



The

Trail Builder

Newsletter of the Ozark Trail Association Spring 2010

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spring, glorious
spring!

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**Ozark Trail
Guidebook 2nd
edition**

The Ozark Trail Association is a non-profit group with the mission to develop, maintain, preserve, promote and protect the rugged natural beauty of the Ozark Trail

Ozark fens Treasures along the trail

By Lynda Mills

Perhaps the most intriguing part of hiking any trail, particularly the Ozark Trail, is not knowing what you will discover around the next bend. Will the next drainage harbor a small waterfall under which you can rest on a hot summer day and cool your tired feet? Will the hillside you are approaching be covered with a carpet of wildflowers? As you climb to the top of a broad ridge, will you find open woodland alive with birdsong? All these little “treasures” waiting to be discovered are what entice many of us to take that next step. However, there is one treasure along the Ozark Trail that often goes unnoticed.



Barton Fen on the Middle Fork section of the OT: many rare species breed and live here, and foot-only traffic is permitted on the southwest side of the fen.

Upon first glance, this “treasure” may appear to be only an overgrown field in a bottomland. Certainly old fields and abandoned farmland are not unique along the Ozark Trail. But, take a closer look at these bottomland fields. You may notice cattails, sedges, and the distant glimmer of water shimmering among the vegetation. This is no ordinary abandoned farm field; what you have discovered is a fen, one of Missouri’s most diverse and most threatened natural communities.

Unique soil and water conditions make fens disproportionately higher in biodiversity than much of their surrounding landscape... they serve as refuge for plants and animals typically found far north of Missouri.

—Lynda Mills

What is a Fen?

The term “fen” is an Old English word that historically referred to lowland marshes, swamps, and bogs. Today, the term is used to more specifically refer to a particular type

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The Ozark Trail Association Newsletter is published four times each year and is mailed to all members. If you would prefer to receive this newsletter electronically, please contact kathy.atnip@ozarktrail.com.

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Along the lower route of the Eleven Point section: one story suggests the river was given its name by early surveyors who had to adjust their compass readings eleven times in one mile while following its crooked, winding route.



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President's Report

Greetings, everyone. The spring of 2010 has been glorious in the Missouri Ozarks and I hope you've had an opportunity to get out and take in some of the splendor that the Ozarks has to offer. I haven't had much time to get out myself, but I did manage to get to the April Mega Event at Bass' Resort and helped in the completion of the Courtois gap. Yes, the Courtois gap is now complete and this means that the Ozark Trail is continuous from the Meramec River near Onondaga Cave State Park to the Eleven Point River in Howell County. And the piece of trail that was constructed to complete the Courtois gap is very nice—great for hiking, mountain biking or horseback riding. Our partners at Bass' Resort, Stephan and Julie Bass, have been wonderful hosts and the OTA owes them a great big thank you for their hospitality.

The clean-up from the May 8, 2009 storm continues. It has been one year and there are still scores of trees left to be cleared from the trail in many places. The U.S. Forest Service will be hiring crews to help fill the holes in the trail left by the uprooting of nearby trees. Sawyers have been hard at work clearing the trail corridor from the blow down. It was a devastating storm, but thanks to the efforts of hundreds of people so far, much of that storm damage has been cleaned up.

We're starting to look ahead at our fall schedule and it looks like it will fill in nicely. There is still work to be done on the Taum Sauk Section at Johnson's Shut-Ins to clean up from storm damage and to complete the reroute of the trail below the scour. The Ozark Trail side of the Berryman Loop is in need of some work and three fairly large reroutes of the Berryman Loop have been planned by the U.S. Forest Service. Lastly, we're finalizing the work plans to begin construction on the Current River Trail in Pioneer Forest sometime late this year or early next year. Lots of stuff on the horizon!

I hope you have a great remainder of the spring and a great summer. Check the web site for a fall schedule that will be posted later this summer.

See you on the trail,

Steve



Adopt-A-Trail program celebrates five years

By Robert Smith

In February, the Ozark Trail Association's Adopt-A-Trail (AAT) program turned five years old, and we marked the occasion by presenting Award of Merit plaques to several trail maintainers who have faithfully cared for their adopted sections since the program began. These dedicated volunteers were Danny McMurphy, Ed Kindley, Jeff Goetter, and a group called The Dolomighters, consisting of Jeff Lamb, Liz McCarty, John McCarty, and Curt Wiersema. In the months ahead, a few other individuals will be honored in the same way. What makes these volunteers special is not only that they maintained trail for five years, but they did so in a consistent way, as developed by the Ozark Trail Association, in partnership with the land stewards from the agencies entrusted with the management of these lands. During the past year, two dozen other successful volunteer agreements were recognized for reaching annual landmarks.

Just what is an adoption? In a nutshell, it is a formal agreement made between the OTA and an individual or group, who agrees to conduct three maintenance outings on a designated segment of the Ozark Trail each year. One of these maintenance trips must be in that pesky late spring/early summer period, when the vines and grass seem to grow six inches a day. And, not only do these volunteers do the maintenance, they report the trip to the OTA, so that we have a record of what was done, and, also, what issues exist that need additional attention. Without these reports, no record exists of the condition of the trail, and, subsequently, needs go unmet.

At the time of this writing, approximately 75 Volunteer Agreements are in force, with 300 miles of trail being maintained through OTA sponsorship. Most adoptions tend to be approximately 3 miles long, with a few in excess of 7 miles. While some adoptions are performed by separate organization or groups, most, by far, consist of individuals or families. Indeed, trail adoptions are a great way for families to give to the community, while enjoying a kindred interest together.

Volunteers come from as far away as Chicago and Kansas. A few lucky ones have only to hike or ride their horses from their backyards. We have volunteers spanning the generations, with some in their early 20s and others in their late 70s. Trail maintenance is an activity suitable for all.



The Dolomighters, left to right: Curt Wiersema, Liz McCarty, John McCarty, Jeff Lamb, plus Robert Smith, OTA



During the February 2010 board meeting, Robert Smith presents Award of Merit plaques to Ed Kindley, Jeff Goetter and Jeff Lamb. Not pictured: Danny McMurphy.

As we begin the next five years, the OTA's AAT program is successful and healthy. Since its inception, it has earned recognition as a reliable volunteer workforce. Trail user groups recognize that the OTA provides the framework for consistency of maintenance: it is a central repository for information about trail conditions; it has a voice at the table with the land stewards (in fact, the OTA chairs the Ozark Trail Council); and it remains the guiding force for trail improvements and expansion. As the AAT program continues to provide maintenance to the Ozark Trail, faces will change. However, through hard work, and by continuing to follow the maintenance guidelines of the OTA's AAT program, the trail will provide a meaningful experience to users, long after those first faces have faded into memory. 🍓

Robert Smith is the Ozark Trail Association's founding Adopt-A-Trail coordinator. His efforts in organizing and managing ongoing trail maintenance are critical in keeping our beautiful OT ready for all users. Thanks, Robert!

Treasures along the trail

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of wetland. Bogs and other types of wetlands are dependent upon surface water, whereas fens are characterized by a nearly constant supply of cold groundwater. Typically, this occurs along the lower slopes of ravines or along broad valleys in the Missouri Ozarks. Often, a stream that flows along bedrock is a good indicator that fens may be present within the valley.

Because fens are influenced primarily by groundwater, they harbor special habitat conditions not found in wetlands influenced primarily by surface water. The relatively constant and cool temperatures of the groundwater along with its high level of mineralization and often low levels of oxygen in the fen combine to create an environment in which decomposition of vegetation occurs at a very slow rate. Over time, this slow rate of decomposition results in a buildup of moisture-absorbing plant material, which forms deep soil muck and peat layers. These fragile fen soils vary in depth from 20 inches to less than 4 inches.

Many plants, and a few animals, have adapted to this rich, heavily mineralized habitat and it is not uncommon to find species of conservation-concern. Fens also are unique because they are buffered from climatic extremes by constant supplies of isothermal groundwater. As a result, fens serve as a refuge for plants and animals more typically associated with regions far north of Missouri, including survivors of boreal or northern temperate zone forests.

Threats to Fens

Unfortunately, the fens we see today are likely only remnants of much larger fen complexes that once occurred on the Missouri Ozark landscape. Like most wetlands in the Midwest, fens generally occur in the broad valleys that represent some of the best land for farming. As settlers moved into these broad valleys during the mid to late 1800s, they immediately began to implement techniques intended to drain the “wet places” in these valleys. By industriously creating ditches, underground drains, diverting streams, and filling springs and wetlands, these early settlers successfully drained many of the fens that once occurred on the landscape. It is likely that the fens that remain today represent some of the areas that were most difficult to drain, or that were not in locations considered suitable for farming. Many, if not all of the fens observed today show evidence of these drainage efforts.

As a consequence of these drainage efforts, fens today are often threatened by an influx of invading vegetation.



Repair of damage caused by ATVs to the delicate habitat of Barton Fen

Lower water levels caused by man’s alteration of the hydrology of the fen have allowed thickets of wild plum, multiflora rose, shrubby St. John’s wort, eastern red cedar, blackberry, buckbrush, and other invasive species to grow throughout the valleys and immediately adjacent to the fens. Exotic species including *Sericea lespedeza* (Chinese bush clover), tall fescue, and Kentucky bluegrass are often interspersed throughout the old fields adjacent to the fen sites. These species all act together to further dehydrate the soils within the fen and often out-compete the desirable grasses, sedges or moisture-loving perennials, and broad leaved herbs called forbs.

The lack of fire also poses an ongoing threat to fen communities. While one would not usually automatically associate burning with wetland habitats, in fact, many fens support fire-prone and dependent plant species. Ozark fens occur in a landscape that was likely historically maintained by periodic burning. Where fire has been re-introduced to fen communities, dramatic increases in fen species diversity has been observed. Fire also is used to help control the ongoing influx of invasive and woody vegetation that threatens the fens.

Barton Fen

However, all hope is not lost. Many of Missouri’s fens are now being closely monitored and managed by state, federal and private organizations in an attempt to preserve what is left of these unique communities.

Barton Fen is one example of a fen currently being managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Managers have identified the threats to this fen and in 2005, began to actively implement a series of management efforts aimed at restoring the hydrology and diversity of the fen

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Green sparkles

By Ambre Tiggs

Many backpackers will tell stories of “trail magic.” I have never experienced coming across a cooler full of treats in the middle of a trail, or a sign that states “FREE home cooked dinner” with an arrow pointing to a side trail leading to a cabin. But I have experienced some trail magic of my own. This trail magic that I speak of can be found along the Ozark Trail.

I am the Backpacking and Hiking instructor for Meramec Community College and last year, I had a student teach me how to see “green sparkles.” Imagine a bunch of college students sitting around a campfire on a Saturday night without alcohol. Away from TV, cell phones, text messaging, fast food, and alcohol they become restless.

“What’s there to do out here?” I hear one of them ask. It is amazing how plugged in people are these days; sitting around a campfire can no longer hold someone’s attention—unless it involves seeing what burns. From this group of restless college students, one student asked us if we had ever seen “green sparkles.” We all looked at him confused.

“Green sparkles,” he said, “you take your headlamp and put it on the end of your nose and scan the ground for green sparkles.” I was wondering if this was a version of snipe hunting, but I was willing to try anything to distract my students from the fact that this was the first time they had ever been camping where alcohol was not involved. We all proceeded to hold our headlamps on the tip of our noses and scan the ground for green sparkles. As we slowly wandered away from the light of the campfire and separated from each other’s beams, one by one the students started declaring they could see these green sparkles.

The sparkles we were seeing were spider eyes! When the headlamp is positioned at the tip of your nose, the light from the spiders’ eyes reflects directly back to *your* eyes: this is why you don’t notice the green glow when you are wearing your headlamp on your forehead. It turns out that spiders’ eyes reflect green, while the eyes of other creatures reflect different colors because of differences in the tissues behind the retina. That evening, we wandered around for well over an hour, coming across thousands of green sparkles. Some of my students were very freaked out by how many spiders were lurking under the leaves, but most of them were in awe.

We also found larger green sparkles which, upon closer inspection, revealed a large spider.

Besides taking students on trips, I take people of all ages and walks of life backpacking. Every trip I guide, I teach them to see green sparkles. A few people choose not to participate; they say that they are better off not knowing how many spiders there are. But curiosity gets the better of most and so the quest to find green sparkles drives them.

I am still amazed that I never learned this trick sooner. It is just a reminder to me that you are never too old to learn to see things differently. By just positioning your headlamp on the tip of your nose, you can be shown a whole new world and in my case, I was shown a world of green sparkles! 🕷️

Ambre Tiggs is the owner of Ginkgo Adventures, a Missouri outfitting company that offers safe, low-impact guided backpacking, kayaking and other trips. For more information, see <http://www.ginkgoadventures.com/>



Have you seen this spider? A non-poisonous Missouri Wolf Spider (*Geolycosa missouriensi*), seen here in a close-up view, has probably been watching *you* near the Ozark Trail.

Through-backpacking the Ozark Trail

Photo Gallery

Jim Wilson and his nephew Keith Eldridge have completed hiking the Ozark Trail in its entirety over a period of five years. They began at Onondaga Cave State Park and finished at West Plains, Missouri. Below are photos of their final leg February 12-13, 2010 when they hiked a portion of the Courtois section. Congratulations, Jim and Keith!



With temperatures in the 20s and 30s, Jim looks over a frozen pond.



Jim contemplates crossing the Courtois Creek. This is gonna be cold!



Keith makes a "wet" (liquid ice) crossing over the Courtois.



Overnight camp: is the coffee ready yet?

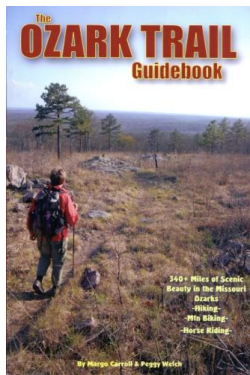
Ozark Trail Guidebook

Second edition

By Margo Carroll


Ozark Trail Association lifetime members, Peggy Welch and Margo Carroll recently released their new 2nd edition of *The Ozark Trail Guidebook*. This new edition features the new Courtois Creek section information from the Narrows past Bass' Resort, the Taum Sauk section post-reservoir breach and the completed Middle Fork section. The guide also includes eight new pages of full-color photographs that show the beauty of the Ozark Trail.

In 2001 Welch and Carroll set out on the Ozark Trail, gathering information to write the first edition of the book, and what started out as a "project" quickly became a labor of love. "We had written guidebooks before, but never one with as much detailed step-by-step information in it as this book has. We rode or walked every inch of the trail, much of the trail many times. We used GPS and detailed digital notes and photos to record what we saw and heard, and we became very close to this trail, It's like home to us." said Carroll. After nearly four years and hundreds of hours of work later, the first edition of *The Ozark Trail Guidebook* was published.



"A few months after we started on the book, we met John Roth, who also already had the trail 'fever'", explained Welch. "John was doing volunteer work on the trail and had a vision of organizing a volunteer group to care for the trail. In 2002 we attended the very first meeting of what was soon to become the Ozark Trail Association".


"When we began our OT journey years ago there were only a few outdated and incomplete maps that were available from the Department of Natural Resources. A lot of the trail was overgrown and not marked very well, making it difficult to follow. The trail has changed so much since then; now most of the trail is cared for by OTA volunteers and it shows." Carroll added, "It's an amazing trail through a lot of wilderness, full of beauty and nature. We miss being so close to the trail, but we get back to Missouri often, to visit our favorite trail."

The Ozark Trail Guidebook is available online at www.ozarktrailguide.com or at the Alpine Shop, Borders Books, Barnes & Noble, Bass' River Resort, and REI. You can visit Welch and Carroll's blog at ozarktrailguide.blogspot.com and follow them on Facebook. 

Treasures along the trail

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complex. Such efforts have included removal of encroaching woody vegetation around the fen, periodically prescribed burning the fen and surrounding woodland, controlling beavers that threatened to flood the fen, and fencing the most sensitive part of the fen to protect it from feral pigs, all-terrain vehicles, and foot-traffic. Future efforts to further restore the hydrology of the fen are also being considered. As a result of this management, Barton Fen today is showing a much greater abundance of desirable plants and animals and a reduction in encroaching vegetation.

Barton Fen, located along Neals Creek in Iron County, Missouri, can be observed by users of the Ozark Trail as they hike along the Middle Fork section. Just look for the cattails emerging from the broad valley and the glimmer of water among the vegetation. Perhaps with a keen eye and a little luck, you will discover this natural "treasure" along the trail. 

Lynda Mills is a Wildlife Biologist with Mark Twain National Forest and is involved in the preservation of wetlands and other plant and animal communities.



Ozark Trail Association volunteer Kathie Brennan points out recently completed work to a visitor: the OTA display, grand re-opening of Johnson's Shut-Ins State Park, May 22, 2010.

Volunteer with the OTA!

For general volunteer information or to become a certified Trail Leader, contact our Volunteer Coordinator, Jeff Goetter at OTA.Volunteer@gmail.com

Members Welcome: OTA Meetings

The Ozark Trail Association meets at **7:00 p.m. on the second Tuesday of each month**. Check out the web site at www.ozarktrail.com for exact times and locations. If you can make it, stop in.

The meetings are open to the public and input is welcome. Meetings are professionally run so you can count on finishing at 9:00 p.m. But the group usually goes out for a late snack and some great camaraderie afterwards. So join in the fun; we'd love to see you!



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