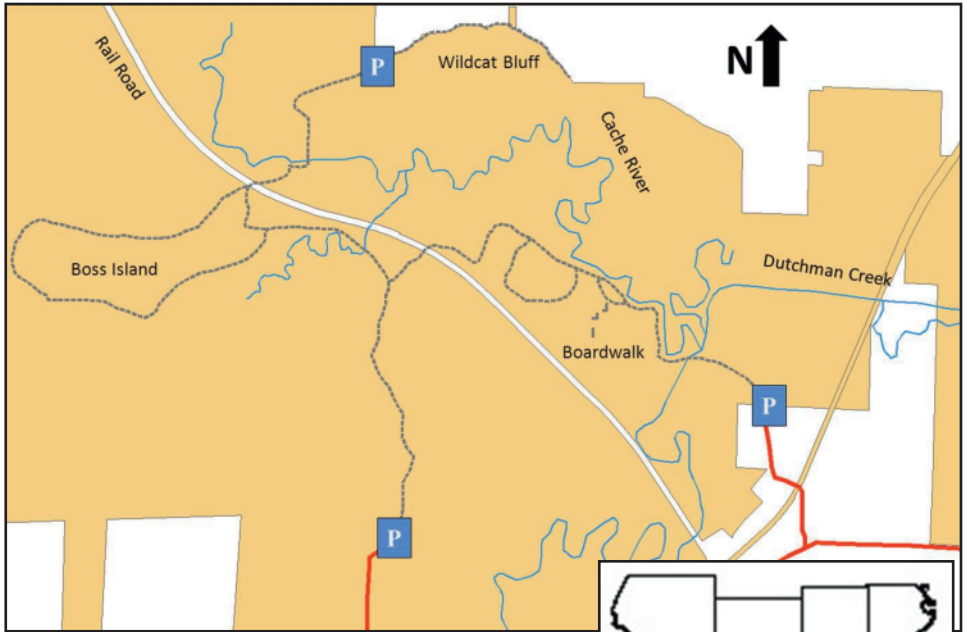


Heron Pond Trail

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)