



Cache River State Natural Area



Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Hiking Fact Sheet

The Cache River State Natural Area (SNA) totals 14,489 acres and offers unique wildlife oriented recreational experiences for visitors. Three dedicated nature preserves exist within the SNA; these include Heron Pond/Wildcat Bluff, Little Black Slough, and Section 8 Woods, in addition to the two National Natural Landmarks. It is composed of two distinct management units - Little Black Slough and the Lower Cache, situated on the Cache River in Johnson and Pulaski counties. The Lower Cache is best known for its remnant examples of high quality wetlands which once were prominent in the Cache River Valley. Buttonland Swamp, the most striking example of these wetlands, includes bald cypress and tupelo with trees more than 1,000 years old. Little Black Slough is also well-known for its cypress and tupelo swamps and rich mixed hardwood floodplain forests as well as its upland woods and small hillside limestone barrens (prairie-like communities).

Over 21 miles of hiking trails offer the best way to experience the rich diversity of the Cache River State Natural Area. Heron Pond, Wildcat Bluff and a variety of other natural sites along the Cache River offer scenic hiking opportunities. Trail length is based on a round trip distance.

Lookout Point Trail

Just east of the Wildcat Bluff access, this trail winds along the edge of a hillside barren and provides an overview of the Cache River, its swamps, and floodplain forest. The trail may be accessed off Route 146 west of Vienna or off of Rt. 45 south of Vienna. Trail length: 1 mile Difficulty: Easy

Little Black Slough

This trail can be accessed via the Wildcat Bluff, Marshall Ridge or the Heron Pond trails. Bald cypress and tupelo swamps, sandstone bluffs, floodplain forests and hillside glades highlight this trail. A rock ford 1.5 miles west of Wildcat Bluff access allows crossing the Cache River to Boss Island; however this crossing is seasonal due to high water. Trail length: 5.5 miles Difficulty: Moderately Difficult

Heron Pond Trail

This trail crosses the Cache River on a suspended bridge and meanders to a floating boardwalk which allows access into the middle of Heron Pond (a cypress swamp). A 14 station trail with interpretive panels is established along the trail and boardwalk. Follow signs off the Karnak-Belknap road north to parking area. Trail length: 1.5 miles Difficulty: Easy

Linkage Trail

This trail links Heron Pond trail with the Little Black Slough trail and offers a chance to observe the State Champion cherrybark oak tree. Access is through Heron Pond, Wildcat Bluff or Marshall Ridge access. Trail length: 2.4 miles Difficulty: Easy

Marshall Ridge Trail

Winding through reforested fields north of Marshall Ridge, this trail connects with the Linkage Trail and provides access to Heron Pond and Little Black Slough. Trail length: 2.8 miles Difficulty: Easy

Tupelo Trail

Beginning 1/4 mile north of Marshall Ridge Access, this trail meanders through rolling upland forest to the southern edge of Little Black Slough. It provide excellent views of tupelo gum trees and Little Black Slough swamp. This trail is accessed through the Marshall Ridge access. Trail length: 2.5 miles Difficulty: Moderate

Section 8 Woods Boardwalk Trail

This boardwalk trail passes through a floodplain forest and then a cypress-tupelo swamp. The handicap accessible boardwalk offers a view of the state Champion Water Tupelo, which has a circumference of 22.5 feet. Trail length: 450 feet Difficulty: Easy

Big Cypress Tree Access

This lowland, wooded area highlights giant cypress and tupelo trees among the largest in the area. The access is located on the west edge of Karnak. Trail length: 250 ft Difficulty: Easy

Lower Cache River Hiking Trail

This trail parallels the Cache River and Cypress Creek allowing access to a cypress and tupelo swamp by foot. During periods of flooding this trail may be impassable due to wet and muddy conditions. The access is between Route 37 and Perks; follow signs off the Perks Blacktop. Trail length: 2.5 mile Difficulty: Easy

Lower Cache River Canoe Trail

A marked canoe route is also available. It winds through backwater sloughs to the State Champion bald cypress tree which is over 1000 years old with a buttress circumference of over 34 feet. Trail length: 3- 6 miles Difficulty: Easy, flat water, no canoe shuttles necessary

Special Note

During the periods of heavy rainfall or flooding low lying trails or rock fords may be impassable or have wet and muddy conditions.

Little Black Slough and the Linkage trails cross the Burlington Northern Railroad track. Burlington Northern has posted no trespassing, as this is an active track. Please use caution when crossing these areas of the railroad.

Only foot traffic is allowed on the Cache River State Natural Area hiking trails. Motorized vehicles beyond access areas/parking lots are not permitted. All Terrain Vehicles (ATV), bicycles, horses, or mules are not permitted in the area.

For additional information contact:

Site Superintendent, Cache River State Natural Area, 930 Sunflower Lane, Belknap, Illinois 62908, 618-634-9678.

