

DEVIL'S DEN STATE PARK, southern Washington County

Location: Devil's Den State Park is about 40 miles southeast of Fayetteville in Washington County. There are several choices for getting there. From Fayetteville you can travel south on 265 then 170 to the park. From I-540, you can turn off on 170 at West Fork or onto 74 at Winslow. In any case, the route to DDSP courses the high country of the Boston Mountains before plunging by steep switch-backs more than a thousand feet to Lee Creek at the park.

Devil's Den covers approx. 2,500 acres of forest and grasslands in the valley and hillsides along Lee Creek. The forests consist primarily of mixed hardwood species. There are also extensive bands of eastern red cedar. Riparian forest is well developed along Lee Creek, a fast rushing mountain stream (listen for the songs of Louisiana Waterthrushes in spring and summer). The park's south end shares a common boundary with the Ozark National Forest (watch for Scarlet Tanagers in summer), greatly expanding forested habitats for birds and birders. Abandoned farmland provides additional habitat.

DDSP is a fine place to sample the Boston Mountains region. The awe-inspiring mountainous aspect is a result, not of true mountain building processes, but rather of erosion that reshaped an ancient plateau into what is today a series of high ridges and deep valleys or "hollers."

During summer, the ringing songs of Ovenbirds can be easily heard above brake noise on the drive up and down. Birds in the park vary from those of extensive forests like Worm-eating Warbler, Red-eyed Vireo and Summer Tanager to those of abandoned farmland grown-up in small trees and shrubs like Blue Grosbeaks, Eastern Towhees and Indigo Buntings. Moist shady forest edge thickets provide habitat for White-eyed Vireo and Kentucky Warbler. Forest dwelling raptors like Red-shouldered Hawk and Broad-winged Hawk occur in the park. Members of the Tulsa Audubon Society have birded the park for years, especially during spring migration of April and May when migrating warblers are plentiful, including Magnolia, Golden-winged, Blackburnian, Mourning, Black-throated Green and many others.

A few Black Vultures and many more Turkey Vultures nest and roost on the slope below Yellow Rock hiking trail. There is also a significant mixed-species vulture roost in winter. Fall hawk watches from Yellow Rock can sometimes be productive. At least on one such watch, Mike Mlodinow and others tallied 12 species of raptors including Osprey, Swainson's Hawk, and Northern Harrier.

The 1.5 mile Devil's Den trail starts near the park headquarters and provides a sample of the forest birds plus gravity flowing springs, peculiarly eroded sandstone strata, wet weather waterfalls, numerous wildflowers, and the cool crevices named the Devil's Den and the Devil's Icebox.

You can sample the hillside forests by walking the two paved loop trails that access cabins near the visitor's center. The pavement is also helpful for those with mobility limitations. Typically there are fewer people in the upper portions of Lee Creek beyond camp area "A". American Redstarts, Louisiana Waterthrush and Yellow-throated Warblers are easily found along Lee Creek. Fossil Flats Mountain Bike Trail on the north end of camp area "A" marks the beginnings of an old road that follows the deep valley of Lee Creek toward its headwaters in the Ozark National Forest. Hikers are permitted on this old road, which passes through a variety of habitats including forest, old fields, and the stream valley itself. Some land in this area is privately owned.

Note the bird feeders outside the main headquarters building. This is a great opportunity for birders with

mobility impairments. They often attract winter Purple Finches when they are hard to find elsewhere. Common forest birds are easily seen here, including Pileated Woodpeckers.

Prairie habitat is being restored on the old Mayfield farm in the park. This field, and the helicopter landing field across the road, both provide extensive grassland habitat. Blue-winged Warblers have nested in the past. Big falcons are sometimes seen in the fall. All kinds of common species associated with grasslands may be found in season.

Finally, in an age when it has become popular to disparage all public-spirited activity connected with government, it is worthwhile to consider that this park is a result of the activities of the men and women of the Civilian Conservation Corps (1934-1942), our government's attempt to find useful work for citizens suffering the hard times of the Great Depression. Along with birding DDSP, it might be well to be mindful of this civic lesson.

The park provides many services to those interested in its natural history: a bird check-list, self-guided trail lists, geological history, plus regular field trips guided by naturalists. For information, contact the park:

Devils Den S.P.
11333AR HWY 74
West Fork, AR 72774
or call 479-761-3325.