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FOR OUTDOOR CLASSROOM — — —

Expert Aids Conservation Staff Develop Nichols Refuge Plans

Plans to develop a wild refuge in Iowa Falls as an outdoor conservation classroom got a boost this week from an expert.

Sylvan Runkel, biologist for the Soil Conservation Service, visited the Ira Nichols Wildflower and Bird Refuge. With him were Homer Calkins and Irwin Burns, County Conservation Board officers.

A reporter joined them briefly for a short walk. The walk was easy; Runkel found something to comment on every few steps. Though Calkins and Burns know their field, they were quick to say they had a lot of questions to ask and Runkel never let them down.

"There are beautiful things to be found in the woods in autumn," said Runkel. "You see color that you don't see in the spring."

Calkins explained that the refuge is kept locked. Paths are being developed and trees and plants will be numbered. Identification sheets will be compiled for teachers to use on class trips.

GINGER

Calkins pointed to an area where he and William H. Schmidt, biology instructor at Ellsworth College, found a bed of ginger.

"I tell you, you just can't step there without stepping on ginger," he said.

"It's a pretty rich little area for spring flowers," Runkel commented.

Runkel pointed to fungi growing on a downed tree limb. It carries a lesson for society, he suggested.

"It has little 'roots' which grow throughout the wood and excrete a material that causes the wood to decompose," he said.

"They are in effect converting the solid, organic material back into soil. They're a converter mechanism."

TRASH

"Really, they're pointing out to the people nowadays one way to control your trash. This is getting to be one heck of a problem, and nature has that figured out in a lot of cases," Runkel said.

"You can imagine what the woods would be like if all the trees had grown up and when they died they just stayed there. You would have the worst trash pile you could imagine, a trash heap."

What actually happens is the converter mechanisms take the wood and convert it back into material which is available to all the other plants and is continually improving the woods, he said.

"It's a process we have to learn to live with also. Nature's already got it figured out," Runkel continued.

A few feet further, Runkel spotted some bed straw. He explained that the plant was used by some pioneers, but mainly by people during the Middle Ages, for mattress

sack filling.

The rough texture of the leaves make them stick, compared to straw which is slick. People found the bed straw kept its shape in a mattress while straw bunched.

Legends spring up about any plant used a great deal by people, Runkel noted.

One of the bed straw legends is that it was in the manger where Jesus was born. (The plant is eaten by livestock when it is young, Runkel said.) Another bed straw legend is that if a newly-wed couple sleeps on a bed straw mattress, their marriage will be blessed by many children.

"Of course that's been proven many times over," he laughed.

He pointed to a patch of small oak trees a foot or so high.

"You've got some honeysuckle shading these and could cut some of it off to help the oaks," he suggested.



IRA NICHOLS REFUGE PLANS — Sylvan Runkel (l) examines specimen with Irwin Burns of the county conservation staff. Burns and Homer Calkins conferred with Runkel on development plans for the Ira Nichols Wildflower and Bird Refuge. (See story).