



GREEN
EARTH

Blue River Wonder Walk

As the Blue River winds through Swope Park it does a good job of hiding. But it can be spotted from the historic suspension bridge, or “Swinging Bridge,” in the Kansas City Zoo, between the black mangabey monkey exhibit and the saddle-billed storks. The bridge has been a postcard-worthy attraction since the earliest days of the park. Another river view is from the Mane Street Bridge between the elephant exhibit and the Equator gift shop. Bold signage on the perimeter fence provides visitors with information about the river below. However, these crossings come with the price of admission. The view of the Blue River from this Wonder Walk is completely free. If you are driving, enter Swope Park and follow signs for the Lakeside Nature Center. Take a right on Mall Drive, a right on Elmwood, a left on Gregory Boulevard, and the next left onto an unmarked street (Crest Drive). You can park somewhere under the trees. If you arrived at Swope Park on the RideKC Bus 18, the last stop for the zoo is close to the start of this walk.

The first unavoidable landmark is an unbelievably large pile of tires. (1) Car, truck, tractor, whitewall, many still covered with mud, all of these tires were pulled out of the Blue River throughout the spring of 2018. The pile is the result of hundreds of hours of work by dozens of volunteers working on Project Blue River Rescue sponsored by the Healthy Rivers Partnership. The pile is hard evidence that the river has been neglected and exploited for years. However, it is also proof that stewardship can make a mountain of difference. Google “Swope Park Tire Pile” if you arrive to find the tires have been carted off. If you want to find some tires yourself, you can zoom in on the Blue River using Google Maps set to satellite view. Follow the banks of the river through Swope Park and you will see dozens of tires stuck in the mud like Cheerios in chocolate milk. It is hard to imagine that a single tire in a river can be seen from outer space.

As you head towards Gregory Boulevard you will notice the hill to your right is under construction. (2) It is the future site of the Kansas City Campus for Animal Care and will be the third largest no-kill animal shelter in the United States. At Gregory Road, take a left and slowly walk over the Gregory Boulevard Bridge. (3) The 700-foot bridge was completed in 1917 and consists of a series of vaulting cement arches over a freight line and the Blue River. It was monumental enough to be a postcard for decades. Traffic is steady but there are sidewalks on both sides. At dawn the view of the lush riparian landscape is stunning and a bird watcher's paradise. (4)

After the bridge turn into the parking lot for the dog run and if you like watching dogs more than birds you are in luck. (5) A road continues out of the parking lot and towards a nursery surrounded by a ten-foot deer fence. These deer can jump! There has been a nursery on this site for over 100 years. (6) An old paved lot surrounds the nursery and is used for storing gravel, sand, woodchips, cinderblocks and a host of very random cast-offs. Pieces of twisted iron, a broken basketball hoop, a giant tractor tire filled with cement; it is like the Isle of Misfit Sculpture. (7) Plants and small trees grow in perfect rows from every crack: mullein, goldenrod, aster, chicory, thistle, poplar saplings, and native grasses, among others. The main attraction is a young sycamore that looks like a candle flame growing out of a narrow crack in the center of the sun-scorched pavement. The small tree exudes magic with its symmetry, vivid color and tenacity. (8) As you continue east a few majestic oak trees are holding court over the floodplain. (9) The Blue River is just out of sight through the woods and it forms a dramatic oxbow around this entire landscape before meandering back into the zoo.

Loop back toward the dog park and walk over the opposite side of the bridge. Take the first left toward the parking lot of the Lakeside Nature Center. (10) The building opened in 1999 and is an important pilgrimage site for every grade school science class in Kansas City. However, for an adult visiting for the first time, it is worth a visit. They have a number of live animal exhibits, terrariums, aquariums, and vitrines filled with curiosities (not to mention bathrooms, a water fountain and air conditioning). Every year the Center rehabilitates over 3,500 animals! A painting of Vicky, the late Harlan's Hawk and longtime education bird, hangs over the front desk.

From the front of the building look for signs for Fox Hollow Trail near the picnic table pavilion. (11) If you have time for a quick detour take the Limestone Trail for up-close encounters with formations of Bethany Falls Limestone. (12) Miniature spruce forests seem to be growing in the deep rocky crevices, but these delicate little formations are actually calcium deposits tinted green with algae. A postcard of Swope Park from 1910 features children playing on similar formations near a spring. A map of the park from 1911 notes the location of seven springs and three rock formations. The springs were likely sources of drinking water and rock formations were often tourist attractions in the early twentieth century.

The Fox Hollow Trail (red on the posted maps) is two miles of twists and turns and an “Easy-Out Trail” at the midway point. The trail edges along Fox Hollow Creek and provides easy access to the rocky creek bed. (13) From July to November the creek flows only after a big rain. Otherwise it is dry with the occasional deep pool. Curious things can be found among the stones. One unnerving reality is that even on this tiny creek in the middle of a forest in the middle of a 1,805-acre park, plastic is a problem. The roots and pools under fallen trees along the creek are a tangle of bags, bottles and Styrofoam. The refuse is on its long journey from the side of the road to the open ocean. A thunderstorm will pick up the litter on a street and wash it down a storm drain into the creek. It may linger here for a season or two before a strong flow pushes it into the Blue River, down to the Missouri, and then it is smooth sailing to the Gulf of Mexico. But try to stay positive.

If you are the first person to hike the trail on a summer morning you will need a spider stick. Any outdoors-loving Missourian will likely be familiar with such a tool. Every night the resident yellow and black garden spiders provide the service of bug removal and their webs can extend fully across the trail. However, if you are the second person to hike the trail, the work has been done. Most of the spider webs are built a safe distance from the path and they are one of the hidden wonders of this walk. The exquisite circular webs are illuminated against the dark shadowy trees by the morning sun shining through the canopy. They refract light like prisms and resemble cosmic drawings suspended in the empty space between branches. One of the most spectacular landmarks is near the start of the trail, at the bottom of the hill, almost in view of the bridge you just crossed. (14) There is a cluster of four massive sycamores growing at the edge of the creek. They photograph like dark highways heading into a green sky. Other enormous sycamores can be found at different points along the creek.

On my last visit I was walking slowly on the dry creek bed and paused to look for fish in a pool of dark water. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed two young bucks walking a short distance ahead and two others studying me from the bank while nibbling grass. I stood perfectly still and watched. The subtle sounds of the forest grew sharper; the birdsong was fading as the July sun worked away the cool air. Suddenly there was what sounded like an explosion in the water just a step away from where I was standing. I jumped out of my skin only to find a walnut bobbing up and down in the small pool behind me. I'm sure the deer had something to do with it.

The great thing about the Fox Hollow Trail is that at times it feels as though you were in a deep endless forest. The small riverine valley is the very definition of a hollow. (15) The constant twists and turns make the trail disorienting but try to relish the feeling of being lost. It is a rare thrill in this day of smartphone navigation. And take comfort in knowing that the trail is only two miles long and in a few moments you will reach the other side of the Lakeside Nature Center.

Confluencing

A confluence is the point where two rivers come together. It seems like a simple idea until one reflects on how rivers have served as the pathways and boundaries of civilizations throughout history. A confluence is a place where you can stand and know for certain others have stood for centuries. The joining of waters can symbolize so much in the life of a person or family. And they are usually great places to fish. I daydream about a future where confluences everywhere are protected and made accessible. The confluence of the Kansas and Missouri Rivers is a celebrated historic site with interpretive signs and monuments, but the confluence of the Blue and the Missouri is off-limits to the public. The headwaters of the Blue River at the confluence of Coffee and Wolf Creeks are also inaccessible. To really know a place takes a lifetime and multiple layers of experience. But what I wanted to do with the Blue River was understand how the river became what it is today and reveal something of its history and geography in the process. I tasked myself with reading everything I could find on the river: cultural and environmental reports, historical texts, maps, brochures, even the handwritten notes on postcards featuring Blue River landmarks. The Missouri Valley Special Collections at the Kansas City Public Library was an invaluable resource. My other goal was to visit and document the confluence of every named tributary in the watershed. When access to a confluence was prohibited I would photograph the obstacle.

When Lewis and Clark passed the future site of Kansas City they wrote the words “Blue Water” on the map near the mouth of a river. The explorers were likely able to denote a clear line where the muddy waters of the Missouri met the dark waters of the Blue. The words were a message to future visitors who would need potable water to survive. For a while it was called the “Blue Water River” staying true to that early notation and replacing the name used by Native peoples. Observational words and symbols on old maps were rarely intended to supplant preexisting names; they simply served as practical signposts. Drink Here. Timber Here. Farm Here. Wolves Here. The generic name “Blue” might be at the root of the disconnection between people and the river. For one, it is hard to look at a brown river called the “Blue” and not chuckle. And there is competition between rivers. The Little Blue River runs a few miles east and is much more pastoral. The Big Blue River 110 miles west of Kansas City is almost 10 times longer. And there are Blue Rivers in Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Oregon.

The confluence of the Blue River and the Missouri is easily visited by canoe. Navigating on foot, however, is a challenge. Satellite footage of the western side of the confluence makes access appear possible. However, navigating landscapes around industrial sites is never easy. The southern bank of the Missouri is forested for almost five miles between the mouth of the Blue River and downtown Kansas City; perhaps there were footpaths to the confluence I could not see on maps. Sadly, there are chained gates at the access points and a line of poles topped with purple paint. Missouri has “purple paint laws” that allow landowners to indicate private property by using dashes of color instead of fences or signage. Security is tight and very present. The Bayer Corporation, which recently acquired Monsanto, keeps a close watch. So instead I settled on watching the sunrise over the Missouri River from River Front Park with the city skyline glowing in the distance. And I knew I would be back. The eastern side of the confluence, which is mostly fields and bottomland forest, might offer better luck with a little research.

Further up the river in the Blue Valley Industrial area are two small confluences. Even on the most researched, detailed maps, the first creek is either nameless or marked as “Unnamed Creek.” There are other tiny unnamed streams, runs, and creeks running into the Blue River, but for some reason this creek is named “Unnamed.” Now, not only did I want to visit the confluence, I wanted to find the name of the creek. Visiting Unnamed was easier than I had imagined. Not far from the highway there is an accessible dirt road running through a field of brush and tall grass. The road becomes a footpath and curves around a hill covered in cottonwood saplings. The channeled Blue River has no obstructions as it moves through the field so it is easy to spot the mound of rocks and sand in the river against a wall of trees. That is the confluence of Unnamed. As I pushed through the tall brush to make a photograph so many grasshoppers jumped around me that it sounded like a rainstorm. Navigating this industrial lowland is not easy by car and on foot it is even more of a challenge. Between the Missouri and Brush Creek there are 18 railroad bridges and 11 roadways passing over the Blue River. All of the riverbanks have been widened and channelized in concrete or edged with stone. As the river passes over the wide, treeless canals the water temperature rises causing a number of ecological problems. A few weeks after my visit to Unnamed I found its name. A survey of Missouri place names was collected between 1928 and 1945 and the manuscripts are in the collection of the State Historical Society of Missouri. Rollins Creek “rises northeast of Leeds, flows northwest and empties into the Big Blue River.”

Round Grove Creek flows for about four miles through woodlands at the edge of Arrowhead and Kauffman Stadiums before it empties into the Blue River. Access to any point near the confluence is a challenge. Thankfully a friendly manufacturing company in Leeds granted me access to the riverbank behind their factory. I only needed to sign a visitor log. I walked as far as I could before fallen logs and loose riprap made access unsafe. From Manchester Trafficway on the opposite side of the river there is a pullover even closer to the confluence, but high brush and a foul smell pervading the landscape made me abandon my approach. I managed to photograph the treetops surrounding the confluence but not the waters. As the neighborhoods and districts within the industrial valley developed during the nineteenth century they adopted names like Leeds, Sheffield, and Manchester, to sound familiar to English investors. A version of the future saw the confluence of the Blue River and the Missouri developed into a major port connecting Kansas City to the world by rail and sea. Others, like the Paddle and Camp Club had dreams of a “pleasure grounds” following the Blue River from the Missouri to Swope Park. A boathouse was opened around 1907 and numerous postcards showcased the stretch of river where a few boathouses, docks, and dozens of pleasure crafts lined the shore. People who had never seen the Blue River imagined it as a quaint, easy escape from the dusty downtown. However, those who were more familiar knew how much work it was to keep the river accessible. The muddy banks, frequent floods, and all the sewage from the eastern part of Kansas City, made the lower Blue River less and less pleasurable. An appeal in the Kansas City Star from 1909 implored, “Nature has been lavish in its gifts to this section of the country and as citizens of one of the best cities of the United States we should unitedly and individually urge, agitate and insist that members of our City Council and Park Board recognize the great importance of the work of improving and beautifying the Blue River from its mouth to the western limits of Swope Park.” One hundred and ten years later, the same is true.

The confluence of Brush Creek and the Blue River has just recently been redesigned as part of the Brush Creek Confluence Trail Project in Blue Oaks Park. The park is small and hides behind industrial sites. I was excited to see the word “confluence” in a public sign. Locally, Brush Creek is known as “Flush Creek” because of what runs into the stream after every rainstorm. The last five miles of the creek have been lavishly redesigned as one continuous park. The City Beautiful movement that swept through urban areas in the early 1900s helped inspire some of this transformation. Low dams make wide, undulating pools alongside paved paths, sweeping lawns and pavilions. By the middle of the summer the trickle of water in Brush Creek is sluggish, the carp are plenty and the algae thick. Town Fork Creek is mostly underground now and the confluence with Brush Creek is an unmarked tunnel a few steps away from an artificial, three-story waterfall.

North of Swope Park is the confluence of the Blue River and Hart Grove Creek. The confluence is still very much a grove and the trees provide complete cover for the creek until it reaches Highway 71. Access is easy and it is the kind of place where you can be close to everything and feel far away at the same time.

Indian Creek is the largest tributary of the Blue River and the confluence can be viewed comfortably from a pedestrian bridge on the left bank or with some effort through the thicket behind the 3&2 Baseball Club of Kansas City. There is some semblance of a portage that might be used during the spring months when the water level is higher. One of the oldest photographic records of the

THE BLUE! O, THE BLUE!

— R. J. LEWIS

The sun shines on the meadow,
The green is on the lee;
Come then, gentle sweetheart
And view the groves with me.

The soft, sweet breath of summer,
The cool, the welcome rain,
Has refreshed all the valley,
And cheered the thirsty plain.

We'll see the varied landscape
Where the Blue's bright waters glide:
Where in life and beauty
Flows the silvery tide.

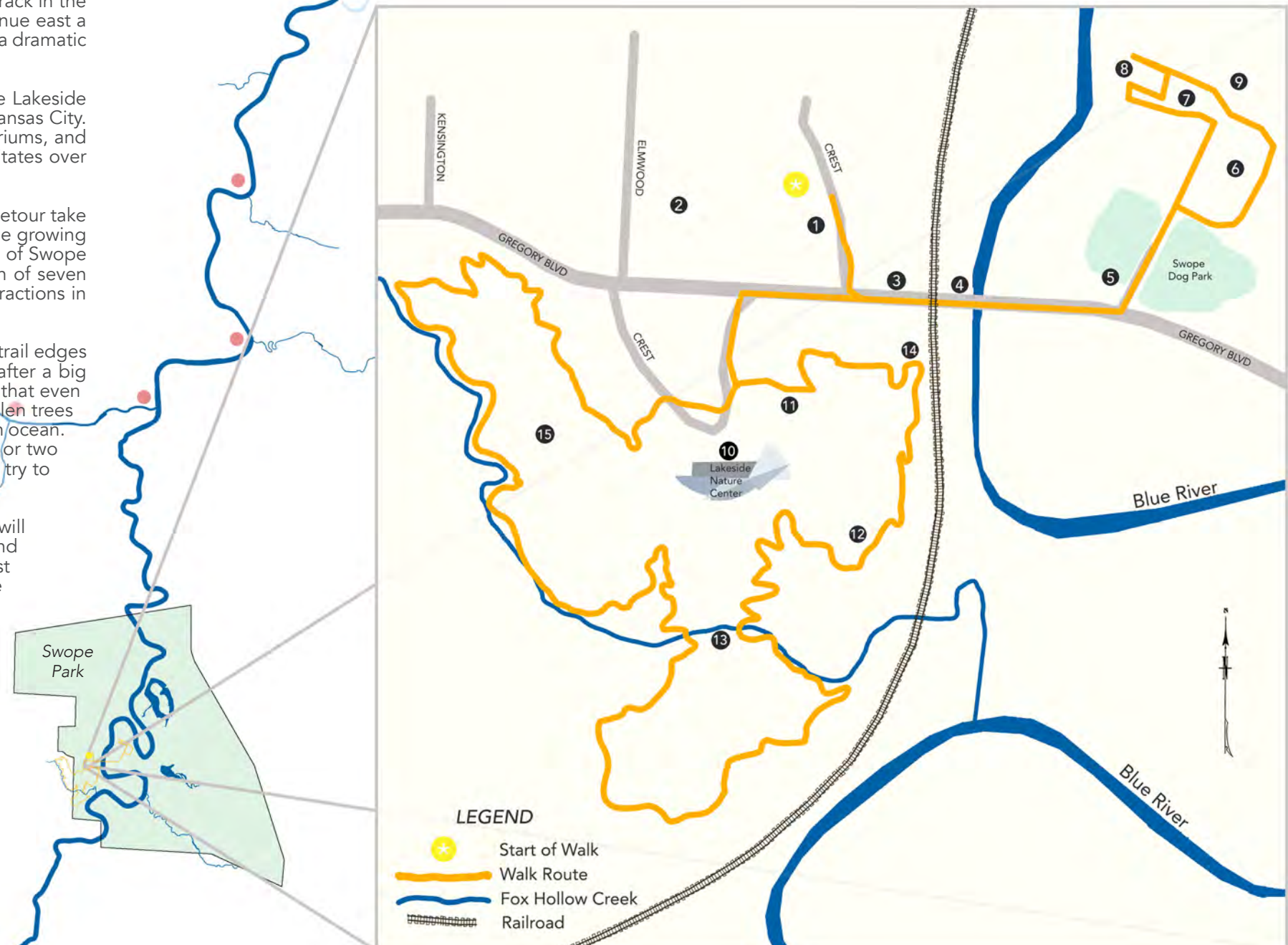
The summer scenes are passing,
Sweetly, calm and true;
Let us then all greet them
By the restful, gentle Blue.

We read of distant rivers
The Avon and the Rhine;
But few have brighter waters
Than Blue! O Blue, than thine.

Then let us go to Westport,
From thence we'll gently ride
To the bright, the gentle valley
Where flows Blue's ever-murmuring tide

We'll view the fertile landscape,
Those as fair and bright, are few:
And gently, sweetly wander
By the bright, meandering Blue.

— August 18, 1897



watershed I could find shows a group of people in full Victorian dress standing on rocks in the river somewhere near the confluence. The image was one of several taken along the Blue River and used in a promotional booklet for the Kansas City & Westport Railroad.

Dyke Branch Creek joins the Indian River behind a subdivision named Holmes Houses. A glimpse of the confluence can be seen between trees near the bottom of a steep embankment only a few paces behind two of the houses. The lawn ends with a sharp drop to the creek below. The transition from parking lot to scenic waterway is incredibly abrupt. Nearby Tomahawk Creek joins Indian Creek in a forest setting with a well-maintained trail system. I found a grove of pawpaw trees on my way to the limestone embankment near the confluence. A few hundred yards away from this magical site is the outwash pipe of the Tomahawk Creek Wastewater Treatment Facility.

The last tributary on the Missouri side is Mill Creek. The confluence is hidden in a grove of trees surrounded by the construction site of a golf course and housing development on Kenneth Road. The closest I could get was a chained gate spanning a driveway of fresh asphalt. The Kenneth Road Bridge once crossed the Blue River here but it collapsed in 1996 and reconstruction is scheduled to start any day now. Across the river on the Kansas side is the confluence of Negro Creek. The small creek runs clear and the confluence hides in a small grove of trees at the edge of a farm field along Kenneth Road. Its problematic name appears on maps of the watershed and Google Maps lists the name but does not depict the creek. It is surprising to learn that the word is still attached to over 757 places in the United States. A blogger from Overland Park, who grew up playing in the creek, writes about a rumor that developers of property there found and quietly bulldozed a small cave of artifacts with possible links to the Underground Railroad.

Camp Branch is a sizable tributary and the confluence is just out of view from a new suburban development and not far from the Blue Valley Wilderness Science Center. Fresh tire tracks in the mud are clues that locals frequently drive out to this spot to fish and grill. The surrounding landscapes are a mixture of hayfields and forest and all are kept in pristine condition. Both rivers run deep and slow along muddy embankments. It is by far one of the most beautiful of all the confluences and it has managed to retain something ancient.

The confluence of Coffee Creek and Wolf Creek is only a few miles upstream and it marks the official start of the Blue River. I am sure it is beautiful. The closest one can get is by driving up to an imposing metal gate with cameras surrounding an expansive estate. Coffee Creek flows from the northeast through Heritage Park and Coffee Creek Crossing housing development. Wolf Creek flows from the southeast through the Overland Park Arboretum, a beautifully designed park with trails running along the creek. The sycamore with the incredible root system featured on the front of this map grows along Wolf Creek in the park.

The health of a river is determined by factors often invisible to the naked eye. Storm run-off picks up animal waste, herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers and chemicals dripping from cars and trucks. Thankfully the Blue River has its own app called the KCWaterBug. You can select certain points in the watershed and get up-to-date water quality data. The wallpaper of the site is a repeating graphic of microbes. At the moment I am writing this the wallpaper for the Blue River near Mill Creek shows blue microbes, meaning “Appropriate for all forms of recreation,” while Indian Creek at Wornall Road shows red microbes for “Contact with water is not advised.” It can be safely assumed that anything downstream from a red warning is also not safe. It is sad and scary to think that a river can't be touched.

The day after visiting the headwaters I got word from the staff at the Blue River Watershed Association that they had secured access to the Blue River's confluence at the Missouri River. The BRWA is a community stewardship organization and had previously visited this site with groups of school children. I dropped what I was doing, met the carpool at the Denny's, and we headed to the Bayer Corporation's security checkpoint. It still took another round of clearance checks but we were granted permission to drive out on the levee towards the confluence. We parked and then walked down a long mowed path to a stand of cottonwoods. It was snowing in July. Any footpath that might have continued to the banks of the river was long overgrown and I waded through a dense tangle of high brush and wild cucumber vine until I emerged at the muddy edge of the river. The confluence is stunning. Looking east up the Missouri everything on all sides of both rivers is green and wild. There are ambitious plans to extend bike trails into the landscape on the eastern side of the Blue. Until then it looks like it might have hundreds of years ago.