

ONONDAGA CAVE STATE PARK

Edge Wade, spring 2017

1,317.7 acres Crawford Co. DeLorme 47, E-9/10

GPS: 38.0307136,-91.1903016

DNR owned; for more information call 573-522-3760

On line link: <https://mostateparks.com/park/onondaga-cave-state-park>

Directions: From I-44 Exit 214, go south on Rt. H, through Leasburg, for a total of about 7 miles.

This guide does not include the detached Vilander Unit.

ADA Information: The half-mile Blue Heron Trail (below) is concrete, with a very gentle slope, going from the visitor center parking area along Spring Lake, passing wooded hillsides and rocky cliff, giving easy access to very good birding.

The roads through the picnic areas and campground (see below) provide access to riparian, savanna-like and open habitats that can be birded from within a car or by short ambles.

When to Visit/Species to Expect: At the writing of this guide in early spring 2017, 145 species have been reported to eBird. This park has such a broad variety of easily accessed Ozark habitats that it is a fine birding venue any season. Spring, summer and autumn days will have several birds nearby nearly every moment. Even winter can be good birding, as wintering species may be viewed from roads or the many open areas.

Winter is a good time here to see geese, ducks in small numbers, Bald Eagles, Red-tailed and Red-shouldered Hawks, Belted Kingfishers, and woodpeckers (including sapsuckers), as well as resident passerines. Possibilities include kinglets, creepers, Eastern Phoebes, Winter Wrens, Hermit Thrush, Yellow-rumped Warblers, juncos and Purple and House Finches. Check the pines for Red-breasted Nuthatch in invasion years.

In late April listen for Whip-poor-wills and begin watching for Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. Watch and listen for returning Great Crested Flycatchers, Eastern Kingbirds, White-eyed, Yellow-throated and Red-eyed Vireos, Northern Rough-winged Swallows, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Gray-cheeked and Swainson's Thrush and early migrating warbler species, especially Yellow-throated and Yellow-breasted Chat.

May brings good chances of seeing Purple Martins and swallows, and a variety of warblers including waterthrushes, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Green, and Wilson's.

Summer breeders include Broad-winged Hawk, Worm-eating, Black-and-white,

Prothonotary, Kentucky, Cerulean, Pine and Yellow warblers, Ovenbird, American Redstart and Northern Parula, Chipping and Field sparrows, Eastern Towhee, Summer and Scarlet tanagers, and Orchard and Baltimore orioles.

Fall migration reports have included Golden-winged, Tennessee, Orange-crowned, Bay-breasted and Blackburnian warblers.

Clearly, an observant birder has an excellent chance of finding a wide variety of species, including some surprises, on a trip to this state park in any season.

Features of interest to birders: The PINE GROVE at the northwest side of the large visitor center parking lot should be checked for Pine and Yellow-throated Warbler and a good mix of small birds in any season.

BLUE HERON TRAIL (paved) runs along the north side of Spring Lake to the campground. It passes the natural entrance to the cave and goes over the 1880s-built dam and millrace.

Along this trail in migration and breeding season the observant birder may find a spectrum of species representative of the potential of the park: Wood Duck, Acadian Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Kingbird, White-eyed, Yellow-throated and Red-eyed Vireo, Wood Thrush, Ovenbird, Kentucky Warbler, American Redstart, Northern Parula, Louisiana Waterthrush, Prothonotary Warbler and Common Yellowthroat, Red-winged Blackbird, Summer and Scarlet Tanager, and Orchard Oriole. Beavers, muskrats and river otters may distract even the most focused birder.

CAMPGROUNDS: The primitive (tent) campground is an open area with good views into an almost savanna-like array of trees. There is a concrete parking area. Near it are large rocks at a graveled area. From the rocks, a wide cut may be walked to the river's edge and a gravel bar to watch for herons, kingfishers and swallows.

A slow drive or walk through the main campground (parking available at a couple of points) can be productive for spotting creek-loving species. Unoccupied campsites give opportunities to check the creek for them.

AMPHITHEATER TRAIL is graveled. This short trail begins near the showerhouse parking area and provides an easily walked peek into the woodland habitat found along the Deer Run Trail (the amphitheater trail goes by the trailhead). Sitting quietly in the amphitheater for a few minutes is likely to result in good views of feeding flocks or individual foragers.

DEER RUN TRAIL is a loop of about 2.75 miles. Start at the showerhouse parking area near the amphitheater. It is a short way to a split. Go right for the

gentlest uphill route. The first part is mostly north-facing dolomite based woodland. Worm-eating Warbler, Yellow-throated and Red-eyed Vireo, tanagers, and Yellow-billed Cuckoo are likely along this portion in spring and summer.

At the top on the hogback ridge is a bench. At this point, the hike can be shortened by taking the old two-track generally east (toward the river) along the ridge top to its junction with the trail along the east side of the trail loop where a left turn onto the trail will take you back to your starting point.

To reach the south-facing slope, continue straight on the trail at the bench. The woodland on this side is drier, and glade restoration efforts are beginning to show results. Great-crested Flycatcher, more Ovenbirds and Worm-eating Warblers, may be found. The habitat looks good for Prairie Warbler.

The trail crosses the road from the campground to the Special-Use Area in two places. Using the road instead of the trail for the last portion of the hike reduces some of the more difficult climb portions of the trail, but does so by missing some

OAK RIDGE TRAIL is a hilly 3-mile loop through habitats similar to those of the slightly less rugged Deer Run Trail. The same bird species can be expected. There is a .8 mile connector between these two trails.

THE PICNIC AREAS OFF RT. H just north of the Meramec River bridge are good for easy, flat ground birding. Both have boat launches that aid in seeing along the river. The area to the east (right) of Rt. H is larger, with good birding along the road through it, and if the river is not high, has access to a gravel bar near the boat ramp.

THE ROAD LEADING FROM RT. H/CAVE RD. to the campgrounds goes past Spring Lake to the north and woodland on the south. Drive slowly through this open area, or walk it to take the fullest advantage of this flat area easy viewing into diverse habitats.

Toilets: Flush toilets in the visitor center and two in the campgrounds; vault toilets in the campgrounds and in the picnic area near the boat ramp off Rt. H.

Camping: Basic and electric/water campsites may be reserved. Weekend reservations require a two-night minimum stay (Friday/Saturday or Saturday/Sunday). There is a special use camping area.

Hazards/Limitations: Much of the park is low lying and subject to flash flooding and to flooding due to back-up from high river levels, especially in winter and early spring. Check with the park office if area weather conditions have been rainy.

Watch for poison ivy.

Park gates may be closed after 11 p.m. during the on-season. Day-use areas are open sunrise to sunset.

Nearby Birding Sites: Huzzah CA* (adjacent, immediately across Meramec River), Blue Springs Creek CA, Meramec SP*, Meramec CA*, Meramec Spring Park, Little Indian Creek CA*, Pea Ridge CA, Dillard Mill SHS.

*Indicates Birders' Guide available when this guide was written. See <http://www.mobirds.org/Locations/SiteGuides.aspx> for these and additional guides.

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