

# The Underwater Exercise Bike and “Hole in the Woods”

Now let's head down to this guarded little wetland nature preserve tucked inside one of the south-west suburbs of Chicago. At the southeast corner of the tract is a modern children's playground built on a padded surface next to sheltered picnic tables and ample parking lot. A paved trail guides dog walkers, bicyclists, skaters and other strollers making laps around the pond where Canadian geese, ducks, occasional egrets, herons and other species dot the shoreline and wade into the shallow water. The trail intersects with another path that passes a woods before reaching the tall grass wetland, which ends where a wooden bridge crosses over a creek. Here the park ends and neighborhood reappears.

This convenient escape has been a favorite of mine and my dog's for years. We visited often and the more we went the more there was to see and to appreciate. A public park, the area is kept mostly clean and well maintained. Ground watchers like me, however, who pass over any spot often enough eventually notice things perhaps dumped overnight or dropped by a dying wind. Watch long enough and you are bound to bump into it: amazing demonstrations of careless disregard for public property or the mistaken belief that, “If there isn't a house built on it, it's okay to dump my junk here.” In time I spotted a few of the above.



Like an empty shopping cart from the nearby supermarket on its side, half-buried in the mud and ice in the middle of the creek...and what appeared to be a discarded exercise bike pitched over the side of a bridge, now fully submerged and barely visible below the water. The cart

I fished out one day with my telescopic boat hook; the sunken bike, a bit more challenging, would wait for another day.

That seemed like a year or more ago. Over the passing months, I removed a second shopping cart from another part of the creek. This summer I collected a third cart, and this one I walked back



to the store — dried mud, sea grass and all — and handed to one of the clerks. It made me realize the time had come to finish up, to raise the bike from the creek if it wasn't too embedded in

the mud. I guess it took the “*Summer Challenge 2020*” to finally transform my idea into action.

One hot, steamy morning in August I parked my car, collected my boat and grapnel hooks, gloves, some nylon line, garbage bag and set out on the trail. A little recon the day before led me along a footworn shortcut through a small forest where midway I encountered an unauthorized open air clubhouse and somebody's party spot about the size of a small banquet room. It was obvious to me some people found it suitable for a “happy hour under the stars” — and more than once or twice. Not it looked like a graveyard for empty beer cans, broken bottles, food wrappers and so on. A little off to the side smashed wood, metal and plastic debris also littered the path and surrounding tall grass. (Was this the work of the same jackals who had “joy rided” the shopping carts swiped from the nearby store lot? I wondered.)

The boat hook made fairly easy work of remov-



ing the exercise bike, and I was glad for that. Cleaning up after the “Hole in the Woods Gang” (as I’ve come to know them) was more time consuming, but at least the shade in the forest kept the mounting heat at bay. I had hoped that my one large plastic trash bag would hold all the small stuff, and by flattening beer cans it was close. The larger items I had piled would take several handfuls and trips to the pickup site about a city block or more down the path. A couple trips today and a few more later in the week, I reasoned, would do it. It was getting close to noon and growing hotter by the hour. Two trips

into it, however, I decided to stick it out. It would be worth it to see all my booty piled together and ready for the haulers. So, I finished the job.

Anyway, now instead of thinking about getting down to doing the work, on my way to the park I wonder how everything looks and what more might be done to keep it a good place to visit.

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