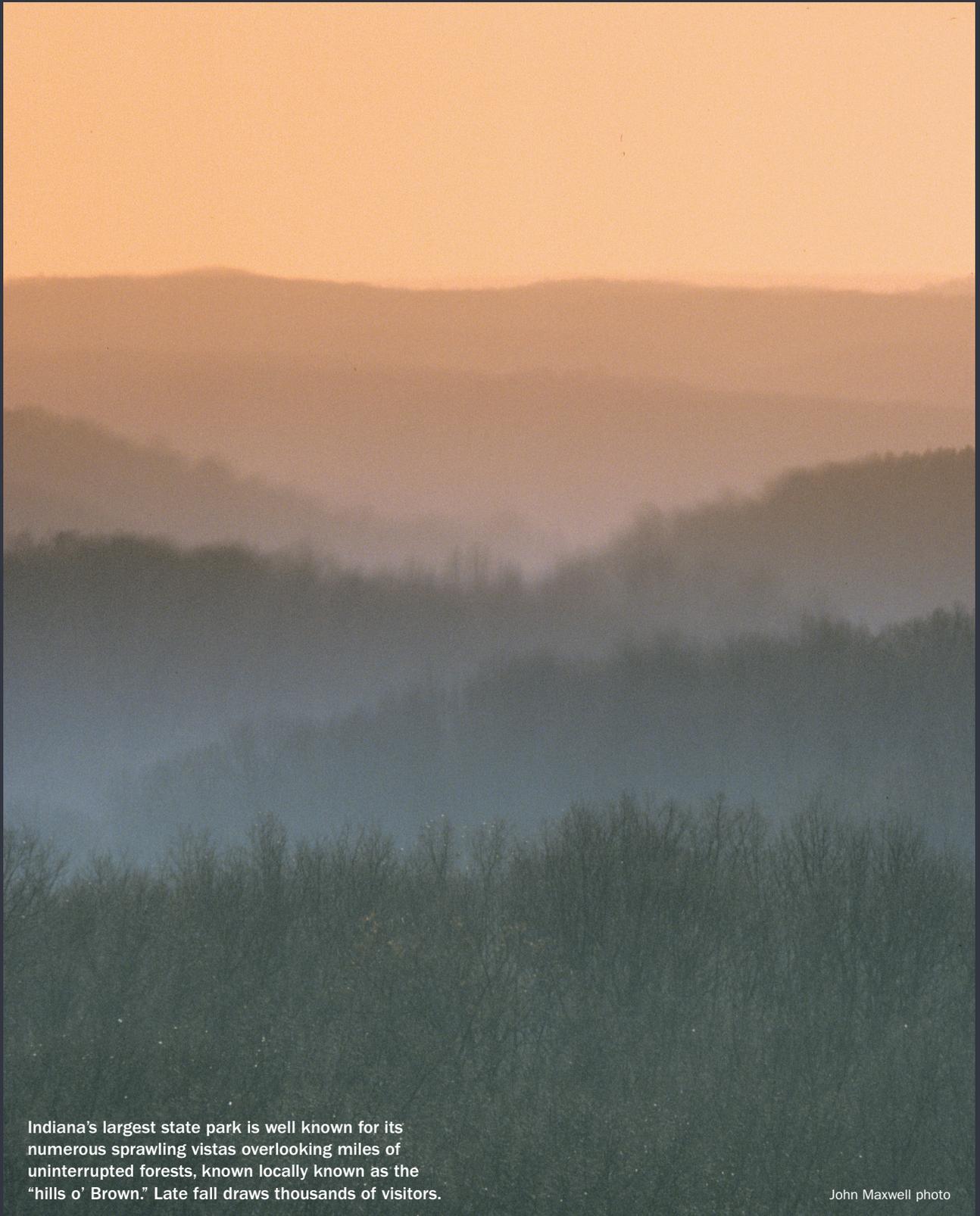


Treasures in your own backyard

BROWN COUNTY STATE PARK

JUST PLAIN MORE



Indiana's largest state park is well known for its numerous sprawling vistas overlooking miles of uninterrupted forests, known locally known as the "hills o' Brown." Late fall draws thousands of visitors.

John Maxwell photo



John Maxwell photo

Jonathan Juillerat (front) of Brownsburg and Charles Shindler of Nashville ride Brown County's Schooner Trace expert-rated mountain bike trail. The park has 20 miles of easy-to-rugged bike/hike trails and 18 miles of scenic hiking trails winding around and over hills, ravines and creeks.

BY MARTY BENSON

Part of a series

An old Hoosier comic strip character once said, "By cracky, it's sum travelin' ter git ter Brown County."

That was before most cars could cruise at 70 mph, before there was a state park in these hills or anywhere else in Indiana.

Even with modern transportation, if the same fictitious gentleman visited the park named for the county today, he might offer a similar quip. Something like "it's sum travelin' ter git *around* this place."

Brown County State Park spans nearly 16,000 acres, dwarfing Indiana's next-largest by roughly 10 grand. Its roads are neither straight nor exempt from inclines for more than a blink. Some call the area the "Little Smokies" because of the likeness to the national park a few states southeast.

Upon entering one of the park's three gates, the northernmost of which is prefaced by the oldest covered bridge in the state, getting around takes time.

Property manager Doug Baird came to the park as an assistant manager in 1978 from Turkey Run State Park, which is about 13,000 acres smaller. He still remembers his first entry, via the west gate, after a snowstorm.

"I looked down those steep ravines and could

not believe that was Indiana, and we just drove and drove before we got anywhere," he said.

During the ice age, meltwaters sculpted the landscape. Glaciers didn't make it to the county. Tens of thousands of years later, until railroad tracks were laid, neither did many outsiders.

Despite the park's vastness, guests can access most of the land. Horse owners relish the 70 miles of bridle trails. The park is known as *the* horseman's campground in the Midwest because of its mileage and prime facilities.

"Horse trails cover a significant part of the park but mainly only horse riders see those areas," Baird said. "I would say maybe 12,000 acres has some sort of feature that gets you out in those areas."

The park's saddle barn offers guided horseback riding on a separate trail system.

Nearly 25 miles of what *Bike* magazine listed as one of the 33 best mountain bike trails in North America provides more versatile access than either horse option. Created largely by volunteers from the Hoosier Mountain Bike Association starting in 2004, the trails welcome foot traffic, too.



Frank Oliver photo

Saddle-barn riders finish a relaxed trail ride in late summer. Brown County State Park also features some 70 miles of bridle trails through the steep, forested hills for patrons who bring their own horse.

Janet Kramer, a local resident and member of the park's Friends group, belongs to a traveling hiking group called Walking Women. She says the cooperation among users on the mountain bike routes has helped make them a club favorite.

"We enjoy them because we can see parts of the park we never knew existed before," Kramer said.

World-class biking of a different sort grabbed headlines in 1987 when road races for the Pan Am Games were staged on park pavement.

The park's older hiking trails were blazed by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. Some CCC features help one of those paths crack Kramer's best-of list, along with its beginning and end at the top of Weedpatch Hill. That area boasts the county's top elevation of 1,058 feet above sea level as well as an attraction that is a few feet higher.

"Trail 10, the one by the fire tower, that's always been one of my favorites," Kramer said. "It's varied, with ups and downs and little creeks and a little pond. It also has the old Peachtree shelter that the CCC built."

The park's grandness applies not only to land but also to popularity. It draws an Indiana-best 1.2 million or so guests per year but its immensity can provide shelter from crowds.

"There can always be found a peaceful place for

those seeking solace to meditate or reflect," said Cathy Schrock, a neighbor and Friends group member who has used the park for a half-century.

Baird advises those seeking serious quiet to stop by during the colder months.

"If you are looking for pretty scenery and solitude, the best time to visit is wintertime," he said. "The scenery can be spectacular after winter storms."

A sea of trees, one of the park's trademarks, creates a feeling of escape. The mass of woods extends throughout and beyond the county. Interpretive naturalist Jim Eagleman has a photo taken from space, 400 miles away, in which you can see the forest as "a green blob."

Along with adjacent Yellowwood State Forest and Hoosier National Forest, the state park forms a large, natural home for animals, birds and plants, including protected species such as the timber rattlesnake and cerulean warbler.

In relative terms, the park's hardwoods haven't been there long. Before this slice of the county became state property, a process that started in the early 1920s, area hills were nearly bare. Settlers had cut and burned much of the original forest.

"It still amazes me that they had the desire to cut back all the timber on such steep slopes," said Eagleman, who wrote his master's thesis on the subject.



Marc G. Waggener photo

The original all-log north lookout tower shown was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. It eventually became unsafe for public use because of insect damage. It was torn down and replaced with the current sandstone-and-log tower in 1988. The original CCC-built sandstone-and-log west lookout tower still stands.

The usual goal, crop production, often proved futile. According to the son of a farmer's written account: "The soil would be productive enough to grow wheat for a few years. Soon however, the topsoil would be gone and they would have to get another piece of new ground cleared, which would soon in turn erode away."

The value of local timber climbed during the second half of the 19th century. Railroad accessibility made the product transportable, and massive amounts were needed to make railroad ties and fuel locomotives.

More topsoil washed away. More farmland was cleared. And, in 1877, one of the last two deer to have been killed in the county was harvested, per a 1922 newspaper account.

Oddly, the dismal environmental factors helped launch the state park.

The first director of the Indiana Department of Conservation, formed in 1919, was Col. Richard Lieber. He'd been the catalyst to opening McCormick's Creek and Turkey Run, Indiana's first two state parks, in 1916. He owned a Brown County retreat. In 1910, he had said: "This whole county ought to be bought up ... and made into a state park so that all of the people of Indiana could enjoy it."

But his interest detoured until Nashville insurance man Lee Bright redirected it.

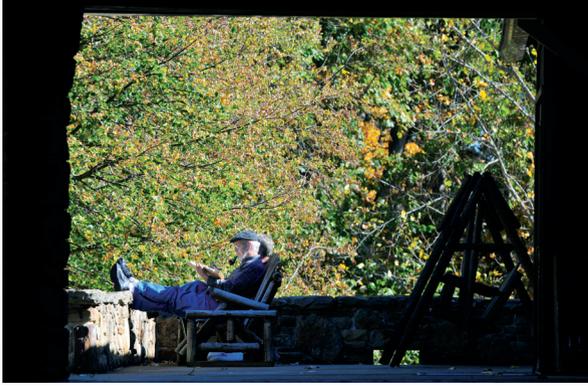
Bright saw how his county's economic woes contrasted with the surrounding roar of the 1920s. Tourism, he reasoned, was a fix. He got wrist cramps writing to Lieber about opening a hometown state park. He ventured to Indianapolis to meet him three times but couldn't get past the secretary.

During one visit, he bumped into game warden Fred Ahlers. Ahlers knew the state had appropriated funds to establish fish and game reserves. He pointed Bright to George Mannfeld, the first superintendent of the Division of Fisheries and Game, who provided the bridge to Lieber.

In 1924, Bright was appointed to acquire the land for a game reserve. Average sales price for the first 50 acres was \$10.17 per acre. For farmers, that was lottery-like salvation. Today, county land is among the most expensive in the state.

"This gave them a chance to make a better life elsewhere," Eagleman said. "One person said they considered Bright the messiah."

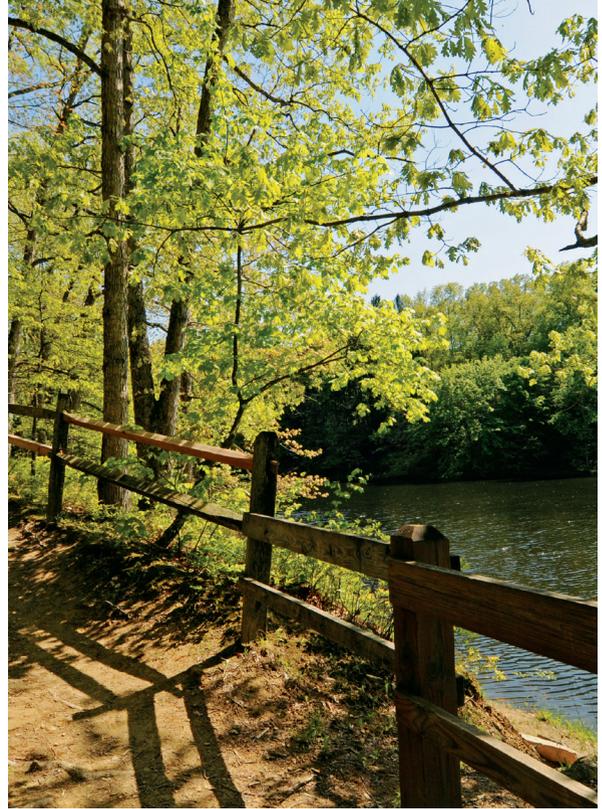
The insurance man eventually secured 7,600 acres. The Brown County Game Reserve opened later that year.



Frank Oliver photo



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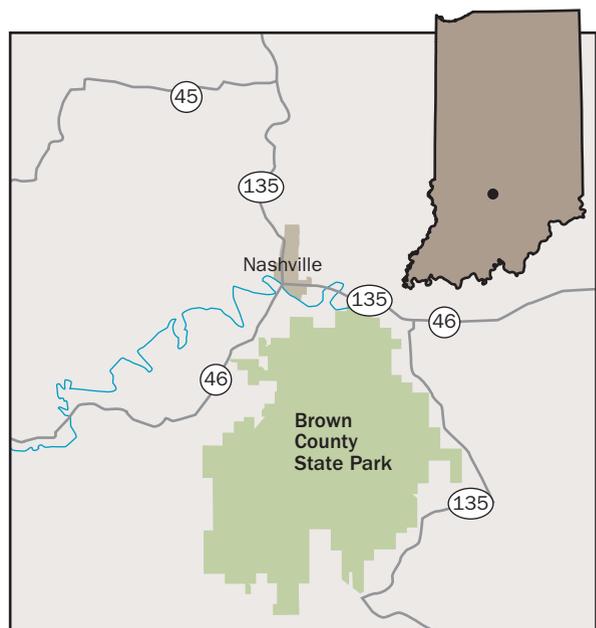
(Clockwise from top left) John Durham draws while looking at fall colors from a patio at Abe Martin Lodge. The park features 15,776 acres of rolling land near Nashville, which emerged as an artist destination about a hundred years ago. A view of Strahl Lake along Trail 6 during late spring. Before there was a lake, the area was owned by Jimmy Strahl, a farmer who sold his marginally productive land to the state. The oldest covered bridge in the state welcomes visitors to the park's north entrance. The bridge was built in 1838 and was moved to the park from Putnam County in 1932.

“Game birds were raised here for release on the property and to ship off to other properties,” Eagleman said. “Game farms were popular at the time to replenish those animals that had been displaced by agriculture.”

The first official discussion about creating a state park happened in 1928. In 1929, the county's commissioners turned over 1,129 acres that bordered the game reserve to the state for that purpose. By 1931, combined with the game reserve, state property in the area covered 13,000 acres. On one Sunday that year, 10,000 people are said to have visited. That one-day total exceeded the annual attendance of some of the established parks.

Transportation being what it was in those days, getting there took effort, as you learned earlier. A few years later, those up to the travel could rest at the park's Abe Martin Lodge, as many of today's guests do.

The place is named for the fictitious speaker of our opening quip—Abe Martin—who was created by political satirist Kin Hubbard of the now-defunct Indianapolis News. Abe's exploits, which were set in





Frank Oliver photo

A family gathers to take in fall beauty. The park's numerous vistas make it a destination for leaf peepers but in the early 1920s, the hills were nearly bare.

Brown County, ran in about 300 newspapers nationwide in the early 20th century.

In 1936, Schrock's great grandfather, Sylvenus "Vene" Schrock, sealed her family's connection to the park when he dressed up as a real-life Abe and posed for an iconic portrait taken by Frank Hohenberger, then one of the best known photographers in the nation. Some surmise the park's Hohen Point vista is named for Hohenberger, who spent 47 years documenting Brown County. But the vista may have been named before the journalist's prominence, for a German word meaning high place.

Lieber sought to honor Hubbard on a ridge in the park, which he later named for the writer. He envisioned doing so by offering mid-budget sleeping quarters—more basic than a hotel but nicer than a tent.

The result was a native sandstone-and-timber commissary and lounge, and a collection of rustic cabins. Each cabin was named for someone in Hubbard's comic strip. Still today, guests check in to dwellings known by names like Elmer Moots, Doc Mopps or Schuyler Wiggins.

The original cabins, built in 1932, have paneled, motel-style rooms with electric heat and air-conditioning, carpeting or wood floors and a bathroom with shower. No two are alike. Twenty family cabins with bedrooms, bathroom and kitchen facilities

for up to eight people were added in 1980. The now greatly expanded lodge is a rustic but modernized full-service state park inn with an indoor water park and a shrine to Hubbard.

In the same era Brown County gained fame from a comic strip character, the area became known for another type of art. In an odd twist by today's standards, the lack of cover on the area's hills from saw and ax helped.

Patricia Rhoden Bartels, a painter of landscapes who moved to Brown County from Ohio in the early 1980s because of the terrain, says the more-open vistas were the magnet for her early predecessors.

"You could see through things and see for longer distances," she said. "We artists like to see forever. We like to create that atmospheric effect and the distance so it looks like it goes on for infinity."

Bartels says about 300 painters regularly flocked to the county during early 20th century summers. Today, artists still do. Many, her included, paint the area during all seasons.

Now, with the woods having returned, the park's views, though not as open, also attract scores of others throughout the year, especially in the fall when leaf colors detonate.

Droves of people come to Brown County State Park to celebrate, commemorate, begin or end life's



Frank Oliver photo



John Maxwell photo



Frank Oliver photo

(Clockwise from top left) Swimming is a year-round activity at the park, though the pool of choice may vary. In 2008, an indoor aquatic center was added to Abe Martin Lodge. Open year-round, the facility features a zero-entry pool, a waterslide and a whirlpool. Twenty furnished family housekeeping cabins, two of which are wheelchair-accessible, can be rented year-round. Instead of being identified by just numbers, they are named for characters from the old Abe Martin comic strip. Abe Martin Lodge has provided Brown County visitors with clean comfortable rooms and country cooking for more than 80 years.

major happenings, often at one of the vistas. Baird guesses there might be a hundred weddings held in the park each year.

Most vista visitors just look and linger. Assistant property manager Kevin Snyder has the advantage of living on the property and traveling through it constantly, which offers him a rare outlook on the outlooks.

“A lot of the people think about the park at different times of the year,” Snyder said. “What I find fascinating is how it’s different during different times of the day. I drive past the vistas a lot and every time I look out there it’s something different.”

Following on the heels of the area’s renaissance, deer were reintroduced to Indiana in the 1940s. Their extirpated natural predators were not. With no hunting allowed in the state park, the deer population exploded, devouring much of the park’s plant life. In the early 1990s, a Natural Resources Commission task force determined the solution was limited hunting.

Indiana’s first state park deer reduction was conducted at Brown County in 1993. As deer numbers were reduced, the property’s flora returned.

In late fall, usually every other year, hunters with proper credentials reduce the property’s deer population. Such hunts are now held in most Indiana state parks. Like most other state parks, Brown County closes for its hunts.

Among its myriad attractions, Brown County State Park also offers outdoor swimming, fishing on Ogle and Strahl lakes, and interpretive programs, plus more history, more trees, more stories ... and just plain more around every corner.

“I still haven’t seen it all,” said Eagleman, who started working there about the same time as Baird.

Baird says the central location is another feature that makes Brown County so popular.

“It’s close enough that anybody in Indiana can get here in a short part of a day or half a day, he said, “and there’s an extreme contrast from most of the rest of the state.”

Put another way, “by cracky, it’s worth sum travelin’.” ■

Marty Benson is DNR assistant director of communications and OI managing editor.



Frank Oliver photo

The fire tower near the Brown County State Park office provides an eagle-eye view of the surroundings, or, in this case, of Rebecca Jordan of Nashville and her dog Huckleberry.



This special *Outdoor Indiana* insert is part of a continuing series that highlights the history and nature of each Indiana state park and reservoir. The series runs through 2016, the 100th anniversary of our state parks. *Outdoor Indiana* subscribers will receive the eight-page inserts as part of the magazine. Additional booklets will be available in limited quantity at www.innsgifts.com and State Park Inns gift shops. Make sure to get every issue—a complete collection would be a treasure on your bookshelf ... or coffee table. *Outdoor Indiana* subscription information is available at OutdoorIndiana.org.