



Hickory Knolls: A History of Our Home

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Publisher: St. Charles Park District © 2020



Hi, friends!

I'm Harley the hawk, and I'll be your guide as you tour this land I call home. My family of red-tailed hawks has lived here for a very long time, and we've seen many changes.

Did you know that huge chunks of ice shaped this land? That it was once filled with trash?

The beautiful plants and animals you see today are the result of humans working hard to preserve our home.

To learn more, walk the trails and read the signs that tell our story.

Are you ready? Let's go!



The walk begins on the trail across the road, west of the garden plots. The entire story walk is an estimated 3/4-mile. Inner loop story walk is about 1/2-mile.



Today is a Special Day

A few weeks ago, Callie the caterpillar hatched from an egg, then spent two weeks eating milkweed leaves and growing. She's been in her chrysalis for 10 days and will soon emerge as a beautiful monarch butterfly.

I'm inviting all my friends to celebrate Callie's change.

There's my friend Greta the grasshopper.

"Hi, Greta! Would you like to come to a welcome home party for Callie?"

"Sure, Harley. I'll gather some clover to share with everyone," she says.

"Thanks, Greta!" I call, as I soar up above the prairie. Then I hear: "Wait!"

I land back on the path, and Greta says: "Um, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, Greta."

"Do you think Callie's change ... do you think it will be ... a good change?"



"Yes, I do."

"I don't think I like change, Harley."

"Change can be a good thing, Greta. This land, for example, was quite different many years ago. Right here, they used to dump trash in big holes. But look at it today!"

"That's a good change, I suppose. I can't imagine sleeping under garbage."

"Would you like to help me invite our friends to the party?" I ask.

"Along the way, I'll tell you more about how this land has changed to become the grand habitat we enjoy today."

"That sounds like a hopping good idea!" Greta exclaims.

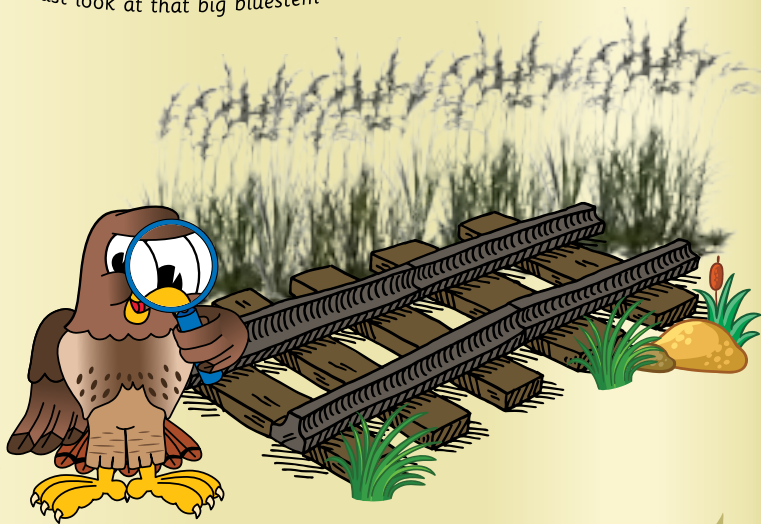


Metra Wetland

Greta and I are on the lookout for Aaron, an American goldfinch, who can usually be found flying amid the tall grasses near the Metra Wetland.

"Greta, did you ever wonder how the Metra Wetland got its name? You know the grass you eat and hop through? It was actually scooped up from another prairie and plopped down right here. Workers did this when the Metra railroad expanded. The prairie could have been destroyed, but instead they moved it here.

"My grandpa Jerry said he saw workers digging, lifting and sliding slabs of prairie. It looked like they were slicing and serving cake! Just look at that big bluestem – it's the state grass of Illinois!"



"That's amazing they could change the land in that way, Harley. And speaking of cake, maybe we should get one for Callie?"

"That's a great idea, Greta!"

We head down the path, and I hear Aaron before I spot him. I follow the high-pitched notes he calls as he flies and soon see him. He's bright yellow and hard to miss!

"Hi, Aaron. I'm throwing a party for Callie the caterpillar. Would you like to come?"

"Sure, Harley. What can I bring?"

"Could you bring a cake?"

"You got it!"



A Friend on the Prairie



I've got my talons crossed that we're able to see Dottie. She's a diurnal lightning bug. Diurnal sounds funny, but it's just a fancy way to say "daytime." Dottie is out during the day and sleeps at night—just like me!

Because Dottie is diurnal she doesn't glow like her lightning bug friends that are nocturnal — they fly at night and need their lights to find each other.

Dottie often hangs out on goldenrod leaves ... and there she is!

"Hi, Dottie! We're throwing a welcome home party for Callie, and we'd love for you to join us."



"Thanks, Harley, I'd love to come. But, where did Callie go?" Dottie asks.

"She's inside her chrysalis where she's changing into a monarch butterfly," I say.

"Oh! I love butterflies! I can't wait to see her!" Dottie says.

"So ... you think you'll like, even love, this new Callie?" Greta asks Dottie.

"I do, Greta! Callie was a wonderful caterpillar but spent most of her time eating. As a butterfly she'll pollinate our flowers, helping them grow! And without our flowers, what would we eat or use for shelter?" Greta smiles. "That's a good point, Dottie. I do like my wildflowers."



Coyote Pass

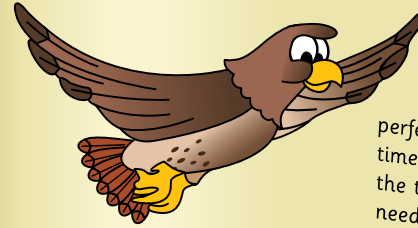
Greta and I look for Cora the coyote in this area called Coyote Pass. I tell Greta a story passed along from my grandpa Jerry. He told me these rolling hills were formed thousands of years ago during the Ice Age. This entire area was covered with massive chunks of ice, called glaciers.



When the glaciers melted for the last time, they left many different types of hills, also called knolls. There are knolls shaped like cones; knolls that are long ridges; and, knolls that form shallow holes, like potholes, in the ground.

"Does Cora live in a knoll?" Greta asks.

"Yes and no," I say.



"These hills, which are made of rocks and sand, are perfect for digging a den when it's time to raise a family. But if it's not the time of year for pups, there is no need to dig a home," I tell Greta.

I don't see a coyote den anywhere, so I soar higher to see if I can find Cora.

Because they're so well camouflaged, coyotes can be hard to see. Also, they are most active around dawn and dusk, times when Hickory Knolls is very quiet.

Finally, from a distance, I spot her sleeping under an oak tree. I don't want to wake her, so I fly down to meet Greta on the path.



A cartoon illustration of a brown owl with its arms crossed and a yellow beak, standing next to a green grasshopper with long antennae and a yellow belly. They are both smiling and standing on a brown patch of ground against a light yellow background.

"We still have several friends on the list, but let me tell you, if it was 50 years ago, we wouldn't be able to find many at all. Back then, humans used Hickory Knolls as a garbage dump!"

To understand how it got better, it's important to understand how it began.

"Oh, Harley, that sounds awful!"



"Not everything went away, though. Scattered along the gravel trails you can still find buttons, pieces of plates, bolts and other remnants that bounced off the vehicles – a reminder of how the land once was misused."

"That's quite a change – a change for the better, huh, Harley?" Greta asks.



Monkey House

Greta hops along the trail that leads us deeper into the woods.

She stops short. "This building looks quite out of place here, Harley."

"You're right, but it's a piece of history," I say.

"How are cinder blocks a piece of history?" Greta asks.

"This structure was the monkey house in a zoo that was here, almost 100 years ago," I tell her. The small zoo also had a bear, a wolf and a few other animals.



"Oh, I wish the monkeys were still here, Harley. They could swing from all these trees."



"Yes, but monkeys aren't native to this area like we are. Native means we came here without the help of humans.

"When nonnative animals or plants move in, they can threaten the health of our environment," I add. "Sometimes they take over, or they bring in germs that could make us sick.

"Plus, monkeys need a different set of conditions to survive, like warmer temperatures."

Greta looks disappointed, so I try to cheer her up.

"We may not have monkeys, but we do have flying squirrels! They are small, about the size of a chipmunk, and can glide about 150 feet between trees."

Greta is excited now. "I really, really want to see one and invite them to Callie's party!"

It will be hard since they are nocturnal, I tell her, but maybe we can invite Sammy the squirrel and Chucky the chipmunk, who I see down the path.

Seasons of Change



Sammy the squirrel and Chucky the chipmunk are munching on some seeds.

I say hello and invite them to Callie's party.

"I'd love to come. I'll bring some berries to share," Sammy says, raising up a pawful.

"Me too," chimes in Chucky.

As Sammy and Chucky scurry away, Greta asks: "Harley, what happens to Hickory Knolls in the winter?"



I tell her the land will temporarily change. "Most of the trees here will lose their leaves. The plants in the prairie will still be there, but the flowers on top will have turned to seeds. Some animals like Sammy will stay active, but other animals, like Chucky, will head underground. Deer roam the woods all winter, while skunks, raccoons and opossums come out on nights when it's not too cold."



"What about you, Harley? Where do you go in the winter?"

"I stay put. This land is beautiful in winter!"

We continue down the path, Greta hopping along the trail and I soaring above. "Do you know what I see, Greta? The ponds where our frog friends live!"

The Potholes

If you listen carefully in springtime, you can hear male frogs calling to meet females. Each one makes a different sound. Do you hear anyone today?

With my sharp eyes, I spot Spencer the spring peeper, Colin the chorus frog and Norman the northern leopard frog. In early spring, Spencer makes a squeaky "peep peep" sound. Colin's call sounds like a fingernail running across a comb. And Norman's call sounds like a throaty grunt or snore.

This wetland is the result of glaciers that melted and left deep holes. Fed by groundwater, these potholes support many aquatic plants and animals including – you guessed it – frogs!



"Hi, guys! We're having a party for Callie, when she emerges from her chrysalis as a monarch. Would you like to join us?" I ask.

"That sounds like fun, Harley! I love butterflies. They're like us in many ways," Spencer says.

"How so?" Greta asks.

Spencer begins: "Well, for one we both undergo metamorphosis and – ,"

Greta cuts him off: "Met ... a ... mor – what?"



"I know, it's a big word. Metamorphosis (meh-tuh-mor-fuh-sus) means we go through extreme changes.

"My frog friends and I were born tadpoles and stayed in the water until we became frogs, while caterpillars transform into moths and butterflies," Spencer explains.

"Because we live on land and in water, humans study us," Norman says.

"If we're doing well, the wetland is doing well," Colin adds.

"So you're helping humans know that the environment is healthy. That's awesome!" Greta exclaims.



Archery Woods

Greta and I gaze over the wild assortment of native plants.

"Oh, it's so beautiful, Harley!" Greta hops up to join the many pollinators buzzing and fluttering above. She indulges in a bit of green leaf, then hops back down, waving a wing at her new friends.



"What an amazing place! I think it's my favorite place in all of Hickory Knolls," she says.

"I think the humans who worked hard to restore this area would be happy you're enjoying it," I tell her.

Greta's intrigued. "Did this area undergo a dramatic change, too?"

"It went through a couple of changes. A long time ago, an archery club used to practice here with bows and arrows," I add.

"But the most recent change came when this land was overrun with nonnative species that did not let any other plants grow. Without native plants, our insect friends didn't have a lot of food or shelter.

"One day, Hickory Knolls staff started restoring this land. They planted all the flowers and grasses you see today, and look what happened!"

"I have yummy food to eat and friends to play with! It's the Best.Change.Ever!" Greta exclaims.

I smile and put my wing around Greta as we walk along the path.



Treasure Beneath Your Feet

While we all depend on one another, we also depend on one of Hickory Knolls' richest resources: groundwater. You can't see it, but it's here. In some areas it's far underground, but in other spots it's just below the surface. And sometimes you can see it bubbling up.

When I fly down to join Greta, she's standing on a mound of dirt looking in a tiny hole.

She looks at me. "I thought I could invite our ant friends to Callie's party."

"It does look like an ant hill, Greta, but it's actually a bee's nest," I say.

At that, she quickly jumps away. "Let's get outta here, Harley!"

"It's OK, Greta. These ground-nesting bees are shy. Females only sting if you try to harm them. Males don't sting at all. In fact, a lot of them don't even look like bees."



Just then a bright green bee emerges. "Hi there, I'm Ginny. Can I help you?"

"You sure can," Greta says. "I'm Greta and this is Harley, and we're having a party for our friend Callie the caterpillar. Would you like to come?"

"Sure! Thanks for inviting me," Ginny says.

"Would you mind bringing some honey?" Greta asks.

"I'd love to, but I don't actually make honey. I collect pollen and nectar and pollinate flowers along the way."

"When Callie's a butterfly, she'll drink nectar, too!" Greta says.



Carol's Wetland

As we approach the wetland, Greta's awestruck by the wondrous landscape. I tell her that, like many areas in Hickory Knolls, it was preserved by people who cared to make a difference. The effort was led by Carol Stevenson, who saw plants popping up among trash and coal ash. She and many others worked hard to make this land come alive again.

"And look what we have today!" I say as I soar above and see all of our friends surrounding Callie's chrysalis, ready to welcome her home.

Sure enough, Callie, no longer a caterpillar, slowly emerges. But then she doesn't fly away. She just hangs onto the chrysalis until she's ready to fly.



As we watch and wait, Greta whispers, "Thank you, Harley, for telling me how Hickory Knolls became our home."

"That's what friends are for," I tell her. "Now you, too, can share why we have trees, not trash; flying squirrels, not monkeys; and a prairie with unique plants and flowers –"

"And Callie! We have Callie the monarch butterfly!"

Just then Callie takes off on her first flight. We all cheer as she circles above.



As the party kicks off, Greta pulls me aside. "I realize I shouldn't be afraid of change, because change is what made Hickory Knolls our home," she says. "I can't imagine living anywhere else."

"I couldn't agree more, Greta," I nod and smile. "I couldn't agree more."



Thanks for coming on this adventure with me! I hope you enjoyed learning about Hickory Knolls as much as I enjoyed retelling the history of our land.

But our story doesn't end here. You can help keep it going by supporting the restoration work in Hickory Knolls, in parks and forest preserves—even your own neighborhood! Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Volunteer at a natural area workday.
- Become a citizen scientist and monitor frogs, butterflies, dragonflies ... many opportunities exist.
- Reduce your use of plastic, especially carryout containers, straws and other single-use items.
- Use bubbles instead of balloons at parties and other celebrations.
- Recycle bottles and cans.
- Organize a litter sweep in your neighborhood or local park.

Learn more by stopping inside the Discovery Center, or visiting stcnature.org.

Yours truly, *Harley*



This sign is part of the walk-and-read story, Hickory Knolls: A History of Our Home. The story starts on the trail across the road, west of the garden plots.