

A BIRDERS' GUIDE TO MISSOURI PUBLIC LANDS

THOUSAND HILLS STATE PARK

Edge Wade, summer 2014

3079.70 acres Adair Co. DeLorme 23, B-7/8

GPS: 40.196252,-92.646795

DNR owned; contact (660) 665-6995 during office hours

<http://www.mostatoparks.com/park/thousand-hills-state-park>

Directions: From the intersection of Business 63 and MO 6 in Kirksville, go west on MO 6 for 3.3 miles, the left (south) onto MO 157 for 1.7 miles into the park.

Thousand Hills State Park just west of Kirksville has 182 species on the checklist, largely the product of a few birders who live nearby. The rolling hills and steep cuts are the results of millennia of streams cutting through once glaciated land. The Grand Divide, separating the Missouri and Mississippi watersheds, runs through the park. The petroglyphs are protected by a shelter at a site listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

When to Visit/Species to Expect: All expected goose species and 19 species of ducks have been reported. The short shorebird list includes an American Avocet and 10 Willets. Raptor sightings include two Golden Eagles.

November finds have included a Western Grebe and Red and White-winged Crossbills. The crossbills, Pine Siskins and Red-breasted Nuthatches may join Purple Finches in invasion winters (see the Petroglyph Trail discussion below).

Both Whip-poor-wills and Chuck-will's Widows may be found in spring and early summer. Twenty-three species of warbler and six vireo species have been seen.

The lake draws gulls and terns among large numbers of Ring-billed Gulls. A Laughing Gull and Franklin's Gulls have been reported. Terns seen: Caspian, Black, Common and Forster's.

Features of interest to birders: The 573-acre reservoir for Kirksville, Forest Lake, formed by damming Big Creek, a Chariton River tributary; stands of pines; second-growth oak-hickory forest; bottomland along the Chariton River; and remnant savannas and grasslands, maintained under a burn regimen, are productive habitats for inquisitive birders to explore.

There is a marina and a dining lodge, call (660)-665-7119 for open hours/days.

Paved park roads go through the campgrounds, to cabins, and along a portion of the south lakeshore. Big Loop Trail Rd. is signed one-way, with the entrance on the west side of MO 157. It is the primary route to access most trails and shelters. The shortest route to campgrounds, cabins, beach, marina and dining lodge is to stay on MO 157.

There are several trail options of varying lengths, terrain and habitats.

Petroglyph Trail is unmarked. One end is at the parking area near the Petroglyph Shelter (follow the graveled step-ups from the lot to the petroglyph shelter and continue past it, turning left onto the trail to the pines); the other end is in Campground 2, at the end furthest from the campground entrance between campsites 56 and 57. Only one parking space (designated handicap) is at the campground end. It is a short (perhaps .10 mile) lightly graveled trail with a very gentle slope. This is the trail through the pine stand where Pine Warblers may be seen in the breeding season and where Red-breasted Nuthatches, Pine Siskins and Red and White-winged Crossbills may be found in invasion years.

Oak Trail is a .20 mile linear natural surface hiking-only trail blazed in green, designated as easy, runs through woods along a ridge from the trailhead at a small parking area at a vault toilet on Big Loop Rd. just south of the playground. The sign is at the tree line, easy to miss.

Red Bud Trail is a 1.25-mile linear/loop natural surface trail blazed in yellow. Trailheads are along Big Loop Trail Rd. from a parking area across from the playground (this may be used to make a shortened (about .6 mile) loop through hilly, wooded terrain; or may be taken, with or without the loop, along Craig's Cove to the trailhead at the parking area west of Shelter 3.

Thousand Hills Trail is a 10.5-mile linear trail blazed in red with one trailhead within the park. This is along the Big Loop Trail road at a small parking area on the right (west) just north of the shelter. On the park map it is indicated as "Hickory Trail", but the small sign at the lot says "Thousand Hill Trail". Another trailhead is on CR 226 northeast of the park in Big Creek CA.

The trail goes around much of Forest Lake, but does not make a loop. The shoreline portion along the south ends and east side are the only access to these areas other than by boat. Two white connector trails may be used to make loops within the park. It is a mountain bike and hiking trail, but in the park, all but the loop portion on the east side of Forest Lake is designated "hiking only".

Forest Lake Trail, blazed in blue, is under construction in 2014. It is a concrete hiking/biking trail along the lakeshore connecting park marina, cabins, beach, and petroglyph shelter parking lot.

It leads to an overlook of the Point Shelter on the shore of Forest Lake. This is a narrow path with a gentle slope through woods and past a power line cut. It is out of the way from most visitor activity. There is a bench at the end, ideal for quiet watching. The eroded gully beside the bench is not recommended as an access to the area below; take the path back to the beginning.

The special use area (on the west side of MO 157 south of the entrance to Big Loop Trail Rd.), when not occupied, provides a walk-in birding area away from other activities. Park at, but do not block the gate.

Not far from the entrance end of Long Trail Rd. it makes a tight bend to the left at a maintenance area. A gravel two track leads straight ahead (usually blocked with a chain). You may park near the gravel road and walk less than 100 yards to view the two sewage lagoons on the left that can only be glimpsed from the paved road.

Toilets: There are several vault toilets along Big Loop Trail Rd. and near shelters. The two campgrounds have flush toilets designated for use by campers, only.

Camping/Lodging: Campground 1 with electric and basic sites is open April through October; the electric sites of campground 2 are open year-round. From November through March, potable water is available only at the park office.

Six air-conditioned/heated duplex cabins open March through November overlook Forest Lake. Units are supplied with linens and towels and kitchen amenities.

Hazards/Limitations: The lake can draw large numbers of people for a broad spectrum of water activities in warm weather.

The DNR park map (both online and printed version) is less than ideal. The scale necessary to include the whole park is too small to cover the entire lake and provide useful information to locate and access the trails, roads and facilities concentrated in the northwest portion. An inset showing the lake perimeter, with the main map showing the area near the northwest part of the lake where the visitor facilities and activity are concentrated would be a more useful depiction of the park. The park office (off the west side of MO 157 south of the entrance to Campground 1) is not indicated on the map available in 2014. A first-time visitor at Thousand Hills may benefit from a visit with staff to locate points of interest on the map.

Some features/facilities have no sign or a sign from one direction, only; others do not match the indications on the map; and in some instances a good sign is present but not in a position easily seen from the road.

Nearby Birding Sites: Big Creek CA, Sugar Creek CA, Union Ridge CA, Hazel Creek Lake.