

Metro Parks and Nature Field Guide

GRAHAM OAKS NATURE PARK

STORY BY Sheilagh Diez

PHOTOGRAPH BY Yuxing Zheng

Rising above an expanse of prairie, a lone tree's gnarled branches reach in every direction. This heritage oak has been a witness to the history of this land, one filled with the complex relationship between people and place.

Nestled in the suburban landscape of Clackamas County, Graham Oaks Nature Park offers a glimpse into oak prairie habitats once common across the Willamette Valley. Now, they cover only about 7 percent of their original range.

Oak prairies reflect the communities they support. The Kalapuya managed this land for thousands of years and used seasonal fires to maintain vast open spaces for hunting and gathering practices. The fires also supported a rich diversity of native wildflowers that continue to draw unique pollinators from across the region to this day.

Western gray squirrels thrived on plentiful acorns for winter caches



while the Kalapuya leached, ground into flour, and then cooked acorns for food.

Along the southwest edge of the park, pockets of towering old-growth Douglas firs invite visitors into a contrasting world of steep canyons blanketed in dense ferns and native shrubs. Woodpeckers can often be heard in the dappled sunshine canopy.

On the eastern flank of the park, songbirds flock to a wetland oasis filled with insects and flowers. Springtime brings the omnipresent sound of

young frogs. Recent restoration work has increased the amount of water flowing to Arrowhead Creek, creating new habitat for sensitive species, such as the red-legged frog.

Returning to the prairie, birds flit about the sentinel tree. They come for shelter when winter storms blow through, and they find insects for food in the crooks and crannies of the bark. Like the gnarled branches of this heritage oak, Graham Oaks Nature Park knits together a mosaic of habitats for local wildlife and people.

BE ON THE LOOKOUT!



PILEATED WOODPECKER



RED-LEGGED FROG



MEADOW CHECKERMALLOW



NORTHERN HARRIER

GRAHAM OAKS NATURE PARK

11825 SW WILSONVILLE RD,
WILSONVILLE

oregonmetro.gov/grahamoaks

DRIVING

Head south on Interstate 5. Take exit 283 and turn right onto Southwest Wilsonville Road. After a mile and a half, turn right into the park. Park at the entrance. Parking is not allowed at nearby schools.

KNOW WHEN YOU GO

Open from 6:30 a.m. to sunset. Bicycles and leashed dogs are only allowed on the Ice Age Tonquin Trail.

AMENITIES

Bathrooms, reservable picnic shelter, parking for six bicycles at park entrance. Much of the park is wheelchair accessible, although some trails are more challenging.

RESERVATIONS

To reserve the picnic shelter call 503-665-4995 option 0 or email MetroPicnicReservations@oregonmetro.gov

METRO PARKS AND NATURE

Whether you're in the mood for a short hike or a weekend camping trip, a boat ride or a picnic, Metro has a destination for you. You'll share the landscape with salmon swimming in restored streams, birds streaking across the sky and giant, old oak trees towering overhead. Thanks to voters, you can explore 17,000 acres of parks, trails and natural areas across the Portland metropolitan region.

If you picnic at Blue Lake or take your kids to the Oregon Zoo, enjoy symphonies at the Schnitz or auto shows at the convention center, put out your trash or drive your car – we've already crossed paths. *So, hello. We're Metro – nice to meet you.*

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IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The park is a short distance from the Wilsonville Family Fun Center, where visitors can play laser tag, ride a roller coaster simulator or play arcade games. Refuel with a visit to McMenamins Old Church & Pub, a family-friendly brewery in a historic, renovated church.

SEASON BY SEASON

SPRING: Watch as amphibians emerge from hibernation and begin to breed. Listen for the sounds of eager frogs along the Arrowhead Creek trail. The familiar peeps so recognizable from common recordings belong to Pacific chorus frogs. Formerly known as tree frogs, these tiny creatures range from bright green to dusky brown, but all share dark masks across their eyes and take part in this vigorous spring chorus.

SUMMER: Take the family for a bike ride along the first five miles of the Ice Age Tonquin Trail. Planned for an eventual 22 miles, this paved trail will stretch from the banks of the Willamette River in Wilsonville through the Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge to Tualatin's Cook Park. Along the way, discover the scablands, rich wetlands and kolk ponds left by the ice-age Missoula floods. At Graham Oaks, enjoy a leisurely ride through the restored prairie on a wide, paved trail.

FALL: Stroll along the Legacy Creek trail and enjoy the brilliant reds of vine maple leaves in the forest. As green pigments begin to break down, the red color shines through these small trees with their many pointed leaves. As the trail rejoins the prairie, search for the hidden wonders of oak galls. These large, round and vaguely apple-like structures are caused by chemicals injected by larva of certain gall wasps. Oak galls were once the main source of ink from the middle ages through the early 20th Century, and they continue to fascinate botanists and artists alike.

WINTER: Watch northern harriers glide across the landscape on a crisp, clear morning. These unique raptors have disc-shaped faces similar to owls that allow them to use hearing as well as sight when hunting. Identify them by their low flight above open lands and distinct white rump patch that's obvious in flight.