West Allis. Sections may be set aside for picnics and play areas, but most of this is untouched shore.

Whitnall Park in Hales Corners is a 660-acre mix of city park, golf course and the Boerner Botanical Gardens. It also contains the Wehr Nature Center, which is just about every area grade-school child’s first field trip destination. Set up as both a reserve and education center, Wehr combines forest, prairie and lake in one setting.

Further west and into Waukesha County is Muskego, a city still largely green because of its two large lakes: the Big Muskego and Little Muskego. Big Muskego Lake is, well, bigger — 2,194 acres, but with a maximum depth of 23 feet it is shallower than Little Muskego Lake, a 470-acre body of water that measures as deep as 65 feet. Each has a park that in summer fills with tourists attracted to the beaches, along with public boat landings.

Immediately north in New Berlin is Stigler Nature Preserve. This is a space easily missed because it is accessed via a short driveway off a side street. Only foot traffic is allowed from its tiny parking lot.

Still north and west are the adjoining Fox Brook and Mitchell parks in Brookfield. The Fox River runs through the eastern side of this combo, while Fox Brook Lake — with a swimming area, park, hiking trails and 178 acres of wetlands with wildlife viewing areas — is to the west.
Tell Us Your Favorite

Readers, what are your best-loved little wild spaces? In cities and towns around the state, there are swatches of green set aside for enjoyment – whether it’s a city park, nature preserve, botanical garden or simply an off-the-beaten-path pathway. We’re looking for details on outdoor spots where the busy hum of urban life can be tuned out, if only for a while.

Send your suggestions for our list of little wild spaces — and a photo, if you can — to: Readers Write, WNR magazine, R.O. Box 7921, Madison, WI 53707, or email dnrmagazine@wisconsin.gov.

Rivers run through it
Having gotten to the village of Menomonee Falls, one finds the undeveloped Tamarack Preserve, very little of which can be accessed in this marsh-based forest. Immediately west is the town of Lannon with its popular Menomonee Park. This former quarry is now a public beach but large sections are being reclaimed by nature. Back to Menomonee Falls, take up again with the Menomonee River as it winds through town. Visitors will find a park with picnic areas and a multipurpose trail along the way.

From here, the Menomonee runs southeast back into Milwaukee County, with plenty of green space all around. The branch Little Menomonee River is here, too, boasting the Little Menomonee River Parkway — 868 acres of wooded park land and a segment of the county’s 100-plus-mile Oak Leaf Trail.

Nearby is Hartung Park, which not long ago was still a quarry. The neighborhood wanted it renovated, and now the outskirts are a children’s play area, but its interior is reclaimed prairie, with some of the best views of prairie in the city.

Farther down the Menomonee River toward Wauwatosa is County Grounds Park, which like Hartung is reclaimed prairie amid an area of freeway near County Medical Center.

A plethora of parks
Moving east back into the city, we find Havenwoods State Forest, former U.S. Army Reserve property now in the hands of the DNR. It is, as the name implies, a haven for nature inside the Milwaukee city limits.

East of Havenwoods, another green stripe runs along the Milwaukee River, with a series of parks including Kletzsch, Lincoln, Estabrook, Kern, Pleasant Valley and Gordon, almost in one long string. On the south end of this stretch we reach Riverside Park, where we find the Urban Ecology Center and the Rotary Centennial Arboretum.

People still canoe and fish along this whole route, now that the river has been through a major cleanup. Much riverfront along the way has been left wild.

Back to the Lake Michigan shore north of downtown is the Shorewood Nature Preserve, a favorite of bird watchers. Heading north, other lakeside parks — big and small — include Atwater, Buckley, Big Bay, Silver Spring and Klode.

Finally, at the county’s northern edge, is Doctors Park and the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center in Fox Point. The 185-acre site is a partner of the National Audubon Society and features numerous programs for children and adult visitors.

All in all, it might be surprising to learn just how green the city of Milwaukee and its surroundings actually are. The areas noted here and many others make up thousands of acres in what might be thought of as strictly urban landscape. Keep that in mind the next time you want to plan an outdoor getaway — and look for all those little wild spaces near you.

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