

## **"Trail Maps? I Don't Need No Stinking Trail Maps!"**

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The worst day of my life—yesterday—began with an uneventful drive through Lincoln's Pioneers Park at dawn, to check off a few early-rising species, as a fine start to my "Big Day." Success: I had 22 species (including both species of meadowlark) by the time I got to my second scheduled stop, Wilderness Park, but—as a novice fiction writer might forecast—there the trouble began. Just as with my last Big Day, I was so intent on identifying those dark winged shadows in the underbrush that my directional gestalt got turned around, and I ended up coming out at the Old Cheney Road exit, several miles south of my parked car on Pioneers Blvd. This time (rather than following Old Cheney to a bike path—the really long way around), I was alert enough to turn directly back on the trail and finagle my way, after a few detours, back to the proper exit. "Damn, I've lost a good half-hour on the morning," I thought, driven to get in as many habitats as possible during those first few golden hours of birds at their most active.

After a second stop at Pioneers Park, for a sojourn through their now-open Nature Center (and my first sight of a Carolina Wren in Nebraska), I drove southwest of Lincoln to the Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center, plopped down my four bucks, and confidently set out on their walking path. (Or paths: as with Wilderness Park, it's more a collection of paths that intersect in a willy-nilly fashion.) Nearly at the end of the main path that made a circumambulation of the prairie pond, I took a right turn at the woods, recognizing another fruitful bird habitat. But—yes—I got lost again. My assumption (and apparently mistaken previous memory) that this trail would meet the main one near the end was mistaken—a dead-end, really, and I circled back, cursing once more, and after a few false side-trails, I found my way back to the main path. "Damn," I thought, "now I'm a good hour or so behind, at least." It was after high noon already, and so I decided then that I'd have to cut Platte River State Park from my itinerary, to make sure that I'd get to Fontenelle Forest—the golden goal of the day—before its office closed at 5 p.m.

Then 30 miles or so east on I-80, to another favorite stop, Schramm Park State Recreational Area. After checking out the Platte River across the highway (Great Blue Heron: *check*), I drove up the park's steep one-way-loop road to its highest altitude, where their nature trail began. I briefly looked at the big sign with a map of the trail on it, but it was so dilapidated that it was pretty illegible, though I could make out that "Nature Trail #1" was only 1.5 miles. "Ha, that's nothing!" By this time, I should

have recognized the effaced sign as blatant foreshadowing, but I was still in a hobbyist lather, hell-bent on adding more birds to my list.

So much for a birder's hubris. By this point, I also should have realized that I was playing out my own sick version of a Greek tragedy. And I realize now that—I should have taken my Diet Coke with me. Of course, "Trail #1" meant a Trail #2, which, towards the end (or so I'd figured) of Trail #1, intersected the first trail at several points; however, the cute-rustic wood-burnt signs distinguishing the two at trailside must have been written, I began to suspect, by Franz Kafka. I told, or asked, myself, "Trail #1 is a loop, isn't it? When's it finally going to get me back to my car?" I couldn't believe it: I was *lost again*. Finally, Trail #1 just seemed to end . . . at the back of the Eastern Nebraska 4-H Center (I looked up the full name just now), and a stack of canoes, and a big blue blow-up waterslide(?) thingy. This is getting bad, I thought. Out of pure dejection more than anything, I kept walking through the 4-H complex, remembering that I had passed this place on the highway several miles before Schramm Park. I first pondered heading out to the highway and making that long walk, but then I retraced my steps back to the path, past 4-H workers who were wondering, perhaps, what kind of pervert wandered into a teen retreat with binoculars around his neck.

I finally found a sign that said, "Trail #1/To the Ak-Sar-Ben Aquarium." Ah, some certainty. And of course it couldn't mean all the way down to the Aquarium at the Park's entrance. . . . Well, it did. Now I just had to walk back up the hill I'd driven up originally, a 60-degree grade of well over a mile. With Virgil, I thought, "*hoc opus, hic labor est.*" The sun was out from behind the clouds in full force, I was thirsty beyond measure, and my legs seemed to barely get off the ground. I felt a pain where my left leg joined the hip, as if I had slightly pulled a ligament there. Oh, well: once I was back in the car, that hot Diet Coke never tasted so good.

This wasn't the Big Day that I had in mind. But at least there was the Fontenelle Forest Nature Center just south of Omaha, lauded by every Nebraska birding publication and website, and this would be my first time there. But by now, as I paid the office lady my fee, I actually wondered what other people might be thinking of my appearance: sweat-soaked completely, shirt untucked in an "I-don't-give-a-@#%-anymore" gesture, and sandalled feet with more dirt and mud evident than flesh. In my sudden paranoia, it seemed that she pointed out the bathroom to me as if I were a vagrant in search of a truck-stop shower.

But when she gave me the Center's—*map*, I took it like a long-lapsed Catholic receiving the Eucharist once again. The glory! And so detailed, ooh: each trail (so what if there were 30 or 40 of them?) glossed with a textual description of its habitat and—hmmm—climbing grade. And so, no, I

never got LOST on this set of trails; but I should have realized that such a riverside terrain would be full of hills and "hollows," and that my strained leg ligament(?) would only get worse. This time, I was glad that I brought a bottle of water.

By the time I got to the far bottom of the series of trails—to the Great Swamp, as it is called, in hopes of that rare warbler or three that the brochures had boasted of—my left leg, after so many hills and valleys, had become pretty much a useless appendage dragging behind the other. Worse yet, the trip back was much more uphill, from the "ground-floor" level of the Missouri River to the natural levee upon which the Center itself was built. The water was reassuring, but now I wished I had brought my cell phone. What if my leg finally just stiffened up entirely, and I had no option but to try crawling out of there? Each trail in the series I'd chosen to follow back was indicated on the map as "0.9" miles, or "1.3 miles," etc. But each trail also seemed to be taking close to an hour. I was further delayed by having to interminably duck the webs of these fat, black spiders that hung across the trail from almost every overhanging tree; or sometimes I had to brush the webs away just to continue on the path; or sometimes I didn't even see them, ending up having to knock a spider off my shoulder or head every now and then. So when one trail intersected a dirt road, I decided to take the latter instead. But the dirt road was an uphill hour of pain itself. A car or two passed, and I almost hoped that someone would stop and give me a ride: but by now I was sure that I looked like a stumbling drunkard (of uncertain long-haired ethnicity, besides). Or my binoculars were just the ruse of a sociopathic hitchhiker bent on random murder. (And even if I were taken at my face value—as a mere "lover of nature"—it's well documented, anyway, that birders have long been deemed as people bordering on lunacy by the general public.)

I only sipped at the bottle of water, vowing not to take the last swallow until I came into sight of my car. For a new fear had come to me: they closed at 5 p.m., and it was now after 7 o'clock. Was there a gate they locked?—I couldn't remember. With all the time I had on my hands, don't think me silly for working out a contingency here: I would climb the fence, sleep in my car, and wait until they opened in the morning. (Yes—in retrospect, I was "losing it" badly. I even remember, at this point, looking down at the side of the crushed-rock road and thinking, "I could even sleep right here.") Finally I came to pavement, and an actual city street, which also seemed to go on a lot longer than the map indicated. A nice bourgeois neighborhood, and I knew I was an incredible sight by now, and so I kept to the street as much as possible, certain that my dishevelment deserved no sidewalk, deserved no closer proximity to real people in this fine-lawned Omaha suburb. As I turned onto the boulevard that led to the Center, I asked myself out loud the question that had only been a muted thought at my previous stops of the day: *What have I done?* I got into my car at last, wondering if I could even drive. I could, and did, but upon

arriving home in Lincoln, my legs had tightened up so much that I groaned aloud dragging my birding stuff up the stairs of the apartment building.

My tragic flaw through all this has been my irrational passion for birding, and specifically, for the Big Day itself, as some (manly?) marathon or quest. But my irrationalism had reversed itself the last several miles of my ordeal, as I silently (though guiltily) cursed the House Wrens that laughed at me every few yards from the side of the trail with their "snake-rattle" buzzing. (Previously, their interminable scolding had been one of my favorite "oh-so-cute" birding events.) "I'll never go on a Big Day again!," I thought—or at least, "I'll never go to Fontenelle Forest again!" (I might even keep the latter resolution—well, except during May or September migration? I hear the birds are *much* better then.)

I figure that I walked at least a good 40 miles yesterday, as a conservative estimate: though I think 50 miles is probably closer to the truth. And frankly, I (usually) enjoy the sheer exhaustion and physical strains of my "Big Day" adventures, and it occurs to me now that part of the appeal is the suffering itself—a sort of expiation or sacrifice out of guilt for something I'm not even conscious of. In sum, it's a "variety of religious experience," whatever the motive. Furthermore, I'm not a stupid man in general (though my wife might argue with that): I don't think I would have consciously refused (as it were) to print out all the trail maps beforehand, if some part of me hadn't *wanted* to get lost—and to suffer accordingly. This time I did take it to an extreme that I don't wish to repeat. Such self-flagellation—metaphorically speaking—is a "religious" task for younger men.

The ironies of the day were multiplied when I finally reached home and found the poem I had jotted down that very morning and forgotten about—a paean to birding, written, it seemed to me now, by another person:

In Praise of Birdwatching: 5:00 a.m., 8/14/08

Birdwatching = "a mild paralysis of the central nervous system which can be cured only by rising at dawn and sitting in a bog." —Joe Hickey

you're so much more aware  
of life and being alive

that each of your senses breaks  
out of its older self  
like a new-  
born baby from its  
(shell)

I thought I just heard  
an early oriole  
testing the dawn, or was it  
only some long-forgotten  
voice inside me  
startled into song?

I actually write this at 3:00 a.m.—poetic license—too excited about the morning to sleep. I don't have the heart right now to add a sardonic strophe or two, as rebuttal to my pathetically Romantic gesture here. I only know that I was going to go to the University today to do some handout stuff, but I'm too sore to walk the two blocks from the parking meter to Andrews Hall. And my right knee actually hurts more than my left leg/hip, probably from the strain on my right leg compensating for its truant brother. I think I'm going to take some Advil now, maybe take it easy for a few days before classes begin.

(Postscript [Aug. 16th]: But no—two days later, spurred on by a post in an Internet birding group, I drove a half-hour out of town to some wetlands, and to four new species. Life's quest for [surrogate-object] meaning goes on.)