

68,000 acres of Cook County wilderness, by bus and train

Chicago Tribune, March 30, 2006, by Barbara Brotman

Personally, I've seen my share of wildlife on the CTA.

Now I can add deer, a blue heron and a coyote to my public transportation checklist. The CTA, Metra and Pace took me to see them all.

Everyone knows how to take the train to the plane. But did you know that you can take the train (and bus) to the wetland? The prairie? The oak savanna?

You can find out how in a new pamphlet that has just been produced by **Friends of the Forest Preserves** and Friends of the Parks. It's called "Ten City Escapes: Easy day trips on public transit to nearby Cook County Forest Preserves," and it is your ticket to ride, not drive.

The groups wrote the guide to show city dwellers that there is plenty of wilderness to be found in and around Chicago--68,000 acres, to be exact--and you don't need a car to get to it.

"It's key for us to promote the forest preserves to urban dwellers who might not even know they're there or how to get to them," said Benjamin Cox, executive director of Friends of the Forest Preserves.

Especially since the preserves aren't easy to find on public transit maps. "Sometimes the forest preserve is highlighted, sometimes not. Sometimes you just see this big green blob, and is there even a stop there?" said Alice Brandon, forest preserve project director for Friends of the Parks.

So the advocacy groups created a guide on how to take public transit to some of the county's best forest preserve sites. The guidelines: The destination had to be of particular interest; the route can't require more than one transfer; and the trip should take no more than an hour.

"I went out and tested a lot of the routes," Brandon said. "Unfortunately, a lot of the ones we were really excited about weren't really accessible. In the Palos Preserves, none [of the preserves] was accessible by public transportation. . . . I was really disappointed. There's so much fun stuff out there."

But there was a bus stop across the street from Busse Woods. Other trips: Eggers Woods along the city's southeastern border and connected to the Old Plank Road Bike Trail; Brookfield Zoo and Woods, where the wildlife turns non-native and exotic; and Sand Ridge Nature Center in south suburban South Holland, which was where photographer Nancy Stone and I found our wildlife.

We looked to be the only hikers on Metra's Electric Line from Millennium Station toward University Park. But the ride was relaxed and pleasant, which you can't always say about a drive down the Dan Ryan Expressway. Thirty-eight minutes later, we were at our transfer point, the Harvey stop.

The 364 Pace bus toward Hammond Transit was waiting at the Harvey Transportation Center, visible from the train platform. We squeezed aboard the packed bus--still no other hikers--and rode along high-traffic streets and past South Suburban College (nature alert: retaining pond with Canada geese) until we reached our stop, 159th Street and Paxton Avenue.

We got off, alone. On one corner of the intersection, there was a bank. On another, there was another bank. On the third, a grassy lot. So, where were the woods?

The bus pulled away, and we saw where. The forest preserve was across 159th Street, along with a sign for Sand Ridge Nature Center.

We headed north down Paxton Avenue, walking in the street in lieu of a sidewalk, past a crew patching potholes.

"Going for a nice walk? Beautiful," one of the workers remarked, in a tone that clearly meant, "Odd."

Maybe, but in exactly the 1/3 mile "Ten City Escapes" had described, we were at the preserve entrance. Time elapsed: One hour and 10 minutes.

Having experienced public transport, we were ready to experience nature. Sand Ridge cooperated beautifully. In a tank inside the visitors center, we saw a Blanding's turtle sticking its neck out so high and still that it looked like a statue. At night, nature center director James Carpenter told us, it and the two other turtles climb into a stack.

Carpenter, who was amazed but delighted to hear that we'd come by public transportation, told us about Sand Ridge, a 235-acre preserve on what was once a beach. There are woods, wetlands, a marsh, an ancient beach ridge, a sand dune and four marked trails through it that total almost 4 miles.

And these days, in a cage out back, a coyote, a bright-eyed year-old charmer raised as a pet and unable to survive in the wild.

Hike? Why, we didn't mind if we did. We headed down a wooded trail that opened onto Redwing Pond, which reflected the surrounding trees like glass. A blue heron took off; a Canada goose stayed, perched on a branch jutting out of the water.

We bypassed the Redwing Trail and took a boardwalk toward the Lost Beach Trail. We detoured on a small trail into the reeds, ending up at water's edge and surrounded by the tall, swaying rods. We did the Lost Beach Trail loop, at 2 miles the preserve's longest. Underfoot was proof that this was, indeed, a lost beach; the trail was packed sand.

Back at the visitors center, we watched through a large window as cardinals, woodpeckers and goldfinches partied at bird feeders.

We lingered for a while, watching the show. Then we had a bus to catch.

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If you go

"Ten City Escapes" can be downloaded at www.fpdcc.com or www.fotp.org. It is also available at the district's River Forest headquarters and some nature centers. To get a copy by mail, call Alice Brandon at 312-857-2757, ext. 17. There will also be a free lecture at 12:15 p.m. April 13 at the Chicago Cultural Center (Claudia Cassidy Theater, 77 E. Randolph St.) introducing the brochure and highlighting three sites with access to bike paths, offered by Friends of the Parks, **Friends of the Forest Preserves** and the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation. For info, contact Alice Brandon.

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Try these escapes

"Ten City Escapes," put together by Friends of the Forest Preserves and Friends of the Parks, will show how to take the bus/"L"/train to:

1. Busse Woods (Ned Brown Preserve), Elk Grove Village. Biking, bird watching, boating, hiking and picnicking.
2. Caldwell Woods/Bunker Hill Woods, between Edgebrook and the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe. Biking on the North Branch Bike Trail and hiking through high-quality woodlands, wetlands, savannas, prairies and outstanding spring wildflowers.
3. Harms Woods, near Morton Grove, along the North Branch Bike Trail. Biking, hiking and horseback riding via the Freedom Woods stable.
4. Sand Ridge Nature Center, South Holland. Hiking, bird watching, walking.
5. Dan Ryan Woods, 83rd Street and Western Avenue. Biking and hiking trails, picnicking.
6. Eggers Woods, far Southeast Side. Prime site for bird watching.
7. Thatcher Woods, River Forest. Features an imperiled oak savanna ecosystem.
8. Chicago Portage National Historic Site, Lyons. Where early explorers crossed from the Mississippi River watershed to the Great Lakes.
9. Chicago Botanic Gardens.
10. Brookfield Zoo and Woods, Brookfield. The Salt Creek Bike Trail as well as the zoo.