



# Big Branch Marsh NWR

*“I go to nature to be soothed and healed,  
and to have my senses put in order.”*

*- John Burroughs*



by Hilary Creamer

MONDAY MORNINGS SEEM to always come with a pang of anxiety for me. Beginning on Sunday evening, I start feeling the uneasiness of the imminent week's challenges, causing sleeplessness and zapping away my last precious weekend moments. So, a few years ago, I started "Self-care Sunday," where I do at least one thing meant to calm those pesky future what-if's and >>



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reconnect myself to the present—things like taking a bubble bath and having a facial, cooking a new recipe or just allowing myself time to be creative. Admittedly, it was a fairly Millennial thing for this Gen-Xer. But you know what? It helped.

To add to my list of ataraxic activities, I've decided to “branch” out of my pandemic cave and enlist the help of nature. Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in Lacombe was a great place to start my journey. The refuge has a lot to offer, with trails, events and a beautiful Visitors Center. But what I needed most was to just coddiwomple around and let nature take the wheel.

I first saw the Bayou Gardens, located at the Refuge Headquarters, a few years ago when I attended an open house event to showcase the 110-acre site with its impressive number and variety of camellias. The best time to see the blooms is December-March; it seems a blessing to have such bold colors at a time when nature is at its most dreary. Magenta, white, pale pink, red, striped—each is lovelier than the last. With hundreds of species and thousands of hybrids, one could spend a lifetime in the study of all things camellia. But, along with the bees, I'm just here on a clear and sunny winter day to admire them.

The next stop on my woodland vagary was Boy Scout Road, another part of the Refuge's 18,000 acres on the northshore of Lake Pontchartrain. Here, several trail options exist, but I decided on the self-guided boardwalk trail that is just under a half-mile long, leaving the longer 2-mile (one way) gravel road trek for the next visit. And during this visit, the wildlife and I had the marsh to ourselves.

Without the usual daily distractions (I'm talking about



you, smartphone), it's easy to let my senses take the stage. A vast blue sky and towering pines set the scene, and there's an orchestra of wind through the saw grass, with woodnotes of egrets and woodpeckers. The low marshy waters are spotted with water lilies, wood ducks and turtles sunning on logs. I took my time letting the story unfold, strolling the boardwalk and stopping to read the educational placards on the diverse habitat along the way. The clean air and natural environment felt lightyears from my life's routine the past two years, but it's really just a few miles away. Another tool for me to use when my body and mind need alignment.

Knowing what awaited me at the end of the trail (responsibilities of the upcoming week, sprinkled with a few of life's fun little pop-up surprises), I felt better equipped to take it all in stride because I had given something to myself first. And it was a lot better than a bubble bath. 🌲

To find more information on Big Branch Marsh NWR, visit [https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Big\\_Branch\\_Marsh/](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Big_Branch_Marsh/).

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