

FORT RIDGELY STATE PARK

NATURE GUIDE: ALL SEASONS

Introduction

Fort Ridgely State Park supports a wide range of natural features including plants, birds, animals, insects, reptiles, amphibians, and even geology. Here are just a few of those natural characteristics found throughout the park. Different seasons will change what you see and the stage that the plants especially are in. Look for the season of your visit on this guide.

Nature Scavenger Hunt

Go for a hike through Fort Ridgely State Park to see how many different items you can find. Bring along a camera to keep a record of your discoveries. Please report anything of interest to the park office.

Spring

American robin: They are one of the first migrating birds to come back in the spring. Often there are several snowstorms after they arrive back.



Pasque flower: Pasque means Easter and this is about when they are found in the spring. The flowers develop into lots of hair-like seeds.



Bloodroot: One of the first woodland wildflowers. It flowers before trees leaf out. Leaves unroll in full sun and close around the flower at night and on cloudy days. Cut a stem to see red (blood) sap in the plant.



Dutchman's Breeches: An early blooming wildflower that is easy to recognize. Look for a collection of waxy, white flowers that could resemble upside down pants or breeches.



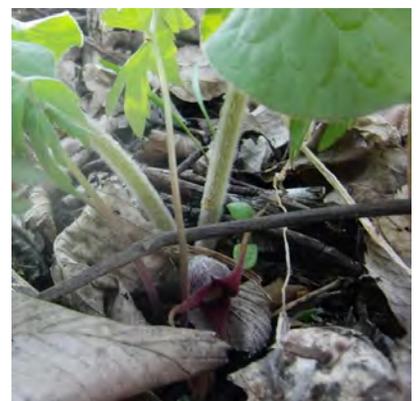
Marsh marigold (cowslip): This member of the buttercup family is found in or near streams or lakes. Several wet areas near Fort Ridgely Creek have them growing in them.



Nodding Trilium: This three leaved plant has a three petaled flower also. It is from the lily family but the flowers hang below the leaves (nod) rather than above like most lilies.



Wild ginger Grows low to the ground in clumps and has two heart-shaped furry leaves and has a single reddish to brown tube flower at its base. Horizontal roots are edible. The stems and flowers are soft with tiny hairs. They unfurl in early spring.



Scarlet Cup: This fungi that grows on the forest floor in leaves or on rotting sticks has scarlet flowers (cups) for a week or so in the spring. American Indians used the cups for medicinal purposes.



Yellow Morel: These are a delicious mushroom found for a short time about when lilacs bloom. They are found around dead trees that still have some bark on them.



Showy Orchis: This beautiful orchid is found in the wet woods. It has a pink hood over the white lower petal. Its lower petal is the landing platform for pollinators which must push hard to get inside.



Columbine: This unique flower is found in the woods and rocky areas, here even by a gravestone. Its nectar tubes make it a favorite of hummingbirds and long tongued moths.



Summer

Blue Violet: This common woodland flower blooms everywhere in late spring, early summer. The leaves and flower are edible



Red-winged blackbird: This common bird can be found in marshy areas often perching at the top of tall stalks of bulrushes. The female has a mottled brown appearance. The male is black



with a red patch on its upper wing.

Black raspberries: This thorny bush is found along the edges of the woods throughout the park. The berries are smaller than raspberries in gardens and are ripe when they turn black and not when red. They are a nice snack on summer hikes through the woods



Bur Oak: Much of the woods in the park are called oak savannah. In the 1800's there were many less trees and wild-fires kept down brush and dead wood in the area. This many lobed leaf tree has dark gray deeply furrowed bark. The lower branches are horizontal and upper ones are ascending.



Virginia waterleaf: This wild-flower covers the woodland floor with abundant clusters of flowers that the bees love. Its leaves are often covered with white "waterspots" thus the name waterleaf.



Beardtongue: This prairie wild-flower has long light purple flowers that alternate along their stem. Bees enter the flower to pollinate.



Wild Blue phlox: This woodland flower has 5 petals in its flowers that come together in a short tube. They flower around mother's day and often are in bouquets for mom.



Bobolink: It is a prairie bird that is blackbird-size and its relative. Males have yellow on top of head and white on back. They have a cheery, bubbly warble. They eat seeds, insects and grains.



Eastern Bluebird: Birdhouses for bluebirds have been placed around the park to encourage bluebirds to nest. Their blue feathers and orange breast make them easily identified.



Rainbow gneiss: Many of the buildings at Fort Ridgely were made of this rock (mined in nearby Morton) by CCC and VCC crews in the 1930's. This metamorphized granite is one of the oldest rocks in the world. The 3 minerals in granite were separated into swirls of each by heat and pressure.



Tall Bellflower: Flowers alternate with leaves on a several foot long stem. They have five pointed blue petals and have a white circle in the center. They are often found along the shady borders of wooded areas.



Common milkweed: A white milky sap exudes from the stems and leaves. Monarch butterflies lay their eggs exclusively in milkweed plants Monarch caterpillars ingest the toxic sap with no ill effects but become



toxic to birds and other animals. A unique bunch of

pink flowers develop into large pods of seeds.

Large milkweed bug: Clusters of these insects can be found on many milkweed pods in late summer and early fall. The smaller nymphs and adults are found together and suck fluid out of milkweed leaves and seeds in the pods.



Butterfly-weed: This milkweed has bright orange flowers but lacks the milky sap.



Lead plant: This prairie member of the pea family has 1-3" spikes of blue flowers. Each leaf is divided into as many as 50 leaflets covered with fine gray hairs. They have roots that can go down 10 feet to find water. They grew on dry soil above lead mines in Wisconsin; thus



the name.

Great Blue Lobelia: These deep blue flowers proceed up the stem as the summer proceeds into fall. They are found in medium to wet soils with little shade. Sometimes the flowers have white stripes along the sides.



Northern leopard frog: This common frog is 2 to 4 inches long and green or greenish-brown with oval brown spots. It is Minnesota's state amphibian.



Dickcissel: This gray-brown sparrow-like bird has chestnut patches on shoulders and yellow breast and eyebrow. Song is an insect-like, buzzy "dick dick ciss ciss ciss".



Black-capped chickadee: This familiar gray bird has a black cap and throat patch. Its song sounds like its name with a few more dees at the end.



Rough blazing star: Monarch butterflies feed on this flower before they take their long migration south. Its pink flowers are farther apart on the stem than its relative prairie blazing star.



Mourning Cloak butterfly: This butterfly hibernates as an adult so appears very early in the spring. It lays its eggs on twigs of poplar, elm, hackberry or

willow trees. Their caterpillars can damage trees by eating too



many of its leaves.

Fall

Canadian goldenrod: These flowers are blooming when many people have allergies. The real culprit is ragweed which blooms at the same time. Ragweed's pollen is carried by the wind and thus gets in your lungs and nasal passages. Goldenrod pollen is transferred by bees and other pollinators.



Prairie onion: The distinct round ball of pink flowers tops a long bare stem. Its bulb and the rest of its plant have strong onion fragrance and was gathered for food.



13 Lined Ground Squirrel: The 13 stripes are actually long rows of spots from tail to neck. There are 6 dark brown and 7 lighter yellow stripes. They are the Golden Gophers for University of Minnesota teams.



Big blue stem : This tall prairie grass reaches 4-6 feet tall and in the fall develops the distinctive seeds at the top of the stalk in 3 to 4 close branches that resemble turkey tracks.



Smooth sumac: This small tree has pointed leaves that are opposite each other on branches. The leaves turn bright red in the fall. The red seed tuft can be boiled in water to make a sweet tea.



Eastern cottontail rabbit: Gray to light brown is the color of this common resident of the woods and our communities. You will see the white cottontail as it hops away from you.



Woodland sunflower: This 3 to 7 foot tall plant has yellow flowers made of 9-14 petals surrounding a yellow center. It is a great producer of seeds for sparrows and finches.



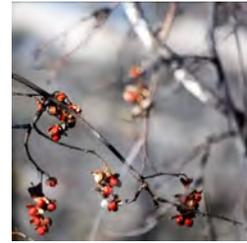
Purple coneflower: A tall showy flower of the prairies. The plant is 2-3 feet tall and the flowers are 3-5 inches in diameter. Flowers have 14-20 droopy purple petals surrounding an orange cone-



shaped center. Butterflies like the nectar and goldfinches love the seeds.

Winter

Bittersweet: This vine wraps itself around the branches of bushes and small trees all summer and the small orange fruit open and are very visible all winter.



Bald eagle: Our national symbol is a common site in the Minnesota River valley. They soar above Fort Ridgely often. They are scavengers and you may see them on a deer that was killed. The white head means the eagle is 3 or more years old.



Downy woodpecker: If you hear a soft tapping on the trees above you, it is probably a downy woodpecker. It has a white belly with black and white feathers on wings and males have a red spot on head.



Many birds live in Minnesota year round. They are easier to see in the winter as they can't hide behind vegetation.

Red bellied woodpecker: This medium sized woodpecker has a 'zebra' striped back and red crown goes to nape of neck. Its tan breast has a touch of red on belly. Eats insects in summer but hammers acorns and berries into crevices of trees for winter food.



Northern Cardinal: The male of this larger bird is bright red with a crest and large beak. Female is buff brown with tinges of red on crest and wings. Both have a black mask around eyes and chin.



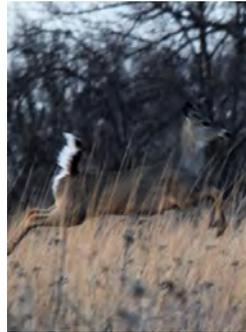
White breasted nuthatch: This smaller slate gray bird often hops headfirst down tree trunks to find things other bird climbing up miss, Its back toe claw is larger making this possible. This one actually hung upside down under a branch.



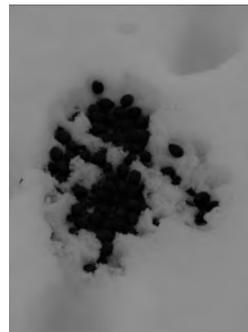
Moss: Moss can be seen all over the park on dead decaying trees, wet ground and even over rocks. They produce spores on stems that stick up from the green mass. In winter it is nice to see some green in the otherwise white and brown of the forest.



White-tailed deer: As any hunter can tell you, the best time to see deer is at dusk or twilight. They stick up their white tail when they run.



Deer scat: Be careful where you walk on trails or on the golf course as there are piles of the round balls of deer scat.



Deer grazing in winter: Deer often dig into the snow and push it aside to get at grass below the snow. They must like the grass



on the golf course as that is often where you find their diggings.

Deer tracks: Deer have cloven (divided) hooves and leave easily seen tracks in the snow. They are seen on hiking and snowmobile trails as well as their own trails through the woods. Horses on the trail have bigger round hooves.

Turkey tracks: Ben Franklin wanted turkeys to be our national bird. Their three toed tracks are over 2 inches long.



Geese flying over park: When you hear honking and see flocks of geese in v's flying over, you know spring is soon to arrive. They form the v's to help each other in flight. The front goose gets the air moving and the rest use this.

