If you go off trail, be careful

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take it outside

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UMSTEAD STATE PARK

Hiking on a 90/90 day — 90 degrees/90 percent humidity — I generally keep my head down.

For one, the sweat pouring down my forehead tends to bypass my eyes and instead funnel to the tip of my nose, which acts as an efficient drain. Mostly, though, I just don't care to see what's ahead. Advance notice of a steep climb can be particularly dispiriting on a 90/90.

So it was by accident that I glanced up and, an instant before salty sweat blurred my vision, noticed a faint trail exiting the bridle path to the left. That the trail was visible at all through the rich sea of Japanese stilt grass, a sea thickened by a summer generous with rain, suggested it must lead somewhere interesting. Despite favorable growing conditions, there was still a path; hikers were getting off in search of something. I glanced around, gathered my bearings, then realized where the path led: Piedmont Beech Natural Area.

A lot of us who use Umstead State Park, a 5,439-acre sylvan outpost in the heart of the Triangle, have come to recognize it primarily as a scenic spot to train for marathons or to take a vigorous mountain bike ride. But this jungle gym also is home to vestiges of the area's natural past, one of the least known of which is a 50-acre stand of towering beech trees, believed by some to be one of the few remaining virgin timber stands in the state. The stand, included in the National Registry of Natural Landmarks, is on a bend of Crabtree Creek on the southeast side of the park. A bend, I now realized, not more than a quarter-mile from where I was standing.

I perked up. Then, about 20 feet down the side trail, I saw the familiar brown state park trail sign, skinny, 3 feet tall, made of bendy plastic and bearing the universal symbols — for the state park system, at least — for hiking, biking and horseback riding. All of which were encased in a red circle bearing a diagonal slash: the universal sign for "don't plan on doing this here."

There were two reasons for this sign's existence. One, Piedmont Beech Natural Area is ecologically sensitive; the park likes to limit access to it. Not that you can't go back there.

"We ask people to get a permit to visit that area," park superintendent Martha Woods later told me. Then, perhaps anticipating a question about the bureaucratic process that might entail, she quickly added: "You can call the park office, and I'll approve it over the phone. We just like to know who's going back there."

The second reason for the sign has to do with Umstead's off-trail hiking policy. Again, no bureaucratic edict prohibits exploring; you're welcome to hike anywhere you please. Park staff just doesn't want hikers wearing new trails in the park. (It confuses hikers new to the park.)

"If you do go off trail, truly do go off trail," Woods requests.

So I went another few yards up the bridle trail, then hung a left and disappeared into the woods.

Woods' initial response when I inquired about policy on off-trail hiking had nothing to do with wearing new trails. It was more a caution: "You're on your own." Meaning, when you venture off trail, a whole new set of rules applies.

For one, if you get lost or injured, you'll be a lot harder to find. When a car remains in one of the main parking lots after closing, rangers fan out on the nearby trails to search for the driver. If the missing hiker has sprained an ankle or had some other problem on a main trail, he is quickly discovered. If he has ventured off trail, the search could last considerably longer. (Which leads to another suggestion: If you do plan to go off trail, let someone know where you expect to be.)

I kept this in mind as I gingerly made my way through the knee-high stilt grass. Downfall, rocks and who knows what else lurked beneath, just itching to mess up my adventure.

I waded in about 100 yards and stopped under a stand of ancient pines. I was in a floodplain extending maybe 75 yards from Crabtree's south bank. Deep-cut drainages coming off a wall off steep bluffs to the south required a bit of scouting to get over, as did a few horizontal pines, victims, judging by their state of decomposition, of Hurricane Fran. Barely conscious that I was doing it, I rubbed my ankles together and peered ahead. *Got to be pretty close,* I thought.

I left my little oasis of sheltered pine straw and plowed back into the undergrowth, which now included a variety of grasses. I took a few steps, stopped and rubbed my ankles together once more as I took inventory, then moved on.

Often, you know immediately when you stumble into a stand of old-growth timber. The trees are bigger, yes, but more notably there's little undergrowth: The massive canopies bogart all the sunlight, leaving precious little to reach the forest floor. I was expecting to suddenly stumble into a homogeneous land of Brobdingnagian beech, their smooth, gray trunks glowing like beacons. Instead, they had gradually insinuated themselves among the pines and tulip poplars, slipping in, unnoticed.

Not that I was disappointed. The beech began in the floodplain, marched up the bluff and descended the more gradual south-facing slope. I followed, planning to hike out to the south and pick up Loblolly Trail. Looked simple enough on the park's handout map.

It was here I learned another truism of off-trail hiking: Always take a topographic map. The south slope descended into a ravine, out of which rose another steep, north-facing bluff, this one crisscrossed with downfall and the mad scramble of succession that ensues. I stood rubbing my ankles together,

Info

What: Umstead State Park's Piedmont Beech Natural Area.
Permit: Call 571-4170 to request a free permit over the phone.
Note: A personal suggestion: Delay a visit until late fall.

Umstead State Park officials hope to limit human impact on such sensitive off-trail areas as Piedmont Beech Natural Area by requiring a permit for entry.

PHOTO BY JOE MILLER

with much more vigor than before, trying to discern a way up and over. "Nah," I finally decided.

I turned and retraced my way out.

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When I got home, sweat-drenched, coated with a film of liquid dust and the entire bottom half of my body eager to rub against something, I made a beeline for the shower. As I took off my hiking boots, I noticed hundreds of tiny red dust specs ringing my sweaty ankles. *Odd, that they haven't disintegrated into mud yet.* I looked closer and realized something else peculiar about these specs: They were moving.

One more thing to keep in mind when hiking off trail, especially in summer: never wear shorts. ■

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The News & Observer

Yuck!

Turns out the pernicious little critters holding a convention on my ankles were seed ticks. "It's the larval phase of the lone star tick," Umstead State Park Superintendent Martha Woods says.

Dandy. You can claw them off, like I did. Or, as Woods suggested, bathe in a hot bath with a splash of bleach. That took care of the ticks.

Now, about the poison ivy, which apparently was in the Japanese stilt grass and which I had helped spread up to my waist through constant itching. Woods said the best way to avoid contact with it as well as with ticks and the like is to wear long pants, stuff the pant legs into your socks, then seal them with duct tape. Also, wear light-colored clothing, which makes spotting a tick easier.

A final five words on ticks, chiggers and the like: Deep Woods Off! for Sportsmen. "It's what the rangers recommend," Woods says.

Also, there are preventive lotions for warding off poison ivy and its cousins. Avon, for instance, sells one called Skin-So-Soft Ivy Block.

If you don't take precautions and do wind up with a nasty itch, a number of commercial products and home remedies are available. A particularly helpful resource is the Poison Ivy, Oak & Sumac Information Center, http://poisonivy.aesir.com/.

If you find ticks on your body after a hike, remove them immediately. Even if they don't appear to have dug in, they can inflict their wrath. Of particular concern is Lyme disease. If a red rash begins slowly expanding from a tick bite even as long as a month after the bite, consult your doctor. For more information contact the North Carolina Lyme Disease Foundation at 496-7390 or www.nclyme.org. ■

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