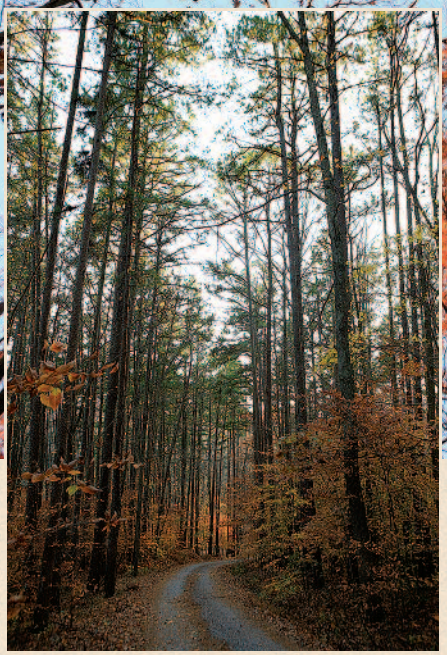
Trail of Tears State Forest in Union County features a landscape mountain climbers will love.

High Country Forest



Story By Joe McFarland
Photos By Adele Hodde

Not all walks in the woods of Illinois are created equal. Depending on where a person chooses to hike in our wild Prairie State, a stroll in the forest might lead down a few mildly sloping trails or up gentle, effortless grades. In the rolling prairie forests of central Illinois, a steep incline might rise 10 or 15 feet. No sweat. Hikers and runners shrug at the simplicity.

But then there's Trail of Tears State Forest in southern Illinois, a sharply contoured, rugged landscape featuring miles of trails that follow ancient rock outcrops and precipitous inclines that challenge even fitness buffs. Some hills absolutely defy climbing. It's a different physical world here compared with most of Illinois: It's a landscape cobbled with iron-stained chert and fossiliferous limestone deposited 400 million years ago. Glaciers never made it this far south, which means the terrain has a sharp-edged appearance that's distinctly rugged compared with the ice-smoothed topography of the north. Layers of sedimentary bedrock deposited during the Devonian thrust upward and weathered out over the millennia to reveal a gravelly soil that sometimes crunches underfoot.

Structural improvements created more than 70 years ago by the Civilian Conservation Corps are still visible at Trail of Tears State Forest.

Hiking in the valleys and hills of Trail of Tears State Forest is an exercise in peace and quiet. Sound doesn't carry far here—including sound from the distant outside world.

Visitors to this state forest in Union County find a combination of solitude, sporting opportunities and unexpected heights.

"I tell people who've never been here that the hills can be surprisingly challenging," explained Trail of Tears State Forest Ranger Neil Coleman. "And for people on horseback, I tell them their horses better be in good shape if they plan to go on certain trails."

This is a landscape of sharp contrasts. Located just a few miles from the Mississippi River and its flat floodplain, Trail of Tears State Forest is situated in a narrow region of extreme southwest Illinois known as the Illinois Ozarks. (Across the Mississippi, rising in the distant west, are the well-known Missouri Ozarks.) Both Ozarks feature breathtaking hills that suddenly fall away into 200-foot plunges. There are long, steep-sided valleys cut over time by sparkling streams—and the water here is beyond clear. Nearby Hutchins Creek offers some of the purest-looking water you'll find anywhere in the region.

It's also a land filled with history. Just a few miles away, in Jonesboro, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas once debated over their bids for the presidency. There is even some evidence Lincoln took a sightseeing horse carriage ride into these hills during his time there.

But a darker moment of earlier American history provides the memorial namesake for this state forest. During the presidency of Andrew Jackson, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 forced Native Americans out of their lands in the southeast and far across the Mississippi River into the west. With no time to prepare for the long journey and without personal belongings or food, it's estimated some 4,000 Native Americans died during the forced march westward. The route that would later come to be known as the Trail of Tears passed from present-day northern Alabama and looped through the southern tip of Illinois, roughly where the state forest now stands.

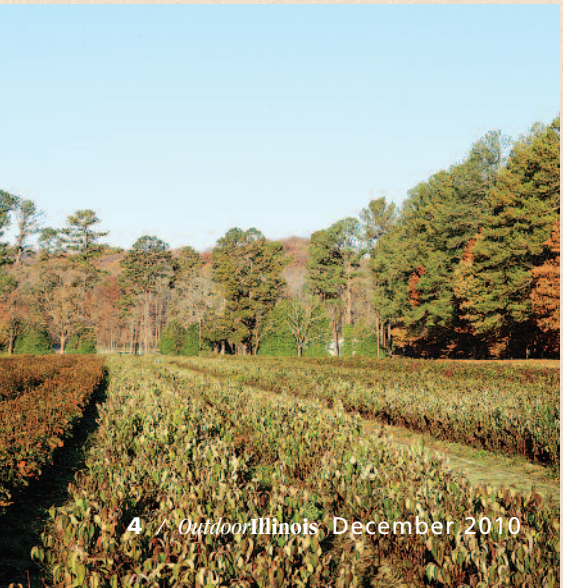
During the past 175 years, it would seem little has changed in appearance in this rugged stretch of Illinois. The rocky hills that were never suitable for farming were left largely undeveloped

Clear intermittent streams trickle through the limestone-filled valleys and continue to carve this ancient landscape.

Sporting opportunities include 22 miles of equestrian trails and hunting opportunities for deer, turkey, small game—and more.

as the fertile bottomlands of the nearby Mississippi attracted pioneer settlers. Timber was harvested from the hills, and some of the lesser slopes were planted in fruit trees. But the rough land that became Trail of Tears State Forest is another example of wild Illinois habitat that survived roughly intact because the modern world couldn't tame it. As land-use priorities evolved, what was once "worthless" land came to be recognized as excellent habitat. And by the 20th century, as new state parks were being established throughout Illinois, officials took notice of these rocky hills.

The state nursery located west of Trail of Tears State Forest raisies millions of native tree seedlings for Illinois landscaping and reforestation efforts.



In 1929, the state purchased 3,000 acres of this property and named it the Kohn-Jackson Forest. The name was soon changed to Union State Forest (or Union County State Forest). Almost immediately, when the Great Depression of the 1930s hit, a Civilian Conservation Camp was set up there for the region's unemployed young men. During the next several years, CCC crews would build hiking trails, picnic shelters, rock walls, bridges and miles of fire trail in this new state forest. Many of these structures, including the amazing limestone retaining walls that have stood the test of time, along with a fire tower now on the National Register of Historic Places, can still be seen today.

As one of six state forests in Illinois, Trail of Tears also is home to one of two state nurseries that provide seedlings for both public and private landscaping and reforestation efforts. The nursery, located on the west side of the state forest, is another accomplishment of the CCC era. The 120-acre nursery provides tree stock for Illinois and includes seed beds, seed "orchards" (where mature trees provide seeds for cultivation) as well as propagation areas where seedlings are raised. A massive cooler built into a hillside was excavated by CCC workers—much of it by hand—more than 75 years ago and is still in service today as the storage room for nursery stock.

Department of Natural Resources Resource Coordinator Dan Bevil said the nursery has, over the years, produced millions upon millions of trees for Illinois—but not always for the same reasons.

"The emphasis of the nursery has changed with the need and demand for trees for specific areas," Bevil explained. "Mine reclamation in Illinois once was a major emphasis. Lately we've been providing a lot of trees to state sites."

Trail of Tears State Forest has 6,000 acres of recreational opportunities. It's

At a glance

Trail of Tears State Forest, 3240 State Forest Road, Jonesboro, IL 62952
Telephone: (618) 833-4910
Web site: dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r5/trltears.htm
Directions: Located 5 miles northwest of Jonesboro, access is from Ill. Route 127 to the east or Ill. Route 3 to the west.

a camping and picnic destination. It's a hiker's challenge. It's also an equestrian and sportsman's paradise, with 22 miles of equestrian trails and excellent hunting for deer (both archery and firearm), wild turkey, squirrel and rabbit.

"We have 54 miles of fire trails in the forest," Coleman pointed out, adding that hunters are welcome to use the fire trails for hiking in and out of the forest, although vehicles are prohibited.

"A lot of hunters will hunt simply by walking down the fire trails," explained District Wildlife Biologist Dan Woolard, who said deer, turkey and squirrel remain the most avidly hunted game in the state forest. Although the steep hills are less challenging while strolling along a ridge-top trail, hunters need to consider the effort required to retrieve game.

"You might shoot a squirrel out of a tree and watch it drop 200 feet," Woolard said. "There aren't many places in Illinois where you can see that happen."

Campers choose this state forest for its rugged beauty and quiet isolation. No noisy crowds of bumper-to-bumper RVs are found here, as Class C (tent camping with vehicle access) and Class D (backpack camping) are the two camping options. Group camping is available, and some locations have CCC-built log shelters with adjacent privies.

Note that the forest's gravel roads are closed to vehicles from December 24 through the end of spring wild turkey season (typically the second week of May) and all camping access is by foot only during that period. Also, the 222-acre Ozark Hills Nature Preserve located within the park differs slightly from nature preserves elsewhere in that deer hunting is permitted during hunting season (rare plant communities were being browsed heavily, hence the management choice). But turkey hunting is not allowed within the nature preserve.

Miles of hiking trails throughout the state forest—some on sharp inclines—can challenge even fitness buffs.

Log shelters for picnickers and campers were built during the 1930s by the CCC and still provide popular resting areas for visitors.

Prepare for a visit to Trail of Tears State Forest by expecting a number of storm-damaged trees to block off-trail access in certain areas. Severe weather episodes during the past two years, with massive ice storms and hurricane winds, toppled trees throughout the region's forests. Trail of Tears was hit hard. But essential cleanup has now been completed.

"The forest crews really should be commended for how well they've cleaned up the trails," biologist Woolard observed. "There was an incredible amount of work to be done after those storms and it's amazing how well they did it."