

the time you get close, you will most likely hear their splash and will see only their heads sticking out of the water.

## STOP 7

Some animals, especially those without many predators, take full advantage of Lake Ballard Trail to travel through the preserve.

The sly red fox trots along the lake trail day or night in search of a bite to eat. Although well known for their hunting skills, red foxes also dine on summer fruits, including wild grapes, persimmons, and blackberries. You will have a good idea of what they ate last by examining a fresh pile of feathers or fur or droppings full of grape skins or persimmon seeds.

## STOP 8

Stop. Look. Listen. Learning to identify birds can be frustrating, especially to untrained eyes and ears. Some species are easier to identify than others, however, when you know what to look and listen for.

Scan the reeds for the bright shoulders of the male red-winged blackbird and listen for his call, “konk-a-lee,” announcing your presence. Common at HCWP throughout the year, these birds take advantage of the edge habitat around the lake. Each male claims a territory on the lake’s edge and attracts two to three females as partners. They attach their cup-shaped nests made out of marsh grasses directly to the reeds. During the summer, they eat insects, abundant near the water. In winter, they feed on the seeds of grasses.

## STOP 9

Do you ever feel like you are being watched? You probably are. As a possible predator, you represent a perceived threat to wildlife who, camouflaged to blend into their environment, keep a wary eye on



all who venture by.

Eastern cottontails hide from their many predators in the blackberry brambles like the one in front of you. Occasionally hopping out of the brush to eat, these watchful vegetarians freeze when they sense danger. When chased, they will leap great distances, often hopping diagonally to throw pursuers off their trails.

## STOP 10

Stop for a moment to consider what lives in the sky, the water, and the trees. Now look down and think about what lives in the earth beneath your feet.

See the hole in the ground? If you look around carefully, you may notice several other holes. These holes are the front, back, and side entrances to a groundhog burrow. This nervous herbivore spends much of its time feeding on the vegetation growing around the lake. If alarmed, a groundhog will whistle shrilly and scoot into its burrow quickly. Abandoned groundhog burrows provide space for other animals that live, eat, sleep, or raise young underground. Other burrowing animals include foxes, shrews, and snakes.



## COME BACK AGAIN

We hope you enjoyed your visit to Hoffer Creek Wildlife Preserve and will return throughout the year to experience the wonders and the mysteries of this unique ecosystem.

On your way out, please stop by the welcome desk to learn how you can support programs of conservation, education, research, and recreation at Hoffer Creek. All who share our mission of stewardship are welcomed as members of Hoffer Creek Wildlife Foundation.

# LAKE BALLARD TRAIL GUIDE

DISTANCE: 1 MILE

APPROXIMATE WALKING TIME: 20 - 40 MINUTES



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## THE TRAIL TO EVERYWHERE

**Lake Ballard Trail** is the main highway at Hoffler Creek Wildlife Preserve both for you and for the wildlife living here. This one-mile loop road connects you with diverse communities of plants and animals. You are entering their habitat, their neighborhood, which is filled with everything they need to live and raise their young.

To meet some of these fascinating creatures, you will need to walk slowly and quietly. Be alert. You just might catch a glimpse of a fox or deer or groundhog. What you don't see, you may hear or smell. Use all of your senses to discover signs of other animals sharing the trail. And, please, **always yield to wildlife.**

### STOP 1

Lake Ballard is a man-made habitat that serves wildlife all year round. As the seasons change, so do many of the animals using the lake as a source of food and water and as protection from strong winds.

During the spring and summer, scan the lake's surface for turtles sticking just their heads out of the water. Look over the lake for ospreys and other fishing birds. As you walk, notice all the dragonflies and damselflies doing their part to control mosquitoes. And watch where you step—turtles often lay their eggs in the trail.

Waterfowl flock to the lake in the fall and winter. From widgeons to buffleheads, ducks are abundant. Conveniently located on the Atlantic Flyway, Lake Ballard is a perfect spot for these divers and dabblers to spend the winter.

### STOP 2

When highway workers finished their mining operations here, they left behind a 35-acre opening in the forest's canopy. Sunlight poured in and created a thriving "edge" community populated by sun-loving plants and all the animals attracted to their tender leaves, sweet fruit, and colorful flowers.

Positioned between the edge of the forest and the edge of the lake, this former road for dump trucks is now a busy trail

for animals and the people who come to watch and study them. Deer, foxes, raccoons, and rabbits enjoy easy access to a wide variety of plants growing in the open areas. At home on the trail, they know they can dart to cover in the forest whenever they feel threatened.

### STOP 3

You can discover a lot about the animals at Hoffler Creek if you pay attention to the clues they leave behind.

White-tailed deer are year-round residents of the preserve and are the largest animals here. If you are lucky, you may see their white tails wagging as they quietly browse in the forest or glimpse them at speeds up to 28 miles per hour racing away from you. The careful observer can count on finding heart-shaped deer tracks in muddy sections of the trail.

Another set of tracks you may see, the ones that look like small hands, belong to the masked bandit of the night—the raccoon. At the preserve, raccoons are able to live in their preferred habitat—wooded areas along waterways. Because they are more active at night, you will rarely see raccoons while at HCWP.



### STOP 4

Most animals living at Hoffler Creek are shy; some are downright reclusive. Stay alert and use all of your senses when looking for wildlife.

The secretive river otter, a member of the weasel family, is a regular visitor to the preserve. You may see areas of matted grass on the sunny bank where they have rolled to dry themselves.

What you can't see, you can often smell. Otters leave behind a strong, fishy odor. Their diet consists of fish, crabs, and oysters from the creek. Look around for their

black droppings filled with shells.

### STOP 5

Hoffler Creek offers shallow water and muddy banks to aquatic life forms that depend on the tidal creek for spawning, feeding, and hiding from predators.

Oysters were once abundant in the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, but their population is threatened by over harvesting, pollution, and disease. The oyster restoration project at HCWP is part of a Bay-wide effort to save this valuable natural resource. Each year, student volunteers tend to seed oysters growing in protected cages floating in the creek. After one year, the oysters are ready for transplanting onto man-made reefs in Hoffler Creek and nearby rivers, where they will work to filter pollutants from local waters.

In the late spring, summer, and early fall, you may notice floats bobbing in the channel of the creek. These floats mark the location of commercial crab pots, cages suspended in the water column and baited to attract the Bay's most famous residents—blue crabs. Famous as a local delicacy, blue crabs get their name from Latin, *Callinectes aspidus*, meaning tasty, beautiful swimmer.

### STOP 6

The lake and its edge provide turtles with everything they need to survive and multiply—food, water, shelter, and sunning logs.

Peek through the brambles for a glimpse of turtles sunbathing on the fallen

trees at the lake's edge. By stretching all their limbs, they expose their leathery skin to the sun, killing bacteria that grow in dark, damp places—like under a



shell! Notice that they position themselves so they can slip quickly into the water at the first hint of danger. By