



# Give it a rest: TNI temporarily closing trails for maintenance

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer  
December 28 2016 9:09 AM



**GODFREY - The Nature Institute (TNI)** will be closing its trails from Jan. 2 through the end of March to give nature a reprieve from humans for a bit.

**TNI Education Director Patti Brown** said the nature preserve off **Levis Lane** sees as many as 10,000 visitors every year, including large school groups. During the three month respite, Brown said plants, and especially animals, will have a chance to go through their natural winter stages without human interference. The break will also give staff and volunteers at TNI a chance to maintain the trails and do controlled burning of parts of the forest.

"We close down so the land gets a chance to rest," Brown said. "Plants need to settle, but it's mostly for the wildlife out there scavenging for food. It will provide a sanctuary for them from people."

During that break, Brown said people will still be invited to the preserve for events such as photography, astronomy nights, and "owl prowls." She said those owl prowls will become more exciting this year, because great horned owls have been spotted within the preserve. Those owls are just one example of an increasing native diversity emerging at TNI in a big way.

"We caught our first bobcat and a gray fox on our trail camera," Brown said. "We left a compost pile out to teach kids about composting, and something was eating all of it. We thought it was a raccoon, but we caught the culprit on camera and it was a gray fox."

Gray foxes are much more rare than their red cousins and will even climb trees. Brown said many species of birds are also coming to call TNI home following the preserve's annual maintenance. Controlled burns destroy many invasive species, such as bush honeysuckle, and encourage the growth of native species, such as oak and hickory, which provide as much as 80 percent of food for wildlife calling the forest home.

The removal of honeysuckle through burning and limited use of herbicide has also had an effect on the bird population. Brown said a whip-poor-will has been heard calling in the forest. Whip-poor-wills are birds known by their distinctive call, which have not been heard in TNI for many years. Brown said they are becoming less common in this area due to their aversion to honeysuckle.





Much of the work being done in the forest during this break will be to encourage the growth of native species in the forest, especially food-bearing varieties. Brown said the greenhouse managed by TNI will grow saplings of oak, hickory, paw paw and hazelnut trees.

"Paw paw are native to this area," she said. "They are actually a sub-tropical variety. Their growth here is partially due to our environment warming. With more climate warming, we have more paw paw trees. They are a good source of food for animals."

Brown said the hazelnut trees will be a welcome addition to the forest. She said the trees have not been in the forest in large numbers for a very long time, and the planting of saplings will be an ambitious venture.

"We're going to try to do hazelnuts in the greenhouse this year," she said. "They haven't been around for a very long time. We have big plans."

The mid-level canopy of TNI is going to be boosted in a big way as well. Trees such as dogwoods, red buds and paw paws will fill that void. Young sugar maple saplings will be removed to encourage this growth as well as the growth of the canopy trees, such as oak. Brown said sugar maples grow voraciously in shade compared to oaks and hickory, which require sunlight. Because of this, sugar maples often "shade out" its neighbors. Despite maple syrup being a delicacy for humans, sugar maples provide a very limited food source for wild animals.

Uninvited visitors coming to TNI during this closure on non-designated days will be asked to leave, Brown said. The gates near its lodge will be closed from dusk until dawn during this time as well.

Besides giving nature a rest, Brown said winter often brings hazardous trail conditions to the preserve. Those conditions could cause someone to slip and fall, which is especially dangerous considering the park's many bluff outlooks.



