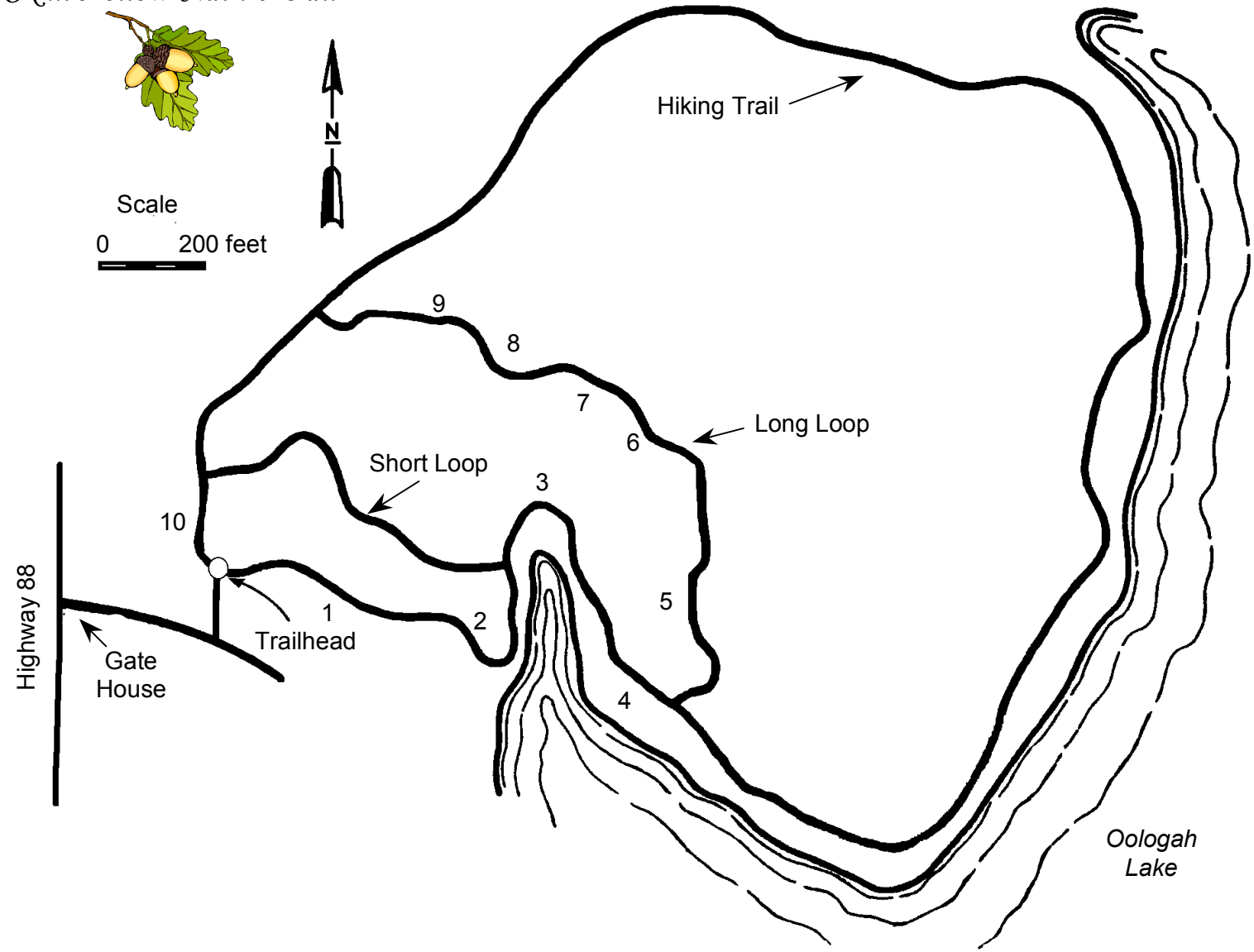
# *Skull Hollow Nature Trail*




For the adventure-some, a hiking trail a mile and a third in length is the thing. The route takes you along the bluff with excellent vantage points of the lake along the way. The trail loops back off the bluff at Skull Hollow following an old wagon road back to the starting point. An old Verdigris River horse crossing is visible leading down the bluff at this point.

We hope you enjoy whatever route you choose, and that you take the opportunity to try them all.

Three different routes are available on the Skull Hollow Nature Trail: **Short Loop**, **Long Loop**, and a **Hiking Trail**. The short loop is about a third of a mile long and has several trees and shrubs labeled along the path. It is designed for those who wish to take a brief look at an oak-hickory type forest common in this region of Oklahoma. The long loop offers a leisurely path approximately three-quarters of a mile in length. This trail features not only labeled trees and shrubs, but is an interpretive trail that has ten points of interest marked by numbered posts. These features are described below in this pamphlet.

**Nature Trail Points of Interest**

1. **Competition**…Here and throughout the trail trees are competing for space and sunlight. Look closely and you can see small shade-intolerant seedling trees that died due to lack of sunlight under the large, mature individuals.

2. **Ecotone**…This is the term biologists use to describe the edges between habitat types. Here woodland gives way to more open shrub and grassland. Some animals thrive in the wooded area, others in the open grassy area. Still others require both areas.

3. **Water, the sculptor**…At one-time this hollow was part of the solid limestone bluff. A tiny stream of water started working at small cracks in the rock thousands of years ago. Now after centuries of weathering, this large hollow has been formed.

4. **Fresh lake community**…Sunlight is needed in the early spring to start the growth of plants called algae. Algae are the basic food for all animals in the lake. The algae are eaten by millions of tiny animals called crustaceans; small fish eat the crustaceans; bigger fish, turtles, and frogs eat the smaller fish. This is an aquatic web of life – an ecosystem.

5. **Chinkapin oak (*Quercus muehlenberggii*)** …Note the large tree with broad, slightly saw-toothed leaves. This species is common to Oklahoma's oak-hickory forests. It prefers limestone outcrops such as those present at Skull Hollow. The fruit of this tree, the acorn, matures in 1 year and is a preferred food of the white-tailed deer.

6. **Grassland battleground**…Plant communities are always in a state of change. Grasses well suited to the rigors of intense sunlight, periodic fire, and parching winds, are being out-competing by the shade-tolerant trees and shrubs at this location. Here, Smooth Sumac (the shrub with long, slender leaves growing above the grasses) is "invading" the grassy habitat, creating shade and reducing the grasses ability to compete.

7. **Return to the soil**…Here and many places along the trail you can observe decaying trees and limbs lying on the ground. The trees are weathered, and fungi such as mushrooms decompose fallen trees and branches, and the nutrients contained in the wood are returned to the soil.

8. **Woodland community**…Trees have a great influence on the "micro-climate" under the protection of their leaf canopy. The overhead canopy gives shade from the sun, shelter from the wind, softens the fall of rain and adds moisture and oxygen to the air we breathe.

9. **Growth rings**…The cross-section of a tree reveals not only its age, but an interesting story of climate of the region during the tree's life span. Count each ring-how old was this tree when cut? Generally a wide ring indicates a good, wet growing season. The study of the relationships between past environments and growth rings is called dendrochronology.

10. **Salt lick**…Deer, just like humans, crave and require salt to supplement their diets. They usually get salt through natural deposits, especially after a rain when it seeps to the surface. Here, we occasionally provide salt for the deer to increase the health of the local populations.

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