

Self-Guided Walking Tour

Elmer & Edna Culver Wetlands Conservancy

Welcome to the Town of Windsor's Elmer & Edna Culver Wetlands Conservancy, off Egge Road between Portage Road and Cty Tk C. This guide is keyed to numbered posts along the trail (map on back page), making a 3/8-mile loop with an optional spur. Suggestions for "hardy walkers" refer to rougher and less-maintained trails.

Start at #1, beyond the kiosk—the post with the arrow, "to the springs."

1. Conservancy. Elmer Culver bought this property in the 1930s. He never lived here but maintained and developed it and rented out the house. The Herrick family lived here more than 40 years. The Town of Windsor bought the property from the Culvers in 1999 to complement its Token Creek Preserve, off Portage Road. Please respect the privacy of the house, which is occupied.

Follow the arrow down the hill to your right and make an immediate right turn at the foot of the hill to find #2.

2. Springs. Groundwater bubbles to the surface in springs like this one. Its constant temperature keeps this pond—and Token Creek—cool in summer and unfrozen in winter, attracting birds and other wildlife. Because of its abundant springs, Token Creek feeds more water into Lake Mendota (via the Yahara River, through Cherokee Marsh) than any other tributary.

The cement platform on the island in this pond used to hold a wheel to pump water, perhaps for irrigation. Dead trees like the one farther along the path give woodpeckers shelter and insects to eat.

Turn and walk the grassy trail around to the far side of the pond. Hardy walkers may prefer to continue counterclockwise around the pond.

3. Millpond basin. In 1861 Token Creek was dammed to power a gristmill. Sediment accumulating in the pond behind the dam shaped this broad, flat expanse. The mill closed in 1945 and the dam broke in 1994. Instead of a pond, the creek now meanders through a rich wetland. The Wisconsin DNR and the US Army Corps of Engineers plan to restore it to a high-quality habitat for brook trout, which thrive in cool spring-fed water.

Listen for the throaty call of sandhill cranes. Watch for cranes, great blue herons, green herons, kingfishers, wood ducks, teals, mud hens, and Canada geese. Coyotes and foxes have been seen across the wetland in winter. Mayflies and dragonflies sparkle on or near the surface of the water.

Turn left and follow the berm (earth wall) along the edge of the millpond basin.

4. Small pond. Formerly a pig barn and then a cabin stood ahead on your left, where there is now a small pond. Listen to the roar of the water pouring through culverts in the berm, fed entirely by springs like the one you visited at #1. This clean, clear, constant spring water gives Token Creek its outstanding quality compared to streams fed primarily from surface stormwater.

Continue forward along the berm.

5. Large trout pond. Mr. Culver built these ponds to raise trout. Working closely with the Dane County Conservation League, of which he was a member, he helped clubs raise trout for release and hosted fishing events on the property. He brought groups from his church, Windsor Congregational (UCC), to fish.

Continue along the berm between the large pond and the wetland basin. Beware of potholes or uneven footing.

6. Sandy knoll view. The large grove of trees a few hundred yards in front of you is on a sandy knoll. Formerly an island in the millpond, the knoll is now accessible to hardy walkers (see #15). The main branch of Token Creek, arriving from the east across the Wagner and Merry farms and Cty Tk C, flows along its far (south) edge. The knoll shows traces of an old gravel pit.

Watercress growing in the pool almost at your feet reflects the high quality of the spring water pouring through the culvert.

Watch your step as you proceed.

7. Former bridge. A bridge once spanned this pond, from about here to the former cottage on the far side of the pond (see #19). Look for turtles sunning themselves on fallen branches in the pond, or a ruby-throated hummingbird feeding on the orange blossoms of the jewelweed (also called touch-me-not) along the shore.

Continue along the berm.

8. Overflow pond. Otter, muskrat and mink have been seen in the pond on your left. It holds overflow from the larger trout pond you just passed (#5-7) and may freeze in the winter, unlike the spring-fed ponds. To your right is another view of the wetland basin.

Go on to the fork at the end of the pond.

9. Trail options. *For the loop trail, turn left; skip 10-15 and resume with #16. For a longer walk, proceed to your right.*

10. Tierney tributary. A tributary starts north of Windsor Road, crosses the Tierney farm on Egge Road, then passes through this culvert to join Token Creek. The floods of 1993 brought the water level 6 inches above the trail, making it impassible. Notice the bur oak on the left, a dominant native tree.

Ahead, you will see a stand of cattails on your right. Leaves reach nearly 9 feet by late spring. Summer brings dense brown seeds of the fuzzy "tail," which turns white in winter.

Continue past the cattails.

11. Sedge meadow. The undisturbed sedge meadow on your right, framed by the cattails and a willow in the background, shows the natural diversity of marsh plants. Joe-Pye-weed dots the meadow with pink in late summer; purple asters and goldenrod bloom in early fall. Hog peanuts, a legume with small lavender flowers, twine around other plants and branches. Look for monarch caterpillars (lime green banded with black, yellow and white) on the marsh milkweeds, which have hot pink flowers in summer and seed-and-floss-filled pods in the fall.

Proceed to the fork in the trail.

12. Agriculture. Notice the privately owned farm field up the hill, ahead to your left. In the late 1990s, farmland covered about 3/4 of the 27-sq-mi Token Creek watershed. Area farmers protect water quality by using such techniques as minimum tillage or no-till, to reduce erosion, and soil testing to avoid overuse of fertilizer.

All around you is reed canary grass. It was introduced to control erosion but proved very aggressive, crowding out native plants. Notice the lack of diversity here, compared to the undisturbed sedge meadow at #11.

Follow the right fork toward the woods.

13. Walnuts. Mr. Culver planted walnut trees, which multiplied. Behind the trees to your right is a small pond. Look and listen for goldfinches, purple finches, nuthatches, wrens and chickadees among the branches.

Continue along the main trail.

14. Outdoor classroom. In 1997 University of Wisconsin Professor Jean Bahr brought her Water Resources Management students to Token Creek as an outdoor laboratory. The pipes sticking out of the ground on your right are the tops of monitoring wells they installed to evaluate groundwater flow and source. A forum the same year began the process leading to formation of the not-for-profit Token Creek Watershed Association.

Proceed to the pine plantation.

15. Pine plantation. Mr. Culver planted these red pines about the early 1950s. Notice how they stand in rows, unlike natural forests. Watch and listen for birds.

Beyond the pine plantation the main trail passes woodland with red oak, elm and walnut trees. Hardy walkers will reach a rise covered with white pine and cedar trees.

For very hardy walkers, an un-maintained path to the right leads out to the sandy knoll (see #6). The path passes shallow ponds built in the early 1960s for wild rice, to attract ducks in the autumn hunting season.

This is the last number on the spur. Walk as far as you choose and then turn around. Return past this point to the fork at #9; then turn right to rejoin the loop trail.

16. Stone wall. Barely visible through the woods ahead of you, to the right of the trail, is a stone wall. It is all that remains of an old barn, which collapsed and was burned for safety reasons in the 1980s.

For an explanation of the pipes in the ground on your right, see #14.

Continue looping around the pond.

17. Spruce trees. The two huge evergreens ahead on the left are spruce. Spruce trees can stay small for many years, then grow very fast if they start to get more sunlight.

The culvert between the large trout pond and the overflow pond (#8) passes under the grassy trail to your left.

The hill on your right formerly held a barn that was used as a machine shed. Notice the scorched trees; the abandoned barn was burned for safety in 2001 after it collapsed under the weight of snow.

Walk through the clearing; then look for a big rock on your left.

18. Rock. This unusual rock is atypical of the area. A glacier probably carried it to this region, where people found it in a field and moved it to this spot. Notice the layers; this is metamorphic rock, formed under heat and pressure deep below the surface.

While still deep underground, the rock cracked and a molten mass of liquid-hot rock pushed up from beneath to fill the opening. It cooled slowly, forming the diagonal stripe of granite (an igneous rock) you see here, with visible crystals of quartz (the shiny dots) and pink feldspar (larger, smooth and pinkish).

Continue to a circular grass clearing around a silver maple tree.

19. Cottage. A pair of schoolteachers once lived in a cottage on the lower side of this grass circle. Later the cottage was used for family gatherings. Beneath the undergrowth are the remains of old stone steps, still visible in winter, which led from the cottage down to the water. Notice the outdoor stove, on your left as you face the pond.

Scorched trees show the effects of fire when the abandoned cottage was burned as a safety measure in 2001.

Continue up the hill to #20, where you will turn left.

20. Return to kiosk and parking lot.

Please take the left fork, down the hill away from the private house. At the foot of the hill, bear right around the small pond and (still bearing right) back up the hill to the kiosk and parking lot where you began.

Thank you for returning your trail guide.

Trail guide by Sarah Cook, 2003, in cooperation with the Token Creek Watershed Association and the Town of Windsor Conservancy Committee. Thanks to Laurie Lambert (Dane County Land Conservation), Nancy Schlimgen (St. Benedict Center naturalist), Steve Falter (Capitol Water Trails), Jennie Nuese, Tom Culver, Mike Kolb, Ron Hennings, Cheryl Theis and Judith Hutchinson for information; and to names for making and installing trail markers.