

1934

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Recommended Citation

Moore, John (1934) "Some Methods of Labeling Nature Trails," *Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science*, 41(1), 103-104.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/pias/vol41/iss1/15>

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SOME METHODS OF LABELING NATURE TRAILS

JOHN MOORE

For several years the students of botany of Iowa Wesleyan College have maintained a nature trail in the Oakland Mills State Park. The writer is one of the three students appointed to take care of this work for the current year.

When the trails were first inaugurated it was necessary to select the course, lay out the path and erect signs to keep the visitors going in the right direction, — as well as to label items of interest. Now through the activity of the C.C.C. workers, permanently constructed paths run through the highly interesting parts of the park and one needs only to locate and label the more attractive items along some of these paths.

The aim has been to encourage a healthy interest in living things, with the largest possible number of visitors. "What is it?" is a universal question with young and old. If the question can be answered and an additional fact or two told briefly and interestingly, the visitor will continue his quest for knowledge.

Most of the labeling is confined to trees, and the other flowering plants, though some effort is made to point out ferns, lichens, mosses, insects, and fossils. Trees along the trails bear 3x5 markers cut from sheet zinc and lettered with platinic chloride. That they are as legible today as they were when first made, several years ago, testifies to the value of such markers. These give only the common and scientific names of the trees.

Heavy manilla shipping tags, lettered with India ink and varnished on both sides to make weather proof, have been mounted on heavy wire supports standing about two feet above ground. These are readily located by visitors and prove satisfactory if carefully placed. Strip tags of the "Aquaproof" type have been used on shrubs and small trees but are more difficult to locate.

What we count our most successful labels, are made on plain white 4"x6" index cards and displayed in special metal holders. These holders and their stake support are made of heavy galvanized iron. The holder stands at the proper height and is bent to the best angle for easy reading. At the left end of the card a careful sketch of the plant is made in India ink and tinted natural colors with show card ink. On the remainder of the card is typed the com-

mon and scientific name and two or three sentences giving the most interesting facts that can be thought of for the plant. The object of the picture is to make the visitor sure which plant is being named and described. This is particularly desirable since several species are often found growing together. In some cases colored illustrations of the plants have been cut from plant manuals such as "Wild Flowers of America" sold in the ten cent stores, and glued to the cards. We have found these less permanent than our own drawings. Colored strings are sometimes run from the label to the plant described, to make surer just which one is meant. The cards are weather proofed with two or three coats of clear varnish, linoleum finish, or Du Pont's No. 6500 Water Repellent Solution. All these have proven fairly satisfactory but the linoleum finish seems some what the most successful.

The cards are filed in alphabetical order in a convenient carrying file case. Weekly or bi-weekly visits are made to the park and the label holders moved about and new cards inserted to bring the trail up to date with changing conditions of growth and flowering of the plants. Cards removed from the holders, if in good condition, are returned to the file case for use again at some later time.

Cards of this same type are made up for certain insects that habitually frequent some definite species of plant or habitat. These cards are displayed in the proper place and suggest that the visitors look for the insect pictured and described. Birds and other animals may be handled in this same way. In like manner attention is called to insect galls, work of leaf miners, insect injury to plants, and fungus diseases.

Some legitimate novelty such as a land snail anchored to its food plant by a tape fastened with water proof cement to its shell, when properly labeled is sure to attract attention, and does no violence to the best conservation ideas.

We have found the visitors to the parks very much interested in living things but, like children, best satisfied with small bits of information. A nature trail will not take care of itself but if handled with industry and enthusiasm will offer a fine type of outdoor recreation for many of the visitors passing that way, and bear fruit in a growing interest in nature study.

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