

# Guide to Spring Wildflower Hikes in Southern Illinois



Illinois Native Plant Society  
- Southern Chapter

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Cover photo: Yellow trout lily along the Rocky Bluff Trail, Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge

Back photo: Woodland phlox at base of bluffs along the Snake Road Trail, Shawnee National Forest

## **Introduction**

Springtime offers nature lovers an opportunity to view beautiful displays of wildflowers in southern Illinois. These gems can literally carpet forest floors in color, bursting forth as the spring sun warms the soil. These species take advantage of that sunlight in early spring, before the tree leaves have emerged and cast the area into heavy shade. This trick of timing allows these diminutive plants that need a lot of sun to survive, reproduce and even thrive alongside the towering oaks, hickories and maples of our hardwood forests. Rich, undisturbed woods are the best sites for seeing large, breathtaking displays of wildflowers. Fortunately, many of these sites are now being protected by state or federal agencies and have been designated as state nature preserves or research natural areas. To help protect sensitive species and preserve the sites for the enjoyment of others, please remain on marked trails.

Through a grant from the Illinois Wildlife Preservation Fund, the Southern Chapter of the Illinois Native Plant Society has produced this guide to spring wildflower hikes in southern Illinois. This guide was designed to highlight the best wildflower viewing opportunities and the seven sites described are all on public lands, have well-marked trails and are relatively easily accessible.

The guide includes a written description of each trail, a list of notable spring wildflowers found at the site, trail distance, difficulty rating and a trail map. Driving directions are included in the text and coordinates for the trailheads are given for GPS users. On the trail maps, the hiking trails are marked with a gray dashed line and public land is beige in color.

While this is not a field guide, instructing the reader on how to identify the wildflowers, a small section is included to show fifteen of the most common wildflowers that you are likely to observe on any of the hikes. To learn more about the identification of spring wildflowers or just to enjoy our native plants in general, please consider getting involved with the Illinois Native Plant Society. The Southern Illinois Chapter is very active, hosting meetings and guided hikes throughout the year. Information on the Southern Chapter of the Illinois Native Plant Society can be found on our website at [www.ill-inps.org](http://www.ill-inps.org) or by sending an email to [southernillinoisplants@gmail.com](mailto:southernillinoisplants@gmail.com). Please "like" us on facebook at [www.facebook.com/southernillinoisplants](http://www.facebook.com/southernillinoisplants).

## **A Note on Invasive Plants**

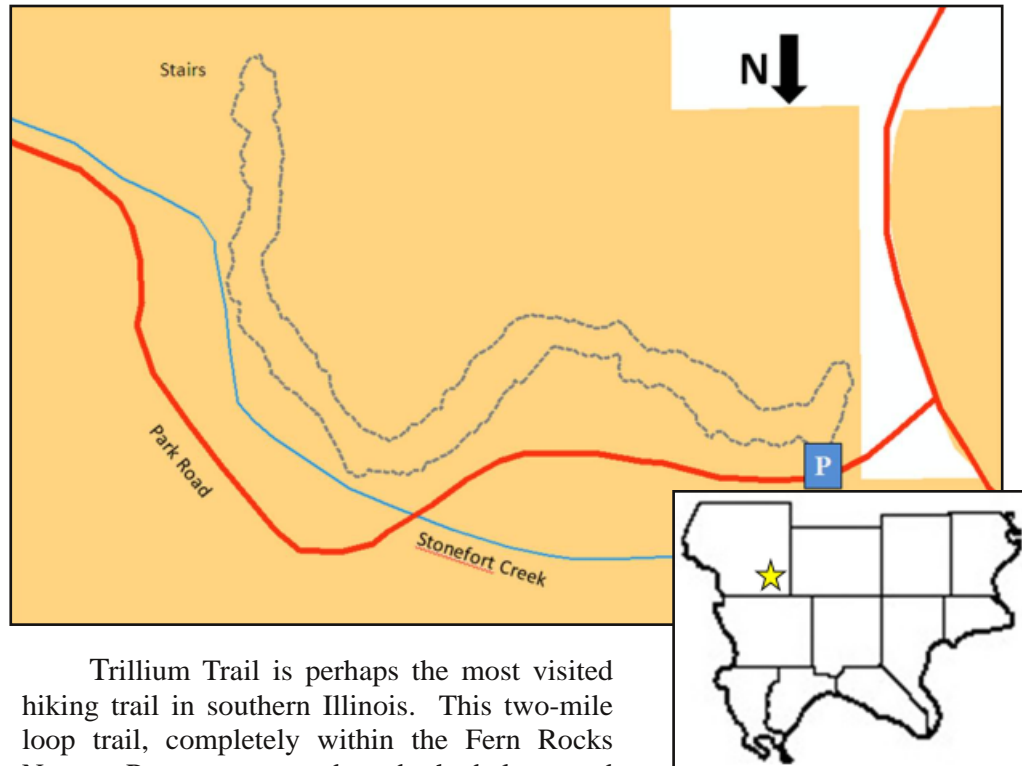
Invasive plants, species not native to the natural ecosystems of southern Illinois, can have a devastating effect on our native wildflowers. Unfortunately, sometimes people unintentionally introduce these species into our natural areas through seeds on their clothing or in mud on their shoes. To help prevent this from happening, we ask that everyone hiking on these trails makes sure their clothing and footwear is free of any seeds or mud before taking the hike.

# Trillium Trail

Giant City State Park

2 mile - Moderate Rating

Trailhead: 37.6249, -89.2037



Trillium Trail is perhaps the most visited hiking trail in southern Illinois. This two-mile loop trail, completely within the Fern Rocks Nature Preserve, meanders both below and above a large sandstone bluff, the prominent geological feature of this area. Hikers need to know that a steep and somewhat long set of stairs awaits them at the east end of the trail, though once on top of the bluff the walking is flat and easy with some gentle switch-backs leading back down the bluff on the west end. From the trailhead, go left along the bottom of the bluff to get right into the wildflowers. You should be able to easily find some of the very earliest spring wildflowers, such as harbinger-of-spring, spring beauties and toothwort. The trail gets its name from the amazingly beautiful display of white and purple trilliums that occur below the bluff among the large boulders that lie scattered as a reminder that erosive powers helped form this area. Other common wildflowers along this trail are yellow trout lily, dutchman's breeches, squirrel corn, waterleaf, phacelia and valerian.



The low woods on either side of the road that runs along the northern edge of the nature preserve boasts one of the most impressive displays of blue-eyed Mary flowers in southern Illinois. It is truly a sight everyone should witness. While the areas below the bluff contain most of the showy wildflowers, the section above the bluff should not be overlooked as it can provide hikers with views of unique species, such as cleft phlox and false dandelion.

This trail is located on the north end of Giant City State Park next to the small town of Makanda. The small trailhead parking lot only has room for 6-8 vehicles and is often filled to capacity. In that case, you can park at the nearby Shelter One parking lot and access the trail via a short spur just across the bridge. More information on this trail and other hiking opportunities at Giant City can be found at the Visitor Center.

- Notable wildflowers present at site**
- White trillium  
*Trillium flexipes*
  - Celandine poppy  
*Stylophorum diphyllum*
  - Yellow trout lily  
*Erythronium americanum*
  - Harbinger of spring  
*Erigenia bulbosa*
  - Blue-eyed Mary  
*Collinsia verna*



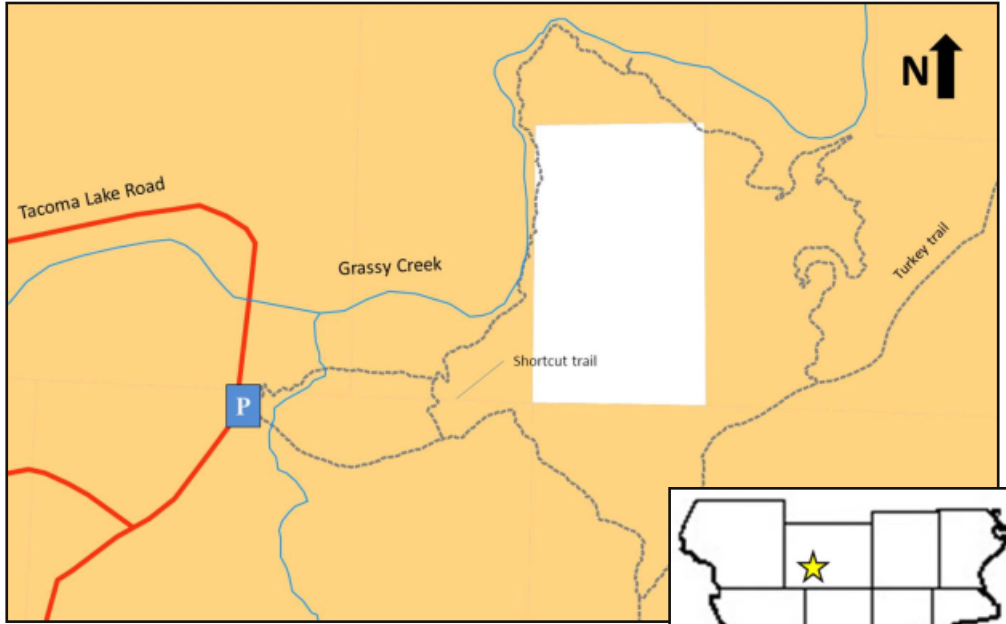
A field of blue-eyed Mary. White trillium (inset)

# Rocky Bluff Trail

Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge

0.5 mile - Easy Rating

Trailhead: 37.6419, -89.0977



Rocky Bluff Trail is one of the most well-known wildflower hikes in southern Illinois. While the entire trail is a 1.8-mile loop that does feature some steep ascents and descents, a recommended 'shortcut' trail is well marked and shortens the trip to an easy .5-mile loop that accesses the best wildflower viewing areas. From the trailhead, you can go either way along the loop. Left from the parking lot brings you immediately down the bluff next to an intermittent waterfall that is impressive when it is running. The other direction goes through an upland pine stand and upland hardwoods before reaching the 'shortcut' trail and descending steeply down the bluff into the heart of the wildflower area. Once at the bottom of the 'shortcut' trail, turning left will complete the loop, but you can follow the trail to the right for several hundred yards to view more wildflower habitat. Famous for its display of celandine poppies, this short, easy trail also provides great opportunities to view a wide array of spring wildflowers. Other specialties include spring beauties, dutchman's breeches, purple trilliums, false rue anemone and bloodroot.

This trail is located near the dam of Devil's Kitchen Lake, on Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge. The trail is accessed via a small gravel lot off of Tacoma Lake Road, .5-mile south of Grassy Road. Parking, particularly on weekends in spring, can sometimes be tricky as this is a very popular hiking location. Keep in mind that this trail is on a National Wildlife Refuge and any visitor will need to have a pass to use the area. Annual and day passes are inexpensive and available at the Refuge Visitor Center on Route 148. The Refuge also typically hosts spring wildflower hikes on Saturdays in April. Contact the Refuge Visitor Center at 618-997-3344 for more information on these.

## **Notable wildflowers present at site**

Celandine poppy  
*Stylophorum diphyllum*

Bloodroot  
*Sanguinaria canadensis*

Yellow trout lily  
*Erythronium americanum*

Harbinger-of-spring  
*Erigenia bulbosa*

Toothwort  
*Dentaria laciniata*



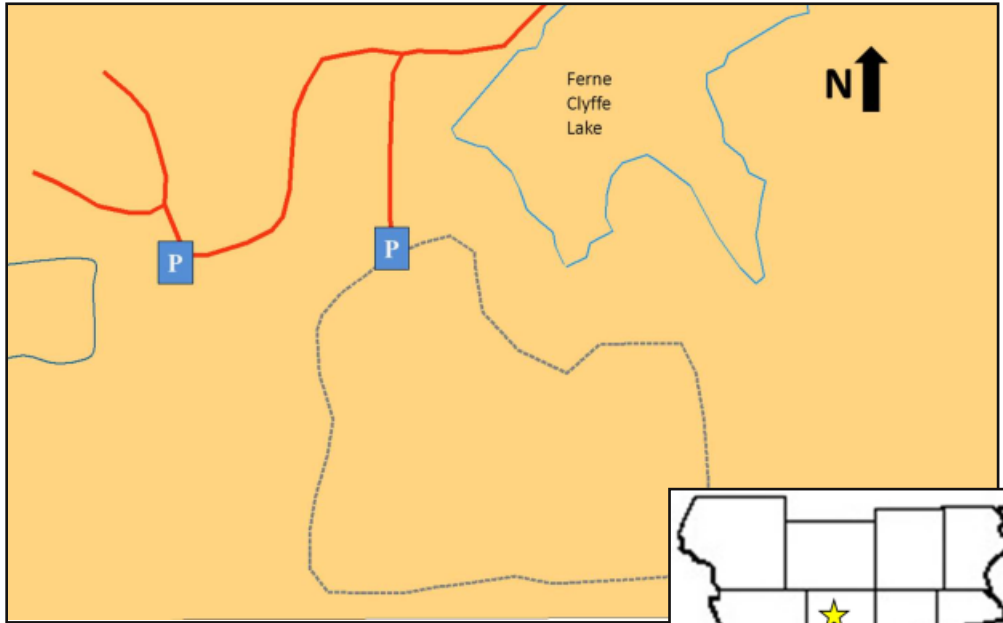
Waterfall along the trail. Blue-eyed Mary (inset)

# Round Bluff Trail

Ferne Clyffe State Park

1 mile - Moderate Rating

Trailhead: 37.5317, -88.9879



Round Bluff Trail is a 1-mile loop around the perimeter of Round Bluff Nature Preserve at Ferne Clyffe State Park, staying mostly in the moist woodlands. While the hiking itself is mostly easy, the trail does have several long series of steps, leading to its moderate rating. The trail begins at the edge of the parking lot and returns by leading hikers through the adjacent picnic area. This picnic area and the latter part of the trail offer beautiful vistas of the 16-acre Ferne Clyffe Lake.

The first half of the trail mostly winds through younger forest and somewhat follows a old roadbed. The second half of the trail is where the wildflower viewing gets really good. What is most impressive about Round Bluff is the large displays of early spring wildflowers, such as spring beauty, toothwort and corydalis. The rich woods along the trail can be entirely blanketed by these flowers. Later in spring, the observant wildflower watcher may spot some of the rare and beautiful fire pink blooming near the base of the bluff.



When the trail winds close to the base of towering bluffs, keep an eye out for wild columbine flowering on the rocks. Even though this is a wildflower guide, the ferns found at Round Bluff need to be mentioned. The rugged sandstone bluffs and boulders found abundantly along the trail are often covered in beautiful ferns and the fragile, fall-flowering small-flower alumroot. Keep an eye out along the bluffs for the rare cinnamon fern, easily distinguished by the cinnamon-colored fertile fronds sticking up like spikes from the center of the fern. Hay-scented fern can also be found on these bluffs. The trail is accessed via the main entrance at Ferne Clyffe State Park, 2-miles south of Goreville on Route 37. Go past the lake, turn left, and follow the signs to the trailhead.

## Notable wildflowers present at site

Dutchman's breeches  
*Dicentra cucullaria*

Fire pink  
*Silene virginica*

Waterleaf  
*Hydrophyllum appendiculatum*

Toothwort  
*Denaria laciniata*

Wild columbine  
*Aquilegia canadensis*



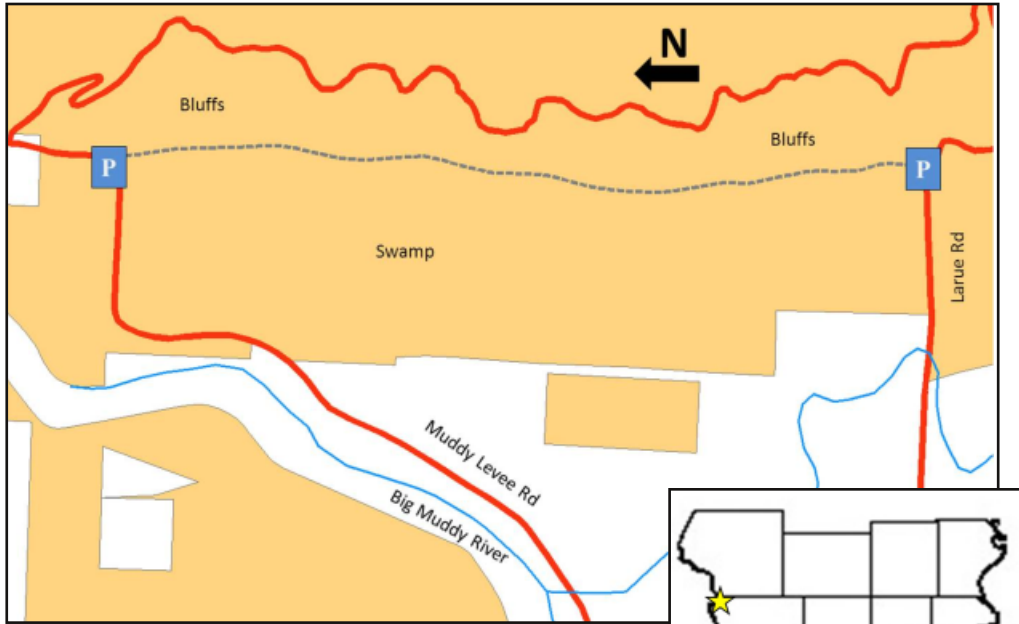
False garlic on top of the bluff. Firepink (inset)

# Snake Road Trail

Shawnee National Forest

2.5 mile - Easy Rating

Trailhead: 37.5455, -89.4394



If variety of color is what you seek in your wildflower viewing, then the Snake Road Trail is the place for you. Deep purples, reds, and blues abound along this trail. In actuality this is a road and not a trail, but every spring and fall the Shawnee National Forest closes down this road to protect reptiles and amphibians migrating between the bluffs and swamps that border this amazing road. While this site is best known for the animal life, it has an amazing display of spring wildflowers as well. This is an easy hike, though it is not a loop. For those wanting to walk the entire length of the closed portion, two vehicles, one parked at each end, is your best bet. In the spring this trail gets a lot of use, mainly from people looking for snakes. You'll have an excellent opportunity to see cottonmouths, water snakes, green snakes, and a myriad of frogs and salamanders. In fact, 65% of all reptile and amphibian species in Illinois can be found at this one site. Collecting of any kind is not allowed.

As for wildflowers, the displays of dwarf larkspur and woodland phlox are some of the best in southern Illinois. Keep an eye on the bluff and take a few of the well worn paths going along the base to see species such as the beautiful wild hyacinth and wild columbine.



Higher up on the bluff, you can see displays of cleft phlox clinging to the rocks. Ohio buckeyes, one of our tree species with very showy flowers, is found along this trail as well. The Snake Road Trail is part of the LaRue Pine Hills area of the Shawnee National Forest, which has the distinction of being the most botanically rich area in Illinois and perhaps in the entire country. The parking lot on the south end of the Snake Road provides the best access to wildflower viewing. It can be easily accessed from Route 3, either south of Murphysboro or north of Jonesboro. From Route 3, follow the signs to LaRue Pine Hills. Be sure to also check out the small road leading from the parking lot south to Otter Pond, as the best displays of bluebells can be found along this path.

## Notable wildflowers present at site

Dwarf larkspur

*Delphinium tricorne*

Woodland phlox

*Phlox divaricata*

Wild hyacinth

*Camassia scilloides*

Miami mist

*Phacelia purshii*

Virginia bluebells

*Mertensia virginiana*



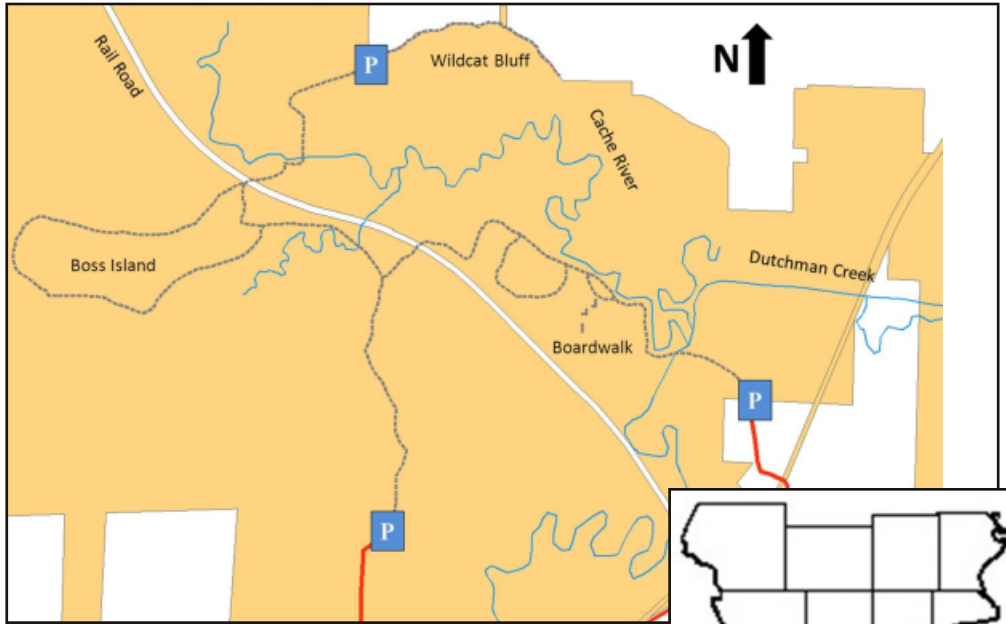
Dwarf larkspur in full bloom. Wild hyacinth (inset)

# Heron Pond Trail

Cache River State Natural Area

1.5 mile - Easy Rating

Trailhead: 37.3572, -88.9132



With a floating boardwalk into a remnant stand of cypress trees and a wonderful view of the Cache River, this hike is a must-do for anyone looking for a great nature trail in southern Illinois. Nestled within the coastal plain, this region was once covered by an ancient sea which led to its formation as a cypress swamp similar to those found farther south.

Located near the small town of Belknap, Heron Pond Nature Preserve lies within the Cache River State Natural Area and is managed by the IDNR. The trail begins at a parking lot at the end of Heron Pond Lane, which is north of Belknap Road near Highway 45 south of Vienna. This short trail descends a small hill to a bridge over the Cache River. Look for the interpretive signs along the way.

A flat gravel trail leads through a floodplain forest with many beautiful wildflowers in the woods and along the trail. Look for Jacob's ladder, rue anemone, blue star, wild geranium, yellow violet, woodland phlox, swamp buttercup and spring cress. Some uncommon species for southern Illinois are also present at this site, and include white trout lily and sessile-leaved bellwort. Yellow lady slipper orchids once occurred here, but were taken illegally many years ago.

At the split in the trail go left to get to the boardwalk, or stay right to go to the champion cherrybark oak tree, or see both by completing the loop trail.

From the boardwalk, you can see an excellent example of a cypress/tupelo swamp. Two rare plants occur in the swamp: Virginia sweetspire and American featherfoil. In some years, the featherfoil can be seen blooming in great abundance in the swamp. Also note the small pinkish brown floating plants. These are the leaves of the mosquito fern, an important wetland plant. Later in the spring, the boardwalk erupts in pink when the swamp rose begins to bloom.

Visitors may also wish to view Cave Creek Glade Nature Preserve, which is nearby along Highway 45 north of Belknap Road. A small parking lot is located on the west side of the highway. Carefully cross the road and walk up the hill to see a totally different suite of wildflowers indicative of prairie habitats in the northern part of the state.

## Notable wildflowers present at site

Jacob's ladder  
*Polemonium reptans*

Wild geranium  
*Geranium maculatum*

Woodland phlox  
*Phlox divaricata*

White trout lily  
*Erythronium albidum*

Rue anemone  
*Anemonella thalictroides*



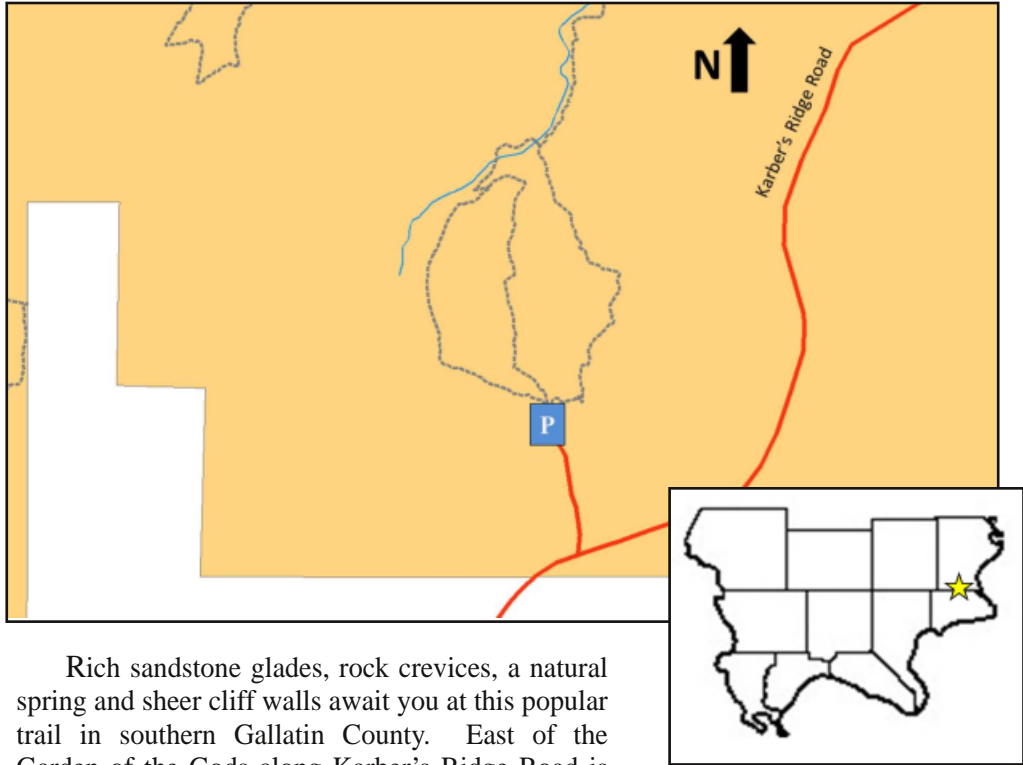
Cypress swamp. Jacob's ladder (inset)

# Rim Rock Trail

Shawnee National Forest

0.5 mile - Moderate Rating

Trailhead: 37.6022, -88.2783



Rich sandstone glades, rock crevices, a natural spring and sheer cliff walls await you at this popular trail in southern Gallatin County. East of the Garden of the Gods along Karber's Ridge Road is Rim Rock National Recreational Trail, a natural area within the Shawnee National Forest. Although this site exhibits one of the better preserved stoneforts built by the late Woodland culture in southern Illinois, this gem of a hike is often overlooked.

There are several options along this interpretive trail and the path leading to the left (northwest) out of the parking lot is recommended. A brick walkway leads you along the top of the escarpment and past the stonefort with buttercups, violets, chickweed, woodland phlox, violet wood sorrel, Virginia spiderwort and yellow star grass flowering along the edges. Wild columbine is also common, and later in the spring the trail is lined with shooting stars. In the rocky openings, false garlic, small bluets and widow's cross can be seen, and the careful observer may spot the perfectly camouflaged lichen grasshopper flying about.

The trail leads to an observation deck at the edge of the cliff and a set of stairs enables hikers to descend into Pounds Hollow. "Pounds" is a term that describes



the type of sandstone found here and it refers to an Old English term that means “some sort of enclosure.” Notice the crack called Fat Man’s Squeeze as you descend the stairs. Liverleaf, once erroneously used as a medicinal plant, can be seen flowering in the early part of spring.

Ox-Lot Cave is the area at the base of the cliffs. A permanent spring flows out of the rock and this area was once used as a livestock impoundment. The trail leads along the creek and around the other side of the cliffs, where white trillium, false rue anemone, mayapple, purple trillium, yellow trout lily, fern-leaved phacelia, pale corydalis and bellwort can be seen flowering near the trail. Look for the white flowers of the bladdernut shrub and notice the unique flowers of the jack-in-the-pulpit along the base of the cliffs. At least two orchid species can also be found in this area.

## Notable wildflowers present at site

Wild columbine  
*Aquilegia canadensis*

Shooting star  
*Dodecatheon meadia*

False garlic  
*Nothoscordum bivalve*

Liverleaf  
*Hepatica acutiloba*

Yellow star grass  
*Hypoxis hirsuta*



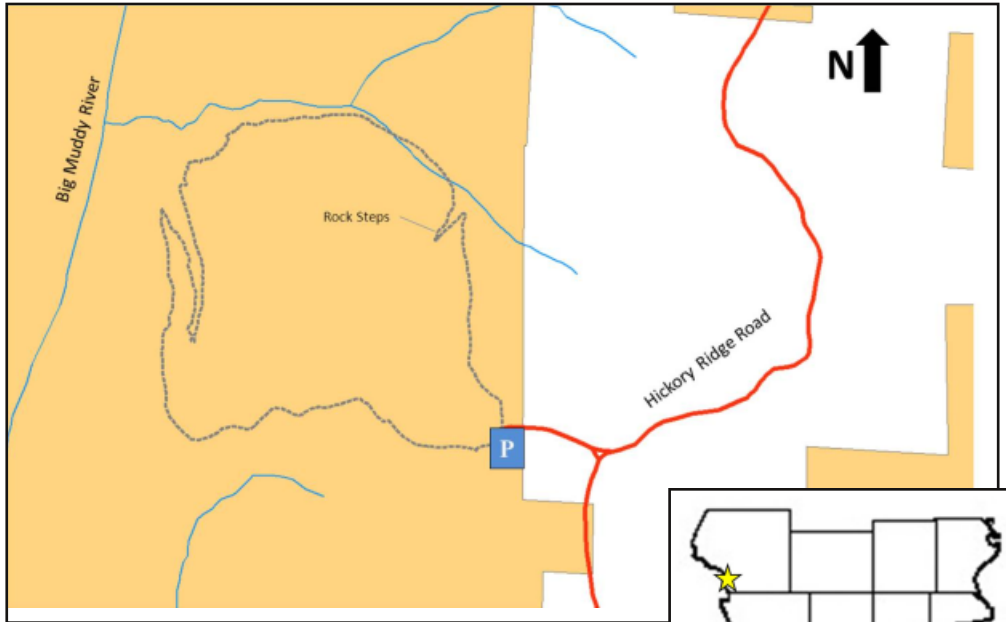
Ox-Lot Cave. Wild columbine (inset)

# Little Grand Canyon Trail

Shawnee National Forest

4 mile - Difficult Rating

Trailhead: 37.6805, -89.3949



This strenuous hike will challenge even the most adventurous hiker. In southern Jackson County, the Little Grand Canyon displays some of the most unique sandstone ravines in the state. The trail is a 4-mile loop that is great from either direction from the parking lot. Descending the trail at the north end, you will walk through a small pine stand and make your way down the ridge to an overlook. After you round the corner, look for dry woodland wildflowers such as rue anemone, pussytoes, false dandelion and bee-balm.

The trail winds its way to a steep sandstone ravine that will take you to the bottom of the canyon. Rock steps have been created in the sandstone and are easy to follow. Flowing water often occurs in the sandstone chute, so extreme caution should be exercised. As you make your way into the canyon, look for dutchman's breeches, toothwort, pale corydalis, squirrel corn and spring beauty.

Some very interesting plants grow in the natural area. During the Illinoian glaciation over 100,000 years ago, plants adapted to northern climates flourished here and when the glaciers retreated, these "glacial relic" species persisted in moist, shaded, north-facing sandstone ravines like the Little Grand Canyon.



The characteristic example of this is bishop's cap, and the tiny snowflake-like flowers can be seen in flowering spikes covering the sides of the cliffs along the creek. Other relic species include partridge berry, shining clubmoss and sphagnum moss.

In the floodplain area at the base of the ravine is a rich display of spring wildflowers like liverleaf, bellwort, white trillium, celandine poppy and bloodroot, as well as many fern species. Blue cohosh, doll's eyes, dwarf phacelia and wild leeks are uncommon plants that call this area home. Flowering shrubs include pawpaw, redbud and flowering dogwood. At least one orchid has been seen along the trail and venomous snakes are known to inhabit the area.

The trailhead is located south of Murphysboro. From Highway 127, follow Orchard Hill Road west to Hickory Ridge Road. Go straight (west) 7 miles to the entrance road to the site.

## Notable wildflowers present at site

Bishop's cap  
*Mitella diphylla*

Rue anemone  
*Anemonella thalictroides*

Dwarf phacelia  
*Phacelia ranunculacea*

Wild leek  
*Allium tricoccum*

Blue cohosh  
*Caulophyllum thalictroides*



Canyon view. Bishop's cap (inset)

# Common Spring Wildflowers in Southern Illinois

Many species of wildflowers can be found blooming in the springtime in southern Illinois. Some are rare and not often seen or restricted to a very specific type of habitat. Others are common and can be found in many different locations. Here are fifteen wildflower species that you are likely to encounter in southern Illinois.



Spring beauty  
*Claytonia virginica*



Yellow corydalis  
*Corydalis flavula*



Dwarf larkspur  
*Delphinium tricorne*



Cutleaf toothwort  
*Dentaria laciniata*



Dutchman's breeches  
*Dicentra cucullaria*



Yellow trout lily  
*Erythronium americanum*



False rue anemone  
*Enemion biternatum*



Harbinger of spring  
*Eriogonum bulbosum*



Virginia bluebells  
*Mertensia virginiana*



False garlic  
*Nothoscordum bivalve*



Fernleaf Phacelia  
*Phacelia bipinnatifida*



Woodland Phlox  
*Phlox divaricata*



Bloodroot  
*Sanguinaria canadensis*



Celandine poppy  
*Stylophorum diphyllum*



Purple trillium  
*Trillium recurvatum*





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