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Hiking back to the Ice Age at Shiawassee Basin Preserve

By JONATHAN SCHECHTER

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The Ice Age was coming to an end. Shuffling its 6-ton frame, a shaggy mastodon laboriously crossed a steep moraine and headed north. Melt water from a giant block of ice, left behind by the Pleistocene Era's last retreating glacier, was the final obstacle for it to overcome before darkness.

Mastodons -- the state fossil of Michigan -- are extinct. But the glacial evidence of nature's power is unmistakable in many sections of our county. Shiawassee Basin Preserve is one of those places that give a clear view into the terrain that was once home to these big, bizarre and hairy beasts. And the watery footprint left by that block of detached ice some 10,000 years ago is there today.

Geologists call them kettle lakes.

The main nature trail, although barely more than a mile long, gives you a window into that not so ancient world of torrents of melting water, sheets of ice one-mile thick and serpentine hills of glacial till. Caution: Although technically an easy trail to traverse, this is not a trail I suggest for a lone first-time hiker. It's hilly. There is no trail signage and you might be out there by yourself. And, of

course, winter weather dictates dressing for the unexpected and carrying a day pack with goodies. With that said, winter hikes keep us healthy and happy. And Parks Director Jennifer Tucker reminded me her trails offer a great workout without the cost of a gym membership. No permits needed, either.

The Shiawassee Basin Preserve (SBP) is an outstanding and diverse wildland of 515 acres, the largest park in the Springfield Township park system. The SBP forms part of the globally rare and ecologically exceptional Long Lake Natural Area. Before heading to the nature trail, I started my exploration at the adjoining Davis Lake Overlook, just a bit past a tiny, almost hidden stream that is part of the Shiawassee River. The Overlook trailhead is on the west side of Eaton Road, just north of Davisburg Road. Be sure to park out of traffic flow. And because of the sensitive nature of the land that cradles the wetlands, and its global ecological significance, it is not permitted to wander into the wetlands and pristine prairie fen.

But, for a peaceful and hilly short hike to partake in wildlife and nature photography, this is the place. You are quickly cradled in a world of big oak trees, lofty pines and hidden waters, laced with first ice. Patience brings wildlife: wild turkeys are very much at home here. Go to the Earth's Almanac blog on www.theoaklandpress.com for turkey photo and facts.

Following my way back along the trail to Eaton Road, I drove a bit further north to the main entrance of the SBP, the area most popular with hikers and an area that also permits some regulated hunting. The small parking lot has a picnic table, a trash can and a prominent rules sign: follow the rules. From there hike west to

the trail split. The northern path, Meadow Trail, heads along a glacial moraine giving great views of a small steep valley to your right and a frozen vernal pond. As the trail meanders away from the meadow -- and chickadees among dogwood berries -- it enters woods and you'll encounter scatted large rocks or glacial erratics, boulders pushed here by that great sheet of ice and deposited on the moraines.

The trail narrows and continues over hills to an observation deck with unobstructed views of the glacial kettle lake. That leafless vista fuels imaginations to the degree where you can almost hear a mastodon lumbering through a swamp. I took the southern loop, the Woodland Trail, on my short return trek and entered the edge of a swampy area and then back up past old apple trees where it reconnects with the Meadow Trail. Unless you are woods wise, stay on the trails, it's easy to lose your bearings in this marvelous preserve that takes hikers back to the ice age.

Special Note

Hike outside your own door tonight! Geminid meteor showers are first rate, with up to 150 per hour if the sky is clear and your neighborhood is dark.

Jonathan Schechter's column on hiking in Oakland County appears on Sundays.

Look for his Earth's Almanac blog on the Oakland Press Web site. E mail him at oaknature@aol.com.

FYI

Eaton Road is in downtown Davisburg next to the fire station. For more information on the SBP Basin and Davis Lake Overlook, hunting and all park regulations contact Springfield Township Parks and Rec. at (248) 634-0412. Maps available at Township Hall: 12000 Davisburg Road; www.springfield-twp.us. Wear orange during hunting season.

URL: <http://www.theoaklandpress.com/general-news/20091213/hiking-back-to-the-ice-age-at-shiawassee-basin-preserve>

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