A Guide to the Root River & Harmony-Preston Valley State Trails

Overview

The Root River and Harmony-Preston Valley State Trails are located in southeastern Minnesota’s Blufflands region. The Blufflands region is a unique, river-directed landscape with many rivers and streams, including the Root River, flowing into the Mississippi. Ages ago, these waterways cut deep into the earth resulting in majestic rock outcrops, steep wooded valleys and ravines, and diverse plant and animal communities.

Fountain

The Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad planted Fountain in 1870. The town gets its name from "Fountain Spring" – the source of the railway town’s water supply. Fountain is the western gateway to the Root River State Trail. Public restrooms and parking are available at the Fountain trailhead.

Peterson

Founded in 1867, Peterson was the site of flour and feed mills before trout hatcheries became its main industry. The Peterson State Fish Hatchery, founded in 1871, is a mile south of town (now operated by the MN DNR). There is a canoe launch, launch in town, as well as public restrooms, parking, and a campground.

Preston

Settled in 1853 along the south branch of the Root River, this community was active in mill production. Today the town is the county seat of Fillmore County. It offers a canoe launch, picnic area, campground, lodging, and dining. A trail center, parking, and public restrooms are available at the Preston trailhead.

Harmony

The “Biggest Little Town in Southern Minnesota,” Harmony is home to both traditional Amish communities and green industries. Harmony is the southern gateway to the Harmony-Preston Valley State Trail and offers lodging, dining, and entertainment. A trail center, parking, and public restrooms are available at the trailhead.

Houston

Settled in 1852, Houston was a steamboat port and the center of railroad transportation. Houston is the eastern gateway to the Root River Trail. It offers a canoe launch, picnic area, a campground and other lodging and dining opportunities. Public restrooms and parking are available at the Houston trailhead.

Rushford

Settled in 1856, Rushford was a major railroad center and mill town. Rushford is home to the historic Rushford Depot, now used as a trail center and museum. Rushford offers a canoe launch, picnic area, lodging, and dining. A trail center, parking, campground, and public restrooms are available at the Rushford trailhead.

Whalan

Planted in 1868 as a railroad town, Whalan was once the tobacco center of Fillmore County. Parking, picnic areas, and campgrounds are located along the trail just outside of Whalan.

Lanesboro

Planted in 1858 as the county seat and commercial center and mill town. Lanesboro is home to the Lanesboro trailhead.

Scavenger Hunt

Explore the vibrant Root River and Harmony-Preston Valley State Trails. The landscape abounds with a variety of plants and animals, and the rocky layers of the distinctive bluffs are a virtual treasure trove of plant and animal fossils. While traveling the trail, keep your eyes and ears open, you may encounter one of the following:

Fossils

Oleander shells are oval shaped and chartreuse in color, but vanish quickly. They’re easy to spot. Wild turkeys are black or gray and have a red breast and wattle—a fleshy growth beneath the beak. Turkey vultures have many calls including gobbling, clucks, and purrs.

As the trail passes rivers and creeks, listen for the slow, birdlike trill of the gray treefrog.

Respect Private Property - Ask First

Skiing

Cross-country skiing is a wonderful way to enjoy the trails with the whole family. Whether perched on a branch or soaring through the sky, the broad reddish-brown tail of the red-tailed hawk distinguishes it from other hawks. Even if you do not see the red-tailed hawk, you may hear its high-pitched shriek.

Red-tailed hawks

Whether perched on a branch or soaring through the sky, this hawk has a broad reddish-brown tail. The long, broad tail feathers make this bird easy to spot. Wild turkeys are black or gray and have a red breast and wattle—a fleshy growth beneath the beak. Turkey vultures have many calls including gobbling, clucks, and purrs.

Turtles

Traveling in flocks of six to forty birds, white-tailed deer are the largest animals seen on their own come spring, there large, rounded bodies are easy to spot. Wild turkeys are black or gray and have a red breast and wattle—a fleshy growth beneath the beak. Turkey vultures have many calls including gobbling, clucks, and purrs.

Gray (common) treefrog

In wet, wooded areas, listen for the trill of the gray treefrog. Although common in Minnesota, this frog is often hard to locate because it changes color to blend in with tree bark and leaves. One color that doesn’t change is the bright yellow inner edge of the gray frog’s hind legs.

White-tailed deer

The biggest little town in southern Minnesota, Whalan is surrounded by forests and streams, such as the Root River, flowing into the Mississippi. Ages ago, these waterways cut deep into the earth resulting in majestic rock outcrops, steep wooded valleys and ravines, and diverse plant and animal communities.

Little bluestem: Prairie along the trail is made up of a variety of grasses, including bunches of little bluestem. This grass has fat, fluffy leaves that start growing in late spring and keep growing until winter frost. Little bluestem typically grows to three feet and is noticeably smaller than big bluestem, which can reach up to ten feet.

Oak trees

Both northern red oak and bur oak trees grow along the trail. Northern red oaks have leaves with pointed edges, while the bur oak leaves have rounded edges. In autumn, northern red oak leaves turn a brilliant red while bur oak leaves turn yellow or brown. The grayish-brown of the bur oak is easy to identify year round.

Trail Etiquette: Share the Trail with Others

• Stay on designated trails.
• Keep right so others can pass.
• Keep all pets on leashes.
• Obey traffic signs and rules.
• Pack out all garbage and litter.
• Respect adjoining landowners’ rights and property.
• Warn other trail users when passing by giving a audible signal.
• Overnight camping and campfires are permitted only on designated campgrounds.
• Do not leave campfires unattended.
• Enjoy the beauty of wild plants and animals, but leave them undisturbed for everyone to enjoy.

Root River & Harmony-Preston Valley State Trails

Welcome to the Root River & Harmony-Preston Valley State Trails located in southeastern Minnesota’s Blufflands region. The Blufflands region is a unique, river-directed landscape with many rivers and streams, including the Root River, flowing into the Mississippi. Ages ago, these waterways cut deep into the earth resulting in majestic rock outcrops, steep wooded valleys and ravines, and diverse plant and animal communities.

The Root River Trail meanders 42 miles along the Root River from Fountain to Houston. The Harmony-Preston Valley State Trail runs for approximately 18 miles, connecting the towns of Harmony and Preston and runs through historic towns tucked into hillscapes, past rolling farm fields, millin districts, and relics of the railroads, byways, lakehores and greenways. This trail provides the visitor with views of the area’s natural beauty. Both trails are designed for hiking, biking, in-line skating, and cross-country skiing.

Respect Private Property - Ask First

This trail requires a permit for cross-country skiing. For more information about the Ski Pass, please call the DNR Info Center at 1-888-MINNDNR or visit www.mndnr.gov/state_trails.

Rest Areas and Camping Sites

• Public rest areas are available along the route in town, picnic, and explore.
• Camp only in designated campgrounds; available on first-come, first-served basis.
• Bring drinking water. Drinking river water is not recommended, but if you do, must be treated.
• Respect private property. Stop only at designated sites; much of the surrounding area is private property.
• Be sanitary! Use designated toilet facilities or bury human waste away from the trail.

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Share the Trail

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