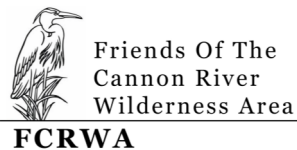


Cannon River Wilderness Area



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RICE COUNTY PARKS AND FACILITIES
320 3rd St NW
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the FRIENDS OF THE CANNON
RIVER WILDERNESS AREA
13192 Cannon City Blvd
Northfield, MN 55057

History: That this area should persist in such diversity and beauty while other areas around it have experienced dramatic change is owed largely to the efforts of two landowners out of whose property the park was carved. Thirty years ago, Jackie May and Aylmer (Barney) Code initiated a campaign to encourage Rice County to take steps to preserve the area. Their efforts were born of their own deep appreciation of the natural treasures in this river valley landscape. In 1966 the Parks Board recommended the purchase of land for the park to the Rice County Board of Commissioners. Funding support from the State Planning Agency for Parks and Recreation, and a federal Department of Interior grant from the Land and Water Conservation Fund enabled the county to acquire properties from thirteen landowners to create the park. The addition of the 70 acres that belonged to Henry Fiske, the hermit, came later. And in 1976 the park was officially dedicated.

Geology: Huge amounts of glacial melt water during the waning stages of the last Ice Age incised the Cannon River through the Wilderness Area. The river is now cutting through the top of the Shakopee Dolostone. If you walk to the top of the bluffs on either side of the valley you will hike through successive layers of bedrock laid down during the Ordovician Period (480 million years ago) including the St Peter Sandstone, the Glenwood Shale, and the Platteville Dolostone at the top of the hill. Water percolating down through the St Peter Sandstone creates many springs and seeps at the base of the bluffs.

Plants: The 800-plus acres of Cannon River Wilderness Area include a wide variety of vegetation. Some of these plant communities, such as the calcareous fen, bluff prairie, and floodplain forest, are quite rare in Minnesota. Some have been identified by the recent (1990) Minnesota County Biological Survey as being of high quality. Low areas in the river floodplain include examples of flood plain forest, hardwood swamps, shrub wetland, wet meadow, calcareous fen, and lowland hardwood forest. The upland areas of the park are dominated by the maple-basswood forest type that once covered much of the Big Woods region of Minnesota, but there are also areas of oak forest, dry oak savanna, and dry prairie. The surrounding area is primarily agricultural, and within the park there are old-field remnants which are in the process of succeeding to forest. There are also areas which are being actively reforested through tree and shrub-plantings.

Trails: The trails that originate near the picnic shelter on the west side of the park provide easy access to some very different plant communities. If you head toward the river you will walk through flood plain forest. The vegetation here must be able to survive wet roots for weeks or months at a time, as well as soil disturbance and the deposition of sand and silt during spring floods. The large trees are primarily Silver Maple and Black Willow. Many native shrubs, herbs, and vines provide support for the valley's abundant wildlife, including Raspberries, River Grapes, Virginia Creeper, and wild Clem-

atis. In spring, the bright yellow of Marsh Marigolds will catch your eye at the bottom of the limestone cliffs and along the muddy edges of the walking path. If you head toward the bluff instead of the river, you can follow a trail that runs along the warm, south-facing slope of the valley. Its orientation to the sun warms it early, and the spring wildflowers have a chance to put on a spectacular show before the trees above them leaf out and darken the forest floor. Spring wildflowers along this trail include Bloodroot, Hepatica, Spring Beauty, White Trout Lily, Dutchman's Breeches, and many others. There is even a tiny prairie on a rocky outcropping overlooking the river where you may be lucky enough to see an early Pasque Flower in bloom! The trees overhead include Sugar Maple, Hackberry, Red Oak, Basswood, Bitternut Hickory, Black Walnut, and others.

Birds: There are a minimum of 50 species of nesting birds. All year round one may see or hear great horned or barred owls at dawn or dusk or on moonlit nights. Also to be seen are Red-tailed Hawks (rare in winter), Ruffed Grouse, Wild Turkey, Pileated, Red-bellied, Hairy and Downy woodpeckers, White-breasted Nuthatch, Blue Jay, Crow, Chickadee, Cardinal, and Goldfinch. Each spring and fall a stream of migrants (at least 50 species) can be observed if you are diligent. May and June nesters include at least 50 additional species. Especially interesting and sometimes observable are Woodcock, Vulture, Crested Flycatcher, Wood Thrush, House Wren, Ovenbird, and Redstart. The late summer is a quiet season when the birds store fat for their fall migration. Nevertheless one can see and often hear Indigo Bunting, Redstart, Red-eyed Vireo, Redwing, Phoebe, and Kingfisher.

Other Animals:

10 kinds of mammals, 5 amphibians, and 3 snakes are all likely to be living and reproducing in the park. With luck one can see White-tailed Deer, Coyote, Red Fox, Badger, Striped Skunk, Opossum, Gray Squirrel, Pocket Gopher.

Snakes can be encountered. Treasure the idea that they are here. They are among the most threatened of our animals; none is poisonous, and they are important to the ecology. The large Fox and Bull snakes and six-inch-long Red-bellied Snakes are most common. Amphibians to be found include Leopard Frogs, Wood Frogs, and Tree Frogs. The latter call from the tree tops spring and summer. If you can't locate the source of a bird-like sound it probably comes from this species.



Early Spring Birds: The Wilderness Area has a remarkable variety of birds, enough to test a highly skilled bird watcher. But we will tell you here about the most common birds. The best time to walk the trail for birds is early in the morning or late in the day. Listen while looking up and down river. At the bridge, listen for Ruffed Grouse drumming on a favorite log. The grouse will be cake-walking about, hop on the log and bring its wings into its breast with a powerful

beat which will decline in intensity sounding like a descending muffled drum roll, or a distant tractor starting up. You must pay attention; it is not a loud sound. The male hopes to attract females and at the same time warn other males to stay away. If you are lucky enough to encounter a grouse as you walk along, try to get a good look at the elegant plumage.

While at the bridge look up and down river for Great Blue Herons each of which will be patrolling a hunting territory along the river. These birds' nest with other herons in large rookeries on nearby lakes. You may also see a Kingfisher rattling down the river or diving for a fish. It is a large headed bird, blue and white. If you get a good look you may see reddish bands on the breast. If so, it's a female. This is one of the bird species in which the female is the more colorful bird.

Along the river listen for a Phoebe singing. It says "pe-witt phoebe" (feebee) a warble on the first word, emphasis on the phoebe. It nests under the overhang of the rocks on the south side. It is a flycatcher. If the day is cold you may encounter this bird in a wet spot close to the ground.

Your best bet for seeing Woodcocks is to come at dusk. They dance on the ground to the interest of any females and then suddenly rise up and down vertically through the air, calling "peent". When the male gets back to the ground he hopes to encounter a lady love. They nest in the swamp or bog. You must wait until the bird strikes the ground, run up, throw yourself down and repeat this process until you have arrived close enough to see the birds dancing. It requires a taste for swamps.

Look up high to see Vultures soaring above. Vulture Wings are at an angle to the horizontal. These are the best gliders among birds. Without moving anything but wing-tips they can glide hour after hour. If a Vulture spots a delectable meal it begins to descend, a behavior immediately spotted by distant Vultures eager to partake of the gourmet feast. A whirlpool of descending Vultures forms. If you should ever encounter a nest, beware. Baby and adult Vultures toss their cookies, showing their appreciation of your presence. Better to sniff a skunk.

Special note to observers: We need information on all breeding animals observed in the park. Dates, time, and circumstance of observation of birds, mammals, amphibians, and reptiles and evidence of their breeding would be particularly welcome. Send such data to

fcrrwa2@gmail.com or to our Facebook page on the website, <http://friendsofcannonriverwildernessarea.org/>.



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