

# Root River & Harmony-Preston Valley State Trails



## Trail Guide

### Location

The Root River and Harmony - Preston Valley State Trails are part of the Blufflands State Trail System located in southeastern Minnesota. The Root River segment passes through Houston and Fillmore counties. The Harmony - Preston Valley segment is entirely within Fillmore County.



The Root River and Harmony - Preston Valley State Trails provide spectacular views of the areas distinctive limestone bluffs; access to historic towns; sixty miles of multi-purpose trails; connections to water trails, campgrounds, and state forests; and an immersive natural experience.

Photos courtesy of MN DNR, unless otherwise noted.

The DNR Information Center is available to provide free publications of facilities and services as well as answers to questions pertaining to DNR recreational opportunities in Minnesota.



The DNR Information Center  
500 Lafayette Road  
St. Paul, MN 55155-4040  
651-296-6157 (Metro Area)  
1-888-MINNDNR (646-6367 MN Toll Free)  
TTY: 651-296-5484 (Metro Area)  
TTY: 1-800-657-3969 (MN Toll Free)  
[mndnr.gov/state\\_trails](http://mndnr.gov/state_trails)

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Respect Private Property - Ask First

# A Guide to the Root River & Harmony-Preston Valley State Trails

## Overview

The Root River and Harmony-Preston Valley State Trails are located in southeastern Minnesota's Blufflands region. The Blufflands region is a unique, river-dissected landscape with many rivers and streams, such as the Root River, flowing into the Mississippi. Ages ago, these waterways cut deep into the earth resulting in majestic rock outcrops, steep wooded valleys and ravines, and diverse plant and animal communities.



### Fountain

The Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad platted Fountain in 1870. The town gets its name from "Fountain Spring" – the source of the railway town's water supply. Fountain is the western gateway to the Root River State Trail. Public restrooms and parking are available at the Fountain trailhead.



### Peterson

Founded in 1867, Peterson was the site of flour and feed mills before trout hatcheries became its main industry. The Peterson State Fish Hatchery, founded in 1871, is a mile south of town (now operated by the MN DNR). There is a canoe launch in town, as well as public restrooms, parking, and a campground.



### Harmony

The "Biggest Little Town in Southern Minnesota", Harmony is home to both traditional Amish communities and green industries. Harmony is the southern gateway to the Harmony-Preston Valley State Trail and offers lodging, dining, and entertainment. A trail center, parking, and public restrooms are available at the trailhead.



### Preston

Settled in 1853 along the south branch of the Root River, this community was active in milling. Today the town is the county seat of Fillmore County. It offers a canoe launch, picnic area, campground, lodging, and dining. Public restrooms and parking are available at the Preston trailhead.

The Root River State Trail meanders 42 miles alongside the Root River from Fountain to Houston. The Harmony-Preston Valley State Trail runs for approximately 18 miles, connecting the towns of Harmony and Preston, both settled in the 1850s. The trail rises and falls with the bluffs, winding through historic towns tucked into hillsides, past rolling farm fields, milling districts, and relics of the railroads, heyday. Lush and verdant stretches present the visitor with views of the area's natural beauty. Both trails are designed for hiking, biking, in-line skating, and cross-country skiing.



### Houston

Settled in 1852, Houston was a steamboat port and the center of railroad transportation. Houston is the eastern gateway to the Root River Trail. It offers a canoe launch, a picnic area, a campground and other lodging and dining opportunities. Public restrooms and parking are available at the Houston trailhead.



### Rushford

Settled in 1854, Rushford was a major railroad center and mill town. Rushford is home to the historic Rushford Depot, now used as a trail center and museum. Rushford offers a canoe launch, a picnic area, lodging, and dining. A trail center, parking, campground, and public restrooms are available at the Rushford trailhead.



### Lanesboro

Platted in 1868 along the South Branch as a resort town, Lanesboro flourished as a transportation and mill center. Today Lanesboro has a historic downtown district and offers a campground and picnic area, lodging, dining, and entertainment opportunities. A trail center, parking, campground, and public restrooms are available at the Lanesboro trailhead.



### Whalan

Platted in 1868 as a railroad town, Whalan was once the tobacco center of Fillmore County. Parking, picnic areas, and campgrounds are located along the trail just outside of Whalan.

## Trail Etiquette: Share the Trail with Others

- Stay on designated trails.
- Keep right so others can pass.
- Keep all pets on leash.
- Obey traffic signs and rules.
- Pack out all garbage and litter.
- Respect adjoining landowners' rights and privacy.
- Warn other trail users when passing by giving an audible signal.
- Overnight camping and campfires are permitted only on designated campsites.
- Do not leave campfires unattended.
- Enjoy the beauty of wild plants and animals, but leave them undisturbed for everyone to enjoy.

Trail users are legally responsible for obeying the rules and regulations provided in Minnesota Rules, State Recreational Trails, 6100.3000 through 6100.4300.

## Rest Areas and Camping Sites

- Public rest areas are available along the route to rest, picnic, and explore.
- Camp only in designated campsites; available on first-come, first-serve basis.
- Bring drinking water. Drinking river water is not recommended, but if you do, it must be treated.
- Respect private property. Stop only at designated sites; much of the surrounding area is private property.
- Be sanitary! Use designated toilet facilities or bury human waste away from the river.

**THE GREAT MINNESOTA SKI PASS**  
This trail requires a permit for cross-country skiing. For more information about the Ski Pass, please call the DNR Info Center at 1-888-MINNDNR or visit [www.mndnr.gov/state\\_trails](http://www.mndnr.gov/state_trails).

## Scavenger Hunt

Explore the vibrant Root River and Harmony-Preston Valley State Trails. The landscape abounds with a variety of plants and animals and the rocky layers of the distinctive bluffs are a virtual treasure trove of plant and animal fossils. While traveling the trail, keep your eyes and ears open, you may encounter one of the following:



### Brachiopods

Millions of years ago parts of southeastern Minnesota were covered by a large, shallow sea. Brachiopods — animals that look like clams — were one of the many animals living in the sea. Look carefully in the rock walls along the trail to find fossils of these ancient creatures.



### Turkey vultures

Like wild turkeys, turkey vultures have bald, red heads. Turkey vultures eat mostly dead flesh, and stick their heads into carcasses to get the meat. A bald head is easier to clean after meals. These large birds are often seen soaring with V-shaped wings tipping, clumsily, from side to side.



### Red-tailed hawks

Whether perched on a branch or soaring through the sky, the broad reddish-brown tail of the red-tailed hawk distinguishes it from other hawks. Even if you do not see the red-tailed hawk, you may hear its high-pitched screech.



### Little bluestem:

Prairieland along the trail is made up of a variety of grasses, including bunches of little bluestem.

This grass has flat bluish leaves that start growing in late spring and keep growing until winter frost. Little bluestem typically grows to three feet and is noticeably smaller than big bluestem, which can reach up to ten feet.



### Oak trees

Both northern red oak and bur oak trees grow along the trail. Northern red oaks have leaves with pointy edges

while the bur oak leaves have rounded edges. In autumn, northern red oak leaves turn a brilliant red while bur oak leaves turn yellow or brown. The gnarly silhouette of the bur oak is easy to identify year round.



### White-tailed deer

White-tailed deer are the largest animal most people will see along the trail. The deer are named for the white underside of their tail

that they raise and wave while running away in surprise or alarm. Both bucks (males) and does (females) are reddish-brown in the summer and grayish-brown in the winter. Young deer, or fawns, are reddish-brown with white spots on their backs.



### Gray (common) treefrogs

In wet, wooded areas, listen for the slow, birdlike trill of the gray treefrog. Although common in

Minnesota, this frog is often hard to locate because it changes color to blend in with tree bark and leaves. One color that doesn't change is the bright yellow inner-thigh of the gray frog's hind legs.



### Turkeys

Traveling in flocks of six to forty birds in winter and on their own come spring, these large, round birds are

easy to spot. Wild turkeys are black or gray and males have a red head and wattle—a fleshy growth beneath the beak. Turkeys have many calls including gobbles, clucks, and purrs.



### Beavers

As the trail passes rivers and creeks, look and listen for signs of beavers. This large, furry rodent with oversized

orange teeth and a paddle-shaped tail makes its home in the water by felling and stacking branches and logs into dams and lodges. If you do not see a beaver, you may see its home or hear the slap of its paddle tail on the water's surface.