



Citizen's Guide to the Current River



People visit the Ozarks, located in Southern Missouri, to experience the rugged terrain, see the towering limestone bluffs, and canoe in the crystal clear, spring-fed streams. The Ozarks are home to many spectacular waterways, and two of the most beautiful are the majestic Current River and its major tributary Jacks Fork. According to Paleo-Indian artifacts unearthed in the area, humans first visited these rivers over 12,000 years ago. Humans continue to find the Current and Jacks Fork rivers enchanting—over 1.3 million people visited the rivers in 2012 to explore the beauty and natural wonders along the rivers.

In 1964 Congress, recognizing the importance of preserving these river gems, authorized the formation of the Ozark National Scenic Riverways (ONSR), a national park containing the bulk of the rivers and over 80,000 acres of land. The national park, the first in America established in order to protect a river system, preserves a critically important wildlife habitat, maintains the world-class spring system which makes the Current River the third-largest spring-fed river in the United States, and provides year-round opportunities to experience some of the most beautiful wilderness Missouri has to offer.

Visitors are drawn to the park to fish, boat, swim, and canoe in either the Current or Jacks Fork River, to explore caves like Devil's Well and Round Spring Caverns, and to hike along the Ozark Trail. The wide array of activities, along with the breathtaking views of the river valleys, allows individuals to experience Missouri's nature at its finest moments.




About the Current

The Ozark National Scenic Riverways is home to a range of unique wildlife and landscape. As a whole, the park contains more than 130 miles of river corridors and thousands of acres of forested hills and limestone bluffs, providing countless areas for families to explore. Guests are encouraged to reconnect with nature by staying in one of the several established campgrounds offered by the National Park Service (NPS), who manages the park.

For those interested in the history of the park, NPS interpreters hold evening programs where they share stories of Ozark wildlife, history, and superstitions around a campfire. Ozark Heritage Days, traditionally held in June of every year, offer school children and families the opportunity to glimpse into traditional life along the river, with demonstrations on crafts, music and culture.

Visitors more interested in the park's natural charms can participate in many outdoor activities including hiking, horseback riding, canoeing or kayaking the Current and Jacks Fork Rivers, floating, wildlife spotting or fishing.

For the nature enthusiast, the park offers several hiking paths including interpretative and long trails. The Slough Interpretative Trail explains the history of the park along its route, spanning half a mile and the Pulltite Trail offers information about Ozarks ecology throughout its 1.5 mile loop. Serious backpackers should note that the park can be experienced via the Ozark Trail. This trail extends from Saint Louis into Arkansas and is over 360 miles long, with an anticipated final length of 500 miles when the trail is completed.



Must see springs

Underneath your feet a body of water, called an aquifer, lies deep below the surface. When aquifers reach open air, they become the rivers, lakes, and streams we enjoy. The Jacks Fork and Current Rivers are fed by hundreds of "leaking" aquifers, or springs. Springs are the primary source of water sustaining the rivers and tributaries throughout the Ozark National Scenic Riverways.

Alley Spring

Six miles west of Eminence, MO, you can find a gateway into the past at Alley Spring. Originally a community of hundreds of farmers, loggers, and river workers, only a few buildings of their time remain today. The most famous remaining structure is a large mill built by George Washington McCaskill in 1893. Though originally unpainted, the now famously red-hued mill used turbines instead of waterwheels and rollers instead of stone grist wheels, making it a (for the time) high-tech operation. The mill is open during the summer from 9AM-4PM, and entrance is free. At the mill, visitors can learn more about the lives of the residents of Alley Spring and purchase books on Ozarks history, nature, and lore.

An extraordinary one-room schoolhouse built in 1903 is located next to Storey Creek at Alley Spring. The schoolhouse educated about 42 local children each year. Visitors are welcome to explore the building on weekend afternoons between Memorial Day and Labor Day.

Big Spring

Located near Van Buren, Big Spring is aptly named—discharging over 300 million gallons of water each day, the spring is the second largest spring in the United States and one of the largest springs in the world!

The drainage basin of Big Spring is extensive, including much of the northern areas of the Eleven Points River. Its water dissolves over 175 tons of limestone a day. This “natural filtration” purifies the spring water and makes it emerge from the depths bright blue. Every second 470 cubic feet of water, chilled to 58 degrees, emerge from the spring before flowing 1,000 feet to join the Current River. The grounds are maintained by the National Park Service and include a short, easy trail that circles the spring.

Blue Spring

Although owned by the Missouri Department of Conservation, ONSR land surrounds Blue Spring, located 16 miles east of Eminence, MO, off of Route 106. Blue Spring is the 6th largest spring in the United States, and every day 90 million gallons of brilliant blue water bubble to the surface from deep underground to join the Current River.

Blue Spring, known by the Osage tribe as “Spring of the Summer Sky” for the startlingly azure hue of its waters, is one of the most extraordinarily beautiful places in the park. During a visit in the spring, Missouri wildflowers will accompany you along your hike, and a visit in the fall provides photographic opportunities to capture the flaming colors of autumnal maples, oaks, and poplars.

Round Spring

Round Spring, one of the park’s most-visited features, contains a 55 foot deep spring which produces 26 million gallons of water each day. One of Round Spring’s most distinctive features is the varying color of the water. Typically, the water is a turquoise blue color as a result of dissolved limestone, but the color can range from a deep blue to a milk chocolate color depending on the rainfall.

Though currently closed, Round Spring Caverns is one of the more popular cave systems in the park. Park Rangers have traditionally led a two hour lantern-lit tour so visitors can explore the natural beauty of the cave as early pioneers did. While visiting Round Springs, keep an eye out for native fauna like otters and wood ducks!

Activities

The park is one of the most often visited natural places in Missouri, with nearly 1.3 million visitors each year. While the most popular activity is floating the rivers, the park offers many more outdoor activities that allow the public to re-connect with nature and experience the Ozarks, like bird watching, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, visiting natural wonders and enjoying events that showcase Ozarks history and tradition.

Bird Watching

The ONSR is important to bird conservation because the park's verdant, preserved forests provide food, nesting space and valuable habitat for birds. The park is home to 195 species of birds, 33 of which have been named as conservation priorities in the region, placing the park among the top ten areas for bird watching in Missouri.

Since the Ozarks region contains over thirty percent of the world's breeding population of the Whip-poor-wills and over fifteen percent of the world's Kentucky Warbler and Summer Tanager population, the park's preserve forests are a globally important habitat for birds.

Because the park is a stopover for migratory birds like the Cerulean Warbler, Birdwatchers are in for a year round treat! While the Red-Tailed Hawk is a year-round resident, a winter birdwatcher may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker or the graceful Bald Eagle.



Songbirds are also abundant in the park, including the distinct Summer Tanager. The male tanager has a distinct rose-red color while the female has a combination of orange and olive colors. Their song is similar in tone to the American Robin. The native Wood Thrush is strikingly beautiful with its cinnamon colored upper back and white and brown spots on the breast. The Wood Thrush has one of the most lovely songs of all the North American birds. As Henry David Thoreau described in his experience of the Wood Thrush, "Whenever a man hears it he is young, and Nature is in her spring."

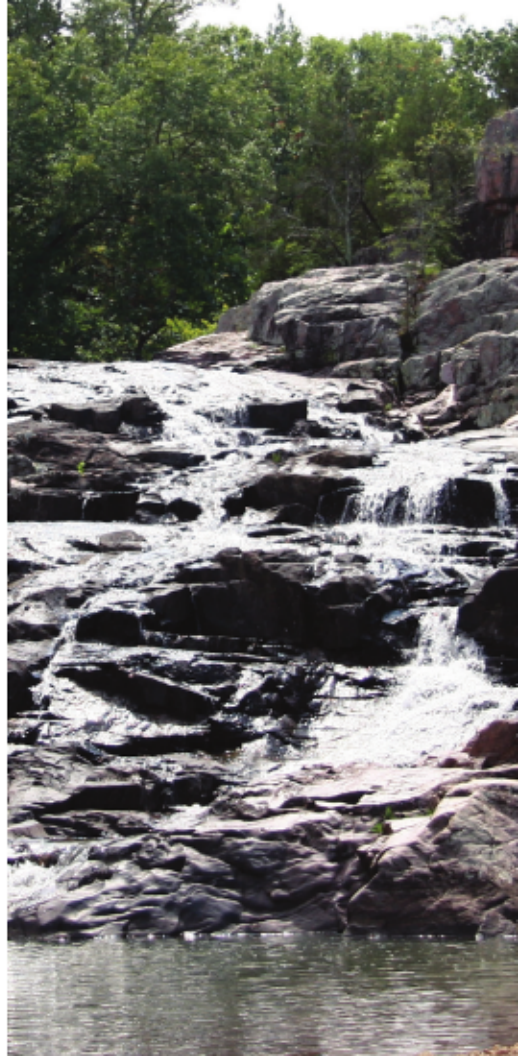
Botanical Beauty

An often overlooked activity in the park is plant identification. Many rare flowers bloom within the park, and plants only found in the Ozarks ecosystem are abundant throughout the ONSR.

The Showy Lady's-slipper is a rare member of the orchid family. The flower is native to North America and is quite rare due to slow

reproduction. The petals are brightly-colored white and pink, and the plant itself can grow up to two feet tall. The flower is mostly found in wetlands and blossoms during the summer months. The Rein Orchid, another rare species found in the park, has stunning green-yellow blooms. This species is only found in four other countries, and it is not found in any other location within the United States.

Along with rare flowers, some species of flowers are endemic to the Ozarks, meaning they cannot be found anywhere else in the world. One flower, the Ozarks Wild Crocus, has an array of colors including deep purples, bright blues, and vibrant magentas. The flowers can be seen from April to May, and the stigma within the bloom produce saffron, a delicate and much sought-after spice. The royal catchfly is another species only found along and around the Current River. This plant's bright red color, only visible to butterflies in the color spectrum, makes it quite unique. No shrinking violet, the royal catchfly can grow as high as five feet.



Once upon a time the Current River had upon its banks the largest sawmill in the world, as non-local timbermen descended on the area to denude the hills and hollows of old-growth forests. After years of restoration by many individuals, groups and government agencies, trees have made a comeback in the Ozarks, preventing streambank erosion and providing habitat for native plants and animals. The park is home to many trees characteristic of Missouri, including white oaks, eastern black walnuts, catalpas, persimmons, and pawpaws.

Animal Antics

The ONSR is home to a variety of life, terrestrial and aquatic. The Current River has at least 18 species of fish, six species of salamander, and 15 species of aquatic insects.

The most unique critter found in the park is the Ozark Hellbender, one of

the largest salamanders in the world. This amphibian has a flattened body, which helps it move in fast-flowing water. It can live for up to thirty years and grow to be two feet long. The Hellbender is an important part of the river's ecosystem because the salamanders balance out the crayfish population. They are also a prime indicator of water quality since they need clear, pristine water to live. Unfortunately, Hellbender populations have plummeted over the years from fungal infestations, degradation of water quality, and illegal pet trading. The Ozarks Hellbender is an endangered species, and researchers at the Saint Louis Zoo are hard at work rebuilding their population and habitat.

Another aquatic animal that you'll only find in the Ozarks is the Missouri saddled darter. Within the ONSR, the fish lives downriver of Big Spring. The males are brightly colored with a primary blue-green pattern and orange belly, while the females are less colored. They are most active in the spring and thrive in the clear spring-fed waters of the Current River.

With the vast aquatic life in the river, one popular activity among visitors is fishing, which is permitted in the park along with gigging to a certain extent.

Of course, there are many exciting animals that live on the land surrounding the rivers as well. If you're quiet, keen eyed and lucky, you can spot eastern collared lizards making a comeback in many of the glades that dot the park, white tailed deer getting a drink along a riverbank, or wild turkeys roosting in the trees.

You might spot some of the 58 species of mammals in the park, including otters, muskrat, mink or beavers who live in and near the rivers. Black bear and mountain lion sightings are rare, but do happen.

An especially exciting wildlife development is the 100 head elk herd that ranges through part of the park. Elk, originally native to the area, had been hunted to extinction. The herd was introduced in 2011 and has flourished over the past few years.

Geology

The geology of the Ozarks is important for ecological, historical, and aesthetic reasons. Though the landscape looks like rugged mountains, the Ozarks were originally a vast limestone plateau. Over time, water and tectonic forces carved valleys, sinkholes and caves into the plateau, creating the rugged beauty that we know and love today.

The landscape around the park consists of uplands, hills, and valleys ranging from about 500 feet to 1500 feet in height. This karst region was formed when surface water eroded water-soluble limestone and dolomite rock to form sinkholes and caves.

The Ozarks' geology is dominated by limestone and dolomite, which dissolved to create Missouri's large springs, including Big Alley, and Blue Springs.





Karst geology has been critically important to humans throughout history. Early humans used caves to live in, bury their dead, and store food. Humans have settled around clean, abundant sources of water for tens of thousands of years, and much of our drinking water comes from spring-fed sources after the subterranean limestone filters and purifies the water. Due to the cool, damp environment, caves were used for food storage for items like potatoes, cheese, and wine. Further north of the Ozarks similar caves were largely responsible for bringing German brew masters to the state during the 1800s to be used for storage.

Within the park, the geological processes have created truly wondrous landscapes, with towering limestone bluffs overlooking the river and strange spires of up-thrust granite and rhyolite jutting out from eroded hills.

Although there are many caves in the park, they are currently closed to the public to protect bats from a disease called white nose syndrome, a highly-communicable fungus-based disease which has killed over five million bats across the United States.

Brought to North America from European cave explorers, white nose syndrome kills hibernating bats by causing them to “wake up” too often during hibernation, leading them to starve to death. Scientists estimate that 2.4 million pounds of insects will go uneaten as a result of the large number of bat deaths, leading to more problems for crops and more mosquito bites for humans. Since the fungus is easily spread from cave to cave via clothing, the NPS has closed almost all of the caves within the park. However, you can still get a glimpse of the subterranean beauty of the Ozarks by visiting the viewing platform at Devil’s Well.

Devil's Well

Devil's Well certainly sounds like a fearsome place, but it is actually one of the most awe-inspiring examples of karst topography in the state. Underneath Devil's Well lies an enormous underground lake, containing 22 million gallons of rain and groundwater filtered through the surrounding limestone. The lake itself is 80 feet deep, and the surface of the water lies 100 feet below a vaulted cavern.

At some point in the past, a portion of the cavern ceiling collapsed leaving a "skylight" into this subterranean lake. First explored in 1954 by Bob Wallace, who was lowered into the cavern by his brother with a steel cable attached to a plank, the surface of the underground lake is larger than a football field. Devil's Well ultimately drains into the Current River through Cave Spring, and many important subterranean critters like the Southern Missouri Cave Fish call the lake home.

Modern explorers can more safely experience Devil's Well via a short walk to

the "mouth" of the cave where they can descend a staircase to a viewing platform inside the cave. More adventurous types can "follow the flow" along a somewhat strenuous 4.6 mile surface trail to Cave Springs and out to the banks of the Current River.

Hiking

Whether you're a weekend warrior or a seasoned backpacker, the park offers a variety of trails to suit all tastes. The trails range from casual, interpretive trails and short day hikes to longer treks not for the faint of heart (or sore of foot).

The interpretive trails are best for those looking for a short trail and a history lesson. The Slough Trail, located near Big Spring, is a half a mile long trail that explains the history of the Big Spring area along the way.

The Alley Overlook Trail is a phenomenal short trail that guides hikers to an overlook above Alley Spring. Beginning at the Powder Mill campground, the Blue Spring Trail is a short hike that ends at the Blue Spring...





Blue Spring is over 300 feet deep, making it one of the deepest springs in the United States.

The longest trail in the park is a segment of the Ozark Trail. The trail extends from Saint Louis into Arkansas and is an excellent way to see the Ozarks. The trail's longest continuous section is from Onondaga Cave State Park to the Eleven Point River, a distance of 225 miles. Plans for the trail began in the 1970s when Missouri prepared a recreation plan showing a need for an additional 500-900 miles of hiking trails. Construction for the trail officially began in 1981, and by 1991 over 200 miles of the trail had been completed. Within the park, you can find several miles of the Current River section of the trail, which is considered by many to be the most scenic hike in Missouri thanks to the breathtaking vistas of the river.

Canoeing

The Current River and the Jacks Fork River are class I and class II waters, making them ideal for family canoeing. A class I river requires no skill and does not require maneuvering. A class II river is classified as having some rocks, drops, and involves some maneuvering, but only basic paddling skill is necessary.

The park boasts well over a hundred miles of beautiful gently flowing water, making canoeing popular among visitors. The average canoeing speed is about three miles an hour, although one can certainly paddle much faster or stop often to prolong the trip. Several local outfitters offer services from equipment rental to guides and transportation for canoeists on the river. Most offer a variety of trips ranging from short one-day trips, such as floating down the 11 miles from Pulltite to Round Spring, to longer two-day trips like the run from Powder Mill all the way

to Big Spring, a 31 mile trip that ends near the landing in Van Buren. For the truly adventurous, another available float starts at Baptist Camp and ends 144 miles later, taking 8 to 9 days and spanning most of the Current River.

The Jacks Fork River contains more class II waters than the Current River, offering a slightly bumpier ride. The river is 45 miles long and the first 25 miles, from Prongs to Bay Creek, run through a shut-in, a geological feature similar to a canyon. Though the Jacks Fork is spring-fed, the river can be difficult or impossible to float during the summer months. Local outfitters offer one day floats of the Jacks Fork that run from 6 to 18 miles, and longer two day trips where visitors have the option to camp on river between access points or at established campsites.



Threats

After a proposal to dam the Current River, state and local elected officials joined conservation groups and citizens from across Missouri in demanding protections for the river, and in 1964 Congress established the park to protect our river heritage. The NPS has done much to protect the rivers and restore the surrounding lands, but many threats persist.

In early 2011 the environmental organization American Rivers listed the Current River as one of the top ten most endangered rivers in the country, due mainly to the increased presence of motor vehicles and uncontrolled use of horses in the park. In 1984, about 20 years after the establishment of the park, there were 13 developed river access points and public campgrounds. Now, there are many more access points, many of which are illegal or unauthorized. The gratuitous access points have allowed vehicles to degrade gravel bars, release large amounts of sediment into the river, destroy riverbanks, and mar both traditional use and quiet enjoyment of the river.

Along with illegal access points, unregulated horse use poses one of the greatest threats to the rivers. While there are four official horse trails that cover a total of 23 miles, there are an estimated additional 250 miles of unauthorized horse trails and as many as 80 crossing points for horses in the park.

The excessive number of river crossings for horses contributes to abnormal levels of E. coli in the rivers, resulting in water quality degradation. In 1998, eight miles of the river were included on Missouri's list of impaired water due to fecal pollution. According to data from the Missouri Department of Natural Resources Water Protection Program, the E. coli level increased fivefold in the Jacks Fork River between 2002 and 2009. These levels have been linked to the increase in the amount of horse waste in the water.

Threats to the Current and Jacks Fork Rivers also threaten the animals living in the river, such as the endangered Ozark Hellbender. Found in abundance during the 1970s and 1980s, the population of the Hellbender has significantly declined over the past twenty years. In the past ten years alone, the Hellbender population plummeted by 70% and

currently only 590 remain in the wild. Hellbenders depend on clean, clear river water to survive, along with consistent levels of oxygen, temperature, and water flow. Due to careless use along the rivers the waters have suffered from increased siltation, impoundments of flow, and water quality degradation.

The damage to the rivers has caused some populations of the Hellbender to disappear entirely and caused others to become isolated, thus more vulnerable to threats such as poaching, disease, and predation. The increased siltation of the water suffocates the eggs of the Hellbender and reduces the oxygen levels needed to survive. The impoundments, or barriers on the rivers, modify the habitat by altering the water temperature and isolating populations of Hellbenders so that separate populations cannot replenish each other.

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How to get involved

Public support helped create the Ozark National Scenic Riverways and many other national parks, and it continues to help the National Park Service provide excellent management of the Current and Jacks Fork Rivers.

There are many different ways to get involved:

- Help the planning process for the park—the NPS is currently finalizing a management plan that will govern the park for the next twenty years. You can learn more about the plan at <http://www.nps.gov/ozar/parkmgmt/planning.htm>.
- Get involved through citizen advocacy for the park with Environment Missouri at <http://environmentmissouri.org>.
- Meet the staff and learn about park events by visiting the park headquarters, located on Watercress Drive in Van Buren, MO.
- Educate others about the many wonders of the Ozark National Scenic Riverways and the importance of protecting these two beautiful rivers using this guide.
- You can be a responsible user of the park by following park rules and following “leave no trace” guidelines.
- Volunteer at the park on a horse patrol, as part of a cleanup team, or as help for special events. You can learn more at <http://volunteer.gov>.
- Donate money to the park at <http://www.nps.gov/ozar/supportyourpark/donate.htm>.