



Exceeding Expectations

One woman's quest to visit all 88 Missouri state parks and historic sites

BY PORCSHE N. MORAN

In the fall of 2016, Jenna Redel set out to achieve an ambitious goal: visit all 88 parks and historic sites that compose the Missouri State Parks system. (There are currently 91; three have been added since she has set her goal.) The Boone County human resources and risk management director was inspired by an article in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that touted Echo Bluff State Park, located in the southeast Missouri town of Eminence, as the perfect starting point for touring six turquoise springs in the surrounding area. In the mood for adventure, Redel headed to the park on her own.

"I was in the middle of getting divorced, and my daughter had just graduated from high school and was leaving for AmeriCorps," she says. "Until then, I had spent most of my adult life facilitating other people's lives, and suddenly, I had free time and I could do whatever I wanted. The trip to Echo Bluff was a chance for me to get out of my comfort zone and work on my independence."

Opened in July 2016, Echo Bluff State Park showcases a valley carved by Sinking Creek — the Current River's second largest tributary — and encircled by limestone cliffs. Activities include hiking, cycling and backpacking, as well as, swimming, fishing and floating. Overnight stays span from

campsites to modern cabins, and a luxury lodge with guest rooms and suites. An on-site restaurant and mercantile complete the amenities. Redel spent a long weekend exploring the park, and nearby Round, Alley, Blue, Falling, Greer and Big springs. She hiked during the day and camped in her SUV at night.

"I had an unbelievably good time," Redel says. "It was stunning. I was taken aback by the beauty of Echo Bluff and all the springs. For the first time, I realized that those brown state park signs that you pass by on the side of the road actually lead to some really great stuff."

Columbia residents don't have to go far for a state park experience. The 63-foot

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Pomme de Terre State Park

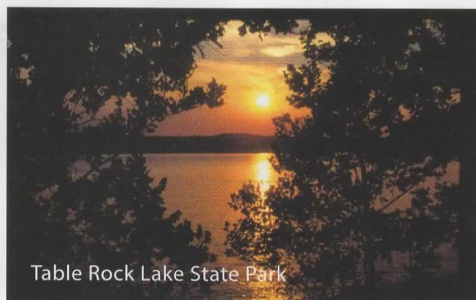


Table Rock Lake State Park



Thousand Hills State Park



Knob Knoster State Park



Jenna Redel

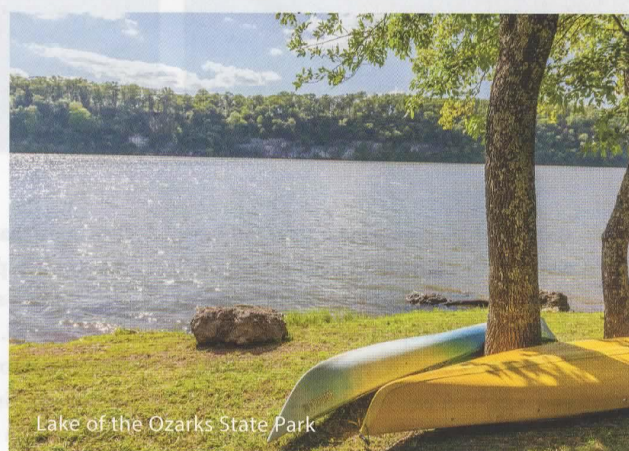
high natural tunnel at Rock Bridge Memorial State Park is one of the local highlights. The park also has caves, sinkholes, and a spring and underground stream. The trails welcome hikers, cyclists and horseback riders.

Columbia's MKT Nature and Fitness Trail connects to the 240-mile Katy Trail State Park, the longest developed rail-trail in the country. The scenic path is open for walking and cycling, and has designated sections for horseback riding. Another Columbia option is Finger Lakes State Park, the second park that Redel checked off her list. It has a 900-acre ATV area and a wooded trail for mountain biking and hiking. Canoes and kayaks traverse the park's 4.5-mile water trail on Peabody Lake. Finger Lakes is where Redel discovered the Missouri State Parks Centennial Passport program, which encouraged people to visit all the state parks and historic sites between May 16, 2016 and April 9, 2018. Brian M. Quinn, division informa-

tion officer for Missouri State Parks, says 650 people submitted completed centennial passports.

"The passport program is designed to get people outdoors to have fun in healthy ways, and we offer a wide range of truly beautiful and unique places where people can go to do that in a variety of ways," he says. "By visiting our parks and historic sites, people can also see an array of important and meaningful natural resources and cultural landmarks that help describe Missouri's long, in fact ancient, natural and cultural histories."

Since Redel started the passport challenge late, she wasn't able to complete it in time, but she has visited 51 state parks and historic sites so far and plans to continue through the list at her own pace. For her extensive travels, she invested

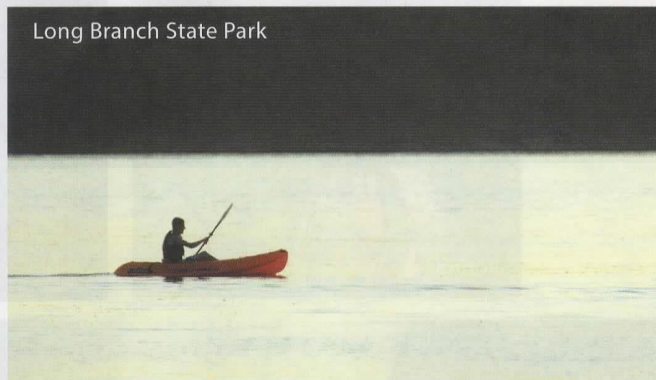


Lake of the Ozarks State Park

in a silver teardrop camper that is large enough to fit a queen-size mattress. It has a galley kitchen, windows, fans, electricity, flooring and solar panels.

"I work full time and I have other stuff going on, so 88 state parks in 52 weeks didn't seem possible," Redel says. "I don't mind it being a slow process. The goal is just to see them all."

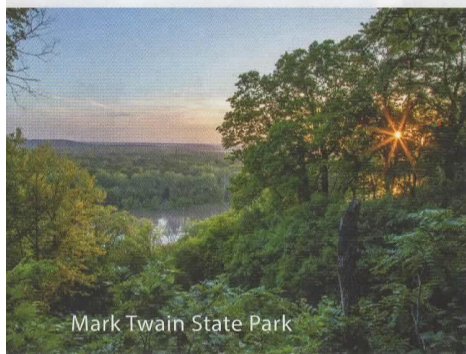
Redel has plenty of company on her quest. In 2017, more than 21 million people explored the Missouri State Park



Long Branch State Park



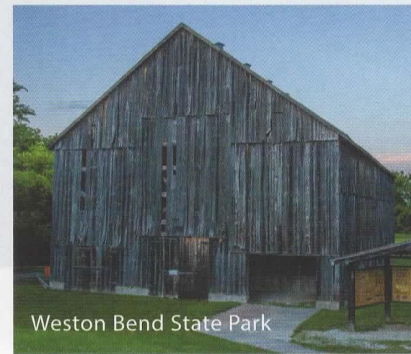
Prairie State Park



Mark Twain State Park



Rock Bridge Memorial State Park



Weston Bend State Park

system, which covers more than 150,000 acres. With 2.5 million visitors, Lake of the Ozarks State Park saw the most traffic last year. The property offers water activities, such as boating, canoeing, kayaking and fishing. A pair of sandy beaches lure swimmers and sunbathers. There are more than 40 miles of trails for hiking, horseback riding, cycling and backpacking, and guides are on hand to lead interpretive tours of Ozark Caverns. Lodging includes electric and basic campsites, rustic outpost cabins, and yurts — wood-framed round tents covered in heavy fabric and elevated on platforms.

Over the past two years, Redel has made repeat visits to some of her favorite state parks. One is Bennett Spring State Park in Lebanon, an angler's paradise stocked daily with rainbow trout. It also

has more than 12 miles of hiking trails, canoe rentals, picnic shelters, playgrounds, an Olympic-size swimming pool and a wading pool. Other offerings include five campgrounds, a motel, cabins and a 1930s-era dining lodge.

"I've been to Bennett Spring three or four times now," she says. "I like to watch the people fly fishing. It is a pretty sport that has a ballet-like quality about it."

This April, Redel trekked to southeast Missouri to visit Taum Sauk Mountain State Park in Ironton, Johnson's Shut-Ins State Park in Lesterville and Elephant Rocks State Park in Bellevue over the course of a weekend. The top of Taum Sauk Mountain is the highest natural point in Missouri at 1,772 feet. The narrow, rocky gorge along the east fork of the Black River forms the famous swimming

hole at Johnson's Shut-Ins. Elephant Rocks features giant 1.5 billion-year-old granite boulders that stand end-to-end like a line of circus elephants. Although Redel has been to state parks in Florida, Colorado, Nebraska and Kansas, she still ranks Missouri's recreation centers at the top.

"A lot of other state parks have entry fees, but we don't have those in Missouri," Redel says. "Our parks are incredibly beautiful and the best that I have seen by far. I am so grateful that someone had the foresight to set these places apart for everyone to enjoy."

Diversity is what makes Missouri's state parks stand out, according to Quinn. Established April 9, 1917, the park system displays everything from prairies, battlefields, covered bridges, ancient Indian



Jenna Redel carries everything she needs for her state park quest in her teardrop camper.

villages and forested hills, to valleys with caves and springs, streams with trout, lakes with bass and the homes of honored artists, pioneers, soldiers and statesmen.

"Many of the precious, one-of-a-kind remnants of our state's past — natural, cultural and historical — can be found in Missouri's state parks and historic sites," Quinn says. "We work every day to preserve, protect and interpret all of them

she's spotted deer, red and silver foxes, owls and several different birds of prey. Redel's daughter gave her a bear bell in anticipation that she might one day come across the massive mammal.

"I've been exposed to things I didn't know much about before," Redel says. "Now, I want to satisfy my curiosity and keep learning more. Just driving to these parks has allowed me to see so many dif-

ferent parts of Missouri that I wouldn't have seen otherwise." Two-bedroom yurts with air conditioning and heating, full bathroom and kitchen, and TV provide premium shelter at the park. Roaring River is stocked with rainbow trout and has basic and electric campsites, rustic cabins, and an inn and conference center with a full-service restaurant. Big Sugar Creek doesn't have campgrounds, but its rugged 3.25-mile hiking trail presents an

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for the public to enjoy, because it all really belongs to them. And, doing so is not just our job or mission — it's our passion."

Redel says her state park journey has inspired her to learn more about Missouri's flora and fauna. She participates in guided wildflower walks at Rock Bridge Memorial State Park. She saw a chipmunk for the first time at Lake of the Ozarks State Park. On other hikes,

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On the horizon for Redel is an August vacation to southwest Missouri that will give her the chance to scope out Table Rock State Park in Branson, Roaring River State Park in Cassville and Big Sugar Creek State Park in Pineville. Table Rock's unique attractions include parasailing, scuba diving and cruises on a

opportunity to roam through woodlands and glades.

"I am always surprised when I arrive at a state park for the first time," Redel says. "I see the Instagram photos, but they don't totally prepare you for the real experience. My expectations are always exceeded." ¹⁰



Follow along on Jenna Redel's state park travels on her blog at SilverliningCamper.com.