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## Conservation Cycling

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Steep, forested bluffs hugged one side of the trail, marshy forests and lush wetlands the other. Treetops from either side of the trail created a shady canopy above and gave the feeling of traveling through a leafy tunnel. The humid, summer air was spiced with aromas from numerous wildflowers and blankets of green vegetation. A cacophony of birds twittered their news, while turtles basked on logs in nearby wetlands. I sighed. The Katy Trail State Park was more diverse, peaceful and beautiful than I had expected.

For an extended, high-school graduation celebration trip, my daughter and I had decided to bike the Katy Trail to access multiple conservation areas across the state. The Katy Trail's crushed limestone trail meanders through some of Missouri's most diverse landscapes, wildlife habitats and conservation areas. Though we limited our scope to biking and enjoying nature close to the trail for our first full-length trip, the options were amazing. Numerous conservation areas along the Katy Trail offer great hiking, fishing and boating opportunities.

Cycling the state's conservation areas can be a great adventure for all ages and ability levels (just research the terrain before your trip). Day trips to individual areas can be just as exciting as longer trips (visit [mdc.mo.gov](http://mdc.mo.gov) and click on "conservation areas" to research areas and trails).

The Katy Trail is America's longest rails-to trails project. It is also Missouri's longest and skinniest state park. It meanders 237 miles across the state, from Machens to Clinton, along the former corridor of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad. About two-thirds of the trail follows the Missouri River and the original route of Lewis and Clark during their 1804-1806 westward exploration. Scattered every 10 to 15 miles along the Katy Trail are trailheads with parking, water and restroom facilities. These depots also offer shady benches and information kiosks with area history and trail maps.

We biked from our home in Columbia and connected with the Katy Trail State Park in McBaine. We were in the middle of the Katy Trail, and headed east toward St. Charles (the trail now extends an additional 12.6 miles northeast to Machens).

We averaged 40-50 miles a day and stayed at bed and breakfasts along the trail. This pace was perfect. It gave us plenty of time to explore and yet still arrive at our accommodations early enough to relax.

### More Nature Than People

Our bikes let us coast through nature without disturbing or scaring off wildlife. We left all electronics at home, except for a cell phone, so silence and peacefulness enveloped us. We'd ride miles and not see anyone. We felt like we were in a different world where time slowed down. It was a great escape from modern life.

The birdwatching was excellent. Hawks, eagles and vultures circled overhead, woodpeckers drilled for insects, ducks and geese swam in ponds, blue herons and egrets fished in vast wetlands, and lots of bluebirds, goldfinches, cardinals and songbirds darted through the green canopy around us. Rabbits raced through the underbrush, woodchucks stood to watch us pass, and deer and turkey foraged in the fields. We saw more turtles dozing on logs, frogs, grasshoppers and salamanders than we could count. One day we saw a large black snake contentedly sunning itself on the rocks near the trail.

### Machens to North Jefferson:

#### Photos

#### Rider Bikes Through Rocheport



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The Katy Trail State Park's easternmost trailhead is Machens. The trail then follows the northern bank of the Missouri River from St. Charles to North Jefferson. On this stretch, dolomite and sandstone cliffs, covered with vegetation and trees, hug the trail as it winds through rich bottomland farms and forests.

Near the eastern end of the trail, about five miles of the Katy Trail traverse the 8,359-acre Weldon Spring Conservation Area, which offers additional hiking, biking, fishing and hunting opportunities. Though few remnants remain today, during World War II, more than 5,000 people worked here in more than 1,000 buildings producing 700 million pounds of TNT. Later, the U.S. Army built a uranium ore processing plant and then later produced herbicides. In 1985, the U.S. Department of Energy took over the site and cleaned it up.

From within Weldon Spring Conservation Area, the Hamburg Trail offers access to the August A. Busch Memorial Conservation Area, a 6,987-acre area containing 3,000 acres of forest in addition to grassland, cropland, old fields, prairie and wetlands. The area has a visitor center, boat rentals, picnic areas, pavilion, hiking trails, fishing jetties, fishing docks, staffed firearms range, archery range and viewing blinds. There are 32 fishable lakes and ponds totaling 550 acres and hunting opportunities.

The 223-acre Grand Bluffs Conservation Area is located in Bluffton. A two-mile hike through maple and oak forests leads to an observation deck located high atop some of the tallest bluffs along the trail, offering majestic views of the river and bottomland fields. The trailhead to this bluff-top hike is just a short ride down Bluffton Road.

Between Portand and Steedman, the Katy Trail crosses the Reform Conservation Area. The majority of the area provides recreational opportunities, including hiking, nature study, hunting and fishing. The area is also known as a good place to collect blackberries in the summer months.

### **North Jefferson to Boonville**

The trail from North Jefferson to Boonville continues to follow the Missouri River as it winds through thick forests and bottomland and beside towering bluffs ranging from limestone to sandstone.

West of Hartsburg, the Katy Trail runs alongside the 657-acre Hart Creek Conservation Area with its camping area and fishable pond. Just south of the trail, along the Missouri River, is Hartsburg Access, which has a boat ramp and parking area.

East of McBaine is the 4,431-acre Eagle Bluffs Conservation Area. Columbia's treated municipal wastewater supplements the needs of the 1,200-acre wetlands. There are 17 wetland pools, forest and woodland, grassland, fishing and hiking areas. A steep trail, accessible from the Katy Trail, leads to an observation deck at the top of the bluffs. Hiking, camping, fishing, hunting (especially for waterfowl, blinds are available), and eagle viewing are popular activities at this area.

Just south of Rocheport is the Manitou Bluffs region, perhaps the most photographed stretch of bluffs along the trail. The bluffs formed as the weight of a massive ancient ocean compressed the skeletal remains of sea creatures. Several miles south of Rocheport you can still see faint pictographs painted high on the bluffs by early Native Americans.

Right before biking through the 1893 train tunnel in Rocheport, the 1,016-acre Diana Bend Conservation Area begins. There is primitive camping, fishable ponds and hunting. Missouri River frontage is within hiking distance. The Missouri River and Moniteau Creek provide good fishing, but visitors need a boat to access them. A 3-acre scour hole on the west portion of the area provides walk-in fishing. A disabled-accessible wildlife viewing blind exists at the base of the bluffs just west of Rocheport. A viewing platform also offers a commanding view of the floodplain from atop the bluffs.

As the Katy Trail crosses Highway 40, west of Rocheport, the trail runs through the Davisdale Conservation Area. This 2,701-acre area features more than 800 acres of riverhills woodland, which includes pecan and walnut, large tracts of warm- and cool-season grasses interspersed with old fields, legumes and shrubs. This area is more than half forest. It also contains loess hills, cropland, old fields, grassland and prairie and features primitive camping, 17.5 acres of fishable ponds and good hunting access. From here you can also see a series of scenic limestone bluffs carved by the Missouri River, which flows 1.5 miles away.

### **Boonville to Clinton**

At Boonville, the Katy Trail crosses the Missouri River and heads southwest, and the trail transitions from the flat bottomlands into the Osage Plains region. The terrain is slightly rolling, and is dotted with deep woods and river bottoms from Boonville to Pilot Grove. More open spaces start appearing, with more farmland and ranches along the trail.

Green Ridge to Clinton brings you into a new landscape, with miles of open prairie on either side of the Katy Trail being restored to tallgrass prairie. Due to lack of shade, locals call it the "gauntlet." Prairie chickens and grassland birds make the prairie their home.

The 288-acre Bryson's Hope Conservation Area, in Bryson, is being intensively managed for the recovery of the greater prairie chicken, an endangered species in Missouri. This area is managed by the Department of Conservation to provide optimum nesting

and brood-rearing habitat not only for prairie chickens, but other grassland species, as well. Birdwatching and hunting are allowed at Bryson's Hope Conservation Area.

### **Back Home**

It was an exciting moment when we arrived back at Columbia. We'd biked both ways, covering more than 450 miles. We were a little sore, but elated at what an adventure we'd had. We fell in love with the trail and "conservation cycling." Each day we enjoyed ever-changing scenery, met new people and experienced a biker's-eye view of Missouri's wildlife.

### **Tricks of the Trail**

Before setting out on the Katy, be sure to visit the Missouri State Parks Katy Trail website at [katytrailstatepark.com](http://katytrailstatepark.com) for updates and advisories. We always carried extra food and two water bottles, since there can be extended distances between towns with no services. It's important to stay flexible, set reasonable goals and carry some extra supplies, just in case. Be sure to plan any restaurant or lodging stays in advance. Many small towns have limited services on weekdays, or may be booked solid on weekends.

To prepare for our trip, we bought *The Complete Katy Trail Guidebook* by Brett Dufur, visit [BikeKatyTrail.com](http://BikeKatyTrail.com), the Katy Trail State Park website and the Missouri Department of Conservation's website at [mdc.mo.gov](http://mdc.mo.gov). We also researched the landscapes we would we pass through and the plants and animals we might see.

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