

June 06, 1993
Kalamazoo Gazette
By Barbara Walters

Within the city, oases of nature provide some respite for the soul

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You don't need to wait for a weekend to get away from it all.

Oases of marsh, lake and forest within the Kalamazoo city limits provide much needed respite for body and soul. Perhaps even better, these places are without the intrusive noise of motors from bikes or boats.

You're more likely to hear the cry of a blue heron or the flutelike song of a thrush in places like Kleinstuck Preserve off Oakland Drive, or the Asylum Lake area off Drake Road.

An earthen path winds around the Kleinstuck marsh, through pine forest, by one of the few tamarack trees in the Kalamazoo area and past towering hardwoods. A huge variety of botanical and bird life, turtles and even a large doe live here, respected for the most part by a gentle variety of regular human visitors to the place, mostly walkers, joggers and bird watchers.

They know every landmark: Where the dogtooth sprouts in the spring, where the red raspberries ripen first and where the iridescent blue indigo bunting can occasionally be glimpsed in a branch in the marsh.

Love is not too mild a word for the urban dwellers who come here several times a week, year after year, on their lunch hour or after work to keep in touch with reality.

"I love it here," says jogger Denny Bowersox as he rounded the bend by the leaning basswood tree, too large in girth to embrace. "This place keeps your mind off the running."

Others walk slowly, wanting to drink in every detail.

"I came here today because I wanted to see the wild ginger on the corner," said Richard Sarona. The pink honeysuckle was about to bloom as well.

Familiarity and intimacy with a wild place gives people like Bowersox and Sarona peace of mind. Yet

At Asylum, you can see an ecological system, called 'oak openings,' that is quickly disappearing in America. Celebrated by James Fenimore Cooper when he visited Michigan, the openings feature majestic old oaks, widely spaced so that wildflowers and plains grass flourish beneath.

there is also a changing fragility to the place.

Peppermint used to grow at one spot in Kleinstuck, Sarona said. Then something changed, perhaps the water table, which lowered noticeably for a while. The peppermint disappeared. It hasn't come back.

The Asylum Lake and the Blanche Hull Estate also heighten one's power of observation and appreciation.

The fox den at Asylum Lake, for instance, is only a few feet from one of the paths. But a visitor may hike there years before discovering it. The daffodils, on the other hand, are impossible to miss, splashes of gold among the dark green.

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Some scientists are talking about connecting the few oak openings left in the Midwest. If that happens, the Kalamazoo folks who love it might hope that it will remain our own, not a tourist curiosity, and that the fox den will remain undiscovered.



GAZETTE CORRESPONDENT PHOTO / TONY DUZZI
Richard Sarona walks through the woods at Kleinstuck Preserve off Oakland Drive within the Kalamazoo city limits.

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