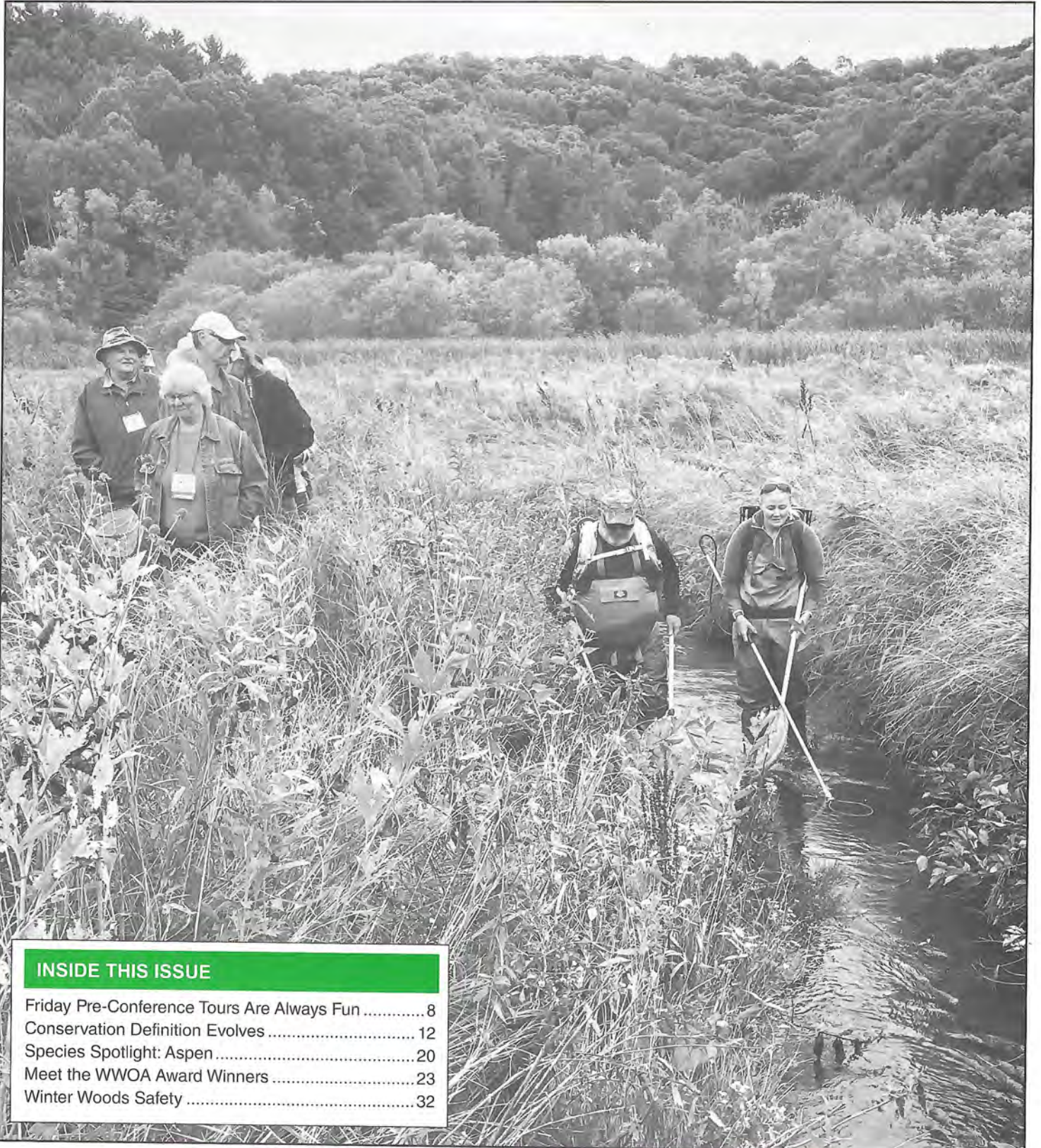


Wisconsin Woodlands



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Creating Tomorrow's Woodlands Today



Photos: LEAF

Students and teachers line the bridge over Marsh Creek for a group photo.

Ice Age trail runs through school forest

Editor's note: This is the second part of a two-part series.

By Stephen Schmidt

Over 7 miles of hiking trails grace the forested hills, remnant prairie and creek bottoms of the Janesville Schools Outdoor Laboratory (JSOL). This unique school forest is also



known as the Robert O. Cook Memorial Arboretum. A portion of the 1,000-mile Ice Age National Scenic Trail runs through the middle of JSOL and provides a wonderful, moderately difficult hike through features that help to define this region. Formed at the southern edge of the Green Bay lobe of the glacier that covered most of Wisconsin during the last glaciation, Johnstown moraine lies to the north of the property. Since the last glacier did not reach JSOL, the site has deeper, more developed soils along with the younger glacial outwash that flowed south from the moraine before being deposited. Granite erratics left behind by earlier glaciation are randomly strewn in this

now mostly mixed hardwood forest and contribute to the hilly scenic trails throughout the property.

A difference in elevation of more than 100 feet exists between the high ground and gullies. In some places, the distance between hilltops and valley bottoms are as little as 200 feet of horizontal distance. These steep slopes move rainwater quickly to form two intermittent streams that flow into Marsh Creek on the northern portion of the property, eventually emptying into the Rock River further north. Marsh Creek originates 10 miles to the east, near the Evansville School Forest that was highlighted in the fall 2021 magazine.

Meandering across the northern part of the forest to the east and northeast, Marsh Creek is surrounded by wooded wetlands with black willow, honey locust, red cedar and black cherry, all species that can tolerate poorly drained soils. Rising above the wetland to the south and east of the creek is a knoll with a remnant prairie that grows little bluestem, pasque flower, lead plant, prairie smoke and others.

Most of JSOL lies south of Marsh Creek. The southern portion of the forest has been sustainably managed under the Forest Crop Law program

Forest facts...

Janesville Schools Outdoor Laboratory

- Registered in 1981
- Total acres: 151 (LEAF)
- School district enrollment: 10,069
- School forest website: www.janesville.k12.wi.us/departments/jsol
- Contact: Paul Stengel, pstengel@janesville.k12.wi.us

previous to the establishment of the arboretum in 1968. Students are fortunate to have a large woodland to explore that is a typical southern Wisconsin mesic oak/hickory forest. Stands are dominated by oaks including red, black, white and bur species with shagbark hickory, ash, black cherry, basswood, black walnut, aspen and sugar maple also present in various stands. Understory shrubs include elderberry, viburnum, dogwood, hazelnut, sumac, gooseberry and raspberries. Invasive shrub species present include buckthorn, honeysuckle, barberry and multiflora rose. A variety of herbaceous species bloom on the forest floor including hepatica, bloodroot, violets, anemones, buttercups, shooting stars, wild



Left, a student shows off the fish she caught in Marsh Creek during the Nature Navigators program, while right, students pose with the trail sign they helped install at the JSOL property.

Photos: Melanie Baumunk and LEAF

geraniums, Solomon's seal, asters, mayapples and others.

Much of the arboretum property was purchased by the city of Janesville in

1968, although acreage was added in 1979 and 1987. This year marks the 50th anniversary of JSOL's registration as an official school forest. It was registered in 1981 under the direction of its first school forest coordinator, Robert O. Cook. The property is maintained through a partnership between the

city and schools with Janesville schools providing the environmental education programs, including curriculum sharing with other school systems that use the forest.

Each summer, students headed into upper elementary school through ninth grade have opportunities to attend day camp. Nature Navigators provide fourth through sixth grade students opportunities to fish, hike, roast hot dogs over an open fire and experience nature studies. This one-week program is offered two times per summer with typical enrollment of 35-40 students in each.

Older students in seventh through ninth grades can attend a four-week course called Survival Science with weekly themes of water, fire, shelter and orienteering.

Janesville students have annual opportunities to visit the arboretum in grades two, four and six. High school student leaders help with the second and

fourth grade student programs, while others study there in their physical education, art, engineering and advanced placement science classes. Despite the difficult terrain, some of the forest is accessible to students with physical limitations and well-marked trails allow for easier

navigation. Janesville School District shows its commitment to outdoor education by providing buses to teachers who take their classes there to learn.

Several developments support student learning at JSOL. The education shelter is an enclosed classroom that recently had more storage added for lesson materials. A circa 1840s log cabin adds history and nostalgia to the property. Eagle Scout projects have included an observation platform to view the south prairie from above, trail work to control erosion and a rerouting of trails to provide residents access to a nearby subdivision expansion. A partnership between Hedberg Library, Janesville parks and the schools recently installed a story walk with 20 stations providing students an opportunity to read a book

along the trail. A primitive restroom is available for JSOL field trips and events only.

The public is encouraged to visit the JSOL – Robert O. Cook Memorial Arboretum anytime during the year. Community activities have included volunteer workdays, cross country races, cross country skiing and candlelight hikes. From mid-May through August 2021, the Rock County Chapter of the Ice Age Trail Alliance hosted a series of 14 hikes called Walk Across Rock County that included the JSOL.

To aid in navigating the trails, an interactive trail map can be accessed on the Janesville Schools' school forest webpage at <https://www.janesville.k12.wi.us/departments/jsol>. The site also has links to visitor rules, forest history, plant identification guides, its Facebook page and other contacts.

The forest may be accessed 1 mile west of Janesville on County Highway A. Watch for the sign and turn north onto the access road, North Bluebird Trail. Follow the road to the parking lot.



Stephen Schmidt, a state-certified science educator, is an educational outreach specialist for LEAF, Wisconsin's K-12 Forestry Education Program.