

OAKLAND COUNTY PARKS

The Wilder Side of Oakland County

by Jonathan Schechter

Lakeshore trekking at Kensington Metropark


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Five years had gone by since my last exploration at Kensington Metropark in the southernmost reaches of Oakland County. Kensington is one of the 14 Huron-Clinton Metroparks in Southeast Michigan that span more than 25,000 acres along the Huron and Clinton river systems. With a beautiful sunny day underway on Monday, it was time for a return visit to this 4,481 acre Metropark gem for an afternoon hike.

I started my journey by parking next to their nature center and chatting with a staffer, picking up a trail map and deciding where I would hike. After admiring the vibrant color changes next to the nature center and taking my turn on a spotting scope, I opted to follow the trail that loops around Wildwing Lake. That two-mile trail provides excellent views and some wildlife encounters. If you are new to Kensington that might be a great trail to follow. (a)

There are numerous other trails at Kensington, but the Wildwing Loop nature trail only allows hiking so it's best to plan ahead. Dogs, bikes, running and jogging are not permitted on the trail. There are also signs near the nature center reminding visitors that feeding of birds or other wildlife is not allowed.

Within 10 minutes of starting my intentionally slow-paced trek I had unexpected company; a trio of Sandhill Cranes. The sandhills of Kensington are very accustomed to and comfortable with human activity. Some are actually a bit too accustomed to humans and expect handouts and will behave as if they expect one. (b)

You certainly do not need a telephoto lens to photograph the cranes; they will walk almost right up to you. As I trekked along the trail I encountered quite a few trail users with professional style telephoto lens. I chatted with one gentleman who said he visits about once a week and said, "Nature's show never ends on this trail". He urged me to return early in the morning when it's livelier and there are fewer people. I will.

The trail is easy to follow and goes over several boardwalks that provide excellent views of the lake and the island. Although I saw numerous species of ducks in the shallows, and a pair of Trumpeter Swans closer to the island, it was the Sandhill Cranes that kept holding my attention. (c)

At one point in my nature embracing trek I encountered an Eastern Gray Squirrel perched on a railing at an overlook. The squirrel barely gave me a glance and continued to munch on nuts as I passed withing about 10 feet of it; a reminder that wildlife along the trail is very accustomed to human activity. (d)


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I'm glad that 'squirrel pause' occurred because I then noticed a Great Blue Heron in the shallows just yards from me that was standing motionless. A family was near me at the time and their young daughter asked why it was not moving. She laughed when I said it was waiting for dinner to swim by. (e)


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Interpretive signs along the way share excellent information. Although I saw very little bird activity at the island, the nests of the Great Blue Herons were obvious. I did notice a few Turkey Vultures soaring high above near the island riding the thermals.

Color changes of leaves are well underway at Kensington and leading the pack along some sections of the trail is poison sumac. The brilliant red leaves of the poison sumac are unmistakable and some of these wetland loving shrubs are immediately adjacent to the trail at what I would call face-slapping height. (f)


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There are multiple places to take a break on a bench and embrace the sights, sounds and smells of the season. It was really a great day for embracing nature's way and as I meandered along I paused at a sign that "It's A Great Day for Wildlife Watching" and standing almost next me was another Sandhill Crane. The best place to start your exploration is by parking in the lot of the Kensington Metropark Nature Center and the colorful days of autumn will add to your eye-catching adventure.

Oakland County Parks staffer Jonathan Schechter is an avid "nature-embracing" hiker who follows phenology - the study of natural cycles of nature's way - to inspire his blogs.