

# What's a National Recreation Trail?



*Lower Cache River Trail*

(Photo by Adele Hodde)

From ancient waterways to old rail lines, National Recreation Trails are all about moving outdoor experiences.

Story By Dick Westfall

**W**hat do the Lower Cache River Trail, where you can quietly canoe through a primeval swamp, the Great River Trail, where you can bike through pleasant river towns along the mighty Mississippi, and the Moraine Hills State Park trail system, where you can see deer and other wildlife just a short drive from busy Chicago have in common? They all are National Recreation Trails.

Designation as a National Recreation Trail is a formal recognition program for outstanding trails of local, regional, state and national significance. Benefits of this designation include nationwide promotion by, and technical assistance from, the National Park Service and national organizations such as American Trails. In many cases, this designation also improves access to funding.

The 1968 National Trails System Act established three types of national trail: National Scenic Trails, National Historic Trails and National Recreation Trails. National Scenic Trails, such as the

**The 25 National Recreation Trails in Illinois offer users a range of outdoor settings—cypress swamps, prairies, woodlands, lakeshores and more.**

Appalachian Trail and Pacific Crest Trail, and National Historic Trails, such as the Trail of Tears and the Lewis and Clark trails, only can be designated by Congress. National Recreation Trails can be designated either by the Secretary of Interior, or, for trails on national forests, the Secretary of Agriculture.



*Illinois Prairie Path*

(Photo by Bob Sobie.)



*Rend Lake Bike Trail*

(Photo by Clark Gyure.)



*Tunnel Hill State Trail*

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)



*Red Cedar Hiking Trail*

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)

Anyone can nominate a trail for designation as a National Recreation Trail, however, the nomination must be supported by the landowner(s), public or private, whose property the trail passes through, and all nominations must include a letter of endorsement from the state's State Trail Administrator.

There are more than 1,000 National Recreation Trails throughout the United States, ranging from less than a mile to 485 miles in length. They are found on federal, state, local and private land. Illinois has 25 National Recreation Trails, several managed by the Department of Natural Resources, that showcase the state's diverse landscape and offer opportunities for many trail activities.

### Managed by DNR

**1. Red Cedar Hiking Trail** Found at beautiful Giant City State Park in southern Illinois, this 12-mile hiking trail provides a little bit of everything, including oak-hickory forests, rocky creeks, and sandstone bluffs and shelters. A primitive tent camping site located at the six-mile point, with fire grills, picnic tables and privies, makes for a great two-day backpack trip.

**2. Starved Rock Trails System** This 12-mile hiking trail system is the best way to experience scenic and popular Starved Rock State Park in north central Illinois. The trails follow the park's majestic sandstone bluffs, often with views of the Illinois River, and provide access to its canyons where, in early spring, snowmelt creates sparkling waterfalls over moss-covered rocks.

**3. Lower Cache River Trail** Located within DNR's Cache River State Natural Area, this 3-mile canoe trail in southern Illinois provides access to the heart of the 60,000-acre federal-state-private joint venture known as the Cache River Wetlands. The trail passes through a true southern cypress-tupelo swamp,



**Tunnel Hill State Trail**

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

home to 100 state or federally threatened or endangered plant and animal species and 11 state-champion trees, including a bald cypress tree more than 1,000 years old.

**4. Rock Island State Trail** This 27-mile hiking-biking trail between Alta and Toulon northwest of Peoria exemplifies the classic rail-trail, a trail built upon an abandoned railroad corridor. The trail preserves a piece of railroad history as well as prairie and wildlife habitat. It includes historic railroad trestle bridges and a restored railroad depot in the community of Wyoming. Plans are under way to extend the trail into downtown Peoria.

**5. Hennepin Canal Parkway** Spanning three counties in north-central Illinois, this trail system follows the historic 96-mile Hennepin Canal. Parallel to both sides of the canal, the 173 miles of trails support various activities, including hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, horseback riding and canoeing. Constructed in the late 1800s using concrete instead of cut rock, the canal served as the model for the Panama Canal and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

**6. Tunnel Hill State Trail** Another classic rail-trail, this 45-mile hiking-biking trail between Harrisburg and Kar-

nak in southern Illinois passes through the rugged Shawnee National Forest and Cache River Wetlands, and includes a 543-foot tunnel just south of the aptly-named community of Tunnel Hill. The trail also passes through the small town of New Burnside, named after one of the original railroad's founders, Civil War General Ambrose Burnside, famous for the facial hairstyle named after him—sideburns.

**7. Vadalabene Bike Trail** Within the Meeting of the Rivers National Scenic Byway, this 22-mile hiking and biking trail follows the Mississippi River between Alton and Pere Marquette State Park, north of St. Louis. This stretch of the river is noted for its spectacular limestone bluffs and restored river towns, including Elsau and Grafton. The trail is collectively managed by the Village of Grafton, IDOT and DNR.

**8. Rend Lake Bike Trail** Owner of the Rend Lake Resort and Conference Center, John Reilly said: "The U.S. Army Core of Engineers best describes the Rend Lake Bike Trail...for approximately 19 miles the bike trail winds through some of the most diverse and scenic habitat that southern Illinois has to offer." Located south of Mt. Vernon, the trail connects Rend Lake's many recreational facilities and attractions, including an artisans center, a golf course and a resort. Eventually, this trail will be expanded to 35 miles and will encircle the Corps of Engineers' 19,000-acre Rend Lake. The trail is a partnership effort among numerous agencies.

**9. Moraine Hills Trail System** Northwest of Chicago, this 10-mile trail system



**Danada and Herrick Lake Regional Trail**

(Courtesy of the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County.)



**Moraine Hills Trail System**

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)



**Springbrook Prairie Trail**

(Courtesy of the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County.)

### Other National Trails in Illinois

- 14. Anna Ruby
- 15. Camp Camfield Nature
- 16. Chief Illini Trail
- 17. Eberley Park Fitness
- 18. Great Western Nature Trail
- 19. Greenbelt Bikeway
- 20. Inspiration Point
- 21. Rim Rock
- 22. Robert McClory Trail
- 23. Roby Recreation
- 24. Shag Bark Nature Preserve
- 25. Virgil Gilman Nature



(Courtesy of the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County.)



**Danada and Herrick Lake Regional Trail**

at Moraine Hills State Park passes through a glaciated landscape of hills, lakes and wetlands and is used for hiking, biking and cross-country skiing. Plans are under way to connect the park's trail system to a larger regional trail system between McHenry and Lake counties.

**Other Illinois National Recreation Trails**

**10. Illinois Prairie Path** This 61-mile trail in Cook, DuPage and Kane counties is Illinois' first National Recreation Trail (designated in 1971). It also is considered by many as the nation's first rail-to-trail conversion, with the original idea proposed in a letter to the Chicago Tribune in 1963. Developed on the former Aurora, Elgin and Chicago Railroad, the trail is open for hiking, biking and cross-country skiing. The path is managed by Illinois Prairie Path, a not-for-profit corporation, along with a number of communities and county agencies.

**11. Great River Trail** Part of the 500-mile Grand Illinois Trail and 10-state Mississippi River Trail, this 60-mile northwestern Illinois hiking and biking trail follows the Mississippi River from Rock Island, through the river towns of Moline, East Moline, Hampton, Rapids City, Port Byron, Cordova, Albany, Fulton and Thomson, ending in Savanna. The trail also passes through the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife Refuge and Albany Mounds State Historic Site. While DNR does not manage the Great River Trail, it has played a major role in the trail's development, including completing the final 2-mile gap just south of Savanna.

**12. Springbrook Prairie Trail** This 9-mile loop trail system for hiking, biking, cross-country skiing and horseback riding provides access to an oasis of meadows, prairies and wetlands in the 1,840-acre Springbrook Prairie Forest Preserve in the western suburbs of Chicago. The trail system was developed by the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County.

**13. Danada and Herrick Lake Regional Trail** Similar to the Springbrook Prairie Trail, this 5-mile trail west of Chicago, in the 1,766-acre Danada and Herrick Lake Forest Preserves, is open for hiking, bik-

For more information on National Recreation Trails, visit [americantrails.org/nationalrecreationtrails/default.htm](http://americantrails.org/nationalrecreationtrails/default.htm).

ing, cross-country skiing and horseback riding. It passes through prairie, woodland and wetland environments, offering trail users opportunities to view wildlife in a natural setting within the state's most densely populated region. The trail also is managed by the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County.

While each of these trails is unique, they all share common characteristics. Collectively, they provide a variety of outdoor recreation activities: hiking, biking, horseback riding, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling and canoeing. They are places for people to connect to nature, engage in regular, healthy exercise, spend time with family and friends, and travel to work, school or other destinations.

These trails perform important environmental functions, including serving as wildlife corridors, providing Green space in urban areas, and improving air and water quality.

Communities are benefitted by these trails through the number of tourists attracted, the local businesses, such as bike shops, supported and the fact that area communities are considered more attractive places in which to live and work.

Illinois' National Recreation Trails are outstanding representatives of all Illinois trails and are part of a growing national system of trails.



Dick Westfall is manager of the Greenways & Trails Section and serves as Illinois' State Trails Administrator.



**Rend Lake Bike Trail**

(Photo by Dana Winson.)



**Illinois Prairie Path**

(Photo by Bob Sobie.)