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Katy Trail State Park

by Jeff Durbin

Katy Trail State Park is Missouri's kaleidoscope state park. A slight turn of the kaleidoscope shows a Saturday afternoon family outing under dramatic Missouri River bluffs or a pleasant, traffic-free path for exercise during early morning or evening. Further turns reveal a day in the sun on the rolling Osage Plains, a commuter route in Sedalia or St. Charles, or a challenging journey across four-fifths of the state. Katy Trail State Park is not only a multiple-use state park, for hiking, bicycling and equestrian use, but a multiple-user state park – attracting walkers, birders, history buffs, horse riders, bicyclists and amateur geologists.

Katy Trail State Park is surely the most oddly shaped of Missouri's parks at 225 miles long and 100 feet wide. The dimensions are a clue that the Katy is a rails-to-trail conversion. The rails were laid by the

Missouri-Kansas-Texas (MKT) Railroad, which connected St. Louis to the Gulf of Mexico. Take the K and T of those initials, and you have the origin of the Katy name. The line on which today's Katy Trail runs was built between 1870 and 1893. When the MKT Railroad decided to cease operations in 1986, it led to the creation of a recreational trail in Missouri.

Under the 1983 National Trails System Act, a railroad line that would otherwise be abandoned is "banked" for potential future use. This keeps the corridor intact in case it is needed again. In the meantime, the right of way becomes a public recreational trail. A U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1990 upheld the federal act permitting these rail-banking and recreation uses. Thanks to the generosity of Edward and Pat Jones, who gave \$2.2 million for its initial development, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources began work on Katy Trail State Park the same year. The Katy Trail is now part of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail (it comprises the longest non-motorized segment), and the cross-country American Discovery Trail. It also is a Millennium Legacy Trail, designated for its importance to future generations.

The former railroad is now a ribbon across Missouri, from Clinton in the west to St. Charles in the east, taking in much of the state's scenery, ecological landscapes, and cultural heritage. Beyond the 10-foot-wide trail of crushed limestone, there is so much to see that you need a list to organize your travel itinerary:

Wildlife – including birds such as orioles, indigo buntings and turkey vultures, and mammals such as groundhogs and deer
Katy Railroad history – remnant signals, telegraph poles, mile markers, and vintage bridges are unique points of interest
Missouri history – French place names from early Missouri River settlement and travel, the Boone family, the Boonslick region, the Lewis and Clark expedition, and the Rhineland region of winemaking
German immigrants

Agriculture – the wide river bottoms are home to corn and soybeans, milo, sunflowers and pumpkins

The Missouri River – semi-tamed with wing dams and reinforced banks; but also semi-wild with sloughs, sandbars and islands, bordered by huge dolomite bluffs

Given all these features, every Katy Trail user probably has personal favorites. Many

people in mid-Missouri go to Rocheport again and again for the town's atmosphere and the way the river pins the trail against the tall Manitou bluffs stretching to McBaine. Others may prefer the wine region around Augusta, or the equestrian section between Sedalia and Calhoun.

Some trail users favor the bluffs and river views from Portland to Treloar, or the road cuts and deep ravines between Pilot Grove and Clifton City. The 100-foot right of way shelters a variety of birds in its woods and thickets, and colorful, mixed flocks can brighten even a winter's day. In summer, a tree-tunnel of shade is a treat. A path winding from the trail to a bench looking out over the Missouri River is worthwhile in any season. An old riveted steel bridge from the 1920s, with the manufacturer and date stamped on it, or bridges of arched concrete or wooden piles, appeal to many railroad enthusiasts. Purple-pink redbuds set against the new flush of green in April, old grain elevators, prairie grasses and open vistas – all these Katy scenes have their devotees.

The possibility the trail may eventually link with other trails to allow a border-to-border experience could make it an even more attractive draw for tourists. Currently the trail attracts around 400,000 visitors a year, many from outside Missouri, and a surprising number from overseas. The Katy, after all, is the longest developed rails-to-trails project in the United States.

Trail users can choose among 25 trailheads to get on and off the Katy – roughly one every ten miles. Trailheads, however, may be as many as 16 miles apart, so users should plan ahead. As former railroad stops, the trailheads are naturally located in communities small and large along the Katy route. Some cities, such as St. Charles,



DNR photos by Scott Myers

(Opposite page) Samantha Myers, Columbia, and her dog Bodhi walk along Katy Trail State Park and the Missouri River near Rocheport in western Boone County.

(Top) Katy Trail volunteer Shirley Wilson talks with Mark Culbertson, Springfield, near the Jefferson City Depot during the 2005 Katy Trail Ride.

(Center) Bicyclists on the 2005 Katy Trail Ride gather for a group shot at the Clinton depot.

(Above) Erica Dickson and Frank Lawson, St. Charles, take a break near the Jefferson City Depot during the 2005 Katy Trail Ride.



Boonville and Sedalia, were settled well before railroads came along, though the new and improved transportation typically spurred prosperity in its path. Other Katy towns sprang up only because of the railroad; they were market centers for the area and railheads for shipping farm products and manufactured goods.

For observant Katy Trail users, in between these 25 trailheads are reminders of even more railroad stops during the glory days of the Katy and of American railroads. Now not much more than a sign, a wide spot in the right of way, and a few houses signify railheads such as Lewis, Beaman, Pleasant Green, Wilton and Peers, which once supplied Katy cars with coal, livestock, grains and hay.

Today, many towns along the Katy route have embraced the trail, as it improves local quality of life and makes good economic sense. Cafes, bicycle and antique shops, campgrounds and bed-and-breakfasts are ideal for attracting trail users. Chambers of commerce and businesses frequently mention the Katy Trail as a selling point for their communities.



Photo by George Denniston

(Above right) Cyclists on the Katy Trail pass the St. Marcus Church near Rhineland, in Montgomery County.
(Below) Katy Trail travelers cross Montgomery County's Loutre River near McKittrick.

The annual Katy Ride, sponsored by the Department of Natural Resources and held the third week of June, is another magnet for bicycle riders. Three hundred riders usually participate in the five-day event, which goes from one trail end to the other, changing themes and alternating directions year to year. The Katy Ride could not take place – nor could many other trail operations – without the support of Katy Trail volunteers. Each volunteer chooses a home segment of the trail (say, the western section from Clinton to Boonville), and does Katy duty at least four hours per month.

The Department of Natural Resources continues to upgrade the trail piece by piece, trailhead by trailhead. New restrooms, drinking fountains, wayside historical markers, and trailhead “info depots” all make the Katy more user-friendly. The department is also developing the St. Charles-Machens segment to complete the entire 238-mile Katy property.

For more information about Katy Trail State Park or other Missouri state parks and historic sites, contact the Department of Natural Resources toll free at 1-800-334-6946 (voice) or 1-800-379-2419 (Telecommunications Device for the Deaf). Information can also be found by visiting the Web at [www.mostateparks.com].

For information about becoming a Katy Trail State Park volunteer, call the toll-free number. A volunteer application also can be completed online at [www.mostateparks.com/katytrail/volunteer.htm].

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Photo by George Denniston