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Natural Excitement:
Outdoor Recreation on the Natchez Trace Parkway

There are people who believe that the Natchez Trace Parkway is strictly for the birds.

157 types of birds.

And counting.

All along the Parkway, the birds are flying and the birdwatchers are flocking to prime birding trails, from Natchez to Ridgeland to Tupelo to the Shoals Alabama Birding Trail and beyond. On the water or in the woods, the Natchez Trace is the place to connect with feathered friends.

And if birds and birdwatchers are singing the praises of the Natchez Trace, so too are thousands of recreational enthusiasts of all kinds. A fixture on lists of Top 10 and Top 100 bike roads, the Trace has been hailed by the GORP outdoor guide as a “treat.” The guide describes the Trace this way:

Peppered with bicycle-only campgrounds, convenient places for service and maintenance stops, and clear directions available for bypasses in some of the more congested areas. . . this is a byway with everything that cyclists of all skill levels could want.

That includes the kind of natural beauty and serenity rarely found in venues outside of off-road trails. Motorcyclists are drawn to the Natchez Trace for the same reason bikers are: with mile after mile of gently curving road and gorgeous vistas around every bend, the Natchez Trace beckons with an irresistible invitation to ride.

For those who do want an off-road experience on foot, the Trace offers over 60 miles of National Scenic Trail for hiking, and 52 different hiking, horse and nature trails are open year-round, adding up to almost 100 miles. Walk among the wildflowers along the free-flowing stream at Sweetwater Branch on the way to Nashville, tramp through the moss-draped cypress trees of the darkly beautiful Cypress Swamp outside of Ridgeland, trek through the dramatic sandstone cliffs and outcroppings at Bear Creek Canyon in Tishomingo State Park, encounter gorgeous waterfalls in the lush foliage of the Shoals Creek Nature Preserve in the Shoals area of Alabama. The trails and the beauty go on and on.

From the primitive bedroll under the stars to the decked-out RV, camping is another Trace favorite, with over 10 campgrounds located on and along the Parkway and with an adjacent 12 state parks spread across Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee.

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For those who are looking for birdies rather than birds, there are golf courses in nearly every town along the Parkway, and in the Shoals area, two courses on the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail.

And for those whose recipe for a great time means “just add water,” the Trace really pours on the fun, not only at the Ross Barnett Reservoir in Ridgeland, but also at the many lakes and parks that form a veritable banquet of boating, fishing and water fun along the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. A few of the highlights are the Jamie Whitten Lock and Dam, Bay Springs Lake, the massive Pickwick Lake spreading across Tennessee and Alabama, not to mention the nearby Wilson Lake in the Shoals area of Alabama.

The abundance in recreation and wildlife is not accidental. Preservation and good stewardship have always been important elements in Parkway philosophy and practice. Today, the Trace is home to approximately 800 different types of plants and 350 different types of wildlife, including at least 22 federally listed threatened or endangered species. Not surprisingly, the Trace ecosystem is a diverse mixture—softwood and hardwood forests, wetlands and prairie landscapes, all of it generously interspersed with croplands.

At the heart of all this diversity and abundance is one simple theme: planning. According to Stennis Young, the Parkway’s Assistant Superintendent, the myriad beauties and benefits of the Natchez Trace are the result of design.

“The Parkway was designed for history, to preserve the Old Trace,” Young says of the route, which was carved out of the wilderness by prehistoric animals. Native Americans followed it for centuries before it finally became a mail route and the preferred pedestrian path of the Kaintuck boatman on their regular journey north from New Orleans. The advent of steam travel on the Mississippi River contributed to the road falling into disuse in some parts or becoming subsumed in others by local byways, so that by the late 1930s, the Trace was the endangered species. The Natchez Trace Parkway was the federally supported solution.

While preserving the Old Trace was the primary purpose of the Parkway, according to Young, the project was undertaken with a broad picture in mind. “It was planned to preserve the Old Trace, but at the same time, it was designed to benefit local communities in providing a good mode of transportation as well as economic and cultural benefits. Recreation was an important part of the plan for those benefits.”

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Thus, many of the natural blessings of the Trace, such as the lakes, majestic and serene, also happen to be man-made. The Ross Barnett Reservoir, created in the 1960s from the impoundment of the Pearl River, is a 33,000-acre body of water bounded on the north by the Trace. Stocked primarily with large-mouth bass, the reservoir is a haven for camping, fishing and water sports of all kinds.

The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway, an historic achievement of the U.S. Corps of Engineers, connects the Tennessee and Tombigbee Rivers and heads south through west Alabama and north Mississippi, creating the Jamie Whitten Lock and Dam as well as Bay Springs Lake, a brilliant blue masterpiece where fishermen head for large mouth bass and where the Crow's Neck Environmental Education and Conference Center has informed—and transformed—the lives of countless school children in the region.

Further north, the mighty Pickwick Lake is a reservoir created by the Pickwick Landing Dam and stretches 50 miles from Tennessee into the Shoals area of Alabama. At full summer pool, the surface area of the lake is 47,500 acres, stocked with record-size small mouth bass and catfish. Fishing tournaments at McFarland Park in Florence and J. P. Coleman State Park in Tishomingo County are special highlights for dedicated anglers. Wilson Lake, at about half the size, also offers plenty of championship fishing and recreation.

Fishermen aren't the only sportsmen to find happiness along the Natchez Trace. Spreading across Tishomingo County, Mississippi and the Shoals area of Alabama are 38,000 acres of pristine and preserved areas where hunting by permit is available for both small and large game. And for hunters who want to experience the chase the way the Native Americans once did, bow-hunting season runs from October through January.

Further south, at the Clinton Community Nature Center, visitors can experience nature in an intimate and infinitely relaxing setting, on 33 acres of carefully preserved and cultivated natural habitat that is both a delightful retreat and a historical and horticultural showplace. A two-mile walking trail leads through native trees and ferns and a butterfly garden, where it's a real treat to watch mockingbirds or butterflies, or catch a glimpse of history along the piece of the Old Natchez Trace that winds through the Center.

Whether it's a flying arrow or a soaring bird, a canopy of trees or a canopy of stars, a fish flashing in the sunlight or the flash of a biker's smile, the Natchez Trace is the road to recreation.

FOR VISITOR INFORMATION: www.scenictrace.com