

Sycamore Land Trust works with high school, college students to create special trail near Lake Lemon: www.heraldtimesonline.com

By Erica Rogers
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On a sunny Tuesday morning, the air is as crisp as the leaves covering the ground. A group of 11 students mingle on the side of a road just north of Lake Lemon, about to embark on a few hours of hard labor.

But this hard labor is anything but ordinary. The students of Aurora Alternative School in Bloomington are building a trail for those who can't enjoy nature quite like everyone else.

Officials with Sycamore Land Trust and students from Indiana University and Aurora High School in Bloomington are working on a one-day experience to help pave a 2,500-foot-long trail for people with visual disabilities so they can enjoy nature out by Lake Lemon.

Carroll Ritter, environmental education coordinator for Sycamore Land Trust, says there are high hopes for the trail once it is completed, although he is unsure of when that will be. In a wooded area of about 17 acres, the group is creating the multiple-use trail.

Donated in 1997 by Lake Lemon Development Corp., the land is labeled as a mesic hardwood forest, which is defined as a moist, wooded area that supports many species of plants, with a stream that is home to wildlife including white-tailed deer and wild turkey, Ritter said. In addition, the land grows a variety of plants and flowers throughout the year including wild orchids.

Ritter explained the motivation for the path. He hopes to have special stations for blind and visually impaired students. This can give these students a chance to experience nature through sound and touch.

"So it's going to be a really cool place to be once we get it all done," Ritter says. "All you're really hearing out here is sounds of nature."

Students in Barbara Curry's State Parks and Other Land Uses' class at Aurora range from grades 9 to 12. Although this is Curry's first year teaching the class, she takes her students on several field trips and has speakers come in to talk with the class, such as city planners and other environmental officials.

That is how Ritter first met Curry, she says. She had him come in to speak to some of her environmental classes, and he called her when he wanted help with this project.

"This has been my most fun trip so far," Curry said.

But they are not the only pupils helping. Students from an IU Health Physical Education and Recreation class helped plan and draw out the trail with Ritter for a class project.

Four students signed up to work with Ritter at the beginning of the year and meet with him about six times throughout the semester. They are each assigned to certain projects and then help plan out the activities the high school students do with Ritter.

The students at Aurora and IU are building a trail that is unlike anything else in Indiana that he knows of, Ritter said.

There are sites similar to this one in West Virginia, Kentucky and Colorado, he said.

"It's good to know those who don't have the resources and abilities we have can still enjoy this," 15 year-old Layla Purtlebaugh said as she brushed away leaves from the trail.

For 15-year-old Cassey Lene, it's about helping others so they don't have to do it themselves. "Plus, I don't get outside that often, so that's nice," he added.

Ritter and Sycamore Land Trust host other activities for students around the area by Lake Lemon.

Elementary students from Pinnacle School come out and do nature activities, pick up litter and help Ritter eradicate some of the invasive species in the forest.

Pinnacle School has been a partner with Sycamore Land Trust for three years, Ritter said.

In addition, he works with 19 other schools in five counties with students ranging from elementary- to college-age.

More information

Although Sycamore Land Trust has a full slate of educational programs the rest of the year, it also works with landowners to preserve land. Anyone interested can contact the group by calling 812-336-5382.

Aurora High School students, from left, Natalie Wineinger, Cassey Lene, Kristen Poore, Lindsey Huffman and Samantha Wray build a trail on acreage owned by Sycamore Land Trust near Lake Lemon. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times



Cassey Lene helps build a trail near Lake Lemon. TOP: A Cranefly orchid is relocated from a trail to a different place in the woods owned by Sycamore Land Trust that's north of Lake Lemon.
Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times



A Crane-fly orchid is relocated from a trail to a different place in the woods owned by Sycamore Land Trust that's north of Lake Lemon.
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The mesic hardwood forest north of Lake Lemon has a creek running through it. The moist forest has many types of hardwood trees and will soon have a trail that will be accessible by people with visual disabilities.
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