Backpacking: Trails to Nebraska's Great Outdoors.

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Backpacking: Trails to Nebraska's Great Outdoors
Hiking the Missouri River Country
HIKERS TREKKING Indian Cave State Park north of Falls City will be in Nebraska’s only hardwood forest. The park’s rugged terrain is shaped by the rolling bluffs overlooking the Missouri River and valley cuts carved by intermittent drainages. A variety of oaks and hickories, ash, basswood, walnut and cottonwood loom over the dense growth of woodland shrubs and wildflowers. During May the forest floor is colored by phlox and May apple, columbine and Dutchman’s breeches, yellow lady-slipppers and showy orchis.

Indian Cave wildlife, like the flora, possesses a distinctive flavor of the Ozarks. Turkey vultures summer and probably nest here. Ruffed grouse have been reported and a chorus of whip-poor-will and tree-frog calls usher in summer evenings. Skittery gray squirrels dance through the treetops of ancient nut trees, and a throng of woodland birds—warblers, ovenbirds, thrushes, grosbeaks and indigo buntings—comb the understory for seeds and insects. The Missouri’s unique plant and animal life make it a must for the naturalist hiker.

Indian Cave’s backpacking trails offer a variety of terrain and surfaces. Of necessity, many of the trails traverse hilly bluff country, but ridgelines afford some stretches of relatively flat walking. Though trails are steep in some areas, there are no rocky or extremely difficult portions. The bulk of the trails are recently cut and well maintained to make hiking a pleasure, yet preserving the wilderness setting. Abandoned access roads, as well as those still used by park personnel, make up the rest of the Missouri River Trail Country.
Indian Cave

Nebraska's hardwood forest; steeped in history, rich in fauna and flora

Before You Hike

- Camping is allowed in designated campsites only, and fires are allowed only in the fire rings provided. Campsites are situated at many points along the trails. Some are near pit toilets, but most are not. Water is available at wells along the trail.

- Backpacking and hiking are allowed on any park trail, including the nine-mile horse trail in the southeast portion of the park.

- An occasional timber rattlesnake is encountered at Indian Cave, especially during the denning seasons. A snake bite kit is a good idea even though it probably will not be used.

- Vehicles, including motorcycles, are allowed on paved roads only.

- All backpackers should check in at park headquarters before hiking.

- Garbage should be packed out or disposed of in receptacles, not buried.

- Indian Cave is a heavy use area. Minimum impact camping and a respect for the rights of others is essential to maintain the wilderness experience.
Suggested Hikes

The trails at Indian Cave State Park loop and interconnect frequently, affording a wide choice of terrain, campsites and length. There are campsites within a quarter of a mile of parking areas and others far more remote, especially in the southern portion of the park. Several hikes are suggested here, but the options available are only as limited as the backpacker's imagination.

A medium-length hike with fairly rugged walking starts at the beginning of the horse trails and courses eastward through the park's wild south section along the Hardwood Trail. This route leads the backpacker through the park's finest display of native oaks and hickories, and woodland flowers. The trail traces ridge tops for much of the way but crosses a number of deep valley cuts as well. A water pump is available along the way and there is a choice of campsites including five with Adirondack shelters. The trail suggested here turns back to the north before reaching the Indian Cave, an option many backpackers will choose to add. No vehicles are allowed to "overnight" in the cave parking area.

A second hike, along Rock Bluff Run, traces the bluff line through the center section of the park. This trail can "head" either at the parking areas below St Deroin school or where the horse trail crosses the paved road west of the cave. Rock Bluff Run offers the park's best view of the Missouri River and the vast floodplain beyond. There are two shelters and two campsites on Rock Bluff Run, but several other campsites and water are along short trails that finger in from the paved road to the west. Backpackers can design their own variations, incorporating lateral trails to create short day hikes or using them for quick access to the middle section of Rock Bluff Run.

North Ridge Trail offers a short two to three-hour hike between St Deroin school and the north day-use area. No overnight vehicles are allowed in the day-use area.

Ambitious backpackers could link up the three trails for a two-day hike that travels the length of the park.
Hiking the Lake Country

FOR THE IMAGINATIVE hiker who is not convinced that backpacking and mountains are synonymous, the 71,500 acres of the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge south of Valentine offers solitude in a setting of natural lakes, marshes, lush meadows and sandhills. The terrain is extremely rolling with the primary ridges oriented in a northwest-southeast fashion. Consequently, any hike that follows a north-south line will prove fairly strenuous.

Two routes are outlined on the map which take good advantage of valleys or follow maintenance roads. Most of the refuge is open to backpacking and many hikers will choose to design their own routes to reach areas of personal interest or of lengths that can be handled comfortably. Over 16,000 acres in the southwest portion of the refuge are a proposed Wilderness Area and closed to all vehicle traffic.

The treeless sandhills can become scorching hot during summer months, so hikers will probably prefer to plan trips during spring and fall. The lake country presents many opportunities to combine other outdoor recreation with backpacking.
The spring months of April, May and June are the peak of waterbird migration and nesting, for hikers interested in wildlife photography. June is also one of the better months for wildflower enthusiasts. These same months provide the best opportunity for the hiker to supplement his dehydrated food diet with fresh northern pike, largemouth bass or panfish.

September and October present the prairie in its finest shades of golds and browns, and coincide with the prairie-grouse season. Only the refuge west of the highway is open to hunting. Nights are cool and days balmy at this time of the year.

**Before You Hike**

- Overnight camping is **not** allowed on the refuge. Campsites are available on two special-use areas north and south of the refuge. Special care should be taken to avoid trespassing on private land.

- Overnight parking is restricted to the Hackberry Lake headquarters, and all backpackers are requested to check in before hiking.

- The natural areas located between Hackberry and Dewey Lake Marsh, and between Dewey Lake and Whitewater Lake are off limits.

- Fires of any type, including stoves, are prohibited on the refuge, and only small, backpacker-type stoves or Coleman-types are allowed on the special-use areas. The danger of range fires always exists and backpackers should take all necessary precautions to avoid starting one.

- Water and restrooms are available at the Hackberry Lake headquarters only.

- Firearms are not allowed on the refuge except during legal hunting seasons, and all trash should be packed out, not buried.
Two routes are suggested here but backpackers are free to design their own hike; in fact, there are no formal trails as such on the refuge. The recommended routes will give hikers unfamiliar with the refuge or sandhills' walking, an idea of distances that can be covered in a day. Whatever the route, allow enough time to reach one of the campsites off the refuge by sundown. Undulating terrain adds considerably to map-planned miles.

Bluestem Trail is relatively short and easy going. It originates and terminates at the refuge headquarters. The western half of Hackberry's south shore is a natural area and off limits. The lookout tower should serve as a point of orientation on the trail south to the Dewey Lake Marsh. The trail turns east here and traces the north shore of Dewey Lake Marsh and Dewey Lake to Willow Lake Special-Use Area for the night, a seven to eight-mile walk. The Bluestem Trail returns by a short (about six miles) hike along the north shore of Clear and Hackberry lakes.

The Long Lakes Trail is more strenuous and recommended only for experienced backpackers. It originates at the refuge headquarters and proceeds south past the west end of Hackberry Lake and Dewey Lake Marsh to the west end of Pelican Lake. The wooded hills along Pelican's south shore will probably woo backpackers on a southeasterly course paralleling them. A third of the way down the lake, the suggested trail cuts south to Dad's Lake, past Mule Lake and on to the Rat and Beaver lakes campsite for the night, a total hike of approximately 11 miles.

The next day's route proceeds north to Dad's Lake wooded south side, and continues north through high sandhills and hay meadows to the east end of Dewey Lake. The trail's last leg follows the north shore of Dewey and Hackberry lakes to headquarters. This is a hard hike, some 14 miles. Some backpackers will choose to stop after 9 miles at the Willow Lake campsite for the night and complete the walk the following morning.
THE BESSEY DIVISION of the Nebraska National Forest, wedged between the Middle Loup and Dismal rivers, offers backpackers a variety of terrain, vegetation and wildlife. The pristine mixed-grass prairie is accented by dense stands of Nebraska’s only man-made forest.

Most of the “forest” is actually prairie—rolling hills of sand locked in place by sandreed, bluestem, lovegrass and several dozen other grasses and forbs. Prairie dogs, antelope, mule deer, kangaroo rats, sharp-tailed grouse and other wildlife indigenous to the prairie, will likely be encountered by hikers. Forest personnel can direct backpackers to prairie dog towns or sharp-tailed grouse display grounds.

Of the 90,000 acres included in the Bessey Division, some 10,500 acres are covered by hand-planted ponderosa pine with occasional stands of jack pine, Scotch pine, Austrian pine and juniper. Broad, grassy meadows and firebreaks relieve the monotony of this “real” forest. Grassland wildlife still claims the woods, but hikers may also encounter white-tailed deer, porcupines and wild turkey coexisting with it.

Most of the trails are primitive roadways used by forest personnel for maintenance. Each has its own character. Some are clearly laid through the grassland, others are barely visible in the knee-high grass. Footing can vary from firm to soft on the trails and is generally quite loose elsewhere. Some trails are steep, others flat, some winding and an occasional exception, straight. Many offshoots from main trails dead-end at windmills, making it important to pick the correct trail.

A variety of loops can be selected to suit the hikers’ tastes in terrain and vegetation. Primitive camping is allowed throughout the area.
Before You Hike Halsey

- Backpacking is allowed on any of the National Forest lands.
- Fires are a constant hazard and consequently some areas are closed during dry periods. The National Forest has a season during which open fires are prohibited. A permit is required to camp in the forest regardless of the time of year, and occasional periods of fire hazard may require a complete ban on any form of camping. At other times, camping with open fires is permitted in most locations. Call ahead to confirm that camping is being allowed, and register at headquarters to learn current conditions.
- Some areas are closed to vehicles. Check at the headquarters before leaving the paved road.
- Windmills and wells are numerous and most are running throughout the summer.
- Blowouts on access trails can be soft and deep, particularly when dry. Cars should not be driven off the major routes.
- There is a small population of prairie rattlesnakes on the forest, primarily along some stretches of the Dismal River during the spring and fall denning seasons, so reasonable caution should be exercised.
Suggested Hikes

The Hardwoods Area on the Dismal River at the southeast corner of the forest serves as an excellent base camp and starting point for a number of hikes of various lengths over different types of terrain.

Longstem Trail begins about 100 yards west of the camp and runs north over the hill to a fence gate (0.7 mile). Once through the gate, the trail winds to the west (0.2 mile) before crossing the White Sand Trail. Turn north on White Sand and follow it up the hills into the timber. The next junction is with Camp Five Trail (2.3 miles) north on a winding trail that approaches the intersection from the east. Camp Five Trail runs west back to the gravel road (2.8 miles). To continue along White Sand Trail go right, over the deeply cut sandy ridge, north to a second junction, Firebreak Trail (2.5 miles). Firebreak Trail also returns to the gravel road (2.8 miles). White Sand Trail continues through one of the most scenic parts of the forest to its next junction with Coyote Run Trail which joins White Sand Trail from the west and with Prairie View Trail which joins from the east. Just beyond this junction is a camping site close to a windmill and an open, grassy area. The trail to this point has covered about 7 miles.

For the beginner, this may be plenty for one day, but the experienced backpacker may wish to continue on Coyote Run Trail to the gravel road, north on the gravel road (0.3 mile), and then west to another windmill (1.5 miles). This point is 10 to 11 miles from the Hardwoods base camp.

From these two campsites there are a number of options for the return hike. Backpackers at the first campsite may take the Prairie View Trail east (1.2 miles) and then south paralleling the fenceline to the Dismal River and west to the Hardwoods camp (3.5 to 4 miles). This route will take the hiker out of the pines and into high sandhills. The trail is soft and the walking strenuous.

Hikers at the second campsite can proceed west on Coyote Run Trail (1.7 miles) and south (1.2 miles) to the paved road. From this point there are a variety of options. Nelson Firebreak Trail leads back to the gravel road and to Firebreak, Camp Five or Longstem trails which return to the Hardwoods camp. Another option would be to strike out south from the paved road to the Blue Banks camp (6 to 7 miles) on the Dismal River for a second night's camp. From Blue Banks east to the Hardwoods area is a scenic five-mile hike along the Dismal River.

Other hikes can be designed by the imaginative backpacker. There are no signs along the trails, making occasional glances at a detailed map necessary to avoid exhausting mistakes.
ORT ROBINSON and adjoining Soldier Creek Wood Reserve offer a unique version of traditional “mountain” backpacking trails in Nebraska. Admittedly, the highest ridges are only 4,600 feet above sea level, some 600 feet above creeks that carved the sandstone buttes, but the effect is much the same—rocky trails of high relief, strenuous walking, and cool nights. There are numerous steep-walled side canyons for wayward hikers to explore.

The buttes and canyon sides are forested with ponderosa pine, juniper and scrubby shrubs. Deciduous trees—cottonwood, boxelder and willow—line the creeks and canyon bottoms. Blue grama, needle-and-thread, little bluestem and western wheatgrass cloak sandy-soiled clearings in the pines. The Pine Ridge’s vegetation is at once lush and spartan, having adapted to the low rainfall and meager soil nutrients.
As at Indian Cave on the other end of the state, wildlife at Fort Robinson and the Wood Reserve has a distinctive flavor. Hikers will find a sampling of mountain birds—Clark’s nutcrackers, pinion jays, gray jays, mountain bluebirds and red crossbills. Mule deer and white-tailed deer share the pine buttes. Golden eagles and prairie falcons nest on sheer cliff sides, Merriam’s turkeys are common, and signs of bobcat are likely to be encountered, far more often than the animal itself. Hikers will no doubt cross trails with porcupines or at least their gnawed, tree-girdling trademarks.

The Wood Reserve can be used for day hikes, overnighers or multi-day excursions. Forging new trails over the 10,000 acres of federal land will appeal to the more adventuresome. The trails vary from two-rut vehicle paths to small foot trails with switchbacks, water bars and rocky climbs.

Fort Robinson trails are well marked maintenance roads, abandoned roads and cattle trails. There are numerous trails in the park, some marked and mapped, others not. The interconnecting trails loop frequently, allowing a variety of hikes that can be tailored to the individual’s schedule.

**Soldier Creek Suggested Hikes**

Backpackers in the Soldier Creek Wood Reserve will be tracing some of the Old West’s truly historic trails; paths that have known the tread of deer-skin moccasins, spit-and-polished troopers’ boots and creaky stagecoach wheels carrying would-be gold miners to Deadwood.

As on other areas, numerous loops allow backpackers to design hikes to suit their interest, time and physical condition. The recommended starting point for hikes in the Wood Reserve is the east gate, reached by way of Soldiers Creek Military Road. Overnight parking is allowed near the gate.

Three of the four primary trails in the Wood Reserve follow the three forks of Soldiers Creek. The North, Middle and South forks converge near the east gate so the excitement of temporarily being “lost” will probably be short-lived.

Boots and Saddles Trail begins near the east gate and runs north along the east boundary, loops back to the southwest and then branches: one branch proceeding westward along the northern boundary and crossing the Middle Fork and the Hat Creek Trail; and the second branch wending south along the North Fork to join up with Hat Creek Trail near the site of the old officers’ club, a former military fun spot that had living quarters complete with a swimming pool. Boots and Saddles Trail is a good choice for a day’s hike.

Hat Creek Trail roughly parallels the Middle Fork and provides an easy two-hour walk from the old officers’ club to a spring seeping from a sheer cliff near the remains of an old cabin. All that remains of the cabin is the brick chimney and foundation. This site is an excellent choice for an overnight camp.

Trooper Trail slices through the center of the Wood Reserve from the east gate to the west boundary near the northwest corner, a hike of about two and one-half hours. The trail is uphill for most of the hike before entering a grassy meadow sloping down to the west boundary.

The South Fork Trail is about an hour-and-a-half hike from the east gate to near the west boundary. North-south trails on the western edge and near the center of the reserve connect Trooper and South Fork trails.

Another trail sweeps around the entire southern boundary from the east gate to South Fork Trail on the west edge of the Wood Reserve. Much of this trail passes through grassland below the south ridge of the reserve, and backpackers will find the low relief easy going after the canyon climbing of the north trails.
Before You Hike Soldier Creek

- Backpacking, hiking and camping are allowed anywhere on the Wood Reserve. Horses are also permitted, but the area is closed to motor vehicles, including motorcycles.
- No camping, water or sanitary facilities are provided in the Wood Reserve. Primitive conditions must be maintained and water is available only from the creek and at windmills.
- All garbage or litter should be packed out; do not bury—if you can carry it in full, you can carry it out empty!
- Campfires are allowed much of the year, but may be prohibited during extremely dry periods. Special fire regulations will be posted at trail entry points.
- The Wood Reserve is grazed during the summer months, and management practices demand that gates be left as they are found. Report any damage to the Forest Service.
- Soldier Creek is an excellent trout stream. By all means, pack in a fly rod, but show your respect for these quality fish by keeping soap out of the water.

Soldier Creek
This historic region offers backpackers nearly 50 miles of marked trails
Before You Hike Fort Rob

- Hiking is permitted and encouraged on most park lands at Fort Robinson. The jeep and horse trails are best seen via those means, and hiking is directed toward other areas. Camping for backpackers is allowed only on the north sections of the park, north of the James Ranch buildings. Camping is not permitted in Smiley Canyon or along Soldier Creek outside of the Wood Reserve.

- Open fires are prohibited at all times in the park due to extreme fire hazard. All cooking must be done on backpacking stoves.

- All backpacking parties should register at the park office indicating who will be hiking, the destination, estimated length of stay and intended trail. Additional information about the hiking trails can be picked up at the same time.

- Backpacking conditions at Fort Robinson are primitive, and no designated camping areas or water sources are provided. Any water desired should be packed in, and all refuse should be packed out.

- Parking for overnighters must be in designated areas at the James Ranch trailhead or at the Wood Reserve parking area. Day hikers may park in areas below the east bluffs or on the Smiley Canyon Road.

Fort Robinson Suggested Hikes

Two day-hiking areas are recommended at Fort Robinson, each with easy access. Butte Crest Trail in the McKenzie Pass area east of the fort is scenic with superb Pine Ridge overlooks.

Smiley Canyon Trail, the second day-hike area, begins at the scenic turnout on U.S. 20 four miles west of the fort. The seven-mile loop leads down to Soldier Creek and back through plains, buttes and riparian woodlands.

There are two major backpacking trails at Fort Rob, both in the northern portion of the park and heading at the James Ranch. Numerous unmarked and unmapped trails weave through the park for those who desire to strike off on their own.

Spring Creek Trail is an easy one-night trail following the fenceline north and northeast along a steep trail up the ridge and down into Spring Creek Valley for a night camp. The second leg of the trail continues northeast around the bluffs and up the ridgeline to an overlook of badlands, grasslands and the Black Hills 50 miles to the north. The trail winds along the ridge before turning south. From there it is two miles downhill to the trailhead. The entire loop is approximately 10 or 11 miles.

A possible two-night trail follows the first seven miles of Spring Creek Trail and then connects with the Wood Reserve Trail at an old windmill site on the west side of the loop. Wood Reserve Trail parallels the north boundary in a westward direction to the northeast corner of the Wood Reserve before turning south to Soldier Creek. The Wood Reserve Trail is about four miles long and links Wood Reserve trails and those of Fort Robinson.