This secluded forest retreat in central Illinois enjoys a perfectly shady reputation.

# Hidden Springs State Forest

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde

Plans for the central Illinois landscape took a sharp U-turn in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

At the time, the state was acquiring land in Shelby County for the creation of a reservoir. When the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announced plans to dam the Kaskaskia River and create Lake Shelbyville, the state reconsidered the need for two reservoirs in Shelby County. As a result, Shelby County State Forest, subsequently renamed Hidden Springs State Forest after the seven known springs on the site, was born.

rue anemone, *Anemonella thalictroides*

Site Superintendent Rick Goble says that the designation of the 1,229-acre site as a state forest does cause some confusion.

"Many people see the sign on the road and drive right past us, thinking that the area is just a bunch of trees," Goble remarked. "In reality, Hidden Springs is a multi-use recreation area, combining sound timber and resource management with compatible recreational opportunities such as hiking, hunting, fishing, camping and a popular day-use area."

With 7 miles of trails passing through gently rolling terrain and 17 miles of fire trails providing access to remote sections of the forest, hikers can experience coniferous and hardwood timber, 200 acres of restored prairie and picturesque views of Richland Creek. Only foot traffic is allowed, and all trails have benches where visitors can rest, reflect and watch wildlife. Two trails pass by two of the forest's namesake springs.

**Although designated as a state forest, Hidden Springs offers visitors a diversity of recreational opportunities.**

At the northeastern corner of the forest, the 1-mile Big Tree Trail offers visitors a chance to gaze upon Quicksand Spring. Sadly, the origin of the trail name is lost to history as no quicksand exists.

"Although it no longer stands, Big Tree Trail was named for a 78-inch diameter sycamore tree, once one of the largest in the state," Goble said. "All that remains now is a chimney of decaying wood that provides a buffet for insects and insect-eaters."

**Great opportunities for viewing wildlife exist on trails paralleling Richland Creek, a tributary of the Kaskaskia River.**

A second spring, Rocky Spring, is accessible from the Rocky Spring Nature Trail located at the opposite corner of the park. The longest of the forest's trails, Rocky Spring provides a 3-mile loop that traverses through all habitat types found in the state forest, past forest improvement and walnut production areas and it parallels Richland Creek for nearly a mile. Rocky Spring Nature Trail has historical significance as it follows a segment of the road area settlers used to travel to and from Vandalia.

Indian Head Spring, Stone Head Spring and Fern Spring are a few of the other known springs scattered throughout the timber. Other springs may exist, but likely have been covered with years of sediment.

Trail guides available at the site headquarters and the trail head provide information about the 35 interpretive stations posted along the ¾-mile Possum Hollow Nature Trail. The self-guided trail is popular with school groups and youth organizations and provides information on trees and habitat features.

Want a sneak peek at Possum Hollow Nature Trail? Check out the self-guided picture tour at dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r3/hsforest.htm.

Birders enjoy taking to the trails in search of some of the more than 110 species of feathered fauna present seasonally. In addition to enjoying a woodland floor carpeted with wildflowers, spring visitors are especially delighted with the presence of nearly 20 species of warblers, including black-and-white, orange-crowned, bay-breasted, Ken-

(Photo by Joe McFarland.)



bluebells, *Mertensia virginica*

wild turkey, *Meleagris gallopavo*

trillium, *Trillium sp.*

Henry's elfin butterfly, *Callophrys henrici*

bloodroot, *Sanguinaria canadensis*

**An oak tree provides an arbor of fall color at one of Hidden Spring's popular day-use areas.**

tucky and yellow-throated. A checklist of known species is available at the office and on the Web site.

Richland Creek flows into the Kaskaskia River and provides a natural travel corridor for wildlife. Deer and wild turkeys are frequently spotted within the forest, and a recent increase in the number of river otters sighted has wildlife watchers on alert.

As one of Illinois' four designated state forests, nearly 70 percent of Hidden Springs is timbered. Most of the timber is classified as a mature, second-growth oak-hickory forest, although there is a 200-acre conifer plantation composed of white, red and scotch pines. The forest does offer a firewood collection program, allowing individuals to obtain a permit to cut up to two pickup loads of wood in assigned areas. Firewood must be for personal use only and a $10/load fee is assessed.

Significant timber resources make Hidden Springs a prime destination for deer (archery and firearm), spring wild turkey and squirrel hunters. Restored prairie patches and 25-acres of sunflowers planted annually enhance rabbit, quail, ring-necked pheasant and dove hunting. All but 200 acres of the site are open to hunting.

Firearm deer hunters are required to possess a site-specific permit. All other hunters and trappers must pick up a free site permit at the office and display a windshield card while hunting at Hidden Springs. Windshield cards must be turned in by February 15th as the harvest data provides biologists with information crucial to wildlife management decisions, and failure to comply means loss of hunting privileges at the site for one year. In most cases statewide regulations apply; however, consulting the Web site or contacting the forest headquarters for additional information is advised.

Archers may want to drop by the forest to hone their skills on the free 3-D archery range. The range has 23 targets of a variety of species and is open year-round.

Not to be left out, anglers may wet a line at any of five ponds located within the forest. Ranging in size from ¾-1¼ acres, Hickory Ridge and Prairie ponds are accessible by vehicle, while a short jaunt is required for those desiring to fish White Oaks, Sassafras and Park

*Earth Day in the Parks*

ponds. Each pond is annually stocked with channel catfish, bluegill, redear and largemouth bass. Richland Creek provides limited fishing opportunities.

The Possum Creek campground features 28 Class C (four yard hydrants, a privie and sanitary disposal station) sites with pedestal stoves, fire blocks and a fire ring. Campers may set up camp on the site of their choice, or may make a reservation by contacting the forest headquarters.

Shady Grove Campground, a group camp large enough to accommodate scout and church groups also is available.

Also a family-friendly destination, Rolling Meadows Day Use Area contains a volleyball court, softball diamond, horseshoe pits and two additional sets of playground equipment. Drinking water, privies, tables, stoves and a fire ring round out the available amenities. The large picnic shelter averages four to six weddings, and numerous family reunions, each year and may be reserved through the site headquarters.

Additional day-use sites include Red Bud Lane, on the south end of the Rolling Meadows Day Use Area, where three small, secluded sites provide intimate picnic settings, and a small picnic area near the Big Tree Nature Trail. Tables and stoves are available at both.

As a state forest, Hidden Springs is an ideal location for research that will benefit sound timber and resource management. The Illinois Natural History Survey has conducted two research projects on the invasive garlic mustard, one on demography and one on the biochemical interactions that inhibit the growth of neighboring plants by another plant.

Hidden Springs was part of a network of 10 sites sampled twice a year during the garlic mustard demography study. Information gathered included size of the population, plant growth stage and what plants were growing with garlic mustard. This information was collected to investigate the population dynamics of garlic mustard before the introduction of biological control agents. (No agents have been approved for release at this time.)

The second multi-site field study tested how the efficiency and efficacy of restoration activities (hand pulling of garlic mustard and restoring the healthy soil microbial communities) depended on the age or biochemical concentration of garlic mustard.

According to INHS post-doctoral researcher Richard Lankau, results of the study provide land managers with two, key management recommendations: restoration activities will probably be more successful in areas with a longer history of garlic mustard invasion and, also, knowing something about the history or toxicity of the garlic mustard population can help determine how much effort is necessary for the restoration to be successful.

Next time you are traveling down the road, or looking for a new site for the family to explore, consider Hidden Springs State Forest—a site that holds hidden springs and many other wonders for you to discover.

**Andrew Goble (left), Stewardson, and Blake Lilly, Mode, enjoy a fall upland game hunt at Hidden Springs.**

## At a glance

**Hidden Springs State Forest,**
R.R. 1, Box 200, Strasburg, Ill. 62465
**Telephone:** (217) 644-3091
**Web site:** dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r3/hsforest.htm
**Directions:** Exit Interstate 57 at Mattoon and proceed west on Route 16 through town. Continue west on Route 16 through the towns of Gays and Windsor. Two miles west of Windsor, turn left (south) on Illinois Route 32 and proceed 4 miles through Strasburg, then 2 miles to the entrance.
**In the area:** Located only 10 miles south of Lake Shelbyville, a visit to Hidden Springs State Forest easily can be part of a weekend getaway or a family vacation.

History buffs will enjoy the Thompson Mill Covered Bridge, one of only five covered bridges remaining in Illinois and located 4 miles east of Cowden. Built in 1868, the 157-foot bridge is only 10-feet, 7-inches wide and was constructed to provide Effingham to Springfield travelers transportation across the Kaskaskia River. Traffic is no longer allowed on the bridge, but the adjacent replacement bridge provides easy foot access.

For additional information on area parks, historical sites, events, accommodations and more, visit lakeshelbyville.com.