McDowell Nature Preserve in southwest Mecklenburg County protects over 1,130 acres of forested, rolling terrain along the banks of Lake Wylie. Over 80% of the nature preserve is undeveloped which offers many wildlife and hiking opportunities. The preserve also offers an accessible trail, two playgrounds, picnic shelters, nature center and campground. Throughout the preserve, individual picnic tables and grill areas are available on a first-come-first-serve basis. There are three large picnic areas - McDowell Pavilion, Red Fox Shelter and Waterfront Deck - these can be reserved by calling the campground at 980.314.2267 or by visiting www.parkandrec.com.

Cedar Ridge Trail - 0.5 miles 
This trail section is only accessible from the Creekside Trail. It provides the opportunity for an increased level of hiking difficulty. It also gives a "bird’s eye" perspective of the bottomland forest below. The trail climbs a steep ridge, passes through an area of very old, large trees and ends with a steep descent back to Creekside Trail.

Chesnut Trail - 1.11 miles 
This moderate to difficult trail has occasional steep inclines. This trail circles around a natural valley divided by a small creek and passes beneath the canopy of a mature hardwood forest. Some of this forest was affected by a tornado in 2004. The forest floor is carpeted in wildflowers during early spring. Watch for Witch Hazel blooming during late winter and winter.

Cove Trail - 0.8 miles 
This moderate trail along the shoreline of Lake Wylie passes beside a deep cove of the lake. Wildlife including birds, beavers, and muskrats can be seen. Numerous Southern Sugar Maples along this trail provide a breathtaking display during autumn.

Creekside Trail - 1.1 miles 
This easy loop trail is accessible from the Four Seasons Trail. It follows alongside a stream into a remote portion of the nature preserve. A variety of interesting habitats are encountered; such as a dry oak-pine upland forest, a rich bottomland hardwood forest, and an old field area. Wildlife seen in this area include white-tailed deer.

Four Seasons Trail - 0.4 miles 
This easy paved trail is constructed for full accessibility. This trail features a babbling brook, Piedmont stream and a ramp, with full access to the creek. Benches are provided at intervals along the trail.

Kingfisher Trail - 1.11 miles 
An easy trail connects the campground and picnic area. It follows along the shoreline providing a nice view of Lake Wylie. During spring, flowers are abundant.

Oak Hill Trail - 0.1 miles 
This short trail crosses McDowell Park Drive and connects the Sierra Trail with the Chestnut Trail.

Piedmont Prairie Trail - 1.1 miles 
This easy gravel service road trail cuts through the Forested Hillside and Creekside Trails. Eastern Red Cedars are common along this trail.

Pine Hollow Trail - 0.8 miles 
This moderate trail connects the Sierra Trail behind the Nature Center with the Four Seasons and Creekside Trails. Eastern Red Cedars are abundant along this trail.

Little Meadow Trail - 0.1 miles 
This short trail passes through tall grasses and features a large platform overlooking the forest.

Shady Hollow Trail - 0.5 miles 
This moderate trail begins at the Nature Center parking lot and intersects the Kingfisher Trail near the Red Fox Shelter. This trail passes through a dry pine forest and along a stream rich in plant diversity.

Sierra Trail - 0.2 miles 
This easy loop trail is located directly behind the Nature Center and provides excellent views of large hardwood trees, including many downed by Hurricane Hugo in 1989. Access the Pine Hollow, Oak Hill, and Chestnut Trails from this trail.

Nature Preserve Rules
★ Collection, removal, or disturbance of any natural or cultural object is prohibited.
★ All pets must be on a leash no longer than six feet.
★ No alcoholic beverages are allowed (except with a valid shelter reservation and permit).
★ Motorized and non-motorized vehicles are restricted to paved roads.
★ Effective March 18, 2015, Mecklenburg County parks and buildings will be tobacco-free. The tobacco-free designation includes cigarettes, e-cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, water pipes, etc.
★ For your safety and the protection of the preserve, please walk with a friend and stay on designated trails. To prevent damage to fragile vegetation and erosion, do not create switchbacks or skirt wet areas.
★ Introduction of plants or animals to the nature preserve is prohibited.
★ All weapons except properly concealed firearms pursuant to valid permit.
★ No swimming or wading is allowed.
★ Avoid natural surface trails for a minimum of 24 hours after a heavy rain, snow, or ice storm even if closure notices are not posted.
★ Children under the age of 16 are required to wear a helmet while riding bicycles, skateboards, or rollerblades.

Educational Programs
McDowell Nature Center serves as the gateway to the preserve. The center houses live animals and an exhibit area with a variety of informative displays which highlight the preserve’s flora and fauna. The nature center offers a variety of environmental education and outdoor recreation programs to the general public, schools, scouts, and other organized groups. Children age 4-12 can have their birthday party at the Nature Center. The Park and Recreation website, www.parkandrec.com has a complete description of public programs and special events. The center also contains public restrooms, a classroom, and gift shop. For more information or to schedule a program, stop by McDowell Nature Center or call 980.314.1128.

Nature Preserve Hours of Operation
Open Daily sunrise until sunset
McDowell Nature Center: 980.314.1128
McDowell Nature Preserve
980.314.2267
McDowell Campground offers 56 camping sites. Sites include: 13 RV sites, 26 Drive-To tent sites, 10 primitive tent sites, and six Tent sites with Decks. All sites can sleep up to six persons each. For more information or to make a reservation, please call 980.314.2267 or visit www.parkandrec.com.

Fishing and Boating
Fishing is allowed on Lake Wylie, but all anglers must purchase a valid North Carolina fishing license. North Carolina fishing licenses can be purchased at www.ncwildlife.gov or through some area retailers.

Boating access to Lake Wylie is available from Copperhead Island at the end of Soldier Road. Copperhead Island’s fishing piers and hiking paths are open to the public, unless the island has been reserved. Reserveable facilities on the island include: six group camping sites and a picnic shelter containing restrooms, electricity, charcoal grills, horseshoe pits, and a volleyball court. For more information or to make a reservation, please call 980.314.2267 or visit www.parkandrec.com.