Look closely beyond the diverse plant and animal communities and unique recreational offerings at Fox Ridge State Park to discover an east-central Illinois geologic marvel.

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hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, nature photography, hiking and approved scientific research. Illinois now boasts more than 34,000 acres designated as reserves in 113 locations in 53 counties.

Named the Embarras River Land and Water Reserve, this biologically diverse area contains habitats for state endangered species, a large tract of forested land supporting declining forest interior birds and unusual concentrations of wildlife.

Bob Szafoni, DNR restoration ecologist, has rambled the hills of Fox Ridge and waded much of the Embarras River—one of Illinois’ highest quality rivers.

“The 5.1 mile segment of the Embarras River within the park supports an exceptional mussel diversity, with at least 15 species present, or 25 percent of the species known from the state,” Szafoni explained. “Two of the mussels are listed as state endangered or threatened and the reserve also is home to
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five plants, two fishes, one reptile and one bird on that list."

A shallow river with a sand-and-gravel substrate, the Embarras is popular with anglers seeking flathead catfish, and is reported to be one of the best sites in the state for spotted bass. The quality of this stretch of the river was a factor in making it one of the locations where river otters were reintroduced to Illinois in 1995—an event witnessed by nearly 1,000 people.

Designated canoe access points at the north and south ends of the park provide an enjoyable 5-mile float trip. For a longer trip, put in at the Lake Charleston public launch and take out 11.7 miles later at the park’s south access point. The river is excellent for those interested in a rustic adventure, and is especially rewarding in the spring when water levels rise, eliminating most portages, and the stream banks are blanketed with wildflowers, flowering trees and shrubs, and birds are flitting overhead.

Forest interior birds—species requiring large blocks of forest habitat to maintain stable populations—receive protection under the reserve designation. Since 1966, significant declines in the numbers of permanent woodland residents and neotropical migrants—birds that breed in Illinois but winter in Central and South America—has occurred.

“The park is an excellent year-round site for birders and photographers because of the amount of timber present,” Glenn Lyons, site superintendent at the park, said. “And because there is an active reforestation program at Fox Ridge, we anticipate the future will hold even greater things for forest-dependant birds and the people who enjoy them.”

A stop at the park office is in order to pick up a copy of the Fox Ridge State Park bird list. Also available are brochures on flowers, trees, shrubs and the self-guided nature trail. “Probably the most unique aspect of Fox Ridge is our trail system,” Lyons commented.

With 9.75 miles of trails that are often steep and meandering, Fox Ridge has gained a reputation with athletes looking for endurance training and with hikers preparing for a mountain trek. The trail up to the Eagle’s Nest river overlook has 144 often-counted steps. For the less adventurous, most trails offer concentric loops and benches for scenic pauses.

The 4-mile equestrian trail (closed from Nov. 15 to April 15) provides a pleasant ride, and when covered in snow is popular with cross-country skiers. A fitness trail and two handicapped-accessible trails round out the system.

Not to forget the bicyclists, a couple of steep hills along the 7-mile park road provide an invigorating workout.

After working up an appetite on the trails, many visitors relax or enjoy a bite to eat at one of the picnic sites along the crest of the ridge, or at one of the park’s nine picnic shelters. Six shelters are available by reservation. The largest shelter contains a kitchen, fireplace and flush toilets and is popular as a family preparing for a mountain trek. The trail up to the Eagle’s Nest river overlook has 144 often-counted steps. For the less adventurous, most trails offer concentric loops and benches for scenic pauses.

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reunion or company picnic destination. All reservable shelters have electricity. To round out activities, sand volleyball courts, baseball fields and playground equipment are near most shelters.

“The White Pines picnic grounds is near the park entrance but the wooded entrance lane provides a secluded feeling and is a popular setting for weddings,” Lyons said.

Fox Ridge is one of the most sought-after campgrounds in east-central Illinois. Each of the shaded, 43 Class A campsites is screened by trees and shrubs, offering a sense of privacy. Two handicapped-accessible camp pads border the shower house, and an accessible trail provides fishing opportunities at Wilderness Pond.

For those looking for an outdoor experience, but still interested in a roof over their head, three rent-a-cabins are available from May 1 through October. Reservations may be made through the park office.

Throughout the spring and fall, many of the campers are hunting 1,082 acres of the park or at the Hurricane Creek Habitat Area, a 377-acre site 5 miles to the east. Check with the park office for additional information and a site permit for hunting squirrel, rabbit, pheasant, bobwhite, dove and archery deer. Permits to shotgun hunt white-tailed deer or wild turkey must be obtained through the statewide lottery system.

A new fishing pond at the Hurricane Creek Habitat Area holds exciting potential. Recently stocked with catfish and bass, anglers are advised to contact the park office for information about the pond’s opening.

Mother Nature carved a rugged park that now provides a diversity of recreational opportunities and habitats for wildlife.

“The park is partitioned so most of the recreation takes place on the tops of the ridges, leaving the bottomlands for wildlife,” Lyons concluded. “Fox Ridge State Park is a great place to visit—whether you are looking for a site for a wedding or reunion, an outdoor setting for some endurance training, a chance to bag your limit of doves or a low-key, secluded place to get away from it all.”