

Living Lessons

At Woodcock Nature Center, learning opportunities are as plentiful as plant and animal species.

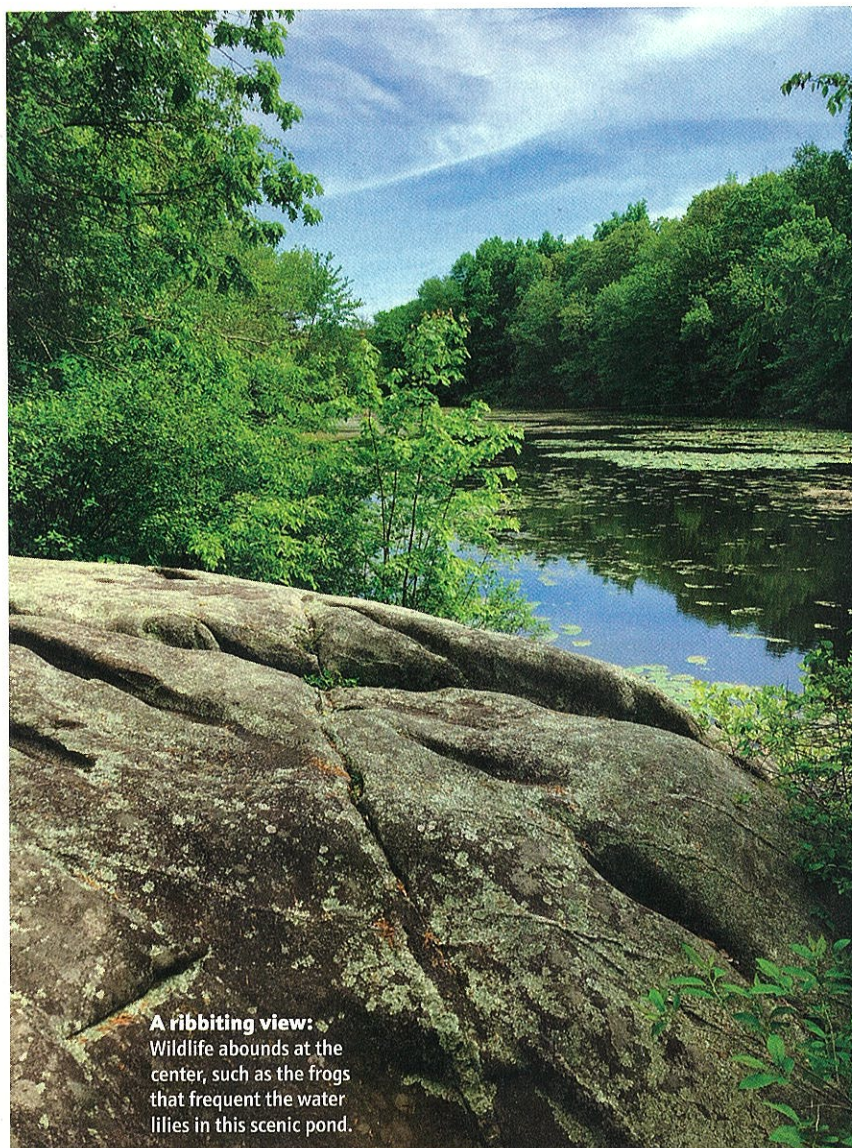
WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY PETER MARTEKA

The sap of sweet birch is added to carbonated water to create birch beer soda. River otters can spend up to eight minutes underwater. Beech nuts were an important food for carrier pigeons and helped lead to their extinction when the trees were cleared for agriculture.

Nothing like visiting a nature center and learning facts about the natural world. The Woodcock Nature Center on the Wilton and Ridgefield line has been teaching and showcasing the natural world for visitors of all ages over the past 50 years through summer camps, outreach programs, hikes and workshops.

The center was founded by former Ridgefield First Selectman J. Mortimer Woodcock, who secured the 150-acre preserve from the state. The center, which is hosting a year-long birthday bash celebrating its golden anniversary, manages the preserve for the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. "Woodcock is a treasured resource with a rich history," says center executive director Lenore Eggleston Herbst.

The preserve is a natural-world gem with four miles of trails for hikers and birders that pass over boardwalks across swamps, along historic stone walls and a pond where frogs hang out on blooming water lilies. The trails pass under stands of huge maple, beech, oak, ash and hickory trees. There is a nature center building and outdoor aviaries that include a pair of non-releasable birds of prey and nearly 20 reptiles and amphibians.



A ribbiting view: Wildlife abounds at the center, such as the frogs that frequent the water lilies in this scenic pond.

Six blazed trails provide access to most of the center's acreage. Plenty of informational signs showcase the natural history of trees, birds and an excellent primer on footprints of animals that live at the preserve. The orange trail is about a mile long and passes through the western half of the preserve with a short "road section." The trail is an easy walk through a wooded area next to a swamp.

The purple trail leads from the entrance parking area to a rocky ridge overlooking the swamp. The path takes visitors across a boardwalk bridge crossing the heart of a swamp where dragonflies bounce on pickerelweed. The trail passes along the preserve's forested northern edge where chicken of the woods fungus grows on the side of a dead tree. The path winds behind neighboring backyards before crossing a small, picturesque stream.

Woodcock Nature Center

Wilton and Ridgefield

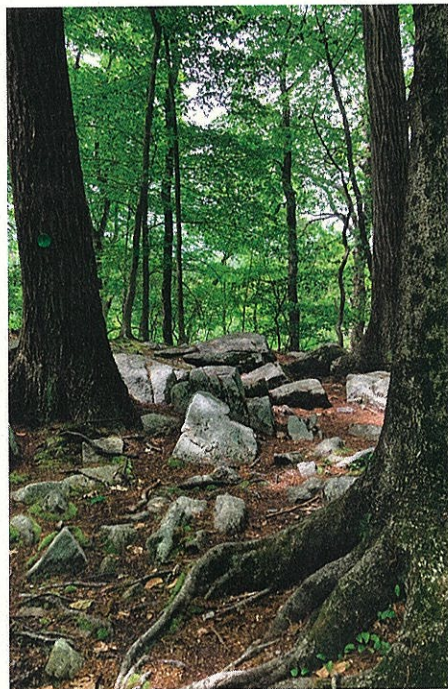
The bottom line: The preserve includes hiking trails among historic stone walls and stands of old maple, beech, oak and hickory trees, a pond, wetlands and vernal pools. There is a nature center and outdoor aviaries.

Difficulty level: Most of the trails are easy for all age levels.

Total mileage: 4 miles

Directions: Coming from the south: Take Route 33 North 4 miles from Wilton Town Center and turn right on Millstone Road. Take a left on Deer Run Road and follow for a mile to the center. Coming from the north: Take Route 102 to Nod Road. Follow Nod for 1½ miles to Deer Run Road. Follow Deer Run Road for a quarter-mile to the center. For a map and list of upcoming events, go to woodcocknaturecenter.org.

Pet friendly? Leashed dogs are allowed and must be cleaned up after.



The Woodcock Nature Center boasts a variety of scenic trails, as well as chances to stop, sit back and watch the wildlife living throughout.

The red trail winds through the forest along old stone walls down to the center's campus area which includes the nature center and aviary, pavilion and staff offices. The trail wraps around the banks of a small pond that includes a dock and a pair of Adirondack chairs where visitors can sit and watch fish jump, water lilies bloom and frogs chirp and croak.

Passing a scenic spillway with a view across the pond, the red trail crosses the center's access road and parking area, and connects to a yellow trail which takes visitors to a boardwalk and viewing platform into the heart of a swamp. The platform is a great place to sit and watch birds flit through or soar high above. The yellow trail moves through a beech tree glade before blending into the green trail, which is the rockiest part of the trail system, but is still easy to navigate.

The year-long celebration continues with a summer "Birthday Bash" July 9 and the Aug. 7 launch of a new

beer labeled for Woodcock by the nearby Nod Hill Brewery. An annual fundraiser, "Under the Harvest Moon," will take place in September and launch the center's "new visual identity and logo." A 5K and kids fun run, "Where the Wild Things Run," is slated for Oct. 16.

The mission of the center is to "creatively connect the community with nature and to one another."

"It is truly incredible to see how former Ridgefield First Selectman J. Mortimer Woodcock's simple vision to get kids outside has grown into the organization we have today," says Jana Hogan, president of the Woodcock Nature Center board.

For a half-century, thousands of people of all ages have passed through the center on school field trips, its summer camp and enrichment programs or those just stopping by for a visit and walk through the natural world. Getting outside is a simple vision, but one with the greatest reward. ■

Things to do nearby

Weir Farm National Historical Park: From 1882 to 1919, Weir Farm was the summer home of pioneering American Impressionist Julian Alden Weir. With 68 acres offering a wonderful setting to paint en plein air, Weir Farm is the only national park dedicated to American Impressionist painting. The grounds and parking lot are open daily from sunrise to sunset. Visitors can enjoy dog-walking, hiking, exploring the historic painting sites with a self-guided tour brochure or creating art with their own supplies. 735 Nod Hill Road, Wilton, 203-834-1896, nps.gov/wefa/index.htm

Heibeck's Stand: The eatery and ice cream stand dates back to 1931 when "roads in our neighborhood were not paved and bread was 5 cents." The stand offers premium food with signature homemade sauces as well as all-natural ice cream. The stand notes that the current owner's great-grandmother and great-aunt crafted more than 100 flavors on the premises from the 1930s to the 1980s. Flavors rotate daily and are sourced from local small-batch creameries. Menu items include a dozen different hot dogs from "LA street dogs" to "Colorado dogs," burgers, lobster rolls, sandwiches and salad bowls. 951 Danbury Road, Wilton, 203-917-9313, heibecksstand.com

Nod Hill Brewery: The father-and-son team of David and Robert Kaye caught the brewery bug after a 2008 trip to Austria, and with their friend, brewer Kyle Acenowr, created Nod Hill in 2017. The trio notes they have "strived to craft expressive, balanced and unique beers that encourage a spirit of thoughtful enjoyment." Brewing hop-forward American ales, traditionally minded Belgian, German and English styles and spontaneous and mixed-fermentation, oak-aged beers, the brewery includes a taproom, seasonal biergarten and event space. There are daily food trucks and live music. 137 Ethan Allen Hwy. (Route 7), Ridgefield, 203-617-1191, nodhillbrewery.com