

The Lakeshore Guardian, 2010 January
Thumb Habitats
The Lure of Silver Trails
by Bill Collins

In December, I told a little of my early years at Silver Trails Scout Reservation, a nearly 300-acre Scout camp a few miles west of Jeddo along the Black River. Of the many natural areas I have seen, Silver Trails is still the most impressive for me. The lower Black River valley is one of the most scenic landscapes in southeast Michigan. Around here, there are few places where one can look down a slope over 100 feet to anything. For us, it is like a small Grand Canyon. Everyone should at least once, stand at the valley rim, forest stretching for miles on either side, look down at the river, look across the expanse of air to the far bank or floodplain, hear the rustling or surging waters below, watch birds from above as they glide by, and feel a breeze gently gust up from the river and continue through tree tops. The best spot for this at Silver Trails is a secluded outlook from the top of a dirt cliff called, "Devil's Point."



Devil's Point overlook of the Black River at Silver Trails. Photograph by Bill Collins.

Like most land along the lower Black River, Silver Trails contains winding slopes and ravines lined by Eastern Hemlock, Yellow Birch, and patches of Northern White-cedar, one of the best remaining examples of this habitat in the Thumb. These trees and other plants are essentially relics of a cooler climate in southern Michigan a few thousand years ago. Once widespread, they are now relegated to cool, moist microclimates like these ravines and shaded slopes where heavier cold air congregates during the growing season. Aerial photographs reveal a striking pattern of Hemlocks concentrated on north-facing slopes along the Black River.



Eastern Hemlock lining a ridge slope in the north of Silver Trails. Photograph by Bill Collins.

From the Silver Trails Dining Hall, the log cabin-like “Rotary Lodge” constructed in 1948, walking down the main stairway about 50 feet on the east slope of the Silver Creek valley, you step onto the highest old floodplain of Silver Creek, formed centuries ago when most of the valley was carved out. This area below is mature Beech - Sugar Maple forest, and where most of the original campsites and a few cabins are located.

Continuing northwest on the main trail, the land drops another notch to the lower floodplain of Silver Creek, where modern flood levels sometimes extend. Crossing the footbridge over Silver Creek, the character of the forest changes. There are more and larger Hemlock trees, and the land suddenly seems an enchanted wilderness area, almost uninterrupted by any use except footpaths. To the west, the far slope of the Silver Creek valley rises like a wall to the flat highlands above.



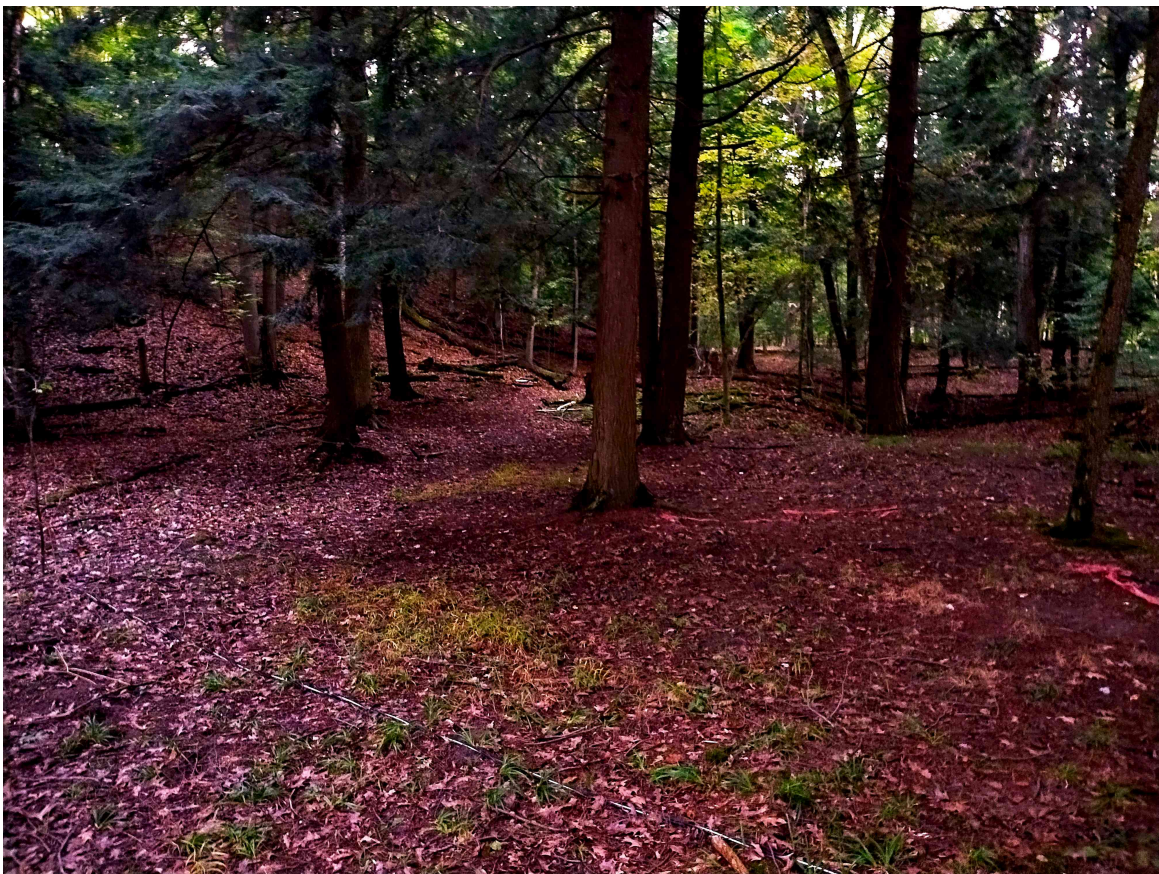
The Ranger John Hardie Pavilion located in the Chippewa campsite area on the upper ancient floodplain of Silver Creek. Photograph by Bill Collins.



Floodplain forest along Silver Creek. Photograph by Bill Collins.



A large forest of American Beech, Sugar Maple, and Eastern Hemlock north of Silver Creek.
Photograph by Bill Collins.



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Out here, the ground is tiered at different levels by the old paths of Silver Creek. In late spring, the forest floor is packed with woodland wildflowers like White Trillium, Red Trillium, Yellow Trout-lily, Dutchman's Breeches, Bloodroot, Spring Beauty, Rose Twisted-stalk, Toothwort, Cut-leaved Toothwort, Solomon's-seal, False Solomon's-seal, Mayapple, Blue Cohosh, Foamflower, Miterwort, Woodland Phlox and many more. Beech - Sugar Maple forests are known for their diversity, but the display at Silver Trails is exceptional.

In the middle of this small forest wilderness north of Silver Creek, sometimes the only sound is the breeze in the tree tops, and on a still summer day, the distant calls of woodland birds like the ethereal Wood Thrush, Ovenbird, Wood Pewee, Eastern Phoebe, and Eastern Flycatcher. At the height of summer, the late afternoon green glow, small shafts of sunlight, the large pillared tree trunks, and the pan flute call of a Wood Thrush produce a cathedral that humans could never hope to build.

Further north, the land drops a little and you cross two small creeks. Here begins the most complex series of narrow ridges and deep ravines I have ever seen. The secret ceremonial areas of the Chickagami Lodge, Order of the Arrow are hidden in these distant haunts of thick Hemlocks and babbling brooks. As with the larger Silver Creek valley, the ravines and ridges were carved out over centuries by small creeks slowly cutting down through clay loam soils, exposing gravel beds left by the last glaciers.



A creek winds through a ravine in the north of Silver Trails. Photograph by Bill Collins.

Unfortunately, the desire to profit from all the gravel underlying Silver Trails may one day be the undoing of the camp and the surrounding area. One of the Order of the Arrow ceremonial areas was already completely excavated away by the expansion of a huge gravel pit on the north part of the camp. For those with fond memories of Silver Trails, pray that when the lure of gravel profits grows, or the next round of council consolidations comes around, or development plans are made, the Boy Scouts of America and Blue Water Council will know the true value of the camp and respect the long heritage of the many Scouters that have been a part of it.



2019 aerial photograph showing Silver Trails and gravel pit on the north part of the camp that was to be a lake for campers, but in fact, did end up being the undoing of the camp.

2026 Update: In 2012, the Blue Water Council was consolidated into the Michigan Crossroads Council covering most of the lower peninsula of Michigan. In 2019, Silver Trails was sold to AMC Mid Michigan Materials to be mined for gravel. By 2024, AMC-MMM determined that the amount and depth of gravel was not worth mining, and sold the camp to a private owner, despite the Thumb Land Conservancy having made the top offer.



Silver Trails and Rotary Lodge dedication on Sunday, June 20, 1948.



Silver Trails and Rotary Lodge dedication on Sunday, June 20, 1948. View northwest overlooking the Silver Creek valley from north of the Rotary Lodge.



Silver Trails and Rotary Lodge dedication on Sunday, June 20, 1948. View northwest from the north porch of the Rotary Lodge.



Silver Trails and Rotary Lodge dedication on Sunday, June 20, 1948. View west on the north side of the Rotary Lodge.