

In contrast to the level, or gently rolling farm lands typical of most of Illinois, the Shawnee National Forest lies in the rough, unglaciated areas known as the Illinois Ozark and Shawnee Hills. The geology is spectacular and divergent, with numerous stone bluffs and overlooks transcending to lowland areas. Topography ranges from the flood plains of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, at about 325 feet above sea level to 1,064 feet at Williams Hill in Pope County. The geologic processes that formed the landscape are partially responsible for the presence of important mineral resources, including some of national significance.

Plant life is extremely diverse and ranges from sun-loving species to those that grow in dense shade. Tree cover dominates the publicly owned acreage, and is a significant component on privately owned lands. Oak-hickory is the predominant timber type, however, many other commercially important timber species also occupy significant acreages. More than 500 wildlife species can be found within the Forest, including 48 mammals, 237 birds, 52 reptiles, 57 amphibians, and 109 species of fish. There are seven federally-listed threatened and endangered species inhabiting the Forest, as well as 33 species which are considered regionally sensitive, and 114 Forest-listed species.

The climate and beauty of the area are especially charming during the spring and fall seasons with the spring bringing an abundance of blooming dogwoods, redbuds, and wildflowers. The fall is saturated with color as the leaves turn. The summers are warm and humid and the winters are mild. There is a rich cultural history associated with the southern Illinois region. Native Americans have used the area's resources for over 15,000 years. French and English explorers traveled the waters of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in their first penetrations into the wilderness. The homesteads of the earliest settlers were also concentrated along these major waterways. Cultural resource sites abound on the forest and this factor alone makes public ownership and protection critical for many properties.

The Shawnee is highly valued by the residents of Illinois and surrounding states. Although Illinois is the nation's 4th most populous state, and 24th largest in size, it ranks 48th in the amount of public land set aside. The unique character of the landscape and abundant natural wonders make the Forest an oasis in the midst of intensive agricultural lands, and a destination vacation point for many city dwellers. This diversity invites a multitude of users seeking escape, renewal, physical challenges, and relaxation in an outdoor environment. About one third of the acreage (277,506 acres) within the forest and existing purchase unit boundaries is national forest system land. In spite of this low percentage, the Forest contains seven Congressionally-designated Wilderness Areas, one additional area recommended for wilderness study, six candidate Wild and Scenic Rivers, four National Natural Landmarks, 10 Research Natural Areas, and more than 80 other designated Natural Areas considered important for botanical, ecological, geological or zoological reasons. As the single largest publicly owned body of land in the state, the national forest is extremely important in meeting the outdoor recreation demands of citizens of the region. The Forest is within a day's drive (350 miles) of more than 45 million people, or 17% of the U.S. population. (U.S. Census Bureau, 7-1-97 estimate)

The origin of the Shawnee National Forest is closely linked to the economic calamity of the Great Depression. The southern Illinois economy was on the skids well before the stock market crash of 1929. Decades of timber exploitation, subsistence farming, and man-caused wildfires resulted in massive erosion, declining soil fertility and a downward spiral in crop production. Non-agricultural jobs were centered in the timber and mining industries, both of which experienced significant market downturns throughout the 1920s. Upstate newspapers, principally the Chicago Tribune, began campaigning for the establishment of a national forest in Illinois. By 1931, the Illinois Department of Conservation and the Illinois Natural History Survey had pushed consent language (required by Article 1, Section 8, Clause 17 of the U.S. Constitution) through the State Legislature. This provided broad authority to the United States to establish, consolidate, and extend national forests within the state without any limitation of acreage or approval by local or State agencies.

On August 30, 1933, two separate purchase units were approved in extreme southern Illinois by the National Forest Reservation Commission. The Illini Unit, near the Mississippi River, contained 307,840 gross acres and the Shawnee Unit, along the Ohio River, contained 290,392 gross acres. Additions to both units were approved by the National Forest Reservation Commission on January 21, 1935. (See map on following page.)

On September 6, 1939, the former Dixon Springs Soil Conservation Service Project (9,864 acres of federal land) was transferred to the Forest Service by Presidential proclamation. The two former purchase units, along with the Dixon Springs acreage, were also given national forest status by this proclamation. The newly created Shawnee National Forest at that time contained 786,607 acres within the boundary and 184,539 acres in federal ownership.

Boundary Retraction: Prompted by a Secretary of Agriculture request in 1953, all national forests undertook a study of possible boundary retractions to eliminate areas of predominately private land. A recommendation pertaining to the Shawnee was presented to the National Forest Reservation Commission on April 17, 1956. By executive order, dated April 7, 1961, the boundary was retracted in several areas, resulting in a gross acreage reduction of 118,725 acres.

Shawnee Purchase Unit: Two unrelated events in 1962 led to the creation of the currently existing Shawnee Purchase Unit, or "The Gap" as it is called by some. Several local citizens requested that the Secretary of Agriculture study the possibility of establishing a connecting corridor between the two existing units of the Shawnee National Forest. A recommendation was forwarded to the National Forest Reservation Commission to create a purchase unit of 125,000 acres which would accomplish that objective. In the same year, the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission Report identified driving for pleasure as the most popular outdoor recreational pastime. Following the release of this report, the Forest Service proposed the "George

Rogers Clark Recreation Way," a 125-mile scenic highway extending between the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers in southern Illinois. These two recommendations resulted in a December 27, 1968, Secretary of Agriculture's Order that established the currently existing Shawnee Purchase Unit linking the east and west-side units of the Shawnee NF.

All recreation users are encouraged to use the "[Leave No Trace](#)" guidelines when visiting.

Shawnee NF Offices

Shawnee National Forest offices are open from 8:00am to 4:30pm Monday – Friday and are closed on holidays. The address and phone number for each District are:

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