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COLLINS RIVER NATURE TRAIL

KEY AT-A-GLANCE
INFORMATION

LENGTH: 3 miles
CONFIGURATION: Loop
DIFFICULTY: Easy
SCENERY: Hardwood forest, big rivers
EXPOSURE: Nearly all shady
TRAFFIC: Moderate, quiet during week
TRAIL SURFACE: Leaves, dirt
HIKING TIME: 1.7 hours
ACCESS: No fees or permits required
MAPS: Available at www.state.tn.us/environment/parks/RockIsland/map.pdf
FACILITIES: Restrooms, water at park office

IN BRIEF

This trail is not a nature trail in the classic sense. It has no interpretive signs. However, it does circle the attractive peninsula between the Collins and Caney Fork rivers. Water is never far away, and a practiced eye will discern old homesites scattered in the woods about this Tennessee state park trail.

DESCRIPTION

There are many ways to get to Rock Island State Park. However, none of them are easy. So relax, make an unhurried drive from Nashville, and enjoy a full day or more at this scenic gem of a getaway. Collins River Nature Trail may be the hook to get here, but you will see there is more to behold than just this path. Swimming, boating, nature study, and camping may bring you back for more adventures. Eagle Trail, also profiled in this book, provides additional walking opportunities.

Because Collins River Nature Trail is just across the road from a powerhouse, it is not surprising that the path starts in an open field beneath power lines. These power lines are connected to the Great Falls powerhouse, which is fed by the Great Falls Dam. This dam

GPS Trailhead
Coordinates

UTM Zone (WGS 84) 16S

Easting 0623440

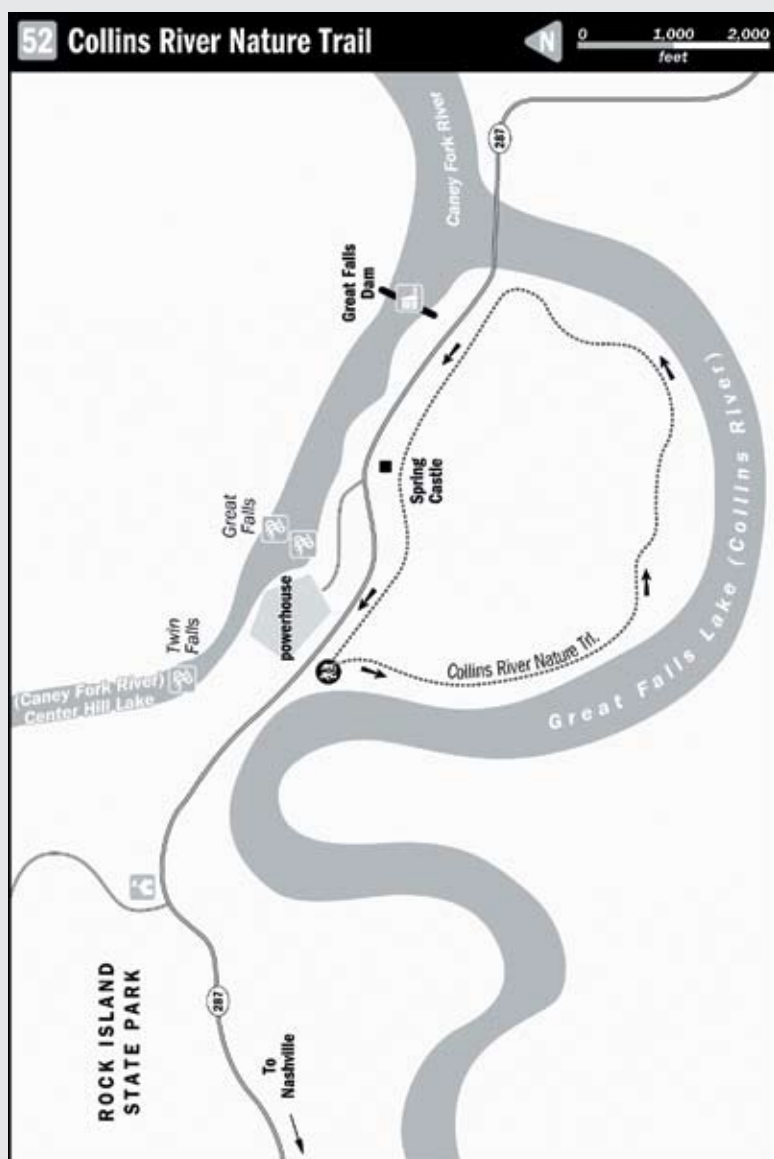
Northing 3962890

Latitude N 35° 48' 14.7"

Longitude W 85° 38' 2.3"

Directions 

From Exit 239A (Watertown) on I-40 east of downtown Nashville, take US 70 for 34 miles to TN 56 south in Smithville. Turn right on TN 56 south and follow it 9 miles to TN 287. Turn left on TN 287 north and follow it 10.6 miles, passing the main Rock Island State Park entrance on your left at 10.1 miles. Collins River Nature Trail is on the right on TN 287, across the road from the Great Falls Dam Powerhouse, 0.5 miles past the main park entrance.





Great Falls spills into the Caney Fork River.

was one of the Volunteer State's earliest hydroelectric projects. The Tennessee Electric Power Company began constructing the dam in 1915 and completed it by late 1916. A one-unit powerhouse was erected adjacent to the dam. Ten years later, the dam was reconstructed, and a second power-generating unit was built. In 1939, Tennessee Valley Authority bought Tennessee Electric Power Company—a good thing, because the dam required extensive repairs in the mid-1940s. The dam and power plant have been in use since then, undergoing rehabilitation in the late 1980s. At that time, a road was built across the top of the dam. Before TVA took over the dam, homesteaders inhabited the peninsula between the Collins and Caney Fork rivers until the 1940s, when they were bought out and relocated. When you walk the trail, look for signs of these inhabitants.

Park at the open trailhead and cross under the power lines. Shortly, you will pick up an old roadbed, which you will be following most of the trail. This wide path makes for easy traveling. Furthermore, it has few hills, which makes the trail doable by nearly everyone. Soon enter the woods and veer right onto the old roadbed. The narrow ribbon of the Collins River, backed up as Great Falls Lake at this point, lies to your right and will stay on your right the entire loop. A short-leaf pine-and-oak forest shades the trail.

Pass under a power line, also emanating from Great Falls powerhouse, and encounter a patch of yucca plants with stalklike leaves. The folks who once lived along this old dirt road likely planted the ancestors of these plants. A second

smaller power line opens the landscape and allows views of the Collins River. The trail continues turning with the Collins River toward the Caney Fork, and the TN 287 bridge comes into view. The path veers right, off the roadbed, near Great Falls Dam, which is visible to the right through the trees.

After you backtrack over the old roadbed, keep your eyes open for the small Cunningham Cemetery to the left of the trail. The graves here have newer stones. The most prominent of the stones is that of John Cunningham, a veteran of the War of 1812. A dug well is near the graves, to the right of them as you face them from the trail. Stones have been laid in a circle down the well to keep its walls from caving in, but the bottom of the well has filled in. This is part of a homesite. I can only wonder which was here first—the graves or the well. It is unusual to have a well so close to a graveyard.

The next trail section reveals more homesite evidence. The forest is evenly aged. Small, level flats are scattered in the woods. Look for metal relics, such as old washtubs. Spring Castle, located toward Caney Fork River, fed water to these homesteads. This circular building, still visible today from TN 287, captured water flowing off the bluff below and pumped it up to these residences. Great Falls Cotton Mill is located near the Spring Castle. This square brick building is pinched in between TN 287 and Caney Fork River. It used waterpower to gin cotton but was in operation only a decade before floodwaters destroyed the waterwheel in the early 1900s. At this point, Collins River Nature Trail leaves the woods and emerges into a clearing broken by a large oak tree. The powerhouse is visible across the road. Make a short walk through the grass to complete the loop.

NEARBY/RELATED ACTIVITIES

Rock Island State Park has an excellent campground, playgrounds, game courts, a boat launch, and other trails. Be sure to see Twin Falls and Great Falls while you are here. They are visible from the road over Great Falls Dam. For more information, visit www.tnstateparks.com.