Optimist Community Park Interpretive Guide

 # 1 Northern mesic forest: This forest community occurs throughout northern Wisconsin on upland sites with well-balanced soil moisture ("mesic" means moderate moisture), commonly identified as Wisconsin's "north woods". Tree species here include sugar maple, basswood, white ash, white birch, American and red elm, red oak, red maple and white cedar. The ash have, unfortunately, been lost to emerald ash borers. The Janesville Optimist clubs sponsored this zone, the first to be planted in the park, in 1994. The Janesville Optimist Club members raised the funds to purchase the trees by selling candy bars! Native wildflowers were added here in 2019.

 # 2 Southern dry forest: This forest community occurs throughout southern Wisconsin on well-drained sites with sandy or thin soils. These forests have been historically dominated by oaks, including red, white, black, northern pin and bur oaks. Other tree species found in this community include black cherry, red elm, shagbark and bitternut hickory and black walnut. This zone was sponsored by the recently opened Janesville Home Depot in 2000, whose employees helped with the first planting.

 # 3 Southern mesic forest: This forest community occurs throughout southern Wisconsin on upland sites with well-balanced moisture ("mesic" means moderate moisture). The dominant tree species here include red and white oak, black walnut, white ash, sugar maple, basswood, American and red elm, shagbark and bitternut hickory, butternut and black cherry. This zone was sponsored by the Craig and Parker High Schools FFA club, who planted the first trees in 1998. An additional section was added to the east end this zone in 2023, after an adjacent area of undesirable trees was cleared. The newer plantings were sponsored by the Janesville Urban Forest Alliance.

 # 4 Durr Interpretation Area: This area was established in 2009 with a donation from the Robert Fulton family in honor of Ken and Naomi Durr, Robert's grandparents. The eight tree stump seats represent the octagon symbol of the Optimist organization. A picture of Ken and Naomi is in the center of the octagon. This location was selected because it is the quietest spot in the park. Groups are encouraged to gather here to study the park's plants and animals, and to enjoy the peaceful sound of the babbling water flowing in Blackhawk Creek.

 # 5 Shortgrass (dry mesic to dry) Prairie: In Wisconsin (particularly in southern Wisconsin), prairies were one of the most common and widespread plant communities in presettlement times. These plant communities are dominated by grasses and forbes (forbes are broad-leaved, non-woody flowering plants), with few trees and shrubs. They were maintained by frequent fires, mostly set by Native Americans, for the purposes of attracting game species (to the fresh, nutritious plant growth following the fires) or to disrupt neighboring tribes encroaching on their territory. This area is an example of a "shortgrass" prairie. The dominant grasses in these prairies are little bluestem and side-oats grama. The most common forbes of the shortgrass prairie are butterfly milkweed, rough blazing star, pale purple coneflower, rigid goldenrod and various asters and sunflowers. At Optimist Park, there were remnants of good quality shortgrass prairie existing on the hillside abutting the subdivision on the north edge of the park. Several prescribed burns were conducted in the 1990s, in an effort to maintain these rare remnants, but the logistics of navigating the property line and neighbor relations became too cumbersome to continue this practice. Most of this area is converting trees and brush. During the winter of 2022-23, a previously undeveloped portion of the parked was cleared by the City of Janesville of the large, non-native trees that had invaded. Invasive woody brush was also mowed and sprayed in this

section. Finally, local volunteers on a United Way “Day of Caring” did the final clean up of tree tops and brush to prepare the area for seeding. A new shortgrass prairie was planted in the spring of 2024. A grassy mowed buffer around the prairie will allow it to be maintained using periodic prescribed burns. This zone was sponsored by the Rock River Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever and the Janesville Optimist clubs.

 # 6 Northern dry forest: This forest community occurs throughout northern Wisconsin on upland sites with well-drained soils on outwash sands and glacial lake beds. These forests have been historically dominated by pines, with several hardwood species in association. The dominant tree species here include white, red and jack pines, red, bur and white oak, red maple and trembling and large-toothed aspen. This zone was sponsored by Elizabeth Loomis. The trees were planted starting in 1996.

 # 7 Northern lowland forest: This forest community occurs in portions of northern Wisconsin with fluctuating water tables and moist to poorly-drained soils, either within river floodplains or swamps (historic lake beds). These forests are known as tamarack-black spruce bogs, white cedar-balsam fir conifer swamps and black ash-yellow birch-hemlock hardwood swamps. The tree species found in these communities include black spruce, white cedar, balsam fir, tamarack, hemlock, yellow birch, black ash, red maple and American mountain ash. A number of these species have proven difficult to establish in the well-drained soils at Optimist Park. Before these trees were planted, this area was infested with boxelder trees. A Wisconsin Conservation Corps crew cleared these weed trees in the winter of 1996-97, under the direction of the Janesville Parks Department. The first tree planting occurred in 1997 and was sponsored by the Janesville Optimist clubs.

 # 8 Blackhawk Creek: Blackhawk Creek flows through Optimist Park from east to west. When the Park was first established in the early 1990s, this creek only flowed during seasonal high-water events, and the creek bed was dry much of the year. Changes in water restrictions upstream, and changes to our climate, have resulted in a stream which now flows year-round. This reliable water source now supports populations of fish, amphibians and insects, and has improved the wildlife habitat diversity at the park. The wildlife in and around Optimist Park rely on this water source for food and drink. Herons, ducks, muskrats, mink and deer are common visitors to this creek. Most of the streambank areas are choked by invasive shrubs (honeysuckle and common buckthorn) and Siberian elms. Future plans are to eliminate these undesirable species, and replace them with native grasses, forbes and shrubs that will stabilize the streambanks and provide wildlife food and cover.

 # 9 Southern lowland forest: This forest community occurs in portions of southern Wisconsin with fluctuating water tables and moist, poorly-drained soils, either within river floodplains or swamps (historic lake plains). Tree species common in this community include silver maple, American and red elm, cottonwood, green, white and black ash, river and yellow birch, swamp white oak, basswood, bitternut hickory and Kentucky coffeetree. The ash trees have, unfortunately, been lost to emerald ash borers. This zone was sponsored by Karate America. Employees and students of Karate America helped to purchase and plant the first trees here in 1995. An additional section was added to the east end this zone in 2023, after an adjacent area of undesirable trees was cleared. The new plantings were sponsored by the Janesville Urban Forest Alliance.

 # 10 Sidewalk prairie: This area, between the sidewalk and the Blackhawk Creek culverts, was planted in 2019 to prairie grasses and forbes (forbes are broad-leaved, non-woody flowering plants) by the Junior Optimist Club from Craig High School. The seed and plants were purchased by the Optimist Park fund.

 # 11 Conifer buffer: This area does not replicate any native community, but it was planted to create a physical and visual buffer between the playfield to the south, and the creek and walking trails north of the creek. This allows those enjoying a peaceful nature hike, and those enjoying a rousing soccer or la crosse game, to coexist. The trees planted here include white pine, white spruce and white cedar. These trees were planted in 1996 by students from Harrison Elementary School.

 # 12 Raised Walkway: Since it is not legal to install a footbridge over a navigable waterway, the Optimists and the Craig High School Junior Optimist Club funded the installation of this "raised walkway" in 2002 to provide access for equipment to areas north of the creek. This required planning from the City of Janesville Engineering Department, and permits from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Army Corps of Engineers. When installed, the walkway was above water and dry for most of the year, but would allow for the free flow of water during high water periods. These days, the walkway is often under water. Beware if you try to cross! You will likely get wet feet AND the algae growth on the concrete can make it VERY SLIPPERY! We strongly recommend following the trail to the west on the north side of the creek and crossing the creek on the sidewalk along Wuthering Hills Drive when water is flowing over the walkway.

 # 13 Oak Savanna: In Wisconsin (particularly in southern Wisconsin), oak savannas were one of the most common and widespread plant communities in presettlement times. Savannas are described as communities dominated by grassland mixed with forbes (forbes are broad-leaved, non-woody flowering plants), but containing scattered "groves" of trees, especially bur oaks. These trees tend to exhibit open-grown silhouettes and thick-ridged bark, able to survive the frequent fires that maintained these communities. The trees were donated and planted in 2002 by the Janesville Shade Tree Advisory Committee. The grasses and forbs were donated and planted by the Rock River Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever and the Blackhawk Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation. The grasses are maintained through periodic prescribed burns, conducted by City of Janesville staff.

 # 14 Tallgrass (mesic and wet mesic) Prairie: In Wisconsin (particularly in southern Wisconsin), prairies were one of the most common and widespread plant communities in presettlement times. These plant communities are dominated by grasses and forbes (forbes are broad-leaved, non-woody flowering plants), with few trees and shrubs. They were maintained by frequent fires, mostly set by Native Americans, for the purposes of attracting game species (to the fresh, nutritious plant growth following the fires) or to disrupt neighboring tribes encroaching on their territory. This is an example of a "tallgrass" prairie. The dominant grasses in these prairies were big bluestem, Indiangrass and switchgrass. The most common forbes of the tallgrass prairie are yellow coneflower, bergamot, purple coneflower, various asters and goldenrods, various silphium species and rattlesnake master. The tallgrass prairie at Optimist Park has some representation of all of these species, although a few are rare. This zone was planted around 1997 and sponsored by the Rock River Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever.

 # 15 Old Conifers: This section of the park consists of an area of older planted conifers including red pine, white pine, scotch pine and Norway spruce. This 5 acre parcel was donated to the City of Janesville as part of an agreement allowing the development of the condominium tracts to the south along Ruger Avenue, bringing Optimist Park to its current size of 40 acres. Boxelder and other hardwood tree species are filling into the areas where the red pine are dying out. Future plans are to supplement this area with more desirable, long-lived tree species.

 # 16 Optimist Corner: The corner of Wuthering Hills Drive and Ruger Avenue marks the main entrance to Optimist Community Park. Our Park sign and the surrounding landscaping has been maintained and improved periodically through Eagle Scout projects (among many Eagle Scout projects that have improved this Park). Two trees planted behind the sign represent the two Janesville Optimist Clubs that originally adopted this park. The eight crabapple trees planted in a semi-circle behind the park sign represent the octagonal Optimist logo and the eight points of Optimism: youth development, community engagement, optimism, global impact, philanthropy and giving, leadership development, character building, and fostering a positive environment. The picnic shelter was installed by the Optimists in 2015 in honor of Conrad Schepp, a longtime, dedicated Janesville Optimist. A large rock, commemorating the contributions of Larry Altreuter, known as "Mr. Optimist", is located near the shelter. Please take a moment to read the Optimist Creed on the rock. We hope it inspires you as much as it inspires us!

Altreuter field was developed in cooperation between the Optimists and the City of Janesville. The objective of this large, open grassy area is to invite the citizens of Janesville to come and play! Events held here include soccer and la crosse, the Optimist Classic cross-country meet, Movies in the Park, and star gazing events. Organized events need to be scheduled through the Janesville Leisure Services office. If there is no scheduled event, feel free to fly a kite, throw around a ball (no golf balls, please) or run with the wind!

Numerous benches throughout Optimist Park have been installed in honor or memory of Optimist members and their families. Optimist volunteers continue to maintain and improve this park, by mowing, pruning, planting, and adding benches, and bird and bat houses.