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FEATURED

Planning some outdoor fun? Make sure your nature spot is open

By Carol Kugler The Herald-Times Jun 19, 2019 Updated Jun 19, 2019

Jim Mitchell helps remove trees from the trails at Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve after a tornado blew through the area. (Courtesy photo)

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Even when the rains eventually end and the sun comes out, some parks, preserves and natural areas will remain closed due to storm damage and high waters.

Those areas include Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve, which Sycamore Land Trust recently reopened after upgrading more than 1 mile of boardwalk into the wetland areas of the preserve.

“We had a tornado go through here,” said John Lawrence, executive director of the land trust. “I went up there Sunday hoping for the best and fearing the worst.”

The tornado went through the middle of the nature preserve and clipped the northern most section of the new boardwalk, leaving behind downed trees that will have to be cleared before the extent of the boardwalk damage is known and reconstruction can begin.

Even with the damage, Lawrence said the nature preserve will remain open. The boardwalk, which loops through the property, can be accessed from either side. It’s just that people will have to turn around when they get to the area with downed trees and damage.

Another problem at the nature preserve is flooding along the trail. Lawrence said parts of the gravel path leading to the boardwalk were almost under water on Tuesday, and with more rain forecast this week, it’s probable that the cleanup will slow down and visitors may not be able to access the trails for a time.

Lawrence noted that Saturday’s tornado wasn’t the first to hit the preserve. Two other tornadoes have gone through the area in the past. One of the observation decks is on a small rise where a barn was located until 2002, when a tornado blew through and knocked it down.

“There was sheet metal blown all over the place,” Lawrence recalled. “That tornado followed a path that was within a few hundred yards of this tornado, at least going through our property.”

Lawrence said there also may be storm damage at the land trust’s Restle property just to the north of the nature preserve. There are no trails on that property and it is close to an area where homes were damaged by the tornado. Lawrence said land trust representatives will stay out of the way until residents have had time to recover before going in to assess any damage. But a small cemetery on the property will be checked for possible headstone problems.

Lawrence said several massive oaks trees were felled by the storm. “It’s part of nature, but it’s sad to see those big trees get knocked over,” he said, adding that the tree line that was home to the preserve’s bald eagle nest was damaged. He suspects the eagles’ nest was destroyed. “This

would be the third time it got blown down," he said. The first two times, the nest was in another tree on the property.

On a positive note, staff and volunteers did see an adult eagle flying over the property this week, so there is hope the eagles will build another nest nearby.

Hoosier National Forest closures

All trails in the northern portion of the Hoosier National Forest have been closed to the public while staff accesses damage from winds and high water. A Tuesday news release announced the closure that includes all trails in Monroe, Jackson, Brown and Lawrence counties as well as trails in the Charles C. Deam Wilderness and Shirley Creek Trail in Orange County.

The beach at Hardin Ridge Recreation Area on the south side of Lake Monroe also is closed.

U.S. Forest Service personnel were out Wednesday trying to access and assess portions of the forest, according to Marion Mason, public affairs specialist. Due to the extensive land base, the process will take some time to complete.

"The safety of our visitors is primary," Mason said, adding that it would take time for trails to dry out enough to be used by hikers, mountain bikers, horseback riders and campers.

Even so, Mason said, the southern portion of the Hoosier National Forest — from Pioneer Mothers Memorial Forest south — remains open to anyone interested in outdoor recreation.

"The trails are going to be wet and muddy, still, but they didn't experience the damage the northern area did," she said.

State properties with closures

Wet and muddy describes a lot of the state park properties in the area. Brown County State Park will remain closed through at least Sunday due to lack of useable water. The park's water source is Ogle Lake, which currently has too much sediment in it for it to be treated in the park's in-house facility.

"It looks like a big, brown milkshake," Ginger Murphy, deputy director of Indiana state parks, said of Ogle Lake.

She said the agency will send out daily updates on Brown County State Park's status.

Murphy said other area state parks remain open, even if there are a few areas where there may be flooding right after a downpour. In McCormick's Creek State Park, Trails 7 and 2 have some water on them but there are no closures in the park. In Spring Mill State Park Wednesday, the boat tours of Twin Caves had to be canceled because of high water.

Murphy's advice to anyone who visits a park is to wear good, sturdy shoes and "expect to come out muddy if you're hiking." She also requested that visitors report downed trees to either the gatehouse personnel or the park office.

With Lake Monroe now more than 13 feet above the normal pool level, there are boat ramps and other areas that have had to close down, again, after just opening a week or so ago. The high water has meant some fishing tournaments scheduled for this weekend and beyond have been canceled, according to Phil Wilson, reservoir specialist.

"This is a time when we remind everybody why this reservoir was built — to protect people down river," Wilson said, explaining that very little water is being let out of the reservoir to prevent more flooding downstream. He expects the lake level will continue to rise as more rain is forecast this week.

Besides having both Fairfax and Paynetown beaches closed, the Paynetown activity center has closed again and some sites in the campground are also closed. The boat ramps at Allen's Creek and Pine Grove state recreation areas are closed because the access roads have flooded, Wilson said.

The Cutright State Recreation Area is "just about unusable," Wilson said. "For the most part, people are taking it in stride."

He cautioned anyone who is boating to take it slow and be cautious. Large tree limbs and other debris have washed into the lake and may not be visible to boaters traveling quickly through the water. "This floating debris can cause a lot of damage," he said. "We're asking people to be more careful and cautious."

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More information

To find out what's closed at Indiana Department of Natural Resources state parks and properties, go to https://bit.ly/2Ks4rTW (case sensitive).

For more information about closures on the Hoosier National Forest, go to https://bit.ly/2N8f7cm or call 812-275-5987.

For more about Sycamore Land Trust and its nature preserves, go to https://sycamorelandtrust.org.

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