

These Parts



Skip Starved Rock

By Robert Dolgan

Camping in Illinois is often a disheartening experience. Most campgrounds consist of unshaded grassy expanses, and though Starved Rock State Park boasts scenic gorges, its campgrounds are amid fields and woods a few miles away, where the views are mostly of RVs.

But a few worthy camping spots in Illinois do exist, though the sites are their most serene in spring, fall, and winter—be sure to make reservations when camping on summer weekends. Unless otherwise noted, all locations below are state parks managed by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources; see dnr.state.il.us for more info.

The February night I spent at **Apple River Canyon State Park** (Apple River, 815-745-3302) was spectacular. Sure, it was only five degrees Fahrenheit and my fingertips turned purple as I struggled to light the stove. And my hand still aches when it's cold. But I had plenty of privacy. This scenic little park in northwest Illinois, about 20 miles from Galena, offers decent camping in all seasons. There are several short hiking options along the bluffs, and the surrounding back roads of Jo Daviess County are more reminiscent of West Virginia than Illinois.

Chain O' Lakes State Park (Spring Grove, 847-587-5512) is popular thanks to its rowboat rentals, bobber fishing, and proximity to Chicago, which attracts campers with loud

stereos and crowds on summer weekends. Yet sandhill cranes grace the park's marshes, and the Turner Lake South campground features some secluded sites with dense vegetation.

Perhaps because it's part of the Vermilion County Conservation District (vccd.org) and not a state park, few people know about the **Forest Glen Preserve** (Westville, 217-662-2142). Located about 170 miles south of Chicago along the Indiana line, the park includes a rugged 11-mile backpacking trail that traverses woodlands and prairies. A 72-foot-high observation tower overlooks the Vermilion River valley; the east camp offers three secluded sites on a tall ridge. Don't let the flatlands on the drive down fool you: the trails are relentlessly steep.

Walk-in sites are the Holy Grail of Illinois camping: ferrying your gear on foot to a site 500 feet or more away from the nearest cars and RVs is worth the effort. There's a walk-in campground at **Jim Edgar Panther Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area** (Chandlerville, 217-452-7741), on a 26-square-mile tract near Springfield. The sites are about a quarter mile from the parking area on the wooded edge of a prairie, though there are sites for RVs and car campers as well; my wife and I could hear caterwauling from them the night we went, but the prairie sunrise the next morning made up for it. The park also has two paved cycling loops (one's 17 miles, the other 5), and it's prime hunting territory as well.

Two outhouses for about 50 people: that's the one thing I remember about the crowded campground at **Kickapoo State Recreation Area** (Oakwood, 217-442-4915). I also remember the sound of cars whizzing by on I-74 and loud squabbles from the neighboring

site. But there are fun things to do in the area. The middle fork of the Vermilion River features some excellent paddling opportunities, and the park's 12 miles of mountain bike trails are among the best in central Illinois.

The most memorable aspect of **Lowden State Park** (Oregon, 815-732-6828) may be the 50-foot concrete Indian statue overlooking the Rock River. The park, the former home of an artists' colony founded in the 1890s, is a typical Illinois state park: a few short hiking loops in the surrounding woods, along with picnic areas and ball fields. There are walk-in sites here, but the one we had during our visit was yards away from another; we spent the evening listening to the chirping of our neighbors' Nextels. For the



scenic route into the park, take Illinois Route 2 south from Rockford. The nearby **Nachusa Grasslands Preserve** (Franklin Grove, 815-456-2340), owned by the Nature Conservancy, is one of the last prairie landscapes in Illinois.

Entering **Mississippi Palisades State Park** (Savanna, 815-273-2731), my wife and I were greeted by the sight of two dead deer hanging from a tree; the hiking trails are closed during the three-day deer-hunting season in November. The car campground is essentially a huge field, and the few walk-in sites have limited availability, but there's plenty to see around this park in northwest Illinois: the views from atop the bluffs are stunning, and there are some prime eagle-watching locales at the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife Refuge and Lock & Dam 13. It's a short drive to Sabula, Iowa, a tiny island town on the Mississippi.

Sand Ridge State Forest (Forest City, 309-597-2212), south of Peoria, has a 44-mile network of trails on sand dunes. Backpacking on sand makes for some serious trudging, but if you like solitude this is the place: I hiked 14 miles on a March weekend and saw only one other person. There is a car-camping area on the site; in addition to the sand prairie and mixed woodlands, the vast pine plantations evoke the north woods of Wisconsin in places. The Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge in Havana is a short drive away.

Alcohol is banned in state park campgrounds, and the sites at **White Pines Forest State Park** (Mount Morris, 815-946-3717) are so close together you won't be able to enjoy your illegal beer in peace. But the 100-mile trip west to Ogle County from Chicago is worth it, especially in the spring or fall. The park's conifers are touted as the southernmost native stand of white pines in the country, and the modest trail system skirts bluffs and ravines. **The White Pines Inn Restaurant** (815-946-3817), which hosts Sunday pancake breakfasts, is inside the park, within walking distance of the campground. There are more fishing and hiking opportunities at nearby **Castle Rock State Park** (Oregon, 815-732-7329), but it doesn't have a campground. ■

