

4 Rock River Cruise

Among the many attractions on this ride are the charming town of Oregon, the John Deere Historic Site, and a handful of picturesque parks where you'll be enveloped in the local scenery. For those with an urge to explore a genuine Illinois prairie, this ride takes you past one of the largest pieces of preserved prairie in the state.

Start: Mill Springs Day Use Area at Franklin Creek Natural Area, located west of Dixon.

Length: 34.7 miles.

Terrain: Consistently rolling with a few small climbs.

Traffic and hazards: The first and last mile of the route is dirt road. Use caution on the brief segments of the route along SR 2 and SR 64.

Both of these roads are fairly busy.

Getting there: From Chicago and points east, take I-88 (East-West Tollway) west to Rochelle. Exit north on SR 251 and turn left (west) on SR 38. Follow the highway to Franklin Grove and turn right on State Street (CR 25). Quickly turn left on Old Mill Road, which takes you into the Franklin Creek Natural Area. Look for the Mill Springs Day Use Area on the left. Coordinates for starting point: 16T 305090E 4636022N

The Ride

The ride starts at Franklin Creek Natural Area, a lovely park little known outside of the immediate area. Either at the end or the beginning of the ride, be sure to explore the path in back of the parking area. This paved trail follows picturesque Franklin Creek to springs where water emerges from under a rock outcropping on the side of a hill.

As you're heading out of the park, you'll pass a newly rebuilt gristmill modeled after the original cornmeal- and flour-producing mill built at the site in 1847. Unlike many gristmills that have been rebuilt, this one uses the same technology as the original mill: Water turns the four-ton wheel located outside the mill, and the turning of the wheel powers the gears, belts, and a vertical shaft that turn the grinder on the first floor. As you're leaving the mill, look to the left for some rocky outcroppings above Franklin Creek.

The next several miles of riding takes you across a series of creeks and through rolling terrain that is part of the Nachusa Grasslands, one of the largest prairie remnants in Illinois (toward the ride's end you'll have the opportunity to explore more of this prairie).

After crossing the Rock River, consider dropping in at the John Deere museum, which includes the former residence and blacksmith workshop of this agricultural icon. There's also a series of exhibits focusing on Deere's main innovation in 1837: changing plow blades from iron to steel. Steel worked better because the rich Midwest soil didn't cling to the steel blade as it did to the iron blade. While it seems



like a modest contribution to farming technology, by all accounts Deere's plow did work better, and thereby hastened the settlement of the Midwest and the prairie in particular.

Continuing over the gently rolling landscape north toward Oregon, occasional views open up as you pass small farms, pastures, old barns, and patches of thick woodland. More long views appear on Oregon Trail Road. In particular, you'll see a couple landmarks in the town of Oregon: the Ogle County Courthouse and the bluffs above the Rock River.

Before crossing the Rock River again in Oregon, you may want to take a closer look at the handsome courthouse, built in 1891. The courthouse lawn contains a monument by the Illinois artist Laredo Taft. Oregon claims several works by Taft, the best one located just 1.5 miles north of town in Lowden State Park. The 50-foot concrete statue of a Native American—often identified as Black Hawk—is perched dramatically on a bluff overlooking the Rock River (see Miles and Directions for this worthwhile side trip).

Turning onto Lowden Road, the traffic quiets down considerably as you ride under a canopy of oak and hickory toward Lowden-Miller State Forest. This forest once belonged to Frank Lowden, a former U.S. congressman and Illinois governor. Lowden lived for a time on the property with his family (Lowden's wife, Florence, was the daughter of George Pullman, the owner of the Chicago train car manufacturer).

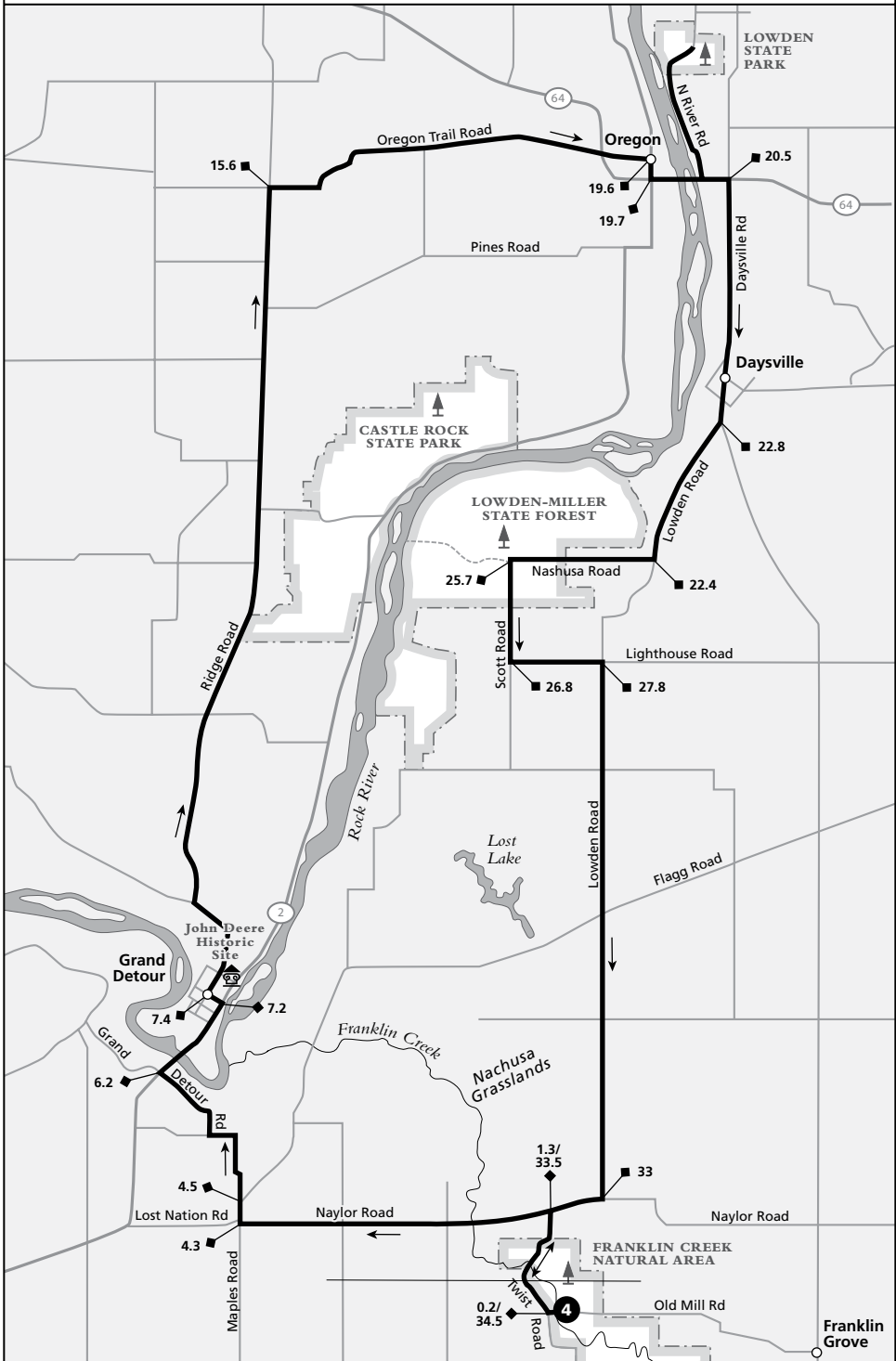
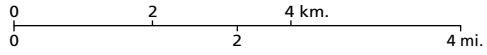
The Nachusa Grasslands—a 2,500-acre natural area that is owned and operated by the Nature Conservancy—appears on the right during the last several miles of the ride. An information kiosk is located at the visitor entrance on Lowden Road, just past the entrance to the preserve's office. Occasional sandstone outcrops as well as rocky soil and streams made this grassland difficult to farm and saved large pieces of it from the plow. From the parking area, take a short walk on the mowed path up to the high point to take in the subtle drama of the landscape's rolling green waves. You'll see birds chirping madly and dashing among the compass plants, spiderworts, and coneflowers. From the grassland, it's a short trip back to Franklin Creek.

Miles and Directions

- 0.0** Turn left on Old Mill Road from the Mill Springs Day Use Area at Franklin Creek Natural Area.
- 0.2** Turn right on Twist Road.
- 1.3** Turn left on Naylor Road.
- 4.3** Turn right on Maples Road, then make a quick right on Lost Nation Road.
- 4.5** Turn left on Grand Detour Road.
- 6.2** Turn right on SR 2.

◀ *Rocky outcroppings adorn the banks of Franklin Creek.*

Rock River Cruise



- 7.2** Turn left on Broad Street.
- 7.4** Turn right on Ridge Road. Several miles ahead, pass a parking area for hiking trails that are part of Castle Rock State Park.
- 15.6** Turn right on Oregon Trail Road. In Oregon, Oregon Trail Road becomes Monroe Street.
- 19.6** Turn right on 3rd Street.
- 19.7** Turn left on SR 64. Crossing the Rock River, take the pedestrian/bike path on the left.
- 20.2** Side trip: Go 1.5 miles north on River Road to Lowden State Park to see the towering statue of a Native American. Ride carefully on River Road—it can be busy.
- 20.5** Turn right on Daysville Road.
- 22.8** Turn right on Lowden Road.
- 24.4** Turn right on Nachusa Road.
- 25.7** Turn left on Scout Road. Side trip: For a fairly quick trip to the Rock River, keep straight ahead on Nachusa Road past Scout Road. You'll have to walk your bike for a half mile to the river; the park does not allow bicycling on the trails.
- 26.8** Turn left on Lighthouse Road.
- 27.8** Turn right on Lowden Road.
- 31.3** Nachusa Grasslands kiosk and trailhead.
- 33** Turn right on Naylor Road.
- 33.5** Turn left on Twist Road.
- 34.5** Turn left on Old Mill Road
- 34.7** Return to Mill Springs Day Use Area.

Local Information

Blackhawk Waterways Convention and Visitors Bureau: 201 North Franklin Ave., Polo; (800) 678-2108 or (815) 946-2108; www.bwcvb.com.

Lee County Tourism: 113 South Peoria Ave., Dixon; (815) 288-1840; www.encounterlee.com.

Local Events/Attractions

Franklin Creek Natural Area Grist Mill: Milling demonstrations; open on weekends; 1872 Twist Rd., Franklin Grove; (815) 456-2878; <http://dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/parks/r1/franklin.htm>.

John Deere Historic Site: The gift shop has that pair of John Deere oven mitts you've always wanted; South Main, Grand Detour; (815) 652-4551; www.deere.com/en_US/attractions/historic-site.

Nachusa Grasslands Preserve: Volunteers and staff conduct periodic tours, bird walks, and

other special events; 8772 South Lowden Rd., Franklin Grove; (815) 456-2340.

Restaurants

La Vigna: Italian food; located on the route 2190 South Daysville Rd., Oregon; (815) 732-4413.

White Pines Lodge Restaurant: Home-style fare; occasional dinner theater; 6712 West Pines Rd., Mount Morris; (815) 946-3817; www.whitepinesinn.com.

Accommodations

Chateau Lodge: 1326 SR 2, Oregon; (815) 732-6195; www.chateaulodge.com.

The Patchwork Inn: 122 North Third Street, Oregon; (815) 732-4113; www.patchworkinn.com.

White Pines Inn/White Pines Forest State Park: One of the oldest Illinois state parks offers camping, cabins, and a restaurant (see above); 6712 West Pines Rd., Mount Morris; (815) 946-3817.

Bike Shops

Green River Adventure Sports: 148 South Peoria Ave., Dixon; (815) 288-1079; <http://greenriveradventuresports.com>.

Restrooms

Start/finish: The Mill Springs Day Use Area has restrooms and a water fountain.

Mile 6.7: John Deere Historic Site has restrooms and water.

Mile 18.6: Oregon Park West has restrooms and water.

Mile 25.5: Equestrian area at Lowden-Miller State Forest has a portable toilet.

Maps

USGS: Franklin Grove quad, Daysville quad, Dixon East quad, Grand Detour quad, Oregon quad.

DeLorme: Illinois Atlas & Gazetteer: Pages 25 and 17.

5 Rockford Ramble

Get a full taste of the Rockford area while touring newer suburbs, older residential neighborhoods, and many acres of parkland. The highlight of this ride is a 7-mile-long path that winds along the grassy banks of the Rock River. While passing through downtown Rockford, you'll have an opportunity to check out a few quality museums clustered together across the river.

Start: Rock Cut State Park, located at the northeast edge of Rockford.

Length: 30.1 miles.

Terrain: Mostly flat and gently rolling; a few small hills appear along the way as well.

Traffic and hazards: About 19 miles of this route follow paved paths; the rest of the route is on quiet side streets. While following the path on Charles Street, keep an eye peeled for cars pulling into the path at driveways and cross streets.

Getting there: From I-39/90 northwest of Rockford, exit west on SR 173. Enter the park on the left and turn right where the park road splits. Follow signs to the Lakeview Picnic Area. Park in the lot on the left, near the shore of Pierce Lake. Catch the beginning of the trail across the park road from the parking area. Coordinates for starting point: 16T 336329E 4690145N

The Ride

As the third-largest city in Illinois, Rockford claims a rich history as a Midwestern manufacturing center. While much of the manufacturing is gone, Rockford remains vibrant, with a handful of historic neighborhoods built during a time when the city's economic engine was purring. The city also has a collection of burgeoning suburbs and an active downtown area. The main focus of the city is the big, wide Rock River, which winds through the center of the city and a variety of neighborhoods.

The ride begins on the shore of Pierce Lake within Rock Cut State Park. The park is packed with trails, fishing spots, and picnic areas as well as hills, creeks, and large swaths of rehabilitated prairie. The initial stretch of trail takes you through lush