

Prime Hook Trails and the Seasons – by Bill Fintel

Prime Hook trails are accessible essentially year round, and of course they offer vastly different experiences depending on the season. Since summer is beginning, let's first discuss Prime Hook Trails in summer.

Summer is the prime time for unwanted critters, or more specifically: ticks, chiggers, mosquitoes, and deer flies. Ticks and chiggers are most frequently a problem when walking through tall grass, so in a nutshell, don't walk through tall grass. The best trail to avoid all grass contact is the Boardwalk Trail, because the trail surface is fine gravel. Treating insect bites is not within the scope of this article, but you should be aware that some ticks can carry Lyme disease, which is very serious. Ticks, chiggers and mosquitoes will be present until at least the first frost. Deer flies are most common in June and July. Insect repellents are recommended, even if they are not 100% effective.

If you are now wondering why venture out onto Prime Hook Trails in summer, remember summer is also a time for birds to be raising young, and many wildflowers to be blooming. Along the Boardwalk Trail in July you will find an attractive stand of Marsh Mallow, a member of the hibiscus family. The flowers are generally white to pink and stand about 3 feet off the ground. This same trail has Indigo Buntings, Yellow-billed Cuckoos and Prothonotary Warblers breeding along it. For the Prothonotarys, a good location is the first 200 yds of the Blue Goose trail where it branches off from the west end of the boardwalk. This portion of trail is also free of grass, but watch your footing with the exposed roots.

Moving on to fall, we have fall colors to look forward to. The best time period is mid-October to mid-November. All Prime Hook trails will exhibit a good show of fall colors, but often trees at the marsh edges will be the most colorful. Black Tupelo (aka Black Gum) is the most dramatic of all, and it has a dark purple fruit loved by birds. One good location for it is along the Dike Trail. Sumacs are a medium height shrub found throughout the refuge, and their leaves turn a very bright red-orange in the fall. If you take the Pine Grove trail in fall, be sure to walk out on the fishing pier at Fleetwood Pond and view the panorama of colors surrounding the pond. In this location, the bright reds and oranges are interspersed with evergreens for accent.

Fall is also a good time to observe migrant birds headed south for the winter. It may surprise you to learn that early migrants begin showing up in late August, and southward migration continues on into November when many winter residents arrive. To see the maximum diversity of migrant birds, be sure to check all the different types of habitat available along Prime Hook trails. In one recent fall, there was an extensive stand of wild rice along the Dike trail, and it held about a half dozen Sora Rails for a couple of weeks. These rails, while secretive, were still relatively easy to observe if one waited and was quiet.

Winter is my favorite season to take a long walk on one of the Prime Hook trails, especially after a light snowfall. There are no unwanted critters to worry about in winter;

if properly dressed you will not get cold or overheated; birds are easy to find with no leaves on the trees; fuzzy critters like Cottontail Rabbits and Red Foxes are often seen. There are also more Bald Eagles on the Refuge in winter, so keep checking the skies for one to come gliding over. And perhaps you remember from a previous trail article, the Pine Grove trail is the premier trail after a light to moderate snowfall.

Spring has the appeal of life re-emerging following the rigors of winter. The first leaves are such a soft color of green, and resident birds begin singing, some such as the Cardinal, begin on a warm day in late January. From a birds' perspective, spring is definitely underway by March 1st as essentially all resident birds, those that do not migrate, will be in full song. By mid-March, early migrants are returning, and by late May, the last migrants have passed through. All Prime Hook trails are good for migrant birds, but the Boardwalk trail is probably the best because of its location right on the edge of the marsh.

If you walk the trails of Prime Hook in all four seasons, you will see how much they change, and I believe you will appreciate the seasons even more. Lots of people retire to Florida, and many of them move back north because they miss the seasons so much.