

Natural gems in our own backyard

Fields, Rivers & Streams – April column

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Earth Day was April 22, leading many of us once again to spend a little extra time to take stock in the natural world around us and local opportunities to get out to enjoy nature.

Our work at Mower Soil & Water Conservation and Cedar River Watershed District with natural resources mostly is spent on areas needing attention. Yet, I'm constantly reminded of how lucky we are to have such great resources here that provide incredible benefits to all of us in the area.

We've all come out of hibernation mode by now, and many are looking for places to connect with nature or get the family out for weekend adventures.

Getting outdoors in spring is an annual rite of passage for the new year of warm-weather activities. Below are a few of our area's gems to consider this season:

Ramsey Mill Pond Wildlife Management Area

Located just north of Austin, Ramsey WMA – owned by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources – is about 395 acres of prairie, woods and river bottom land along the Cedar River State Water Trail. It borders much of the 55-acre Ramsey Mill Pond created by the Ramsey Dam on the Cedar River. The Ramsey area has a rich history, and opened to public use years ago through an acquisition effort led by the Austin chapter of the Izaak Walton League.

Ramsey WMA's unique opportunity lies in its vast acres of wild, diverse ground. It's a fantastic area for hiking without getting too far from town. There are no specific trails but getting around is relatively easy, particularly along the river where trees provide canopy. You can access the property from either side of the Cedar River to get lost in nature a bit.

An important note, however, is that Ramsey WMA – like other state WMAs – is open for hunting during those specific seasons. Right now is turkey hunting season so be mindful of that and probably avoid the site if you see vehicles at the entry points.

Conservation Corps of Minnesota also recently conducted a controlled burn on part of Ramsey WMA. Visiting Ramsey WMA after the burn also provides a great way to talk with kids about the history of prairie management and the value of fire on our prairie plantings.

Several different resources are available to give you directions to the site and more background. Just search online for "Ramsey Mill Pond WMA."

Cedar River Water Trail

Designated as a DNR State Water Trail in 2011 through an effort led by the Cedar River Watershed District, the Cedar River remains the region's most-underrated recreational experience. The river runs through a mostly wooded corridor, where canoeists and kayakers can escape to a fun, natural experience on the water. Many are surprised at

how disconnected they feel once floating on the river. Cedar River Canoe & Kayak Service, out of Austin, can set people up with all they need for a paddling trip and pick them up downstream. There also are plenty of jump-in and jump-out points along the river, including a DNR access south of Austin and each county bridge. I can't think of a better way to bring in spring than an afternoon float on the Cedar!

For more on the Cedar River State Water Trail by visiting the CRWD's website at: www.cedarriverwd.org. For canoe or kayak rental, search for "Cedar River Canoe and Kayak Rental" on Facebook.

Lake Louise State Park in LeRoy

Mower County's lone state park is another gem tucked away in the county's southeast county near the city of LeRoy. Lake Louise – formed by a historic dam on the Upper Iowa and Little Iowa rivers – allows for paddling, swimming and fishing. Lake Louise attracts hikers and horseback riders to its trails that wind through open meadows and hardwoods. It also provides bicyclists with access to the paved Shooting Star State Trail that bisects the park. The lakeside picnic grounds also are a nice feature.

For more, go online to: www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks/lake_louise/index.html

Grand Meadow Chert Mine tour

About 11,000 years ago, a 100-acre parcel of land in what today is the Grand Meadow area served natives as an outlet mall of materials for making weapons and tools essential for daily life at the time. Natives traveled there from miles around and camped at the site as they mined the unique pieces of chert stone that easily could be chipped and shaped into useful tools.

The Grand Meadow Chert Mine is an incredible bit of local history likely not known by most people. Aside from trees now covering the site, the mines remain well preserved to what they were thousands of years ago. Aerial photos show divots reflective of a golf ball at the site now managed by The Archeological Conservatory. Tours can be arranged through the Mower County Historical Society. For more, go online to www.mowercountyhistory.org/chertmine or call the historical society at (507) 437-6082. Make sure to enjoy your spring outdoors!

Mower SWCD provides technical assistance to landowners with conservation practices that protect land and water resources. SWCD also performs the duties of the Cedar River Watershed District to improve water quality and reduce flooding. This monthly column by Mower SWCD/CRWD typically runs the last Thursday of each month. More information is available on the Mower SWCD and CRWD websites as well as the CRWD's Facebook page: www.facebook.com/CedarRiverWD. Questions and comments can be sent to tim.ruzek@mowerswcd.org.