

Exploring Friendship Woods at Red Oaks

The Oakland Owlet's Families and Friends gathered on June 14 at the Red Oaks Nature Center to explore this well-known birding hotspot. Red Oaks Nature Center was formerly known as Friendship Woods. This 37-acre green space is situated in Madison Heights, a very urban area. The park is managed by Oakland County Parks in partnership with the City of Madison Heights. The mature forest is an ideal stopover site for migrating birds and provides habitat for resident birds.



Oakland County Parks naturalists Benjamin Prowse and Matt Hackett greeted the Owlets. Both naturalists have extensive knowledge of Red Oaks and provide educational programs at this site. Benjamin shared a list of birds seen at Red Oaks Nature Center which was very impressive. Benjamin noted from over 5,435 eBird checklists that Red Oaks has recorded 173 species on this site. Benjamin further noted that since April 11th 134 species have traveled through the park during spring migration. After seeing this list and hearing about the property, the group was eager to walk the trails and see some birds.

We initially headed north on the trail. Benjamin and Matt pointed out some of the invasive species' management that is being done at the park. Natural Resources work group is removing Buckthorn, a shrub that outcompetes with native flora and disrupts ecosystems. Areas along the trail were open from the removal of this shrub. We saw some Whitetail deer just off the trail which can survive within the city limits. The group paused often, listening for birds. Blue Jays, Northern Cardinal, Black-capped Chickadee and Gray Catbird were calling and singing but due to the leaves it was hard to see these birds. However, with patience and perseverance we located some Blue Jay nests. Benjamin noted that Blue Jays are commonly found and nest on the property.



Red Oaks is a long narrow stripe of land that extends south from 13 Mile Road. Near the road, a wetland pocket provided habitat for Red-winged Blackbirds. They were singing, and the dense vegetation hid chattering Gray Catbirds. The trail turned south at this point. Along the pathway back to the Nature Center, the group saw several American Robin fledglings on the ground begging for food from their parents. The spotted pattern of



the juvenile birds was obvious. Everyone had a chance to witness this interaction between the adults and young birds all along the walk.

Beyond the Nature Center building, the pathway leads into a mature diverse hardwood forest. As we walked into the forest the shade from the tall trees darkened the overall sunny day. The trees towered overhead, and the air was cooler. The group stopped occasionally to see some of the interesting trees. At one point, Vickie stepped off the trail to see an unusual tree growth. Burls develop due to stress and infection on growing trees. Often this wood is used to create decorative bowls and art. Bird songs and calls along with part of the walk were different. Red-bellied Woodpeckers chattered, and the pierce call of the Cooper's Hawk was heard.



Benjamin guided the group to the pond outside of the Nature Center building after a time. We stopped for a group photo and Benjamin invited everyone inside the building to check the bird feeding station and displays. Snacks and water were available for the group in the parking lot. Everyone thanked Benjamin and Matt for the excellent hike and sharing their expertise. Overall bird activity was low, but it was a pleasant morning and a wonderful way to experience this lovely park.

An eBird checklist for this hike was submitted for 19 species we encountered. The checklist included most of the common birds at the site. It was great to see and hear the Cooper's Hawk, spotted in the deep woods by Megan. Also, a few new species were observed at the Nature Center's feeding station that we did not see on the trail including the Ruby-throated hummingbird and the Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Red Oaks Nature Center is worth the hike.



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