

ILLINOIS RIVER ROAD
NATIONAL SCENIC BYWAY
FULL BYWAY TOUR



This itinerary connects 15 points of interest that best illustrate the natural intrinsic quality along the byway and its many diverse facets. It is 291 miles long and requires about seven hours to drive, non-stop; and with stops to explore each of the points of interest, the route becomes a two to three-day trip. The best nature observation opportunities are in the spring and fall at both dusk and dawn. Wildflower and other nature photography are best undertaken in full sun. Bird and plant guides are recommended, as are sturdy shoes for walking on trails; and a good pair of binoculars will enhance the visitor's experience.

Day 1

> Start: Illinois and Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor

Sites along the corridor to visit include the Marseilles Swing Bridge, the Ottawa Toll House, the Utica Museum Complex, and Lock 14 Canal. The Marseilles Swing Bridge is a pivoting metal railroad bridge located in Marseilles, IL. It was originally built to conduct railway traffic over the I&M and into the town's commercial district. The bridge's "swinging" design allowed for continuous boat traffic along the canal, and would swing shut to allow trains to pass. The Ottawa Toll House is located on the northern edge of Ottawa's downtown district, the Ottawa Toll House is the last of its kind on the I&M. The city of Ottawa, IL has restored it and currently plans to use it as a visitor information center. The Utica Museum Complex houses the LaSalle County Historical Society, a group that acquired the stone warehouse (ca. 1848), one of 3 remaining original buildings on the I&M, which houses the society's headquarters as well as a bookstore/gift shop and a number of exceptional exhibits. Also part of the complex are the Aitken School, an 1865 one-room school house, a stone blacksmith shop (ca. 1892) which houses a fine blacksmith tool collection, and an original white pine pegged barn (ca. 1875) with antique tool collection. The I&M Canal Lock 14, in LaSalle, IL, is the only one of the 15 original locks installed to maneuver boat traffic up and down the 140-foot elevational grade between Chicago and LaSalle-Peru that still survives. Like all the other I&M locks, Lock 14 was built with local limestone, and possesses massive white oak gates and swing arms. This site also provides visitors with an idea of the scale of canal boat operation.

> **Stop 1: Illinois Waterway Visitor Center**

The Illinois Waterway Visitor Center contains several displays and exhibits portraying the history of the Illinois Waterway System. The center is owned and operated by the US Army Corps of Engineers, who also maintain all the locks on the Waterway System.

> **Stop 2: Starved Rock State Park**

This state park features over 18 glacier-carved canyons, along with several different nature walks and trail overlooks.

> **Stop 3: Hennepin & Hopper Lakes Restoration**

In April 2001, a Chicago-based non-profit ecological restoration organization known as The Wetland Initiative began restoring water flow and retention back into this 2,600-acre complex which, like so many Illinois River backwater areas, had been drained for agriculture. The influx of water was like lifeblood, almost instantly reviving Hennepin and Hopper lakes along with their accompanying marshes and wet-prairies back into viable wildlife habitat. Within weeks, species of birds, frogs, and aquatic plants that had not been seen on the site for the past nine decades reappeared. In order to restore ecological integrity within the Illinois River system, The Wetland Initiative estimates that a total of 400,000 acres of floodplain will need to be converted back into the kind of wetland complex exhibited here at Hennepin-Hopper Lakes. Besides reestablishing native wildlife habitat other objectives for this site include demonstrating cost-effective, self-sustaining solutions to water pollution and flood management issues, educating the public about the values of wetlands and their restoration, providing additional opportunities for research, and providing high-quality open public space for recreational opportunities.

> **Stop 4: Hennepin Canal Parkway State Park**

The Hennepin Canal was originally conceived in 1890 as part of an overall plan to connect the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico in order to facilitate barge shipping. The problem was that by the time the canal was finished 17 years later, a combination of decreasing railway shipping rates and increasing barge sizes had already rendered the narrow canal obsolete, particularly for commercial purposes. Thus, primary usage along the 105-mile Hennepin Canal has always tended toward recreational. In order to facilitate this objective, the entire waterway was designated as a state park and has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The best place to begin your exploration of Hennepin Canal State Park is at its visitor center near Sheffield. At the center, you can orient yourself, talk to staff members, and view excellent exhibits of tools used to construct the canal and other natural history aspects of the park. The park's primary habitat includes riparian type forests comprised of shagbark hickory, black walnut, white ash, hackberry, and red mulberry.

In addition, numerous patches of tallgrass prairie fill in the non-forested areas. Recreational opportunities include birding (wild turkey and waterfowl are park specialties), hiking/biking/horseback riding along the park's 155-mile trail paralleling the canal, boating, picnicking, and winter sports such as cross country skiing and snowmobiling.

> **Stop 5: Rock Island Trail State Park**

Established in 1871 the Rock Island Railroad busily carried freight and passengers between Peoria and Rock Island for over 40 years. By 1915, however, rail volume declined, and ceased altogether by the mid-Twentieth Century. Peoria's Forest Park Foundation acquired the abandoned railway in 1965, and deeded it over to the state. Since that time, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources has converted a 26-mile segment between Alta and Toulon into a hiking/biking/nature trail system, dedicating it as a state park in 1989. Running through a mosaic of regenerated forest and tallgrass prairie habitats, the trail offers improved access at its southern terminus in Alta, at the Kickapoo Creek Recreation Area (just north of Alta), at the Williams Street Depot Museum in Wyoming (where the park office is located), and at the trail head in Toulon. Parking-only access is also offered at Dunlap and off of Cedar Bluff Road at the Peoria/Stark county line. The trail accommodates a wide range of outdoor activities from long-term through-hiking, biking, and primitive camping, to shorter day-use outings like bird and butterfly watching, wildflower touring, picnicking, and the like.

> **Stop 6: William H. Sommer Park**

Owned and operated by the Peoria Park District, William H. Sommer Park is a 320-acre park offering a variety of public events throughout the year, including Kite Day (April), Blacksmith Demonstrations (late spring/early summer), Indian PowWow (June), Peoria Balloon Fest (July), Hayrides/Live Music (Thursday evenings in October), and numerous living history events such as "Pioneer Days" and Civil War encampments. Sommer also offers educational programs in historical interpretation or outdoor education for school classes or other groups as well as team building programs on their Teams Course for groups ranging from youth to corporate organizations. During the summer, the park also hosts a day camp for children aged 6-15. Habitat-wise, Sommer Park, a Peoria Park District facility, is comprised of ridge top-ravine woodlands, meadows, tallgrass prairie, and ponds. Interesting bird species include Eastern Bluebird, Bobolink, Vesper Sparrow, and Grasshopper Sparrow.

> **Stop 7: Wildlife Prairie State Park**

This 2000-acre state park is owned and operated by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The park is spectacular in scale, setting, and amenities. It doubles as a zoological park featuring native Illinois animals including bison, wolves, elk, black bear, cougar, otter, waterfowl, and raptors. In addition, the park has wild songbirds, butterflies, and other native Illinois plants and insects. The park's visitor center features free educational programs (<http://www.wildlifeprairiestatepark.org/>). While at the visitor center, begin your educational process by taking time to note the labeled native plantings. Use the spotting scopes strategically positioned at the center overlooks to spot bison, elk, and other wildlife. Take advantage of opportunities to tour restored prairie habitat, and an early 19th Century working pioneer farmstead in the park. Ride the park's train. Stay overnight in the park in one of several unique lodgings, including the Cabin on the Hill, Cottages by the Lake, Prairie Stables and Santa Fe train cabooses.

> **Overnight Point: Peoria RiverFront**

The early history and development of Peoria can be traced to the RiverFront District. Early pioneers of the mid-1600s stayed close to the Illinois River to take advantage of the bountiful harvest of the Peoria lakes and surrounding land, and the transportation opportunities of the river. Today the Peoria RiverFront still holds fantastic richness and diversity. The Peoria RiverFront District is an area now graced with attractions and venues for people of all ages and all walks of life, including cultural, entertainment, dining, shopping, residential, historical and recreational activities. It is home to the many popular public festivals and fairs, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors every year from throughout the State of Illinois and the Midwest. Spend the night in Peoria.

Day 2

> **Stop 1: East Peoria Riverfront Greenway**

East Peoria's Riverfront Greenway project is a 1.8-mile walking/hiking trail along the east bank of the Illinois River. This trail project is congruent with Fondulac Park District's planned phase II of the River Trail of Illinois project. It includes a 1200-foot section of raised boardwalk equipped with 3 separate observation decks, which overlook multiple wetlands. Due east of the Greenway, on the east service road of SR 116 almost directly across from Eastport Marina, is Bennett's Terraqueous Gardens, a small, but fine nature preserve developed around a 4-acre woodland seep habitat. This site features a small plumegrass marsh, a steep, rocky, informal hiking path up to an associated bog, and a charming wooden "learning station" perched on the hillside. Beginning at Eastport Public Boat Ramp, the trail runs through Cooper Park and terminates at Spindler's Marina and Campground.

> **Stop 2: Dirksen & McNaughton Parks**

Dirksen Park is a 459-acre site comprised of oak-hickory forest and open shrubland. An extensive hiking/mountain biking/cross country trail (Running Deer Trail) runs through a majority of the park, crossing several cobble-bottomed brooks and creeks. In 2003, Dirksen Park along with its sister park, McNaughton Park, were entered into the Illinois Land and Water Reserve Program, designed to protect and improve woodland habitats using restoration management techniques under the guidance of state natural resource professionals. Dirksen Park serves as an important site for deep-forest breeding neotropical songbirds such as yellow-billed cuckoo, Acadian flycatcher, wood thrush, yellowthroated warbler, chestnut-sided warbler, Kentucky warbler, the breathtaking scarlet tanager, and chestnut-sided warbler (found in shrubland). Besides birding, other activities commonly pursued at the park include hiking, cross country running, mountain biking, archery, and radio-controlled airplanes. McNaughton Park's 850 acres feature natural habitats such as shrubland, restored tallgrass prairie, and oak-hickory forests containing some of the most impressive specimens of white oak in the entire Illinois River Valley. Check out the area near the ponds, dog-training sites, and picnic shelters for the oldest and most massive specimens. This same savanna-like area is also a great spot for glimpses of white-tailed deer, wild turkey, and other interesting birds such as eastern bluebird and American goldfinch. Equestrian enthusiasts will also want to check out the Rockin' P Public Riding Ranch (open April 1 – November 15; phone 309-382-1268), located in the center of McNaughton Park. The ranch offers guided trail rides, pony-on-a-lead rides, hayrack rides, horseback riding lessons, and horse boarding services for individuals or groups. Because of its role in providing habitat for a wide diversity of neotropical songbirds, McNaughton Park, along with its sister site, Dirksen Park, have been nominated for inclusion in the National Audubon Society's Important Bird Areas Program. McNaughton Park has also been recognized as an environmentally sensitive area and worthy of special management considerations by the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission's Peoria Area Environmental Corridor Inventory Committee.

> **Stop 3: Spring Lake State Fish & Wildlife Area**

Once the main channel of the Illinois River, Spring Lake is now geologically classified as a "meander scar," that is, an abandoned channel of the river. Guarded by a high sandstone bluff, the lake and its adjacent woodlands encompass 1,946 total acres. This site is one of the few Illinois River floodplain components where upland pine forests exist. Mound-building Native Americans occupied this site until they were finally driven out by European settlers in the late 18th Century. European settlement ensued by 1830, and Spring Lake served as a commerce feeder to the Illinois River until a large dike constructed in 1903 cut off access to the river. The containment dike was raised even higher by the mid-20th Century, resulting in a greatly expanded impoundment, nearly twice the size of the original lake. The Spring Lake area possesses a total of 7.5 miles of hiking trails spread over 3 different trail systems. Besides hiking, these trails are also the best means for watching/studying the bird, insect, and plant life associated with the site. Waterfowl watchers will want to utilize the numerous parking sites and day-use areas located along the 18 miles of lake shoreline.

> **Stop 4: Banner Marsh Fish & Wildlife Area**

Purchased in the 1980s by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, this 4,363-acre site composed primarily of freshwater marshes and shallow lakes, boasts over 200 individual water bodies. Banner Marsh serves as a major holding area for migrating waterfowl that join the numerous songbirds such as American robin, gray catbird, common yellowthroat, and American goldfinch which are found in the scrubby areas along the site's edges. The unique water lily, American lotus, shows pastel-yellow blooms all summer long and the distinctive seed heads of cattails fill out by mid-summer. Look for the shy American bittern and its diminutive cousin, the least bittern, amidst cattail colonies. Perhaps the most beautiful of the local wildflowers is swamp milkweed, with its lush heads of pink flowers. Like all milkweed species, swamp milkweed is an important host plant for the monarch butterfly, which inhabits the marsh during spring and fall migration. Look for this as well as viceroy and spangled fritillary butterflies.

> **Stop 5: Emiquon TNC Preserve & National Wildlife Refuge**

"We were looking for a place to begin the restoration of the Illinois River, and the river led us to Emiquon," remarks Doug Blodgett, director for The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Illinois River project. To that end, TNC has embarked on one of the largest wetland restoration projects in the entire US. When complete, this project will be used as a model for restoration of the entire Illinois River system. Scientists believe that beneath the 7,000 acres of plowed cropland TNC acquired, lies a dormant seed bank of prairie, hardwood forest, and aquatic plants just waiting for re-exposure to natural elements. Once the river is reconnected to the site, the backwater habitats will almost restore themselves, attracting even more of the region's hundreds of mammal, bird, butterfly, and fish species. It is hoped that the populations of some of Illinois' rarest organisms, including the river otter, paddlefish, and western ribbon snake. Derived from an Indian name for "spoon," Emiquon refers to the historic plethora of freshwater mussels within this region of the Illinois River, the shells of which were used as spoons by early Native Americans. Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge represents a massive effort undertaken by the US Fish & Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy, and other partners in converting croplands back into native habitats throughout the backwaters of the Illinois River. Historically, the middle reaches of the Illinois River's floodplain supported a vast mosaic of clear, shallow lakes, sloughs, bottomland hardwood forests, and tallgrass prairies. Managed by Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge, the historical hydrology on the recently acquired Emiquon NWR is being gradually restored, resulting in ever-increasing patches of shallowly-flooded agricultural lands. Visitors equipped with spotting scopes should carefully peruse these newly flooded lands for sandpipers and other shorebirds, especially during spring and fall migration periods. Likewise, ducks and other waterfowl make use of the refuge during the winter months. Perhaps the best introduction to the Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge would include a hike down the Frank C. Bellrose Nature Trail. There, not only birds and butterflies, but also mammals such as Striped Skunk, raccoon, Opossum, and River Otter may be spotted along the trail.

> **End: Dickson Mounds Museum**

One of the major on-site archeological museums in the country, Dickson Mounds Museum interprets the ecology of the Illinois River's Emiquon region as well. The site itself lies at the cusp of two major ecosystems: The Upper Mississippi River-Illinois River Bottomlands, and the Western Forest-Prairie complex. Turning onto the museum's entry road, it's easy to visualize this natural division, with the bottomlands situated due east and the forest-prairie complex lying to the west. Thus, nature-oriented visitors have the luxury of exploring both ecosystems from this single site. The museum's observation deck provides an excellent starting point for new visitors. From there, it's easy to note the habitat differences inherent to the site. The oak-hickory forest creeps into the facilities parking area, and a newly restored prairie exists adjacent to the Eveland Village site to the south. The museum grounds are substantial, and both forest and prairie plants and animals abound at the site. Inside the museum, explore the world of the region's early Indians, whose villages and burial grounds surround the facility. The exhibits interpret the amazingly complex societies of native peoples who inhabited the site all the way back to the Ice Age! Also inside the museum, visitors may peruse the hands-on discovery center, resource center, gift shop, and coffee shop.