

State Parks in Eastern Kentucky

History and Interesting Facts



EASTERN

Resort Parks

Buckhorn Lake State Resort Park

Established January 18, 1961

On June 28, 1938, under what has come to be known as the “Flood Control Acts of 1938,” Congress authorized the construction of a dam and reservoir about 43 miles above the mouth of the Middle Fork of the Kentucky River and about a half mile upstream from Buckhorn. The Kentucky State Parks Board approved the acceptance of Buckhorn Lake into the Commonwealth’s parks system on January 18, 1961. The area has some of the most dramatic and beautiful scenery in Kentucky. However, the seclusion of the park caused a great deal of difficulty in obtaining road access during the early 1960s. The Kentucky Department of Highways constructed a road over the mountain to the park, but the stabilization of the road took two years before commercial traffic could utilize it. The park did not officially open until 1965.

Located in the southern portion of the Daniel Boone National Forest, in the foothills of the Cumberland Plateau, Buckhorn Lake State Park has 856 acres of lush Kentucky mountain land. The name for the park and nearby town came from the discovery of a buck’s horn at a nearby saltlick. Another story recounts how Jerry Smith, the first white settler in the area killed a four snag buck, thus giving the name to the community. The surrounding forest is filled with wildlife.

Carter Caves State Resort Park

Established July 31, 1946

On July 31, 1946, the citizens of Carter and surrounding counties donated 945 acres to the Commonwealth of Kentucky for a state park. Contained in this tract are some of the most impressive caves in the state. Additional land has been obtained, making a total of some 2,000 acres. Carter and Cascade Caves are the best-known caverns in eastern Kentucky. The Carter and Cascade Cave system is comprised of more than 20 caverns. Four of these caves are open for tours. Others are undeveloped or access is limited. Each cave has distinctive features reflecting geological forces.

Bat Cave is the largest cave in the park. It is open only in the summer and is the home of an estimated 40,000 Indiana bats called *Myotis* that hibernate there in the winter. These bats are protected by the Kentucky Parks System. The cave's main passageway is a half-mile long. The ceiling of the passageway varies in height from about 35 feet at the downstream entrance to a claustrophobic 4 feet. Known as "Backache Avenue," the low ceiling of the passageway extends 700 feet. This passage is wet and there are small pools of water throughout its length. During heavy rains the passage can be flooded by torrents of water.

Saltpeter Cave comes from the old saltpeter works near the entrance that helped produce gunpowder during the War of 1812. Kentucky caverns had several saltpeter mines during the war. Nitrates for making gunpowder could be extracted from the earth in the caves. On the wall near the entrance is the legend, "Simon Kenton 1783." Kenton, an early Kentucky pioneer, explored the area in the late eighteenth century.

In 1959 Cascade Cave, once privately owned and operated, became part of the Carter Cave State Park System. Highlights of the cavern include "Counterfeiter's Room" named for the supposed use of the cave by counterfeiters.

Although established as a state park in 1946, funding for Carter Caves did not occur until 1948. Between 1948 and 1968, the state created one of the most beautiful parks in the Commonwealth.

Cumberland Falls State Resort Park

Established August 21, 1931

Geologists estimate that the rock at Cumberland Falls, where the Cumberland River plunges, is about 250 million years old. Romantics are enchanted with the poetic beauty of the falls. Visitors are awed by the majesty of the falls. Historians note the uniqueness of the site. Often called the "Niagara of the South," Cumberland Falls has attracted the attention of countless people since prehistoric times.

Early travel accounts describe the falls. Dr. Thomas Walker, during his 1750 exploration of Kentucky, named the waterfall after the Duke of Cumberland, a son of King George II of England. Kentucky historian Richard Henry Collins wrote a vivid description of Cumberland Falls in his 1874 *History of Kentucky*. He describes the falls as one of the "most remarkable objects in the state" with "scenery as romantic and picturesque as any in the state."

The first official record of the falls ownership occurred in 1800. In later years the falls was sold several times and a hotel constructed at the falls. In 1927 the Kiwanis Club sponsored the building of a trail from Corbin to Cumberland Falls. This project involved 200 men and women working for nine weeks to complete the task.

In November 1927, Kentucky native T. Coleman DuPont offered to buy the falls and the surrounding acreage and give it to the Commonwealth for a state park. The offer came at the right time. Discussions already were under way regarding a proposal by the Cumberland River Power Company to build a dam above the falls. However, not until March 10, 1930, did the Kentucky legislature vote to accept the now deceased DuPont's offer of the falls area as a state park. The dedication of Cumberland Falls as a Kentucky State Park took place August 21, 1931. Between September 7 and Thanksgiving Day 1931, over 50,000 visitors came to see Cumberland Falls.

The greatest attraction is the thundering waters of Cumberland Falls. Besides the falls, one of the great attractions at Cumberland Falls State Park is the moonbow. Visible on moonlit evenings, the moonbow is said to only be duplicated at Victoria Falls in Africa. This is one of truly awesome sights in not only Kentucky, but also in the world. The beauty of Cumberland Falls draws visitors from across the world to Kentucky to see its grandeur.

Greenbo Lake State Resort Park

Established 1969

The idea for a recreational lake in Northeastern Kentucky was born in 1948. The idea was brought before the Greenup Fish & Game Club. The club embraced the idea and it was decided to start making plans for the lake and begin soliciting donations and pledges. Word of the project spread rapidly and many people throughout Greenup and Boyd Counties were anxious to help. As plans progressed, enthusiasm grew quickly.

A contest was held to name the new organization. Reflecting the efforts of the citizens of both Greenup and Boyd Counties, the name Greenbo was adopted and the organization was incorporated on January 29, 1953.

A concerted drive was made to raise the money needed to purchase the land, construct the dam, build good roads through the rugged hills and set up all the other facilities needed to make a fine park. Greenbo representatives made speeches before Tri-State club meetings and on the local radio and television stations. Newspaper articles and editorials came out in support of the project as well. Letters were sent to all those who had signed pledge cards. Personal contact with local businesses and industries resulted in Armco Steele and Ashland Oil agreeing to match the amounts donated by their respective employees. A Porch Light Night was advertised, where anyone wishing to donate would turn on their porch light to be visited by collection volunteers. Porch Light Night was a huge success and brought in a sizable amount of money. In all, \$210,500 was raised and the land was purchased from the 33 landowners with the deeds recorded at the Greenup County Courthouse on February 16, 1954. A contract was let for the construction of the dam.

After many meetings the organization came to realize that managing the 3330 acre park and the 300 acre lake was simply beyond their expertise. It was decided to approach the Commonwealth of Kentucky and offer the deed to the state for a state park.

Jenny Wiley State Resort Park

Established January 1, 1954

Originally known as Dewey Lake State Park (named in honor of Admiral George Dewey of Spanish-American War fame), Jenny Wiley State Resort Park became part of the Kentucky State Park System on January 1, 1954. The construction of the Dewey Reservoir project, begun in March 1946, created the 1,100-acre Dewey Lake.

In the late 1950s, Dewey Lake State Park became Jenny Wiley State Park. The name change honored one of the frontier's most amazing women, Virginia "Jenny" Sellards Wiley (circa 1760-1831). Born in Pennsylvania, Jenny Sellards married Thomas Wiley in 1779. The couple made their home on Walker's Creek in what is now Bland County, Virginia. They built a

two-room log cabin and started a family. By 1789 the Wiley family had grown to four children, their youngest child was fifteen months old.

Indian raids on the western Virginia frontier were commonplace in the 1780s. The settlers had little patience with the Indians. If trouble arose between the settlers and the Indians the swiftest way to deal with it was with violent retaliation. One of the Wiley's' neighbors, the Harmon family, had recently killed two Indians. On October 1, 1789, the Indians sought revenge. A raiding party targeted the cabin of Mathias (Tice) Harmon, but was unsure of its exact location. In a tragic twist of fate the Indians attacked the Wiley cabin by mistake. The horrors that Jenny Wiley endured during her captivity never weakened her resolve to escape. At one point she nearly became a victim of the Indians. Jenny had been under the protection of an old Shawnee chief since her capture. The Cherokee in the raiding party wanted to kill her. The Cherokee chief paid the Shawnee for Jenny and decided to take her to his village on the Little Sandy River to teach his wives how to weave cloth and write. Before the Cherokee had the chance to take her away she made her escape. During a heavy rain storm Jenny made her way from the Indian camp. After a harrowing journey through forests and over swollen streams, Jenny arrived at the banks of the Louisa River and to her relief, a settlement called Harmon's Station. Henry Skaggs floated across the river on his raft to bring Jenny to safety at the fort. Her eleven-month ordeal was over. Jenny Wiley reunited with her husband and through the years she gave birth to five more children.

Jenny Wiley State Resort Park opened in 1962. The lodge is named for Andrew Jackson May, a local native and Congressman for many years. The park has 49 lodge rooms, 18 one and two-bedroom cottages, a dining area that seats 244 people, a convention center, hiking trails, picturesque Dewey Lake, disc golf, and a 121 site campground. From June through August the Jenny Wiley Theatre Company performs Broadway Musicals. Also located in the park is Josie Harkins School. This one-room country schoolhouse operated from 1924 to 1987, making it the last one-room country schoolhouse in Kentucky. The building was moved from Daniels Creek in Floyd County to the park as a part of the Commonwealth of Kentucky's bicentennial celebration.

Natural Bridge State Resort Park

Established 1926

The sandstone arch that is called Natural Bridge has stood for millenniums. Some geologists believe the stunning natural sandstone arch is at least a million years old. There are other natural archways in the area, but none have gained the prominence of Natural Bridge. Since 1889, visitors have made the trip to the eastern Kentucky mountains to see this amazing natural wonder.

The natural beauty of the area and the great sandstone archway had potential for commercial development. In 1889 the Kentucky Union Railway established a rail line through the town of Slade to connect with some of the Commonwealth's most extensive timber resources. Railroad executives also sensed the potential for visitors to come to the area to witness the spectacular beauty of the land. The railroad acquired the land around Natural Bridge and began to build trails and campgrounds. The Louisville & Nashville Railroad later acquired the property and in 1926, donated the lands around Natural Bridge to the state park system, becoming one of the four original state parks.

The awe-inspiring beauty of Natural Bridge State Resort Park is an inspiration to those who wish to see one of the great natural wonders of Kentucky. The Kentucky Nature Preserves Commission set aside 1,188 acres within the park as a nature preserve. This not only protects, but also enhances the pristine beauty of this eastern Kentucky marvel.

Pine Mountain State Resort Park

Established 1924

Pine Mountain became Kentucky's first state park in 1924. When the Kentucky State Parks Commission was created in the 1920's, there was considerable interest among the citizens of Bell County in establishing a state park. Eventually, dozens of local citizens would join with the county officials to assemble and donate land in a community effort for the establishment of a state park.

The parks commission accepted this generous gift, originally consisting of present-day Laurel Cove and adjacent areas, and named the new site Cumberland State Park. By 1938, the name had been changed to Pine Mountain State Park to avoid confusion with the similarly named Cumberland Falls State Park, which had since come into the park system. In the early years, little development took place at Pine Mountain. There were few facilities and a limited system of roads and trails. Substantial development began in 1933 with the inception of the Civilian Conservation Corps, a federally funded program to put young men to work and relieve some of the financial strain of the Great Depression. Today, core park facilities originally constructed by the CCC reflect the splendid craftsmanship and work styles of their creators. These historic structures lend a special old-fashioned charm to Pine Mountain. The park is widely regarded as one of the finest resorts Kentucky has to offer, boasting magnificent natural landscapes steeped in cultural history.

Historic Sites

Dr. Thomas Walker State Historic Site

Established June 20, 1931

Thomas Walker, born January 25, 1715, became one of the early explorers of Kentucky. As a youth he studied medicine and later became a practicing physician in Fredericksburg, Va. He also speculated in land. He became a member of the Loyal Land Company, made up of a group of ambitious land speculators.

Walker organized the first known English expedition through Cumberland Gap on April 13, 1750. He named the gap through the mountains after the Duke of Cumberland, the son of King George II. The Walker expedition, under the auspices of the Loyal Land Company, came to Kentucky to explore and lay claim to 800,000 acres of western wilderness. On April 23, 1750, the explorers encountered a river that Walker also named the Cumberland.

After exploring the surrounding countryside, Walker built a small, crude cabin to give legality to the lands he had claimed. It would not be until Daniel Boone came through the Cumberland Gap in 1769, that there would be a renewed interest in settling Kentucky.

The explorations of Walker and his men did much to open the western lands of Kentucky to settlement. The Cumberland Gap became the great highway for the westward movement. In less than 50 years, tens of thousands of settlers would pour through the Gap on their way to the rich lands of "Kaintuck."

The Barbourville Post of the American Legion became interested in honoring the memory of Walker. They campaigned to make the traditional site of the Walker cabin a state shrine. The American Legion and the Barbourville community donated the 12-acre tract to the Commonwealth. On June 20, 1931, the Dr. Thomas Walker State Shrine became a part of the Kentucky Park system.

Recreation Sites

Carr Creek State Park

Established April 1997

Carr Fork Lake has the longest sand beach in the Kentucky State Parks system. Considered to be one of the best campgrounds in southeastern Kentucky, the park also has a full service marina. The marina provides visitors with boating and fishing supplies. There are covered and open boating slips, and rentals for fishing boats and pontoons.

Carr Creek State Park is surrounded by history as well as nature. The Cherokee and Shawnee hunted in the forests of eastern Kentucky, including the Carr Creek Park region. The scenery surrounding the park consists of tree-covered hills that showcase a variety of Kentucky's trees and plant life. These extensive woodlands bring to mind the grandeur of a bygone age when most of Kentucky remained a part of the forest primeval.

Fishtrap Lake State Park

Established 2003

The impoundment of the waters of the Levisa Fork of the Big Sandy River in 1969 provided Kentucky with one of its best fishing lakes. Near the states of Virginia and West Virginia, the deep, long, narrow Fishtrap Lake is known for some of the finest fishing in the Commonwealth. The highest dam (195 feet) in Kentucky contains the waters of the lake.

The natural beauty of eastern Kentucky enhances the lake as a popular destination for tourists. Built for flood control along Levisa Fork by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the lake can hold as much as 54 billion gallons of water. Extending 16.5 miles in length, Fishtrap Lake covers 1,131 acres and is 84 feet deep. Construction of the dam began in February 1962. President Lyndon B. Johnson dedicated the project on October 26, 1968. Workers moved five million cubic yards of earth and rock to construct the dam.

The name of the lake came from pioneers who observed the unique fish traps made by the American Indians. Archeologists discovered 33 prehistoric American Indian sites in the Fishtrap area. They found 65,000 artifacts at the Slone site at Woodside. The physical facilities of the park are under the auspices of the Army Corps of Engineers.

Grayson Lake State Park

Established 1970

Grayson Lake was a project of the Army Corps of Engineers, which began construction on an earth and rock filled dam in 1964 to help control the flood waters of the Little Sandy River. The dam also improved the water quality of the area. The lake is filled with an abundance of bass, bluegill, catfish, crappie and trout. There are 74.2 miles of shoreline with magnificent scenery. Some of the sandstone walls along the shore reach as high as 150 feet. The name Grayson comes from the name of the county seat of Carter County, and is named in honor of Col. William Grayson, an officer who served under George Washington during the American Revolution.

The park opened in 1970 and quickly became a popular addition to the state park system.

Kingdom Come State Park

Established June 11, 1961

Located on the top of Pine Mountain, Kingdom Come State Park has the highest elevation of any park in Kentucky. The views are spectacular. Black Mountain, the highest peak in the Commonwealth at 4150 feet, can be seen in the distance.

The Cumberland Lions Club purchased 500 acres to donate for the new park. John Coppinger donated more than 800 acres, Mrs. A.J. Creech donated 200 acres, and the International Harvester Company donated 245 acres.

The history of the area that includes Kingdom Come State Park is colorful. Ravens' Rock, huge sandstone outcropping, reportedly got its name from the hundreds of ravens that flew around the site and were observed by early settlers.

Ravens' Rock also has a more sinister history. According to local legend the rock may have been the last campsite of one of the region's most notorious thieves and murderers, the renegade Simon Benge. During his murderous career Benge and his band of cutthroats looted, killed and kidnapped a number of unfortunate victims. He kidnapped young women to give or sell to the Indians. On his last raid he captured a woman by the name of Elizabeth Livingston. Benge camped at Ravens' Rock and Livingston scratched the letter "B" and two crosses in the rock hoping her husband would follow her clue and rescue her. According to the story Benge reached a large chestnut tree at East Stone Gap where as a matter of habit Benge carved a mark to note his passage through the area. He counted his eleventh mark and said, "I always count myself safe when I reach this spot." Just as he said this, a shot rang out and a one-ounce musket ball struck him in the forehead, killing him.

On June 11, 1961, the Kentucky Parks Board unanimously agreed to accept an area of Pine Mountain called Ravens' Rock into the state park system. After considering a suggestion made by the Cumberland Lions Club, the parks system agreed to change the name of the new park from Ravens' Rock to Kingdom Come. The change of name honored author John Fox, Jr. (1862-1919). *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, written in 1903, became the first novel in the United States to sell a million copies. Fox wrote about the people of the Cumberland Mountains in such a way that he is identified as a mountain author although he was born in Bourbon County in the inner Bluegrass region of the state.

The park is famous for its eight overlooks that give a panoramic view of the surrounding mountains and valleys. A gazebo overlooks Black Mountain giving visitors to the park a sense of the area's grandeur.

Levi Jackson Wilderness Road State Park

Established December 7, 1931

Levi Jackson Wilderness Road State Park combines the beauty of a rolling, wooded hills park with a historic site that honors the pioneers who braved the perils of the wilderness to settle Kentucky. John Freeman came to southeast Kentucky in 1802 and claimed an extensive tract of land bordering the famous Wilderness Road as payment for his Revolutionary War service. He built a large two-story house that he licensed as a tavern. Freeman's daughter, Rebecca, married Levi Jackson. Jackson and Freeman became partners and the two men ran the Wilderness Road Tavern and the Laurel River Post Office. Upon Freeman's death, Jackson continued to run the tavern. The surrounding farmland became known as Jackson's Farm. On December 7, 1931, Colonel G.D. Jackson and Ella Jackson, descendants of John Freeman and Levi Jackson, donated 307 acres of land to the Kentucky State Parks system for a park honoring the state's pioneers.

The Wilderness Road is an integral part of Kentucky's early history. Along with Boone's Trace (named for Daniel Boone), the Wilderness Road carried thousands of people into the interior of Kentucky using a wagon road constructed from Crab Orchard, in Lincoln County, to the Cumberland Gap. The thoroughfare became a toll road for many years. Boone's Trace and the Wilderness Road at times cross each other. Both historic trails pass through Levi Jackson Wilderness Road State Park.

One of the most tragic events in the history of Kentucky took place within the confines of the modern park. On October 3, 1786, a group of fourteen families were moving to central Kentucky. Throughout their journey they had taken every precaution against Indian attack. They made camp one night and failed to post a guard. On this particular evening they felt that since they had traveled this far without attack, they could relax. The families danced and drank until late that evening. After they retired for the night, the Indians attacked the camp and massacred all but three members of the group. The site became known as Defeated Camp or McNitt's Defeat.

The creation of Levi Jackson Wilderness Road State Park is a unique memorial to pioneer Kentucky. During 1935 the Board of Public Property reported that the National Park Service, with the support of the Department of the Interior, had invested nearly \$55,000 in developments. Cabins, foot-bridges, an observation tower, parking areas, an auditorium and the restoration of an old log house as a museum made the park an excellent attraction for visitors. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the parks system continued to make major improvements. Park improvements continue to be made to keep the facility up-to-date for the comfort and enjoyment of its guests.

Levi Jackson Wilderness Road State Park is an excellent example of combining history and recreation. Visitors can hike on portions of the historic Wilderness Road and Boone Trace.

Paintsville Lake State Park

Established 1986

Paintsville Lake State Park borders over 13,000 acres leased by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Created by the Corps of Engineers, Paintsville Lake covers more than 1,100 acres, is 26 miles long and in places is more than 100 feet deep. Fishing is an important sport at the park. Paintsville Lake has a full service marina with over 160 boat slips. Boat rentals are available for those who wish to enjoy fishing or just taking a leisurely boat ride. There is also a four-lane launching ramp to the lake.

Along the jagged cliffs that line the lake a variety of wildlife can be found. Black bears are once again making their home in the area. There is an abundance of deer, squirrels, rabbits and ruffed grouse in the woods surrounding the park. The scenic beauty of the Paintsville Lake region is a wonderful destination for both sportsmen and naturalists.

Yatesville Lake State Park

Established 1992

Creation of Yatesville Lake gave eastern Kentucky one of its most popular lakes and state parks. With the impoundment of Blaine Creek, the extreme eastern part of the Commonwealth gained its largest lake. Yatesville Lake covers 2,300 acres, has three islands and averages 40 feet in depth. Known for its cleanliness, the lake is a fisherman's delight. The State Outdoor Boating Association named Yatesville Marina the most outstanding project of 1999.

Interstate Park

Breaks Interstate Park

Established 1954

180 million years ago, in an area now lying across Kentucky and Virginia, a vast inland sea receded, leaving an immense and spectacular gorge, renowned as the largest east of the Mississippi. Here ferns, galax, colts foot, tea berries and a profusion of fungi and moss dot the undergrowth. Biking, hiking, riding, rafting — no matter how you choose to move through the park, you will find yourself exploring, just like those who came here first. Passing through the ancient hunting grounds of the Shawnee and Cherokee, one might just as easily be tracking the 18th century legend of the lost silver mines of John Swift or following the footsteps of Daniel Boone as he searched for a new way into Kentucky and the Ohio River Valley. The Breaks is one of only two interstate parks in the United States

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