History of Rayburn-Purnell Woods

This woodland is an old-growth oak-hickory forest. Some of the trees are believed to be over 175 years old!

The land was designated as a “woodlot” in the early 1900s for the purpose of providing lumber and fuel for woodstoves. Because it was set aside, it has never been farmed, and so many of the original wildflower species still grow here.

After being acquired by the Forest Preserves, it was named after the Rayburn and Purnell families of Mahomet, who previously owned the woods.

Forests originally covered 20% of Champaign County, most of them along rivers. (The other 80% was open prairie.)

These forests were important to Native Americans and settlers because they provided shelter from the wind and sun of the prairie, as well as food, wood, and other resources.
Welcome!
This fall nature hike will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes and is roughly 0.5 miles long.
Enjoy your hike!

Joe Pye Weed
*Blooms: Summer*
One of the tallest woodland wildflowers, this plant's flowers are very attractive to butterflies. The large leaves grow in whorls of 3-4 on sturdy green stems four to seven feet tall. Its seed heads persist well into winter, adding interest to winter gardens.

White Snakeroot
*Blooms: Summer*
Once incorrectly believed to be a treatment for snakebite, white snakeroot is actually poisonous. People who drink milk from cows fed on this plant can develop a disease called milk sickness, because the toxins from the plant transfer to the milk.

Black Squirrels
Black (or melanistic) squirrels can be seen at Lake of the Woods. These squirrels are actually Eastern Grey Squirrels (*Sciurus carolinensis*) that have extra melanin, a pigment, in their fur.

Squirrel Nest
Large round leafy balls in tree branches are squirrel nests. They are made of leaves and twigs, and lined inside with shredded plant material. They can be waterproof and are used primarily in warm weather or by young squirrels.

Footbridge & Creek
Underneath the footbridge, an intermittent creek flows - usually it only has water flowing in it in the spring, and after rainstorms the rest of the year.
The water in the creek flows to the Sangamon River, just a short distance away.
Tracks, such as this deer track, can often be found in the mud.

Poison Ivy
*Blooms: Summer*
This plant can grow as a shrub, low spreading vine, or as a climbing vine. Deer, rabbits, and some moth caterpillars feed on the leaves, and birds eat the fruits. The highly variable leaves often have ‘thumbs.’ Vines growing up tree trunks are covered by coarse brown hairs. Oils of this plant cause blisters on human skin.

Wild Black Cherry
*Leaves: Alternate, pointed tip, Bark: Like ‘burnt potato chips’*
The fruits ripen in August-September, and are eaten by a variety of wildlife and birds. All other parts of the tree, however, are poisonous, including the cherry pits. The wood has a rich red color, and is often used in woodworking projects.