

At the south end of the hike, you'll climb on top of a mound left over from a former coal-mining operation in the park.

Not far from Goose Lake Prairie, the town of Morris hosts Gebhard Woods State Park, a small but pleasant park that adjoins a stretch of the Illinois and Michigan Canal Trail. Inside the park, the 0.8-mile Nettle Creek Nature Trail runs along the winding creek and through stands of maple, cottonwoods, and sycamores. On the east side of the park, toward downtown Morris, is an old stone aqueduct where the I&M Canal flows over Nettle Creek. Morris, the Grundy county seat situated on the north bank of the Illinois River, was one of many towns that grew up alongside the I&M Canal. To reach Gebhard Woods from Goose Lake Prairie, take Pine Bluff Road to the right (west) for 5 miles to IL 47. Turn right (north) on IL 47 and continue over the river and into Morris, turning left (west) on County Road 2 (West Jefferson Street). Proceed 0.9 miles and turn left (south) on Ottawa Street. The park is just ahead on the left.

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Matthiessen State Park Dells Area Hike

OVERVIEW

LENGTH: 2.2 miles

CONFIGURATION: Loop with out-and-back segment

SCENERY: Sandstone canyons, waterfalls, wooded bluffs, lake, high footbridges over creek

EXPOSURE: All shaded

SURFACE: Gravel, dirt

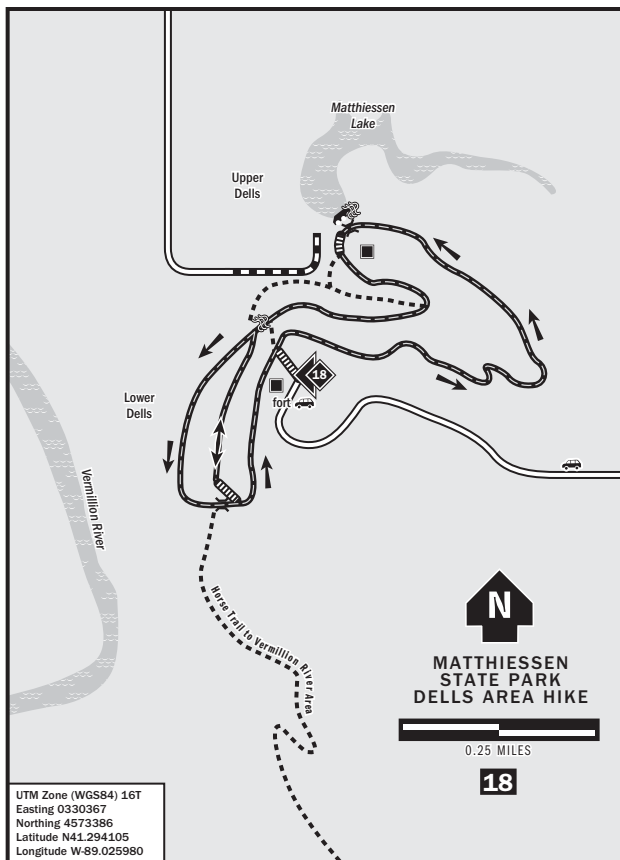
HIKING TIME: 1.5–2 hours

ACCESS: 8 a.m.–sunset

FACILITIES: Picnic tables, pavilion, water, flush toilets

MAPS: Park maps are available at trailhead; USGS topo LaSalle, IL

SPECIAL COMMENTS: Cross-country ski rentals are available December–March when weather permits. Maps at horse-trailer parking areas show the routes for 13 miles of equestrian trails available at Matthiessen. Horse rentals are available on IL 71, a half mile west of IL 178.



■ SNAPSHOT

Formerly a private retreat for a local industrialist, Matthiessen State Park features a narrow, mile-long canyon carved in sandstone by a stream. Beginning at the dam and lake at one end of the canyon, you'll encounter a couple of dramatic waterfalls while exploring the moist and shady canyon floor and the wooded bluffs above.

■ UP CLOSE

Overshadowed by the far more popular Starved Rock State Park 2 miles to the north, Matthiessen State Park is often unjustly ignored by the many visitors to the area. Although the 1,938 acres at Matthiessen State Park don't offer as many miles of trails nor as many canyons as Starved Rock, they still have plenty of geological charm—plus a much quieter atmosphere.

A LaSalle businessman named Frederick William Matthiessen, who reportedly employed some 50 people to build the trails, bridges, stairways, and dams, first developed the area as a private park. Matthiessen also built a not-so-modest summer home with 16 bedrooms and 9 baths, along with a smaller mansion for one of his children. While Matthiessen's structures no longer remain, visitors will see the handiwork of his grounds crew in the dams, stairs, and soaring concrete footbridges. By 1940, 22 years after Matthiessen's death, his heirs donated the property to the state.

Similar to Starved Rock, the beautiful sandstone walls at Matthiessen were carved out by centuries of flowing water. The mile-long canyon at Matthiessen is nearly 100 feet deep in places and ranges from 50 to 140 feet wide. The section closest to the dam and Matthiessen Lake is called the Upper Dells, and the path of the canyon closest to the Vermillion River is called the Lower Dells (the canyons here were called "dells" during Matthiessen's time—since then the name has stuck). A dazzling 40-foot waterfall separates the two sections of the canyon.

From the parking lot, head toward the small log fort, which is a replica of forts the French built in the Midwest during the 1600s and early 1700s (the French constructed one of these forts on Starved Rock in 1683). Start the hike by heading down the stairs and taking the first trail to the right. This elm-lined, wide gravel trail follows the bluff above the creek deep within the sandstone canyon on the left. At 0.2 miles, as the path starts to curve, you'll begin to see rock on the other side of the canyon and hear a couple of waterfalls down below. Stay to the left as you pass over the creek flowing through a culvert under the trail (the trail to the right leads to the horse-trailer parking area).

Continuing on the other side of the canyon underneath a canopy of sugar-maple trees, the trail soon becomes paved. Before crossing the bridge over Lake Falls, pay a visit to the overlook on the left for your first view of the Lake Falls as it drops 40 feet from the top of a dam to the floor of the canyon. After crossing the bridge, which provides a nice view of the wooded banks of Matthiessen Lake and the falls underneath, the first trail on the left brings you down closer to the falls and then descends to the floor of the Upper Dells.

On the canyon floor, you can gingerly step through a mix of sandstone, rock, and mud to get a better view of the falls. Mosses, liverworts, and ferns grow on the damp, shady, 30- to 40-foot walls of the canyon. Farther along in the canyon, solid sandstone channels the stream over a small waterfall that empties into the pool called the Giant's Bath tub. Geologists say these pools develop and grow larger by the action of rocks and pebbles getting swirled around. Continuing ahead, several places require using boards and rocks to cross the stream. As the canyon curves to the right at a place called Cedar Point, continue ahead past stairs leading up to the bluff.

Farther ahead, take the stairs out of the canyon and then follow the sign for the Lower Dells and proceed along the bluff, passing Cascade Falls on the left. After walking along the bluff, cross the bridge and follow the stairs to the Lower Dells. The short box canyon on the right is called the Devil's Paint Box, because the walls are decorated with swaths of yellow, orange, and brown, formed by minerals seeping out of sandstone. In the main canyon, look for spots where lichen has changed the rock to light green. Look for changes in the texture of the walls, too: some sections are smooth and flat, while others are rough, pitted, and almost grotesque. The cracks in the walls form much like the cracks in pavement during the winter, growing bigger and chipping apart when water freezes inside.

Similar to the Upper Dells, the trail here alternates between mud and rock and requires stream crossing via large rocks and concrete blocks. More trees grow in this canyon, particularly sugar maples, some of which are draped with vines. At the end of the canyon, listen for the soothing echo created by the 40-foot waterfall. Frederick Matthiessen named his private retreat Deer Park in honor

of the Native American practice of using these canyons for confining deer. Heading back up the stairs, turn left at the sign for the fort and parking lot. Turning right at this junction leads to the Vermillion River Area within the park (see More Fun section). Heading toward the parking lot, the trail rises and then curves left. Complete the hike by climbing the stairs back up to the parking lot.

■ TO THE TRAILHEAD

From Chicago, take I-55 to I-80. After driving 45 miles on I-80, take Exit 81 south to Utica. Proceed south along IL 178 for 5.1 miles, passing through Utica and over the Illinois River. The entrance to the Dells Area at Matthiessen State Park is on the right, just south of IL 178.

■ MORE FUN

South of the Dells Area, the Vermillion River Area within the park offers 1.9 miles of hiking along the wooded bluffs above the river. While there are no canyons in this section of the park, there is exposed rock in places, and there is a striking view from a high bluff. Visitors can drive to the Vermillion River Area by heading south on IL 178 from the Dells Area entrance. A better way to make the trip, if you have the time and energy, is to take the mile-long horse trail, which starts on the right after emerging from the Lower Dells.

For more canyon hiking, head over to Starved Rock State Park, located 2 miles north. From the Starved Rock visitor center, some shorter trails will take you up on platforms offering expansive views of the Illinois River. Since Starved Rock is the busiest state park in Illinois, consider visiting early in the day or during the week. The trails often get congested at peak times.