

# **Sam D. Hamilton Noxubee National Wildlife Trails and Boardwalks**

## **Bluff Lake Boardwalk**

This boardwalk is located at the north end of Bluff Lake, near the intersection of Bluff Lake Road and River Road. This beautiful boardwalk offers visitors another opportunity to view wildlife in a very different habitat. The boardwalk winds through a cypress island at the edge of Bluff Lake. Just under 1,000 feet long, it makes its way to a roofed overlook on Bluff Lake. The overlook has a binocular telescope for viewing wildlife.

This site is known as an excellent place to view birds year-round. During the summer the overlook offers the best view of the Bluff Lake rookery which contains thousands of nesting egrets, herons, and ibis. Spring and fall bring migrating songbirds to the edge of Bluff Lake, and the boardwalk gives the best access to these elusive birds. Prothonotary warblers are a common sight. There are benches along the way to rest and enjoy the sounds of the area or just to stop and watch the birds. The boardwalk is wheelchair accessible.

## **Beaver Dam Trail**

This is a there-and-back type of trail that makes for a round trip of a little more than two miles. The trail entrance is near the spillway on the Bluff Lake levee. It winds through bottomland hardwood forest and offers a good opportunity to view various species of wildlife such as great blue herons, wood ducks, and even white-tailed deer.

Except for the entrance where it leaves the levee, this trail is fairly level. This trail follows the meanderings of Oktoc Creek as it travels from Bluff Lake towards the Noxubee River. At the beginning of the trail, in a bayou-like area, you can expect to see wood duck nest boxes. A short distance from the trail is a stand of large bald cypress trees. Do not be surprised if you cannot locate a beaver dam, for this trail's namesake disappeared long ago, although beaver are still commonly seen in the area.

Note: At the trail end, there is a signpost which reads "END OF TRAIL." Continuing past this point and onto the levee road is not advised. The levee does not intersect with the main road or return to the trail head. Portions of the trail may be flooded when the Noxubee River is out of its banks. This trail is not wheelchair accessible.

## **Morgan Hill Overlook and Prairie Trail**

Connecting the parking area to the Morgan Hill Overlook, the Morgan Hill loop takes visitors through a Prairie Demonstration Area. The Prairie Trail has been added downhill on the approach to the overlook

and several plants indicative of the Black Belt prairie planted along this loop. Only the first portion of the Morgan Hill loop has a packed gravel surface making it wheelchair accessible to the overlook with an accessible ramp. The Morgan Hill Overlook, equipped with a binocular telescope, provides visitors a panoramic vista of 450-acre Loakfoma Lake.

From this trail visitors may see a variety of plants and animals including Indian grass, plume grass, white-tailed deer, fox and various species of waterfowl, butterflies and songbirds. Spring and summer are the best seasons to see several varieties of butterflies. Fall wildflower viewing can be spectacular in this grassland habitat. Waterfowl are best seen in the late evenings of fall and winter as the birds flock to the back of the lake to roost.

### **Dr. Ray Watson Trail**

This trail is dedicated to the memory of Dr. James Ray Watson (1935-2006), retired professor of botany at Mississippi State University. Dr. Watson, who taught dendrology for many years, frequently used Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge for outdoor lab sessions with his students. He also enjoyed hunting, birdwatching, and just being at the Refuge.

The loop is located across the road from the Refuge Office/Visitor Center. Approximately ¼-mile long, it will take the hiker through a typical pine-hardwood forest. This is not a mature forest but a second-growth stand that has seeded in naturally. No trees have been planted here by man. Before this land became part of the Refuge it was under cultivation. In fact, if one looks closely along the trail, a few elevated rows can still be seen. More recent evidence of human activity is the furrowed fire lines that were plowed by Refuge personnel to act as fire breaks. Over 30 species of trees, shrubs, and woody vines have been identified along the trail. Each is marked by numbered signs and plant identification markers. There is a trail guide available at the Visitor Center to identify the species of plants by the numbered markers. This trail is not wheelchair accessible.

### **Webster Memorial Oak Grove and Overlook**

This two-story tower offers a lower level that has a wheelchair accessible ramp as well as an upper level accessible by stairs. The viewing platform is roofed and offers a wonderful scene of Loakfoma Lake. Year-round there is something to see from this vantage point; bald eagles, alligators, deer, and wading birds. The tower is located off of the Webster Memorial Oak Grove on the edge of Loakfoma Lake across from the Visitor Center.

### **Cypress Cove Recreational Boardwalk**

This winding boardwalk is located on Bluff Lake at Doyle Arm. A little over 500 feet in length this boardwalk allows access to Bluff Lake for fishing, sightseeing, birdwatching, or just a different view. It takes the visitor into a cypress grove on the edge of Bluff Lake and into the domain of the alligators and water dwelling creatures. In warm weather the floating cypress logs offer sunning spots for turtles. Wading birds, waterfowl, bald eagles, and a large winter rookery of cormorants are often seen from this vantage point. This boardwalk is wheelchair accessible.

### **Goose Overlook**

This 30 foot high observation platform overlooks Dickerson Arm of Bluff Lake and is a favorite wildlife viewing area for many people. During the fall, as many as 400 Canada Geese, and up to 70 White Tailed Deer can be seen at one glance in the fields and lake from this location. The platform is accessed by a level, handicap accessible, 150-ft walk. This site is open year-round, daylight hours only.

### **Woodpecker Trail**

All species of woodpeckers native to the Southeast can be found on the half-mile round trip trail, located across from the Goose Overlook. The trail is one of the shortest found on the Refuge, and if you have only 20 to 30 minutes of time this trail is a good choice. Periodically throughout the trail are informative signs explaining the plants and animals you may find. A wooden bench, overlooking Bluff Lake, is located near the half-way point of the trail.

The trail winds through a mature stand of loblolly pine which houses an active cluster of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Notice how open this forest is. This is the result of prescribed burns conducted by Refuge staff to benefit the red-cockaded woodpeckers that prefer open, park-like, stands of older pines. The best time to observe these endangered birds is at sunrise or sunset as they are leaving their cavities to forage or coming in to roost. May is the best time to observe the adults feeding their young at the cavity.

### **Scattertown Trail**

Scattertown Trail, a 1.75-mile loop, is located in the Bevill Hill area of the Refuge. It runs along the ridges of the North Central Hills and is one of the Refuge's most scenic trails. Upland hardwoods, shortleaf pine, mockernut hickory and a thick stand of switch cane are some of the plants hikers will see. The upland hardwood forests and hilly topography make this one of the best places on the Refuge to see fall colors. The views from the top of the ridges into the ravines can be spectacular during both fall and

spring. Visitors to this trail should be ready for moderately steep terrain. This trail is not wheelchair accessible.

### **Craig Pond Trail**

Located off of Hwy 25 just south of St. Marks Road is one of our newest trails. Hikers travel through a bottomland hardwood area just north of Chinchahoma Creek. Although the highway is close, as you get to the back of the loop the sounds of traffic fade away and it is easy to feel as if you are truly “getting away” from civilization. There is a spur trail off of the loop that can take the visitor to Craig Pond where it is not uncommon to see wintering waterfowl and occasionally a beaver. Craig Pond is open to fishing from March 1 through October 31. There are benches along the trail and an informational kiosk at the parking lot. Also this trail is susceptible to flooding from Chinchahoma Creek when it leaves its banks. This trail is not wheelchair accessible.

### **Trail of Big Trees**

Now approximately one-half mile in length, it was originally a four-mile, to-and-from type trail, leading the hiker to a National Champion Shumard Oak tree. The Champion tree fell before the trail was finished. The name of the trail persisted due to the many sizable trees to be seen along this part of the Noxubee River. Several years ago a tornado found its way down the trail and significantly shortened the trail. Hikers will now find themselves on a narrow winding trail along the bank of the Noxubee River. Many species of wildlife may be observed from this trail including beaver, squirrel, wood ducks, deer and otter. To get to this trail, turn onto the River Road off of Bluff Lake Road and continue to the end. There is a parking area, and the trail entrance is marked with a sign. River Road is open year-round except when flooded by the Noxubee River. This trail is not wheelchair accessible.

### **Wilderness Trail**

This 4-mile loop, maintained by the Starkville chapter of the Sierra Club, is located at the end of Keaton Tower Road. As you enter the trail, it skirts the Noxubee River offering beautiful views. The sandy soil, at the beginning of the trail, is a great place to see tracks of wild animals such as bobcat, beaver, otter, white-tailed deer and raccoon. The trail loop begins with a metal footbridge crossing the Noxubee River. The trail then leads hikers through beautiful mature hardwoods and by some spectacular root masses. The trail was re-routed after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita felled many of the giant trees. You will see evidence of these storms throughout the trail. This area is proposed for official wilderness designation since it has had no active management for the past years. It is an excellent example of bottomland hardwood forest. This trail is also susceptible to flooding when the Noxubee River overflows its banks. This trail is not wheelchair accessible.