

Article on Wood Lake Nature Center (below):

WOOD LAKE NATURE CENTER

By Dana G. Severson

My first job out of college was working as a personal enrichment instructor for people with developmental disabilities. I'm not exactly sure how I stumbled into it. My degree had nothing to do with this. Most of my time had been spent either with a book in my hand or in front of a computer writing about the book I'd had in my hand. It seemed I was destined to find employment more inline with my schooling than what I'd done to help pay for it. Every summer since high school, I'd been a camp counselor for people with developmental disabilities. My plan was to do this until I graduated and then become quite famous for something clever I'd written. But no one was seeking to staff someone who did a mean deconstruction of popular literature so I applied for what I knew I could do. And I got the job.

When I moved into my new position, a curriculum had already been put into place. I wouldn't have the opportunity to create my own until the current semester was over so I would have to work with what I was given. There were two classes a day, five days a week. And one of my classes was Science & Nature. As I mentioned before, my world up until then had pretty much revolved around books. To tell you why an author had used a certain image to convey a particular emotion was cake. To tell you why a squirrel had a bushy tail was next to impossible. Thankfully, my fellow instructors were adept in planning their days and had a bevy of suggestions for this newbie. One of the best was a fieldtrip to Wood Lake Nature Center.

Not far from 35W or 494, in the midst of today's urban living, the city of Richfield has a 150-acre natural oasis, a haven for both flora and fauna called Wood Lake Nature Center. It sounded like a perfect fit for my group. They offered environmental education and wildlife observation – two features that definitely fit within the curriculum. So I quickly scheduled a class. Little did I know that I would discover a place I'd be visiting for years.

We started off our outing with a hike around the park, a three mile trip of trails and boardwalks that would take us through three different habitats: a cattail marsh, a mixed lowland forest, and a restored prairie. I was amazed at the activity. The amount of birds that call this sanctuary home is simply astounding. I would soon find out that over 200 species of birds had been sighted here, some rather rare. And I could also see other varieties of wildlife from deer or raccoons to turtles or snakes. It's just a matter of observing. After our nature trek, we settled into the Interpretive Center where we were treated to a session on animal tracks. Other trips would have us learning about edible foliage, the creation of food sources, identification of trees, and other topics. Quite the boon! What I lacked in knowledge of the natural world, they could provide. My group was rapt, asking question, offering guesses, enjoying their time. My class had become a success. I knew we'd be back.

I only ended up working in this field for a year. A position had opened at a friend's company that offered better pay and better hours. Time can be valuable for a writer. I would be able to set my own hours, giving me more occasions to write – something I just knew I couldn't pass. But without my first job out of college, I'm pretty sure I'd never have happened upon Wood Lake. Or know the purpose of squirrel's bushy tail. I'd tell you but it'd be more fun to find out yourself. When you're looking for stuff to do, I can't help but recommend making a visit to Wood Lake Nature Center. It's an oasis unlike any other.

Wood Lake Nature Center is located at 6710 Lake Shore Drive in Richfield. The park is open to the public from 5am to 11pm. Building hours are 8:30am to 5pm (Monday – Saturday), noon to 5pm (Sunday). To schedule an activity, call 612 861-9365. www.woodlakenaturecenter.org.

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