

## BOOK REVIEW #1 – 2002

McPherson, Alan. *Fifty Nature Walks in Southern Illinois*. 1993. xii + 299 pages; maps; black and white photographs; appendices; index. Cache River Press, Vienna, Illinois. Hard Cover. Price: \$ 13.95 Available from Cache River Press, 2850 Oak Grove Road, Vienna, IL 62995

This book is a useful guide to more than 50 publicly accessible places to hike and enjoy nature in southern Illinois. It was written for people who want to combine their appreciation for natural beauty with hiking and other activities. Most of the 50 places are found in or near the Shawnee National Forest, and include state parks, wildlife refuges, national monuments and recreational areas. The trails range from short and easy to walk loops to much longer and more rugged. Some trails require climbing and close attention to footing, and may take more than one day's hiking to complete.

The extensive introduction addresses a variety of things one would need to know to make hiking an enjoyable experience. McPherson discusses proper clothing and footwear, safety issues regarding seasonal weather, safety during hunting seasons and in areas shared with off-road vehicles and horse-riders, and tips for overnight camping. There is a fairly substantial discussion of insect pests, snakes, poisonous plants such as poison ivy, and other hazards such as lightning and tornadoes. A map following the introduction shows southern Illinois and the major highway network with the 50 locations indicated.

The 50 walks are organized into geographic sections corresponding to the four Shawnee National Forest administrative areas, even though not all the places are actually within the national forest. Each entry begins with a brief, but informative, description of the historical, natural or geological features of the site. Each trail is then described, including an indication of the degree of difficulty and distance, along with any notable features about plants or landscapes. The entries end with detailed driving directions on how to reach each location from the major highways in the region. Following the written material is a map of the site, showing road access, buildings, water bodies, and the trails. Further information includes United States Geological Survey reference map sets, total trail distance, acreage, and activities with fees if applicable.

Being a recent newcomer to Illinois, I was perhaps an ideal reviewer, as I had not explored the southern part of the state. The book offered an excellent opportunity to gain some first hand experience in that part of Illinois. Only one site was deliberately chosen for its features (cypress knees); other trails were more or less randomly chosen for convenience along several roadways. I came upon one wonderful park, that I had not planned to visit, when I had to detour around some construction and came upon it by serendipity.

My intent was to use the guide to locate and try out some of the trails included in the book, and to see how accurate the information is, eight years from publication, and how the explanatory information prepared me for the parks and trails. The material was compiled and verified more than 10 years ago in some cases. It is indicative of the popularity of hiking and of the attractiveness of the areas that changes had been made at some sites. New trails were added and structures were upgraded. Nevertheless, the book is still an

excellent introduction to the sites, and the site drawings are particularly useful for orientation at each location.

The entry for Crab Orchard Natural Wildlife Refuge (Trail 28) predates the development of a new visitor's center and bookstore, as well as a completely new trail. The visitor's center is located on the east side of Route 148 across from route A-3 and the Chamnestown School Trail. Behind the parking lot is a short new trail which is wheelchair accessible and with informational signs that include Braille. The trail leads through a forested area to a pond. The pond has a truly remarkable field of American Lotus (*Nelumbo lutea*), a hidden treasure.

The entry for Section 8 Woods Nature Preserve (Trail 21) indicates that a boardwalk was scheduled for construction starting in 1992. It is there and leads in as far as several important trees. This is a very short trail, only 500 feet long, and would be more appropriately termed a viewing structure. The main features of the site are the important Illinois State champion Water Tupelo (*Nyssa aquatica*) and Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) trees.

On my next stop, I found that the wooden suspension bridge at the beginning of the Heron Pond Trail (Trail 20) had been replaced by a steel bridge with a set of steps leading down to the ground level on the west side. However, the Ghost Dance Canyon Trail that I visited in the Dixon Springs State Park (Trail 18) was just as described in the book.

On the Fern Clyffe State Park (Trail 27) trails, I was continually astonished by the diverse array of fungi and lichens, and kept wishing I had brought a few field guides along. The guide states that "several of the plants found here occur nowhere else in southern Illinois and are actually more common in wet acid soils of the northeastern United States and Canada" (p. 152). I would like to know what those species are, and why they are found only here.

This book will appeal to a broad range of people. Families and school groups will find descriptions of numerous sites with trails of various difficulty levels located close to campgrounds and other places suitable for children. Birdwatchers and naturalists will be led to a broad range of natural landscapes. In some entries, the author highlights the presence of important assemblages of rare and endangered species and unique plants and animals. Photographers will especially appreciate the information about the spectacular as well as the more subtle vistas encountered on many of the nature walks. In addition to the natural environment, a large number of places of historic and cultural heritage are featured in the guide.

I recommend this useful field guide, and hope that a new edition is forthcoming which will incorporate the changes and enhancements that have been made at a number of locations. Also, a revised edition might provide an opportunity to incorporate a list of other applicable field guides and to include some comments about hidden treasures to watch for along the trails.

Reviewer: Janet I. Halpin, Associate Professor of Geography, Department of Geography, Economics and Anthropology, Chicago State University, Chicago, IL 60628-1598.