

Taking a Look at Trails: Part 3

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

[Parts 1](#) and [2](#) of this series investigated good and poor trails with some ways to offset problems. This installment looks closer at trail issues.



Figure 8. Filled with soggy wooded wetlands, sensitive [vernal pools](#), and flash flood zones, the Crooked Creek Park vicinity epitomizes a bad place for trails. Saturated soil and wetland plants (A) such as the skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) and debris piled from dangerous floods (B, with a pool towards the right in the back) are obvious signs that no trails should be situated here. All photographs were taken along the periodically cleared, low-lying sewer line easement, which is visible by the straight line of sight in the left side of image (C). Tire marks from a maintenance vehicle that kept getting stuck along this easement (D) reveal puddling after water drained out of the waterlogged soil. The notion of adding a trail through here is irresponsible regardless of public calls and political pressures to do so.

Another environmental concern is for the parkland's archery deer management here. The program is especially needed due to large deer numbers, their impact on native plant populations, Chronic Wasting Disease's presence in Fairfax County, and maintaining the herd's overall health. Hunters' tree stands must be at least 50 feet from trails and 100 feet from property lines, leaving little room to hunt should an official trail be placed here; more information is at <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/wildlife/archery-program>.



Figure 9. So-called “social trails” are forms of encroachment caused by people stomping and cutting in areas beyond the official trails for whatever reason. They take on many appearances—anything from a trampled path (A, with beige paint splashed on a tree trunk) to audacious brickwork (B). Social trails are never created with sustainability in mind and are vulnerable to previously discussed poor placement problems. The posted park rules state, “No animals, plants, minerals or artifacts may be disturbed or removed,” i.e., folks should leave no trace of their presence. Fairfax County Park Authority’s complete list of rules is published in the *Park Policy Manual* <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/publications/policy-manual>. Sites such as Huntley Meadows Park post cautionary signs where social trails start forming (C).



Figure 10. A good way to protect the parks is to stay on the main trail, shown here with a ✓, and off social trails. Using social trails only adds to the problems they cause. In this example, a park bench used to be near where the X appears but fishermen extended the path down to the lake. The best action for bank fishermen is to cast from open, grassy clearings or docks—away from poison ivy and where fishing line gets tangled in branches. Submerged artificial fish habitats help improve the fishing at these designated areas.

[Part 4](#) concludes this series with an additional look at social trails. It shares an excellent resource for authorized trail maps.

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