Lone Rock Trail: 'You're in the middle of nowhere'

Article by: LIZ ROLFSMEIER, Special to the Star Tribune
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In takes some work to get to Lone Rock, the 30-foot-tall cliff in the middle of the Vermillion Highlands.

This used to be a big party spot, but now the route is overgrown, and reaching the top requires thrashing through wild blackberry vines and grabbing the roots of tiny aspen or birch growing in the crevices of the sandstone. The graffiti -- initials that kids once carved in the sandstone -- now looks as if it were written with moss.

For years, the place was overrun "by people coming up and having their keggers," said Bob Fashingbauer, Department of Natural Resources wildlife area manager. "I picked up hundreds of beer cans and various junk."

Once the park started locking the gates and actively restoring the wildlife area, things changed for the better, in his opinion.

"There have got to be places that are left wild enough so that it's still a challenge to get through," he said, standing on top of the rock and talking about the autumn warbler migrations. "In the fall, when all the leaves are off, you can see forever."

Even with a little foliage in the way, the 2,840-acre research, recreation and wildlife management area in the southern section of Rosemount's UMore Park seems to extend endlessly.

The cliff is surrounded by the 10 1/2-mile Lone Rock Trail, a scenic loop that runs past cornfields, patches of sunflowers, stands of aspen, birch and red pines, rows of hybrid willows planted for biomass experiments and stretches of restored prairie with monarchs and dragonflies flitting among the wildflowers and prairie grasses.

Driving his six-wheeler through the tall Indian grass, Fashingbauer said few people recognize the Vermillion Highlands as a recreational destination. He stopped to pull some prickly ash berries ("It smells like lemon Pledge," he said, pulling it off the stem), and he identified birds as they flew past.

These days, a few cross-country skiers,
hikers and horseback riders share the trail. Visitors come to the area to hunt morels or pick blackberries and raspberries. And a small group of hunters covet the limited number of licenses available -- the first year, about 850 people applied for the 30 archery permits allotted for the area.

Fashingbauer sees the area as "first and foremost a wildlife area. ... It's still kind of an unknown gem," he said.

"It's gorgeous. You hear no traffic. You pretty much have the place to yourself. You really do get the feeling you're in the middle of nowhere." And there is no one else out there, though he expects that to change as habitat restoration continues and interpretive/nature centers are added in an adjacent Dakota County regional park.

The University of Minnesota granted the land to the state in 2006 in return for funding for the U’s new football stadium, and it’s now managed by the DNR and the University of Minnesota, which have been working with Empire Township and Dakota County on a master plan to integrate all of the recreational and educational ideas for the area.

Fashingbauer said they hope to establish information kiosks along the Lone Rock Trail that discuss the history of the landscape, the prairie restoration process and research being done at UMore.

"It's going to be a whole different ballgame 10 years from now from what you're seeing here," he said.

Each year, more sections of prairie are re-established -- so far about 250 acres have been restored -- and many of them are now in their third growing season.

"The critters have responded," Fashingbauer said, and the size of the tracts of land means more varied bird species and a bigger pheasant population. Also, he said, "as the prairies get established, the dragonfly and butterfly species are pretty phenomenal."

Liz Rolfsmeyer is a Minneapolis freelance writer.