

# DISCOVERING **GIRDLED ROAD** RESERVATION

By Vince Urbanski, *Chief of Park Planning*


## **NEAR THE PAINESVILLE TOWNSHIP AND CONCORD TOWNSHIP**

border, at a spot in the woods that very closely represents the geographic center of Lake County, Big Creek contributes its waters to one of the finest Lake Erie tributaries, the Grand River. Big Creek begins its flow to the Grand in Hambden Township along the agricultural-suburban interface of northern Geauga County. Over the next 15 or so miles on its way to the Grand, Big Creek merges with such streams as Aylworth Creek, East Creek, Jordan Creek and Kellogg Creek. Several other unnamed seasonal streams cascade over shale or glacial till beds before meeting up with this substantial tributary.

Just as with its geographic location in Lake County, Big Creek lies at the heart of some of Lake Metroparks' past and present highlights. The park district's first park, Helen Hazen Wyman Park, is centered on the confluence of Kellogg Creek with Big Creek and Big Creek with the Grand River. At the opposite end

of the spectrum, the Big Creek drainage is home to one of our most recently opened parks—Chair Factory Falls. Finally, Big Creek winds more than two miles through Lake Metroparks' largest park, 932-acre Girdled Road Reservation.

Girdled Road Reservation, historically accessed from Radcliffe Road in the south and Girdled Road in the north, and now via Concord-Hambden Road (Rt. 608) at Skok Meadow, is one of the park district's most biologically diverse properties. Covered by a mosaic of woodland, meadow and wetland, the park is home to a wide variety of plants and animals. This year alone, 64 resident bird species, 38 butterflies, 18 mammals, 39 dragonflies and damselflies, 19 reptiles and amphibians and countless plant species have been documented in the park. Among these are a number of rare or endangered species including yellow-bellied sapsuckers, cerulean warblers, bobolinks and a shrub called hobblebush.



*A view of Big Creek in spring from the overlook at Girdled Road Reservation North.*

Big Creek has cut a deep gorge through the center of the park from south to north as have three sizable tributaries entering the main stream from the east. This geologic force has created a series of deeply incised stream valleys separated by peninsulas of dry uplands. This rollercoaster of topography has also necessitated the construction of a network of interesting trails ranging from easy, short and flat loops to strenuous, long, up-and-down stretches. In total, there are more than 7.5 miles of trails in the park including more than 1.5 miles added in 2010. There are very few, if any, other locations in Lake County where you can experience this quantity and quality of trails within a top-notch natural area.

With all that it already has to offer, Girdled Road Reservation is still evolving. This past summer, the park district completed the first phase of a planned multi-phase improvement to the western half of the park, known as Skok Meadow. This initial work involved the installation of a 20-car parking lot, a one-mile mowed grass trail, and access to a stocked fishing pond. Concurrently, a 20-acre meadow restoration (see *The Evolution of Skok Meadow* on pages 18-19) is underway in the former pasture. Future phases being contemplated include typical park amenities like a restroom and picnic shelter, along with further expansion of the trail network with the ultimate goal of linking the trails east and west of Big Creek via a pedestrian bridge or bridges. In addition, two overlook decks are in the works and will offer commanding views of the Big Creek valley and the restored meadow.

The Skok Meadow section of the park is also home to a restoration of one of Lake County's earliest barns, the Hosea Brown Barn. Built by one of Concord Township's first families, the barn harkens back to a time when the community's uplands were dominated by agriculture and Big Creek powered a number of mills within its valley (see *Hosea Brown's Barn* on pages 20-21).

Girdled Road Reservation's 932-plus acres have been pieced together over the last 45 years in a patient pursuit of a vision established by Lake Metroparks and Lake County planners. At the same time, improvements to the park continue to evolve. Here today are the goals of balancing public access to the most interesting areas the park has to offer, while still protecting the fine natural resources described above. Stay tuned and join us in expecting great(er) things to come.



## Girdled Road Reservation

### NORTH ENTRANCE:

12898 Girdled Road  
Concord Twp., Ohio 44077  
GPS Lon: 81° 10' 39.850" W • Lat: 41° 40' 4.641" N

### SOUTH ENTRANCE:

12899 Radcliffe Road  
Concord Twp., Ohio 44077  
GPS Lon: 81° 10' 28.605" W • Lat: 41° 38' 29.009" N

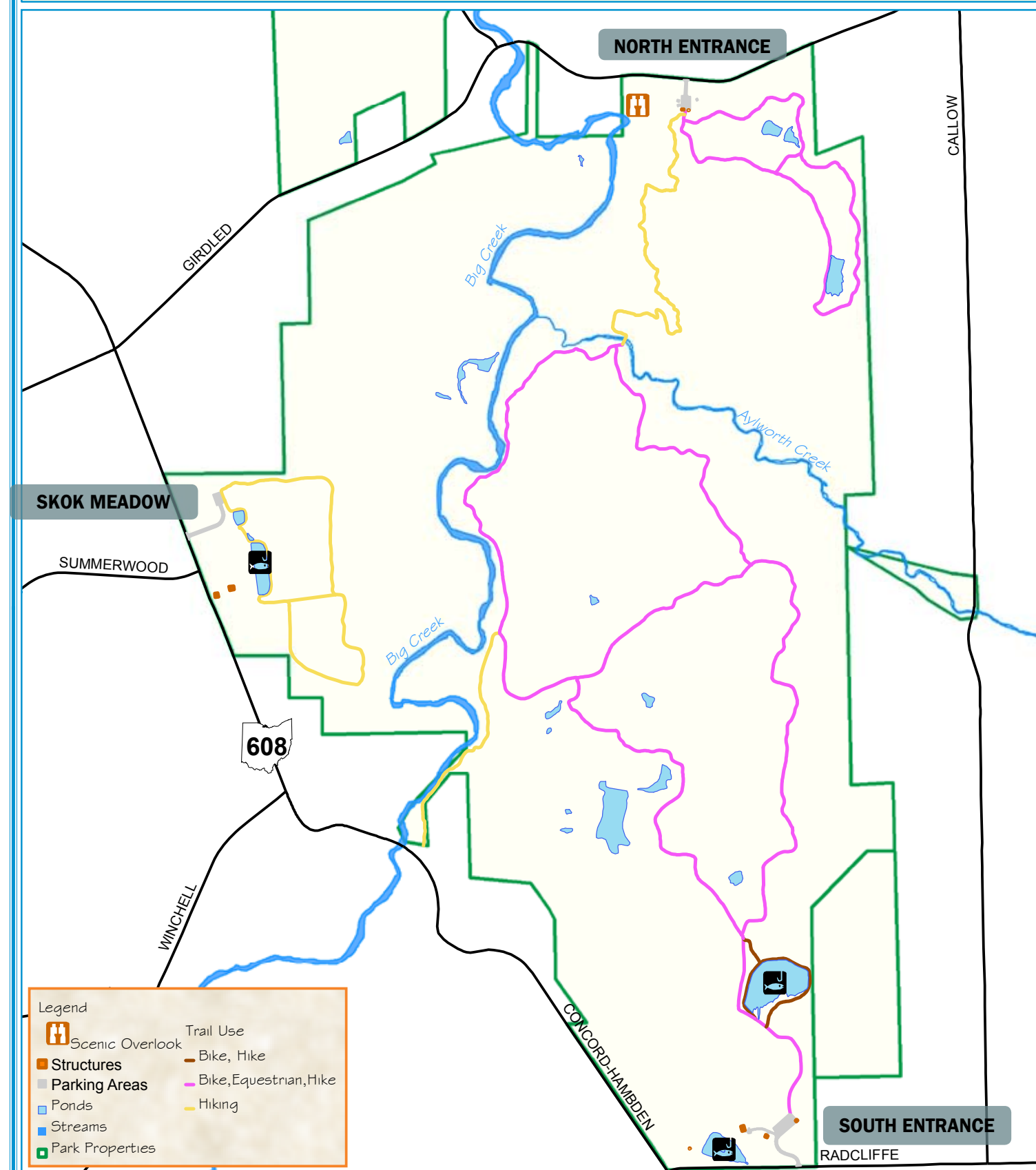
### SKOK MEADOW ENTRANCE:

12415 Concord Hambden Road (Rt.608)  
Concord Twp., Ohio 44077  
GPS Lon: 81° 11' 39.108" W • Lat: 41° 39' 25.203" N

- Hours: Sunrise to sunset.
- Amenities: 932 acres. Picnic areas with grills. Picnic shelter (south). Drinking water (north), restrooms. Over seven miles of hiking trails. Playground (south). Fishing. Cross-country skiing. Ball/game fields (south).

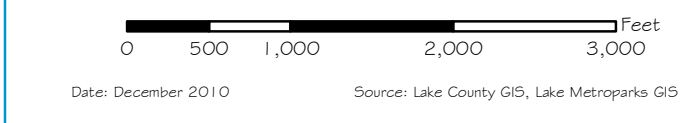
Girdled Road Reservation was purchased by Lake Metroparks in 1965. It is named for the first road the early European settlers built from the Pennsylvania line to the new city of Cleveland in the early 1800s. A small path was cut first. Settlers knew that a larger road was needed, so they "girdled" the trees along the path. (Girdling a tree means cutting through the bark around the entire tree. This cuts off the flow of nutrients so the tree dies. Once a tree dies, it is much easier to remove it and thus widen the road.) Today the remaining section of Girdled Road is the northern boundary of this park.

## Girdled Road Reservation



**Legend**

Scenic Overlook	<b>Trail Use</b>
Structures	Bike, Hike
Parking Areas	Bike, Equestrian, Hike
Ponds	Hiking
Streams	
Park Properties	



This map is intended for use as a reference. All boundaries and locations are approximate. The information depicted was obtained from various government and proprietary sources. This map is believed to be accurate as of the publication date, but no warranty or guarantee on any park is given or implied.

the evolution of

# SKOK MEADOW

Article and photos by Tom Adair, *Natural Resource Manager*

**FOR MUCH OF THE LAST CENTURY**, the property now called Skok Meadow had been in agricultural production. This area, situated along Girdled Road Reservation's western boundary, was home to prized cattle and a large expanse of cool season grasses on which they would graze. Today, the site is Girdled Road Reservation's newest park entrance and home to a roughly 30-acre grassland complex perched just above the Big Creek Valley.

Pasture lands all across Ohio are being left to revert back to old field areas as once larger farmsteads are sold off and broken into smaller parcels for development. If residential development pressure does not consume these lands, they can spend successive decades "growing up." This form of vegetative succession can result in an increase in plant and animal biodiversity over time. Agricultural lands represent an important piece in the regional habitat puzzle. These areas are utilized by grassland specialists such as bobolinks, meadowlarks and numerous butterfly species. Land that is in active agricultural production can sometimes have a diminished value to wildlife as a result of interruptions by multiple hay cuttings that destroy nesting habitat. An intact and largely uninterrupted open meadow habitat is an increasingly important habitat type for these plant and wildlife populations.

Lake Metroparks has decided to take an active approach to enhancing the habitat at Skok Meadow. Allowing the former pasture to revert back to meadow on its own would eventually result in a more diverse plant community, however this would be a relatively slow process. Our plan is to establish a mix of warm season grasses and forbs (flowering plants) on the site within a period of five to seven years, with periodic management.

Beginning in the summer of 2010 and continuing into the fall, several herbicide applications were made to nearly 22 acres of the total 30-acre grassland complex. These applications of a low

persistence herbicide were completed so that existing cool season weeds were eliminated from the site. The elimination of these existing plants set the stage by creating appropriate conditions for a seeding finished in November 2010.

Lake Metroparks used herbicide rather than tillage practices so that we would not disturb the underlying seedbank, which could lead to greater competition for the young meadow seedlings that will begin to emerge in spring 2011. The practice also leaves the soil layer intact and reduces the potential for the erosion that often accompanies tillage practices. This was an important management consideration for a site directly adjacent to the Big Creek Valley and watershed.

Lake Metroparks contracted with Ohio Prairie Nursery (Hiram, Ohio) to create two custom seed blends and carry out the planting of the seed. One seed blend was mixed to accommodate the dryer, upland areas and the other was more suited to the persistently wet areas of the meadow. Each blend contains a mixture of dozens of grasses and forbs that should result in a highly diverse meadow over time. The upland mix contained grasses like Indian Grass as well as a variety of forbs including Purple Coneflower and Black-eyed Susan. The wet areas will give rise to plants like Big Bluestem, Brown Fox Sedge, Ohio Spiderwort and Grey-headed Coneflower.

A dormant season planting was completed in November 2010 by Ohio Prairie Nursery using a no-till seed drill over most of the area (areas that remained too wet at the time of seeding were planted by manually broadcasting the seed). The no-till method ensures that the seed is drilled down to the appropriate depth to spend the winter preparing itself for eventual spring germination and emergence. In addition to reducing soil erosion, no-till seeding conserves moisture already present in the seedbed and also requires less time and fuel than traditional tillage-based practices.



herbicide



filling drill with seed blends

Within the next few years the field will begin to show an emerging mosaic of the seeded grasses and forbs. In time, any gaps will begin to fill in as seeds drop from the established plants and the establishing plants begin to spread out. Throughout this period, Lake Metroparks staff will monitor the vegetative succession and manage any invasive or unwanted species that may be present. By the third year of the meadow establishment, fire will be applied as a management tool by burning the meadow and then continuing to burn on a three to five year rotational basis. Grasslands coevolved with disturbances like fire and many of the plant species are stimulated by periodic burns. In addition to promoting the desirable plant species, these controlled burns tend to discourage the growth and establishment of competing cool season weeds.

The eventual progression from a field predominated by several cool season weed species to the establishment of a biologically diverse meadow habitat with dozens of representative grasses and flowering plants is a slow and unpredictable process if nature takes its own course. With a little planning and some human intervention, we can urge that progression along slightly. In the end, we arrive at a similar place, but taking an active role can allow more generations to witness the ecological benefits of these dynamic habitats—more birders witnessing their first spring migration, more children seeing their first Praying Mantis climbing a Goldenrod stalk and perhaps, more people willing to mimic these same habitats in their own backyards!

no-till seed drill on tractor



# Hosea Brown's Barn

By Andy Baker, Farmpark Administrator

**AROUND 1817, REVOLUTIONARY WAR VETERAN** Oliver Brown, his wife Gracy and son Hosea moved to Concord, Ohio with Hosea's young family. Within a year of arriving they framed up a house and barn, felling the tall straight poplars to hew into posts and beams. As they cleared the land, logs were hauled to a local water powered sawmill on nearby Big Creek to provide boards and planks. Their three-bay "English" style barn provided housing for grain, hay and livestock, serving the needs of the diversified style of farming that Oliver and Hosea transplanted from New England to the uplands of what would become Lake County.

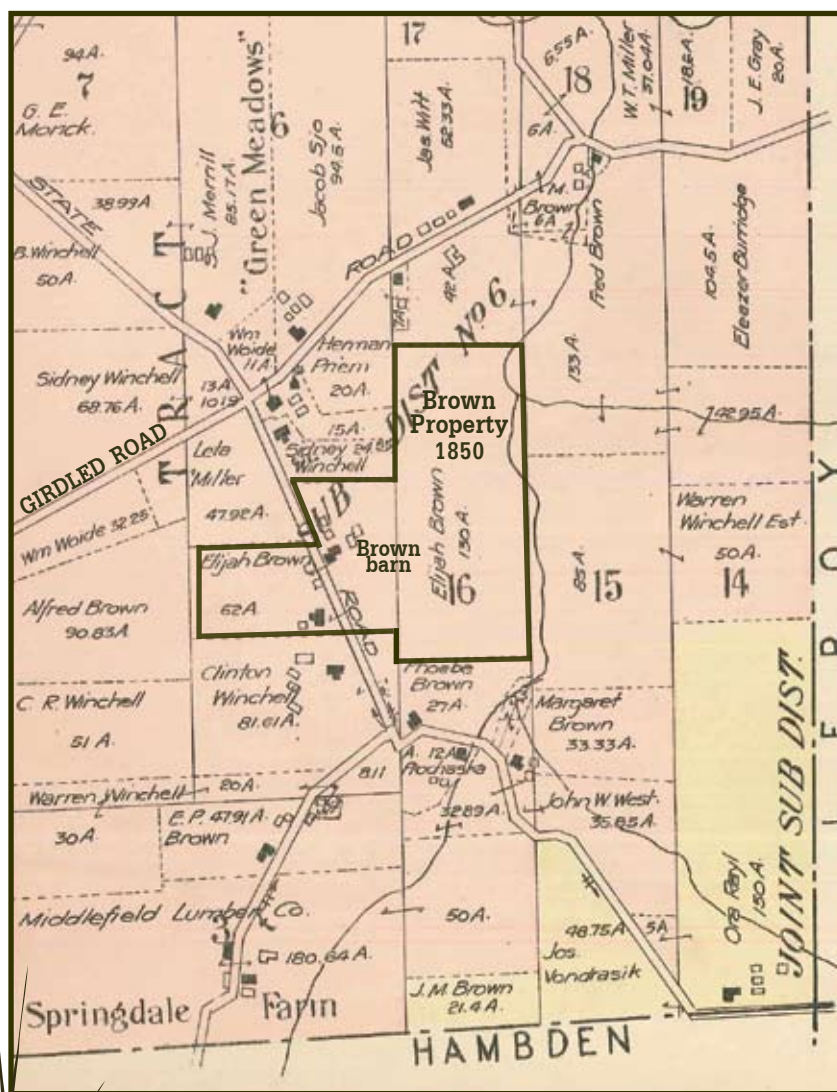
Hosea and Oliver laid out their 32' by 42' barn with the main door in the longer side wall. The central drive or threshing bay had large double doors on both ends and was floored with thick planks. The narrower east bay was set aside as a cow stable. At the south end of the east bay, a small door allowed entrance for humans and cattle. The 19' deep west bay was used primarily for storing hay. Lofts above the main drive and the cow stables were used to store grain and hay. Two small framed buildings were built to house dried corn on the cob and threshed out grains.

Five years after his father Oliver died, Hosea listed four horses, a team of oxen and seven milk cows on the 1850 Census. He raised 35 tons of hay, 20 bushels of wheat and 55 bushels of oats and 100 bushels of corn. Other more temporary structures may have housed his 25 other cattle, 25 sheep and four swine.

*A few old barns can still be picked out on the Lake County landscape. Many are now surrounded by houses or shopping centers. With their primary task accomplished (that of housing the crops and livestock of early Western Reserve farmers), they were gradually abandoned. Every year a few more succumb to rotting sills or the moisture eating away beneath a leaky roof or are torn down to make way for progress.*

The Brown family continued to farm the property into the early 1900s. By the time Hosea's grandson Fred died in 1926, parts of the property had begun a slow return to woodland. Hosea's great grandson Elijah H. (then superintendent of Harding High School) was an ardent conservationist, a member of the Audubon society and a founder of the Blackbrook Audubon Club. He set aside 200 acres of land for the scouts and nature clubs to use for camping and nature study.

After Elijah died in 1953 without any heirs, the property was purchased by Arthur and Gladys Buschmann who revived the farm as a stock farm to raise beef cattle. In 2002, after the death of Gladys Buschmann, Lake Metroparks purchased the property. By that time the barn, altered many times in its 185 years, needed attention.



1915. Much of the Brown land is now part of Lake Metroparks Girdled Road Reservation.



In 2007, Lake Metroparks hired a local timber framing specialist, Scott Carlson to evaluate the barn. Structural problems were evident and other unseen areas of rot lurked where decades of grass and grain seeds had encouraged burrowers or held in moisture to begin the rotting process. The sills, affected by proximity to the ground moisture had mostly disappeared. It was obvious that restoring the barn would require deconstruction and then reconstruction. Knowledge that this was the oldest documented barn in the county added incentive to the undertaking. In 2008, the construction firm, Union Industrial Construction, took down the old frame, repaired old beams, hewed new ones and erected the restored barn frame on its original foundation stones in its original location.

Today the restored barn stands alone on the landscape in mute testimony to the story of those settlers who came to clear the land and settle Lake County. Over the years, the connection of the Brown family to the land evolved into a conservation ethic that helped launch the process that now preserves the land for future generations of Lake County residents. Today, Lake Metroparks is restoring the old fields to traditional grasses and providing access across the property with trails. Standing in the doorway of the newly restored barn, one can look to the east across the new meadow and get an appreciation for the view that Hosea Brown may have had almost 200 years ago.



photo by Tom Adair