

Old Cedar Avenue Trailhead

Bloomington, Minnesota

ENTRY CATEGORY: General Design

ABSTRACT:

The Landscape Architect helped the City of Bloomington and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service envision an enriched trailhead that welcomes visitors to the Minnesota Valley Wildlife Refuge and then helped make that vision a reality. Within a multi-disciplinary team, the Landscape Architect developed the conceptual layout, grading, planting, wayfinding, and interpretive plans. Crossing the floodplain, the central spine of the design is a bicycle/pedestrian path across a historic bridge and also includes a shelter building, redesigned parking area, bicycle hub, and connecting pathways. The project succeeds in enhancing recreational access while overcoming technical challenges in a sensitive environmental area.

NARRATIVE:

South of the Twin Cities, the Landscape Architect helped the City of Bloomington and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service envision an enhanced trailhead that welcomes visitors to the Minnesota Valley Wildlife Refuge and followed up by working to make that vision a reality.

Frequented by birders, bicyclists, hikers, and student groups, the Refuge is one of only a few such places in the country located near a major urban area. The Refuge, a protected area situated along the Minnesota River, is within a floodplain, a forest, and wetlands—with residential development and a busy thoroughfare in view. This unique juxtaposition of modern life and the natural world drew the Landscape Architect to the project.

In a preliminary phase of the overall project, the Landscape Architect's firm developed the plans used to restore a historic truss bridge spanning Long Meadow Lake for pedestrian and bicycle use. While a bridge might be characterized as a man-made imposition within the Refuge, its design incorporated intricate framing with the elegance of a different era that softens its effect. The Landscape Architect's first phase contributions included design details for the bridge railings and project visualizations. Undoubtedly, the bridge affords sweeping views across the wetlands previously unavailable.

Subsequently, the Landscape Architect took a lead role in the Old Cedar Avenue Trailhead site design. Within a multi-disciplinary team, the Landscape Architect developed the trailhead's conceptual layout, which included grading, planting, wayfinding, and interpretive plans. The illustrative plans and renderings developed as part of the layout were shared with stakeholders, policy-makers, and the public to build support for the project. The Landscape Architect also developed construction documents and assisted with construction support to bring the project to fruition.

The trailhead project scope included two main areas, one at each end of the bridge. The West Approach incorporates a new shelter and restroom building, a redesigned parking area, bicycle hub, and connecting pathways. The East Approach serves as a trail extension along an existing causeway, leading to an orientation point and connecting trail along the river. The project completes a gap in the regional trail network by connecting the Nokomis–Minnesota River Regional Trail and the Minnesota Valley State Trail.

Descending the bluff from the west, visitors arriving at the Refuge follow a curving road and boardwalk trail where steep topography transitions to the broad floodplain valley. At the end of the access road, twin entry signs constructed of Minnesota limestone frame the view to the bridge portal in the distance. Along the former road alignment, the central spine of the trailhead's design is a shared bicycle/pedestrian path that utilizes landscape features and interpretive overlooks to encourage people to linger and learn before embarking further into the Refuge.

Native plantings cloak the reconstructed parking area and pedestrian paths, blending with the Refuge landscape beyond. Playful limestone benches invite sitting (or climbing!) while also defining a boundary for cars. Removing invasive buckthorn to open up views, the Landscape Architect selected a pollinator-friendly plant palette in consultation with Refuge naturalists to enliven the setting seasonally.

While posing design challenges, the site affords a unique opportunity for visitors to witness the dynamic floodplain hydrology. Located on the highest ground for flood protection, the shelter building provides a gathering place connected by accessible paths. Floodplain regulations do not allow additional net fill, so subtle adjustments to existing grades were needed to fit the design into the terrain. From the slightly elevated terrace, visitors can take in views of the sur-

rounding floodplain forest, wetlands, and the historic bridge in the distance. Designed to meet the rising popularity of trail riders, the convenient hub location also provides hitches, a repair kiosk, and bottle-filling stations for cyclists.

With the project historian and recreation managers, the Landscape Architect helped identify key interpretive themes and coordinated the development of graphic panels. Signage was sited in specific locations to enrich the educational experience by highlighting unique cultural and natural resources, including wetlands and wildlife, bridge history, geology and industry, movement and crossings, and refuge stewardship.

The project area opened to the public again in the spring of 2020. Together, the bridge restoration and upgraded trailhead breathe new life into the Refuge's recreational and educational purpose, a nature-centered opportunity in direct opposition to its former use as a vehicular river crossing.

The Old Cedar Trail project merits recognition in the ASLA-MN awards program for successfully enhancing recreational access while meeting the technical challenges of the site and minimizing its footprint in a sensitive environmental area.



01 — AERIAL VIEW OF TRAILHEAD SITE AND SURROUNDINGS

South of the Twin Cities, the Landscape Architect assisted the City of Bloomington and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to envision an enhanced trailhead that welcomes visitors to the recreational and educational opportunities in the Minnesota Valley Wildlife Refuge.



02 — PROJECT CONTEXT MAP

Located along the Minnesota River, the site is within floodplain, forest, and wetlands but with residential development and a major highway nearby. The project completed a gap in the regional trail network by connecting the Nokomis–Minnesota River Regional Trail and the Minnesota Valley State Trail.



03 — HISTORIC BRIDGE RESTORATION

In an earlier phase of the overall project, the Landscape Architect's firm developed the plans to restore a historic truss bridge that spans Long Meadow Lake for pedestrian and bicycle use. Undoubtedly, it affords sweeping views that people can now enjoy.



04 — TRAILHEAD SITE PLAN

Within a multi-disciplinary team, the Landscape Architect developed the trailhead's conceptual layout, grading, planting, wayfinding, and interpretive plans. This included developing illustrative plans and renderings to share with stakeholders, policy makers, and the public to build support for the project and then preparing construction documents.



05 — ACCESS ROAD AND BOARDWALK TRAIL

Descending the bluff from the west, arriving visitors follow a curving road and boardwalk trail where steep topography transitions to the broad floodplain valley.



06 — GATEWAY TO THE REFUGE

At the end of the access road, twin entry signs constructed of Minnesota limestone frame the view to the bridge portal in the distance.



07 — RESTORED HISTORIC BRIDGE AND INTERPRETIVE POINT

Along the former road alignment, the central spine of the trailhead's design is a shared bicycle and pedestrian path that utilizes landscape features and interpretive overlooks to encourage people to linger and learn before embarking further into the refuge.



08 — PEDESTRIAN PATH FROM PARKING AREA

The reconstructed parking area and pedestrian paths are cloaked with native plantings that blend with the refuge landscape beyond. Playful limestone benches and markers invite sitting or climbing while also defining a boundary for cars.



09 — TRAILHEAD SHELTER AREA SITE SECTION

The site affords a unique opportunity for visitors to witness the dynamic floodplain hydrology. Located on the highest ground for flood protection, the shelter building provides a gathering and orientation place connected by accessible paths.



10 — AERIAL VIEW OF TRAILHEAD SHELTER AREA

Floodplain regulations didn't allow any additional net fill, so subtle adjustments to existing grades were needed to fit the program into the terrain sensitively and limit construction impacts.



11 — SHELTER TERRACE GATHERING SPACE

From the slightly elevated terrace, visitors can gather and take in views of the surrounding floodplain forest, wetlands, and the historic bridge in the distance.



12 — BICYCLE HUB

With the popularity of bicycling, the “hub” provides hitches, a repair kiosk, and bottle-filling station for riders in a convenient location.



13 — NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES INTERPRETATION

Signage was sited in specific locations to enrich the educational experience by highlighting unique cultural and natural resources. These themes included: wetlands and wildlife, bridge history, geology and industry, movement and crossings, and refuge stewardship.



14 — AERIAL VIEW OF CAUSEWAY TRAIL AND SURROUNDING WETLANDS

Together, the bridge restoration and upgraded trailhead have breathed new life into the refuge's recreational and educational opportunities making this access point more nature-centered instead of its former use as a vehicular river crossing.



15 — ENHANCED RECREATIONAL ACCESS

The project succeeded in enhancing recreational access while meeting the technical challenges of the site and minimizing its footprint in a sensitive environmental area.