





This pair of walks isn't in Madison proper but in Middleton, its nearest neighbor to the west. But don't let a little thing like a boundary line keep you from these pleasant perambulations through the Pheasant Branch Conservancy.

Surrounded on three sides by urban development, the conservancy comprises a pleasing variety of terrains, from wetlands to prairie to forest. There's an upper section and a lower section, each with its own distinct character and feeling—a walk for every mood and fancy.

To get there, head west on Century Avenue in Middleton. Turn right at the traffic light at Frank Lloyd Wright Avenue and then right again onto

Pheasant Branch Road. Park in the lot about 0.7 of a mile down the road and start with the lower section of the conservancy. Its half-dozen crossings of Pheasant Branch Creek are especially appealing to children.

The path is wood-chipped and clearly marked, and leads from the parking lot down a slope behind Middleton Hills, a planned community built by local developer Marshall Erdman. The several hundred families who live here like the old-fashioned feeling of the neighborhood and the way shops, offices, and houses cluster to give a small-town feeling to this community within a community.

At the bottom of the hill, turn right and go about a quarter mile to a boardwalk that leads you into the woods. In summer look for the distinctive leaves and bright flowers of jewelweed on either side of the boardwalk. A 90-degree turn takes you over a small wooden bridge—the first of several times you'll cross Pheasant Branch Creek on this walk. One summer afternoon we saw a kingfisher swoop down the creek here, skimming the water, searching for its next meal.

On the other side of the creek, turn right onto a wide, grassy trail that follows the creek upstream. About a quarter of a mile down, take a small side path down to the water. It's a little steep, but there's a reward at the end of the path: a rare patch of jack-in-the-pulpits, with their bright red "jacks" tucked under veined leaves.

Haul yourself up the slope and back onto the main trail, which meanders through the woods. The trail seems to end at busy Century Avenue, but if you cross



Century and look to the right, you'll find another trail, which follows the creek and leads into the next area of the conservancy. Look for raspberry, purple phlox, and the low umbrella-like leaves and tiny inedible fruit of mayapples along the trailsides.

The trail flirts with the creek, veering off in other directions but always returning, following the sound of clear, flowing water. After a short distance, you'll come to the first of several spots where a series of tall, smooth stepping stones crosses the creek. The stones are close together, and children love to hop, skip, and jump across the shallow water. (Keep a close eye on them, though; the stones can be slippery.)

On the other side of the creek, look for the small white flowers of bedstraw. This unusual plant feels sticky because of the little hairs on its stalks and leaves. Pioneers stuffed their mattresses with bedstraw, which doesn't compress the way other plants do. A mattress stuffed with bedstraw is reputed to be softer than a mattress stuffed with grass or other greenery, but we've never tried it.

A short walk brings you to another creek crossing, this one in front of a tiny waterfall. Two more creek crossings follow in short order, each with its own set of stepping stones. After the fourth such crossing the trail crosses Park Street, and once again you enter another part of this section of the conservancy. Go downhill, past two large culverts and into a section of wetlands under restoration. The wooded trail rises and falls gently, still following the creekbed.

Cross the creek one more time on a set of stepping stones that are much bigger than the others. Stairs on your left lead up a steep wooded bank and into the backyard of Middleton High School.

The trail continues a little farther, dead-ending just under the Beltline. There's no loop back to the parking lot, so you have to retrace your steps.