



Yellow River Bridge Trail



For thousands of years, local American Indians were sustained by the bounty of the Mississippi and Yellow River wetlands. From beavers to arrowhead plants to the local clay, invaluable materials that were very much a part of ancient Iowans' everyday life were gathered from these wetlands.



The Yellow River Bridge Trail at Effigy Mounds National Monument, which is accessible to those with physical disabilities, allows visitors to explore one of these important wetland environments. Currently about 2 miles for a round-trip walk, the recycled plastic boardwalk and wood chip trail will eventually connect the visitor center to the South Unit and the Marching Bear Trail, and perhaps provide a trail into the Heritage Addition.

When you walk the boardwalk to the Yellow River, you are never entirely alone. Birders will enjoy the neotropical migrants and resident nesting birds that are frequently found along the boardwalk. Turtles, frogs, muskrats and other four-legged animals are also found in abundance here.

Starting Out

As you begin the trail, keep your eyes open for bare patches of dirt on the lawn. This is a favorite nesting place for the painted, snapping and map turtles that live nearby. Females lay their eggs high up on the bank so that the young don't drown in a late flood. (*Stop #1 is not indicated along the trail. Please look to the north and east side of the sidewalk.*)

When the trail winds around near the highway (*stop #2*), take a look over the road to get a peek at the wetland--this is your best chance to see muskrats and ducks. While you will be much closer to the wetland on the other side of the tunnel, the resident red-winged blackbirds will announce your presence to every other animal, limiting the prospects of seeing much wildlife. As you follow the trail toward the tunnel entrance, keep an eye out for animals in Bluegill Pond, which is located on your left.

The young shagbark hickory tree just before the woods end (*stop #3*) is a favorite of yellow-bellied sapsuckers. The tiny holes drilled in lines across the trunk are "wells" made by sapsuckers, who feed on the sap and the insects attracted to it. Although other birds come to the wells, sapsuckers guard them jealously.

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The 67-foot tunnel you will walk through (*stop #4*) is lit by solar power collected from panels near the top of the tunnel. The tunnel provides a safe way for visitors to cross the highway.



Buffalo Pond



A wetland, such as Buffalo Pond to your left, is technically defined as "an area inundated or saturated by surface or ground water at a frequency and duration sufficient for hydrophytic vegetation to develop." In other words, a wetland is land that is wet at least part of the year, where water-loving plants grow.

Wetlands once covered over 1.5 million acres in Iowa, but over 90% have been drained. Over 50% of the wetlands in the lower 48 states are gone. Buffalo Pond is a floodplain marsh that varies in water height depending upon conditions. In some years, the pond is dry. In others, the water can be very high. Look for the flood marker on the right side of the trail to see how wet your feet would have been in April 2001.

Please remember to stay on the trail at all times for your own safety and to avoid crushing fragile plant life.



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Wetlands are important stopping places for migratory waterfowl, and nesting sites for some. Wood ducks are not uncommon at Buffalo Pond, nor are Canada geese, pied-billed grebes and blue-winged teal. Wetlands are also home for a myriad of other wildlife--keep your eyes open for muskrats or signs of beaver or otter.

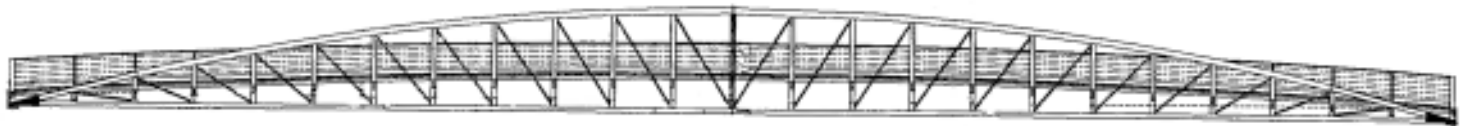
Wetlands are also important for people. They act like a sponge to absorb excess water, reducing the chances of a flood in nearby waterways. They also catch excess nutrients, like nitrogen, a major component of fertilizers and one of the largest pollutants of the Mississippi River. Wetlands also catch *the* largest pollutant of the Mississippi--excess soil. By containing these sediments and chemicals, wetlands help keep the river cleaner and safer.

As you walk along the wetland (*stop #5*), look for arrowheads--not the ones used for hunting, but the plants that look remarkably similar to the tools. American Indians dug these plants and ate the tubers.

Most of the green "slime" on top of Bluegill and Buffalo ponds is not algae--it's duckweed. This interesting little plant floats on top of the water with tiny roots that hang down about 1/8 inch below the plant. As the weather cools, duckweed sinks. When the water warms, the plants rise to the top again, surviving the winter by living under the ice. Look for trails through the duckweed that mark the passage of wildlife--from beaver and muskrat to water insects.

Just before you get to the turn toward the bridge (*stop #6*), look to your right. The tree stump, obviously gnawed by a beaver, reminds us of the animal resources used by the moundbuilders. The beaver's soft, dense underfur provides warmth for the animal in frigid waters, and the pelt was a prized source of winter clothing.

As you near the backwaters of the Yellow River (*stop #7*), you'll notice several large snags. This area floods and drains regularly, and some trees established in drier years are overcome during the inundations. These snags provide wonderful places for animals to find food and homes.



Yellow River Bridge

The modified bow truss bridge before you (*stop #8*) was installed across the Yellow River in January of 2002. It weighs 72,500 pounds and spans 160 feet. The bridge was installed in the same location as the old Highway 13 bridge, which was removed in the early part of the 20th century. Notice the original abutments still in place along the north bank of the river.

The Yellow River is the source of the clay that makes prehistoric pots of this area distinctive. This clay is still collected and used today by American Indians to make pots in the traditional style.

The Yellow River is popular for canoeing, especially in the spring or when the water is high. Many people "put in" at Volney, and canoe to the Mississippi River. From Volney, the trip is approximately 19 miles long, so allow eight to ten hours to complete it.

The bridge is meant to be enjoyed, but fishing and jumping into the river from the bridge is not permitted. Please remember to stay on the trail at all times.

Future Plans

From the southern banks of the Yellow River, the trail continues up to the old Highway 13 roadbed and connects to an unused county road, where it follows a wood chip path for a short distance. This trail is the beginning of the future path to the Marching Bear Group, a collection of ten bear and three bird effigies located on the bluffs above the Mississippi River.

In a few years, this trail will provide safer, easier access to the South Unit and the Marching Bear Group than the trail visitors currently use. It may eventually lead into the Heritage Addition, which comprises over 1,000 acres of land in and around the Yellow River valley. The Heritage Addition was added to the park on December 15, 2001.

Effigy Mounds National Monument, located along the Mississippi River in extreme northeast Iowa, was established in 1949 in order to preserve nearly 200 prehistoric American Indian mounds. Thirty-one of those mounds are effigies, or animal-shaped mounds. Effigy mounds are found in the southern half of Wisconsin and a small portion of Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois. The park covers about 2,500 acres, and contains almost 14 miles of hiking trails. The visitor center contains a museum, changing displays and an introductory film. For more information about the park, please visit our website at www.nps.gov/efmo, or call 563-873-3491.



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