



# Nature's Best

by **Elma Chapman**

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**Hiking in Delt Church Park.** Friday morning, Jan. 27, the Wild Walkers, organized by the Fort Wayne Parks and Recreation Department, met at Delt Church Park in LaGrange County. It was a blustery day with light snow falling, but nonetheless 22 intrepid souls made their way to the park for a hike of about two miles. We were met by Scott Beam, LaGrange County Parks Interpretive Naturalist, who gave us a brief history of the park. Despite the name, there is no church associated with this park, but rather a Church—a man by the name of Delt Church, to be exact—who donated the property for the park.

It was interesting to see the leaves on the trail. Because of the recent warm temperatures, the ground was just warm enough to melt most of the snow, but the leaves were covered because the air could get underneath them and make them cold enough to retain the flakes. It really looked as though the snow had fallen only on the leaves scattered across the trail.

We noticed that the Little Elkhart River was out of its banks in places. The trail was in good shape along the river, but a little muddy in places where the trail crossed through open areas. And in some places the trail was frozen and a little slippery. Nothing serious—just typical January trail conditions.

At one point Scott swore he smelled a fox. Most of the Wildwalkers scoffed at this, but I can attest to the faint musk scent. It is somewhat like a skunk smell, but extremely mild and fleeting. I've been on other walks with Scott when he smelled a fox and I smelled nothing, but this time I can verify his claim. In fact, when my husband and I were in the Huron National Forest two weeks ago I smelled a fox without anyone pointing it out to me. A little later on, on a bridge over a creek, we saw the fox's paw prints. Scott had a tape measure to measure the stride and was sure it was a fox. Because of the placement of the prints, Scott further stated that the fox was picking up speed. Brenda Willis, who plans all the Wildwalker outings, quipped, "So can we say he was doing the Fox Trot?" That drew a laugh from the group, and may be one of the few times someone beat Scott to a corny punchline.

Part of the trail goes through a stand of pines. I'm trying to get in the habit of looking up into the pines, particularly near the trunks, to see if I can find a roosting owl. No luck yet. But on one of the April woodcock watches at Delt Church two years ago, we did find a lot of owl pellets under the pine trees, so you could tell they had been roosting there.

After our two-mile walk, three of the hikers decided to stay and hike the trail again. The rest of the Wildwalkers participated in our traditional after-hike ritual: finding a good local restaurant for brunch or lunch. This time we drove to Topeka and ate at Tiffany's. The group had eaten there previously after walks at the ACRES Land Trust property, Spurgeon Woods, which is located on 600 West just south of Topeka.

It was cold while we were standing around waiting for the group to gather for the hike, but once we got moving the cold wasn't much of a factor. The Wildwalkers may be visiting LaGrange County again next year to walk at Dallas Lake Park, but for this year the closest they will be again is June 9 at Gene Stratton-Porter State Historic Site in Rome City and June 23 at Chain O' Lakes State Park near Albion. You won't have to worry about the cold then!

Hope to see you on the trails soon!