

DEVIL'S DEN STATE PARK (March 2017)



Devil's Den State Park is about 40 miles southeast of Fayetteville. From Fayetteville travel south on 265 then 170 to the park. From I-49, (2) turn off on 170 at West Fork or at Winslow, turn onto 74. In any case, the route to DDSP courses the high country of the Boston Mountains before plunging by steep switch-backs more than a thousand feet to Lee Creek at the park.

Devil's Den covers approx. 2,500 acres of forest and grasslands in the valley and hillsides along Lee Creek. The forests consist primarily of mixed hardwood species. There are also extensive bands of eastern red cedar. Riparian forest is well developed along Lee Creek, a fast rushing mountain stream (listen for the songs of

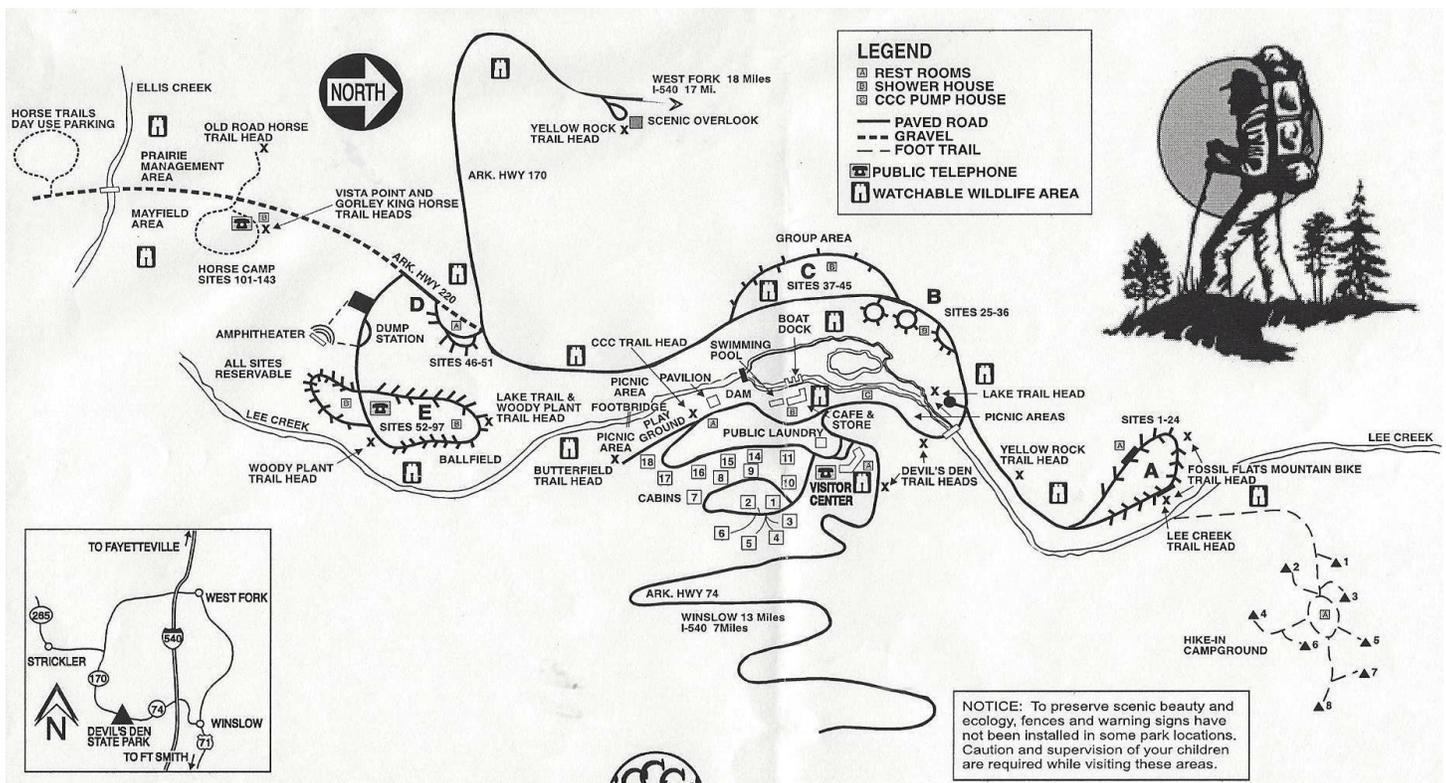
Louisiana Waterthrushes in spring and summer). Much of the park shares a common boundary with the Ozark National Forest, greatly expanding forested habitats for birds and birders. Abandoned farmland provides additional habitat.

DDSP is a fine place to sample the Boston Mountains region. The awe-inspiring mountainous aspect is a result, not of true mountain building processes, but rather of erosion that reshaped an ancient plateau into what is today a series of high ridges and deep valleys or "hollers."

During summer, the ringing songs of Ovenbirds can be easily heard above brake noise on the drive up and down. Birds in the park vary from those of extensive forests like Worm-eating Warbler, Red-eyed Vireo and both Scarlet and Summer Tanager to those of abandoned farmland grown-up in small trees and shrubs like Blue Grosbeaks, Eastern Towhees and Indigo Buntings. Moist shady forest edge thickets provide habitat for White-eyed Vireo and Kentucky Warbler. Forest dwelling raptors like Red-shouldered Hawk and Broad-winged Hawk occur in the park. During the peak of spring migration there can be many interesting warblers, for example: Magnolia, Golden-winged, Blackburnian, Mourning, Black-throated Green and many others.

A few Black Vultures and many more Turkey Vultures nest and roost on the slope below Yellow Rock hiking trail. There is also a significant mixed-species vulture roost in winter. Fall hawk watches from Yellow Rock can sometimes be productive. At least on one such watch, Mike Mlodinow and others tallied 12 species of raptors including Osprey, Swainson's Hawk, and Northern Harrier.

The 1.5 mile Devil's Den trail starts near the park headquarters and provides a sample of the forest birds plus gravity flowing springs, peculiarly eroded sandstone strata, wet weather waterfalls, numerous wildflowers, and the cool crevices named the Devil's Den and the Devil's Icebox.



You can sample the hillside forests by walking the two paved loop trails that access cabins near the visitor's center. The pavement is also helpful for those with mobility limitations. Typically there are fewer people in the upper portions of Lee Creek beyond camp area "A". American Redstarts, Louisiana Waterthrush and Yellow-throated Warblers are easily found along Lee Creek. Fossil Flats Trail on the north end of camp area "A" marks the beginnings of an old road that follows the deep valley of Lee Creek toward its headwaters in the Ozark National Forest. Hikers are permitted on this old road, which passes through a variety of habitats including forest, old fields, and the stream valley itself. Some land in this area is privately owned.

Prairie habitat is being restored on the old Mayfield farm in the park. This field, and the helicopter landing field across the road, both provide extensive grassland habitat. Blue-winged Warblers have nested in the past. Big falcons are sometimes seen in the fall. All kinds of common species associated with grasslands may be found in season. Also, in the Mayfield area, it is worth stopping at Day Use Horse Camp for an easy exploration of an old field and forest edge.

Finally, only a few miles away, it's worth checking out birds and habitat along Cartwright Mountain Road. It has been a good place to find birds like Worming-eating and Cerulean Warblers in summer. Cartwright Mountain Loop is not in the park. From the park, take Highway 74 back to Highway 71, then head a few miles south to Artist Point. Still on 71, immediately south of Artist Point, turn west on Cartwright Mountain Road. This is approximately 3 miles of high elevation forest and farmland. Slow drive. Cartwright comes back out on 71.

IMPORTANT NOTE FOR 2017: The Den is close to the rapidly growing population of Fayetteville and northwest Arkansas in general. Because it is rugged and beautiful, it is often the place of choice in good weather for camping, hiking, dog walking, picnicking, and mountain biking. Whereas the Den is often a relatively quiet place during the week, on mild weather weekends it turns into a congested, noisy city. On such days, the place to go birding is the park's far

edges. If you can pick days for your birding trip, avoid weekends in spring, and go for weekdays instead.

If you only have a day or part of a day, here is an agenda to consider: Devil's Den includes several long trails (Butterfield Trail, Yellow Rock Trail) and many shorter trails. One strategy for birding the Den is to concentrate on a few shorter trails, loop walks through several camping areas, and some highway stops especially in high elevation forests. (1) High elevation highway stops: at or near park entrances on Highways 74 (east) and 170 (west). Bird along the highway at both places. (2) Shorter trails, all or in part: (A) Devil's Den Trail – rocky uplands and a stretch along Lee Creek. (B) Lake Trail, from near Lee Creek bridge and out onto a sort of woody-brushy island before you reach the lake. (C) Fossil Flats Trail, at least the first part leaving Camp area A – so this won't be a loop. (D) Cross creek from Camp area A and walk loop through Walk-In Camp. (E) Amphitheater and loop through Camp area E. (3) Paved loop roads through Camp Area A, C, and the Horse Camp, plus paved road that loops up through the rental cabins. Mayfield area, along highway 220 (now under construction) in on the park's southwest side. This includes a big open field mowed for helicopter landing, a brushy spot where the park piles tree trimmings, and a field managed as a prairie. Just down the road, near the park's SW boundary, is the Day Use Horse Camp with a small field and good forest edge.

Finally, in an age when it has become popular to disparage all public-spirited activity connected with government, it is worthwhile to consider that this park is a result of the activities of the men and women of the Civilian Conservation Corps (1934-1942), our government's attempt to find useful work for citizens suffering the hard times of the Great Depression. Along with birding DDSP, it might be well to be mindful of this civic lesson.

The park provides many services to those interested in its natural history: a bird check-list, self-guided trail lists, geological history, plus regular field trips guided by naturalists. For information, contact the park: Devils Den S.P., 11333AR HWY 74, West Fork, AR 72774, or call 479-761-3325.



Bee pollinator on Harvey's Buttercup, one of earliest spring wildflowers that is also endemic to the region.