

## Mark Twain National Forest Trail Map – Irish Wilderness Area 2022

The Irish Wilderness is a dense forest of oaks and hickory. Wilderness is set aside by Congress as a natural area affected primarily by the forces of nature with little evidence of man's works - "where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Many outdoor enthusiasts seek out its peace and special closeness to experiencing the wonders of nature. No two individuals share the same meaning and values of the wilderness experience, but it is primitive and challenging, and recreationists must be self-reliant.

In the mid 1800's a Catholic priest, Father John Hogan of St. Louis had a dream of a place where Irish immigrants could escape the oppression of urban life in St. Louis. It was in this wild area of the Missouri Ozarks that Father Hogan established a settlement that would forever after bear their name, Irish Wilderness. It was here that Father Hogan said people could "so profoundly worship as in the depth of that leafy forest... where solitude and the heart of man united in praise and wonder of the Great Creator,"

The timing of the ill fated settlement however was not right, as the Civil War erupted. The Irish Wilderness was caught in the middle, became a "no man's land" and was raided by both Union and Confederate troops as well as bushwhackers. It is not certain what happened to Father Hogan's Irish immigrants, but after the war they were gone.

The mystery of the Irish immigrants is part of the character of the land today. Since that time the area has been logged and grazed clean of vegetation. But today, because of the efforts of the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Forest Service, and the amazing ability of the land, the Irish Wilderness again has regained the same character that Father Hogan found.

The Irish is characterized by a rolling to steep topography with a wide variety of Karst topography features such as sinkholes, disappearing streams, and caves. Elevations range from less than 500 feet near the Eleven Point River to over 900 feet in the northeast corner near Camp Five Pond.

Whites Creek, the principal stream in the Irish Wilderness, flows cool and fresh in the spring, but during the long, hot summers, much of the creek dries up, with only a few scattered pools remaining. Other small streams flow along the surface in short stretches to disappear underground, and emerge again at numerous small springs throughout the area. The western boundary of the Irish Wilderness is adjacent to the Eleven Point National Scenic River.

The Irish is dominated by an oak-hickory forest with scattered native shortleaf pine. A variety of ground vegetation also exists, including an abundance of smaller trees, such as flowering dogwood, persimmon, and sassafras, shrubs, grasses, and herbaceous plants. Along the Eleven Point River, occasional black walnut and associated hardwood river bottom species can be found. A few old growth stands remain, but the majority of trees are less than 60 years old.

Wildlife is typical of the Missouri Ozarks. White-tailed deer, squirrel, coyote, bobcat, raccoon, rabbits, and the gray fox are common. Occasionally a black bear will use the area. There are also a variety of birds such as eastern wild turkey, hawks, owls, turkey vultures, herons, pileated woodpeckers, and many small songbirds. Rattlesnakes, copperheads and the eastern cottonmouth can also be encountered within the Irish Wilderness. The major travel way within the Irish Wilderness is the 17.5 mile Whites Creek Trail. From the trailhead at Camp Five Pond to the Eleven Point River, visitors are exposed to a wide variety of natural terrain and geographical relief. From relatively flat land at the beginning, hikers

traverse through many ecological zones including dried creek beds, grasslands, glades, bluff country, and breathtaking views overlooking the Eleven Point River. Whites Creek Trail is not designed for horse use, but horse use is permitted. Horseback riders are encouraged to use the old loop trail that comes out just above Fiddler Spring and Whites Creek Cave, it is less steep and erodible than Whites Creek Trail. There are three short spur trails from the main trail at Fiddler Spring, Whites Creek Float Camp, and Bliss Spring. There is also trail access near Brawley Pond.

Scenic attractions include Fiddler and Bliss Springs, both cool and refreshing places to stop for a refreshing break; Whites Creek Cave and other caves along the trail around Whites Creek; steep limestone bluffs overlooking the Eleven Point River; and the unique plant and wildlife communities.

As a designated wilderness, the Irish Wilderness is managed by the Mark Twain National Forest and enjoys the highest level of permanent protection!

**Trails:** Whites Creek Trail, Brawley Pond Spur, Camp 5 Spur, Eleven Point Spur, & Fidler Springs Spur.

**Restrictions:** Foot, and horseback travel only, **no motorized or mechanized use.**

**Rating:** Moderate, terrain is sometimes steep.

#### **Disclaimer:**

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