The Glacier's Edge

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.

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde

(Photos courtesy of Richard Larimore.)

Fox Ridge State Park has a construction history dating to the 1930s and a geologic history unique to east-central Illinois. Kaley McKinney and Anna, Elizabeth and Laura Southards enjoyed an afternoon hiking the park's extensive wooded trail system.

A band of rugged, thickly forested hills lies nearly hidden in the expanses of rich, flat agricultural land in east-central Illinois. Driving down a serpentine, canopied road, visitors pause to stare into fern-covered streamlets 150 feet below and marvel at the force of the Wisconsin glacier.

Welcome to Fox Ridge State Park, 1,683 acres of wooded ridges, lush valleys and vigorous, scenic hiking trails 6 miles south of Charleston. Located at the crest of the last episode of Pleistocene glaciation in Illinois, glacial meltwaters eroded through the end moraine, dissecting the park area and eventually forming the Embarras River.

As a Coles County native, let me start with a basic lesson that separates the men from the boys—or the locals from the visitors—and can save a little...ahem...embarrassment. Embarras is pronounced AM-BRAW. Local legend

A staircase down the wooded hillside leads to the biological field station on Ridge Lake, where anglers can participate in the longest-running creel study in Illinois. The lake and field station were constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the 1930s.

claims early settlers, frustrated with the number of log jams encountered as they traveled down the river, coined the name from a French word for obstruction. At one time, livestock and manufactured goods were loaded on flat boats and transported down the Embarras to the Wabash, then Ohio and Mississippi rivers for sale in New Orleans. Time toiling to clear debris from the channel meant delayed delivery—and payment.

From 1933 to 1943, members of the Civilian Conservation Corps left their barracks at Eastern Illinois University, piling into former Army flat-bed trucks for transport to their work station 6 miles south of town. Hundreds of young men constructed a residence/workshop, 4 miles of trail, a water treatment plant, a brick pavilion, a research laboratory, two small shelters and a lake—all but one small shelter remains in use today. The state accepted management of the land from the U.S. Department of Interior in 1942.

Nearly 1,000 acres of the park has been designated by the Illinois Nature Preserves Commission and Department of Natural Resources (DNR) as a Land and Water Reserve. Biologically rich lands worthy of protection, reserves differ from nature preserves in that, with permission from the landowner, reserves may be used for activities that will not harm the natural features for which it has been protected, including 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

Accessible from the campground and rent-a-cabins, Wilderness Pond provides ample fishing opportunities for park visitors.

Visitors are encouraged to stop by the Fox Ridge State Park office to view exhibits featuring local plants and animals.

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

Volunteer services

The Fox Ridge Foundation is dedicated to the improvement and promotion of the park. Governed by local citizens interested in the park's future, the foundation sponsors several annual events and fund drives to underwrite park improvements. For further information contact the park office or write to the Fox Ridge Foundation, P.O. Box 714, Charleston, IL, 61920.

The work of the volunteer-based Embarras Valley Stewards has made a significant difference in DNR's ability to preserve, protect and manage the resources of Fox Ridge. For the past 10 years, hundreds of hours have been spent restoring a natural prairie remnant, pulling garlic mustard and monitoring an endangered species.

Dick Andrews and Pam Waddell enjoyed an early spring float trip on the Embarras River, accessible from canoe access points at the north and south ends of the park.

Facts at a glance

Fox Ridge State Park: 18175 State Park Road, Charleston, IL 61920.
Telephone: (217) 345-6416.
Website: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/PARKS/R3/FOX/FOX.HTM.
Directions: From I-57, take the Route 16 exit east to Charleston, traveling through town to the intersection of Routes 16 and 130. Turn right (south) and go 7 miles. From I-70, turn north at the Route 130 exit and proceed approximately 11 miles.

Whether for a family outing, overnight visitor or company picnic, Fox Ridge's shaded campsites and historic pavilions provide a quiet, scenic backdrop.

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 though 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."

Ridge Lake

Constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps and completed in 1941, Ridge Lake is the location of the longest running creel study in Illinois.

Since opened, onsite caretakers have provided uninterrupted service to Ridge Lake anglers, taking boat reservations and then measuring and recording all fish harvested. The ability to control water levels has provided decades of data on the effects lake drawdowns have on fish populations.

The 14-acre Ridge Lake is administered by the Illinois Natural History Survey and open to the public from Memorial Day to Labor Day, Thursday through Sunday from 2 to 8 p.m. Eight boats are available on a first-come, first-serve basis by calling (217) 345-6490. Fishing from the bank is prohibited.

New to fishing or forget your rod and reel? Ridge Lake is part of the DNR fishing equipment loan program. See www.ifishillinois.org.