



Cache River

Cache River State Natural Area

When storms pushed Norseman Leif Ericsson westward to the North American continent 1,000 years ago, many of the cypress trees of today's Cache River State Natural Area were just saplings. By the time Christopher Columbus landed in the Western Hemisphere 500 years later, they had grown into ancient trees that towered above even more ancient blackwater swamps.



Cache River State Natural Area is situated in southernmost Illinois within a floodplain carved long ago by glacial floodwater of the Ohio River. When the Ohio River adopted its present course, it left the Cache River to meander across rich and vast wetlands. Among the outstanding natural features found within the area today are massive cypress trees whose flared bases, called buttresses, exceed 40 feet in circumference. Many are more than 1,000 years old, including one that has earned the title of state champion bald cypress because of its huge trunk girth, towering height and heavily branched canopy.

Despite intensive efforts to convert land along the Cache River to cropland, the land that today makes up the Cache River State Natural Area has managed to hold onto some of the highest quality aquatic and terrestrial "natural communities" remaining in Illinois. Wetlands within this area are so important to migratory waterfowl and shorebirds that in 1996 the RAMSAR Convention collectively designated them a Wetland of International Importance, only the 15th wetland in the United States to receive this distinction.

It is within southern Illinois that north meets south and east meets west. With its diversity of soils, bedrock and landforms, the Cache River Valley contains four distinct ecological regions.

owls, great blue herons, great egrets, little blue herons, green herons, least bitterns, wood ducks, mallards, snow geese, sora rails, woodcock, quail, mourning doves, red-headed woodpeckers, pileated woodpeckers, prothonotary warblers, black vultures and turkey vultures. Seasonal migrations bring multitudes of waterfowl and shorebirds to the area, as well as the occasional osprey, golden eagle and black tern.

Mammals often encountered include white-tailed deer, squirrels, raccoons, beavers, gray foxes, red foxes, opossums, skunks and mink. Lucky visitors might catch a glimpse of river otters, bobcats or tiny Indiana bats.

Swimming under or on the tea-colored waters of the Cache are numerous fish, amphibians and reptiles. Channel catfish, crappie, bass and bluegill are prized by area fishermen. Less sought after but true swamp fish include the bowfin, needle-nose gar, grass pickerel and yellow bullhead catfish. Pygmy sunfish and cypress minnows are two state-endangered fish found only in wetlands dominated by forested swamps.

Bird-voiced tree frogs, southern leopard frogs, spring peepers, western chorus frogs, bullfrogs and American toads are among the more vocal of the area's amphibian inhabitants. Other well-known residents of Cache environs are the cottonmouth, copperhead and timber rattlesnake. While the bite from these venomous species is dangerous, as long as visitors are both cautious and observant, they have little to fear from these reclusive, non-aggressive creatures.

Barkhausen Wetlands Center

The wetlands is a high-quality destination point that fosters natural resources appreciation and education, while interpreting the unique natural and cultural history of the Cache River Wetlands. Located south of Whitehill on Illinois Route 37, the center is named for Henry N. Barkhausen, who served as Director for the Illinois Department of Conservation from 1970-73 and for 18 years, served as Secretary of the Citizens Committee to save the Cache River. He worked to encourage government agencies, organizations and residents to protect and restore the natural character of the Cache Wetlands. Wetlands Center hours and days of operation are Wednesday through Sunday 9 a.m.–4 p.m. Address and phone number: 8885 State Rt. 37 South, Cypress, IL. 62923. 618-657-2064.

Its hodgepodge of ecological factors has resulted in a collage of natural communities, each with its own unique assemblage of physical attributes, plants and animals.

Not surprisingly, people have rallied to protect the Cache River watershed. The National Park Service has designated two National Natural Landmarks within its borders—Buttonland Swamp and Heron Pond. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources has identified three Nature Preserves here—Section 8 Woods, Heron Pond-Wildcat Bluff and Little Black Slough—and registered over 13,000 acres of the area's 17,700 plus acres in the Land and Water Reserve Program. These designations assure that site management will emphasize restoration and preservation of the area's natural characteristics.

The Landscape

Totalling 17,783 acres in Johnson, Massac and Pulaski counties, Cache River State Natural Area is composed of three distinct management units—Little Black Slough, Lower Cache River Swamps and Glass Hill.

The Little Black Slough Unit surrounds the Upper Cache River north of the West Eden Road. Nestled deep within the shadowy bottomland forests of this unit lies Heron Pond, a shallow wetland dominated by cypress and tupelo trees. A boardwalk winds its way into the secluded depths of this forested swamp, providing visitors a chance to step back in time and observe wetland and aquatic ecosystems that have remained relatively undisturbed for thousands of years. During the growing season, massive gray-brown cypress trunks arise from a floating carpet of brilliant emerald duckweed. These living pillars of wood extend high over the swamp before disappearing into a shadow-filled canopy. Here, seldom-seen but often-heard bird-voiced tree frogs haunt the leafy branches of tall cypress trees, their melodious calls considered by many to be the most beautiful of all the frog voices. Above and below the water's surface, birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and insects interact in a symphony of survival.

Overlooking the swamps are the low ridges of the Lesser Shawnee Hills. At the base of these hills, bottomland hardwood forests dominated by overcup oak, pin oak, cherrybark oak and sweetgum give way to red oak, white oak and shagbark hickory. Barrens occur on the highest ridge tops where soils are thin and bedrock is exposed. These sites are dominated by small post oak and black-



jack oak trees scattered about open expanses of land dominated by grasses and forbs more commonly encountered on dry prairies.

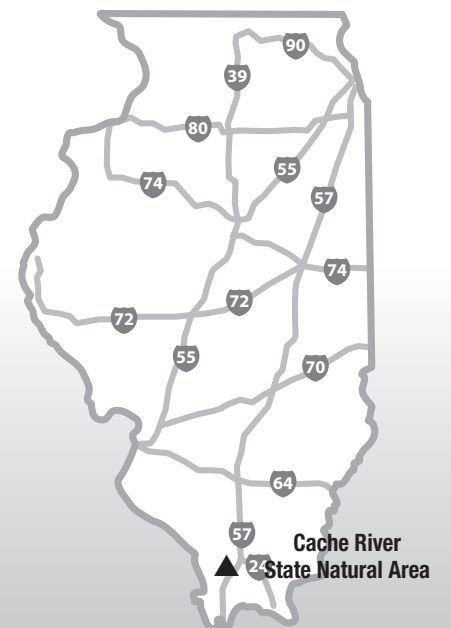
South of the West Eden Road, the Lower Cache River Swamps spread across a broad, flat floodplain between the towns of Karnak and Ullin. The swamps are a mosaic of permanent, deep, open water interrupted here and there by thick-buttressed cypress trees that were old hundreds of years ago. Younger, even-aged stands of cypress and tupelo trees and thickets of buttonbush occur in areas of shallow water. Visitors can experience this lost world while paddling a canoe through 6 miles of trails that meander through rivers, swamps and ponds in a portion of the Lower Cache River known as Buttonland Swamp.

The Glass Hill Management Unit occurs about 3 miles north of Buttonland Swamp near the town of Cypress. An outstanding example of a rare landform called a sandstone knob occurs on this site. All around and on top of this inaccessible knob is relatively undisturbed upland forest dominated by chinquapin oak, red oak, white oak, shagbark hickory and pignut hickory.

Wildlife

The diversity of wildlife and wild places found in Cache River State Natural Area provides food, cover and water for an incredible number of plant and animal species, more than 100 of which have been listed as endangered or threatened by the state of Illinois.

If swamps are the Cache River's signature natural community, then birds are its signature species. Observant birders can expect to see bald eagles, red-tailed hawks, great horned owls, barred



Cache River State Natural Area
930 Sunflower Lane
Belknap, IL 62908, 618-634-9678

- While groups of 25 or more are welcome and encouraged to use the park's facilities, they are required to register in advance with the site office to avoid crowding or scheduling conflicts.
- At least one responsible adult must accompany each group of 15 minors.
- Pets must be kept on leashes at all times.
- Actions by nature can result in closed roads and other facilities.
- We hope you enjoy your stay. Remember, take only memories, leave only footprints.
- For more information on tourism in Illinois, call the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's Bureau of Tourism at 1-800-2CONNECT.
- Deaf and hearing-impaired individuals may call the Department of Natural Resources' TTY number, 217-782-9175, or use the Ameritech Relay Number, 1-800-526-0844.
- visit our website at www.dnr.illinois.gov.

Cache River Wetlands Center — 618-657-2064

Equal opportunity to participate in programs of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) and those funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other agencies is available to all individuals regardless of race, sex, national origin, disability, age, religion or other nonmerit factors. If you believe you have been discriminated against, contact the funding source's civil rights office and/or the Equal Employment Opportunity Officer, IDNR, One Natural Resources Way, Springfield, IL 62702-1271; (217) 785-0067; TTY (217) 782-9175.



Canoe Trail

The **Lower Cache River Trail** offers paddlers a quality canoe experience, 3 to 6 miles in length, through a magnificent cypress-tupelo swamp. The highlight of the trail is Illinois' largest and, therefore, **state champion bald cypress tree**. Like many trees within Cache River State Natural Area, it is more than 1,000 years old.

Canoeists can begin at the Lower Cache River access area or at a private boat launch (\$1 fee) south of Perks. Car shuttles are not necessary. The trail is marked with international canoe symbols and arrows and/or yellow stripes on trees. Canoe maps and fact sheets are available at the site headquarters and wetlands center.

While canoeing the Lower Cache is enjoyable, paddlers should be aware that the Upper Cache River is difficult if not impossible to canoe. Severe bank erosion, which is responsible for trees tipping over and creating log jams, makes canoe portages very frequent.

Hiking Trails

There are more than 18 miles of designated foot trails within Cache River State Natural Area. Other than Little Black Slough Trail and Tupelo Trail which are considered moderate in difficulty, the trails are easy to walk. A five-mile segment of the 45-mile-long Tunnel Hill State Trail will pass through some region, providing expanded opportunities for hikers and cyclists. Paralleling the Karnak-Belknap Road on its northern side, the Tunnel Hill Trail will link Little Black Slough, the Lower Cache and the Henry N. Barkhausen-Cache River Wetlands Center. *All trail lengths are based on round trip distances.*

- **Todd Fink-Heron Pond Trail** (1.5 miles) with access at the Heron Pond area: This easy trail includes a truss bridge over

the Cache River and features a floating boardwalk to the middle of Heron Pond's cypress pond. There are 10 interpretive panels located along the trail.

- **Little Black Slough Trail** (5.5 miles) with access via Wildlife Bluff, Marshall Ridge and Heron Pond areas: Bald cypress and tupelo swamps, sandstone bluffs, floodplain forests and hillside glades highlight this moderately difficult trail that gives hikers passage to Boss Island. A rock ford on the Cache River, difficult to cross during high water, must be negotiated 1.5 miles west of the Wildcat Bluff access.

- **Lookout Point Trail** (1 mile) with access east of the Wildcat Bluff access area: Taking visitors along the edge of a high-quality hillside barrens, this trail provides an overview of the Cache River, its swamps and floodplain forests.

- **Linkage Trail** (2.4 miles) with access via Heron Pond, Wildcat Bluff and Marshall Ridge areas: Linking Heron Pond Trail and Little Black Slough Trail, this easy hike offers a chance to observe the **state champion cherrybark oak tree**.

- **Marshall Ridge Trail** (2.8 miles) with access via the Marshall Ridge area: Winding through reforested fields, this easy trail connects with the Linkage Trail and provides a gateway to Heron Pond or Little Black Slough.

- **Tupelo Trail** (2.5 miles) with access via Marshall Ridge Trail area: This moderately difficult trail begins a quarter-mile north of the Marshall Ridge access area and goes through rolling upland forest to the southern shoreline of Little Black Slough. It gives excellent views of tupelo gum trees and swamp.

- **Lower Cache River Swamp Trail** (2.5 miles) with access via the Lower Cache River area: Paralleling Cypress Creek and Cache River on a high earth berm, this trail takes hikers to a cypress and tupelo swamp. It is a great place to hear the rhythmic croaking of tree frogs at dusk in the spring. With 3,000 linear feet surfaced in aggregate, much of the trail is accessible year-round, except during periods of flooding. A 1,000-foot handicapped-accessible trail, located west of the toilet facility, ends with a viewing platform overlooking the swamp. A 20' x 28' picnic shelter is available with privy toilets, water hydrant and drinking fountain.

- **Big Cypress Tree Trail** (250 feet) with access via the Big Cypress area on the Lower Cache River: This short flood-plain

forest trail takes visitors to one of the bald cypress trees older than 1,000 years and whose base circumference is more than 40 feet.

- **Section 8 Woods Nature Preserve Boardwalk** (475 feet) with access via Section 8 Woods area: Passing through a cypress-tupelo swamp and a flood-plain forest, this handicapped-accessible boardwalk ends with a view of the **state champion water tupelo**. Along the boardwalk, 10 tree species are identified and there is a kiosk with interpretive panels.

Past and Present

The area's natural resources have always been important to people living in the Cache River valley. Native Americans found the region rich in wildlife and relied on their expertise in fishing, hunting and trapping for food, hides and furs. The first European settlers arrived in 1803, and, finding the soil too wet to farm, concentrated their efforts on timber harvesting. By 1870, several saw mills were processing timber for lumber, railroad ties, boxes and charcoal. Large-scale drainage and land-clearing efforts began in the early 1900s, eventually bringing thousands of acres of bottomland under cultivation. The state of Illinois acquired the first parcel of Cache River State Natural Area in 1970, following cooperation among private, governmental and commercial groups working together to conserve this unique natural resource.

Today, a cooperative effort called the Cache River Wetlands Joint Venture Partnership is working to protect and restore a 60,000-acre wetland corridor along 50 miles of the Cache River. Partners include the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Cypress Creek National Wildlife Refuge, The Nature Conservancy, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Ducks Unlimited with support from the Friends of the Cache River Watershed. The focus is to repair natural ecosystems and provide hunting, fishing, hiking, canoeing and other recreational opportunities, which will promote economic development and tourism.

Scientific and educational use of the area is allowed by permit, issued by the Department of Natural Resources. For information about the permit, hunting and fishing regulations or the site in general, contact Cache River State Natural Area, 930 Sunflower Lane, Belknap, IL 62908, or phone (618) 634-9678 or Henry Barkhausen-Cache River Wetlands Center 8885 State Rt. 37 South Cypress, Illinois 62923 phone (618) 657-2064.

