Creve Coeur Park Trail Guide

Creve Coeur Park is the largest park consisting of 2,240 acres in the County Park system. The Park takes its name from the French which means “broken heart.” Although there are legends and stories as how the lake got this name but the actual reasons has been lost over time.

Creve Coeur Lake is an ox-bow lake forming several thousands of years ago when a meander loop of the Missouri River was cut off. Historically the lake was much larger than what we see today as it extended to the west and included Little Creve Coeur or Upper Lake. Over time some of the areas silted in reducing the lake’s size and forever separating the two lakes.

The lake became a vacation destination and resort area in the middle 1800’s. In 1881, the Missouri Pacific Railroad built a spur line to the lake from Laclede Station. The Spectator of June 18, 1886 announced the completion of a rival line by the St. Louis, Kansas City and Colorado (the Katy). Jacob Studt, a local farmer and general store owner, built the first of several hotels, dance pavilions, and boat houses on the Upper Lake. In 1889 he offered grounds and a subsidy for the annual county fair, which was held there for about thirty years.

Not to be out done by the railroads the United Railway Company built a street car line from Delmar & Kingsland to the park in 1899. The line terminated at the “Brick Building.” This old track line is still visible in some parts of the park today. Eventually a “scenic railway” cable car was built from the brick building area to the lakefront. This railway operated on a gravity principle downhill, and was pulled to the top by a large cable. After the 1904 World’s Fair, a 255-foot observation tower was moved from Forest Park to Creve Coeur. This tower was placed north of the brick building overlooking the lake but has since been removed.

Around the 1920’s the area began to decline in popularity as gangsters and hoodlums began to frequent the saloons, restaurants and nightclubs located at the lakefront. By the end of Prohibition, Creve Coeur was almost exclusively a gangster hideout.

Four hundred (400) acres of land was donated to St. Louis County on June 3, 1945, and Creve Coeur Lake Memorial Park became the first County Park. Between 1950 and 1955, the lake almost dried up, and local conservation agents were attempting to save the fish. Rather than allow the fish to die, citizens were asked to come to the lake and take whatever fish they could find by any means they had available. During the following seasons, the Missouri River rose and backed up into the lake, not only refilling it, but also restocking the fish supply.

The use of the Federal Land & Water Conservation Fund grant in land acquisition and park development placed strong restrictions on future uses of the lands for purposes other than outdoor recreation. Should the lands be used for other than park purposes, some conditions of federal law would have to be addressed. In early 1990, MoDOT started active planning for the extension of Page Avenue. It was determined that 25.8 acres of right-of-way needed to be taken from Creve Coeur Park across the south end of the lake. Section 6(f) of the Land & Water Conservation Act and Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act require that the environmental damage associated with this highway project be mitigated. As a result, 1,005.8 acres were added to Creve Coeur Park in 1999. Four miles of paved bicycle path were constructed in the park. MoDOT was required to
dredge Creve Coeur Lake to help remedy a chronic siltation problem and to create a new lake (Mallard Lake) to help alleviate the recurrence of siltation. MoDOT was asked to contribute not less than six million dollars to implement the entire mitigation plan. 167 acres of the mitigation tract have been leased to Crystal Springs Quarry Golf Club for 30 years, until December 2029.

Lakeview Loop
3.7 mile Flat Paved Treadway Hiker & Biker

Lakeview Trail is a multi-purpose loop paved trail that encircles Creve Coeur Lake. Along this 3.7 mile trail are numerous access points where one can get on the trail and go. If you start at the Sailboat Cove and head south in a counter clockwise manner around the lake one of the first landmarks will be the bridge crossing the lakes’ outlet. From the park it is 2.5 miles before Creve Coeur Creek flows into the Missouri River. Swinging on around to the west side of the lake are numerous soccer and athletic fields. Here is where the trail forks. To the left is the Lakeview Trail; to the right is the Meadows Loop Trail. The trails ultimately reconnect underneath Page Avenue.

During the spring and fall migration literally thousands of ducks make Creve Coeur a stopover on their long journey north and south. This portion of the trail offers good vistas for viewing waterfowl on the lake. Continuing past the parking area on the left the trail descends a small hill. The wooded area to the left at one time was an island in the lake created with the 1980’s dredging of the lake. Continuing on toward the west the trail parallels Creve Coeur Creek. The trail makes a sharp turn to the south as it goes under Page Avenue. Along this route are shallow wetlands with seasonal wading birds and waterfowl. At the end of this stretch of the trail it takes a sharp turn to the east. To the left are views of the lake and to the right are the steep old river bluffs of the Missouri River. The wooded bluff hillsides are a great place for spring wildflowers and birds.

The trail breaks out of the woods at Dripping Springs. This waterfall coveted in legend is the reason the lake is called Creve Coeur-broken heart. As the story goes the local Native American Chief was not happy with his daughter’s choice of husband and forbid the marriage. The Native American Princess distraught and heartbroken climbed to the top of the waterfall and jumped to her death. Looking at the height of the waterfall the question has to be asked; how many times did she jump off? But that is the legend.

For the remainder of the way back to the Sailboat Cove the trail remains along the lake and out in the open. If it was not the usual lakeside breeze this would be an oven during the hottest summer days. Suitable for cross country skiing.

Meadows Loop Trail
2.8 mile Flat Paved Treadway Hiker & Biker

Meadows Loop trail is a 2.8 mile multi-purpose paved trail. The trail is entirely on the west side of the lake. The trailhead is located in the parking area for the Gateway Sports Athletic Field Complex. Here there are modern restrooms and drinking water. Starting out and going toward the west the trail parallels Creve Coeur Mill Road. The high ground is a result of fill be placed on the area during the 1980’s dredging. The trail makes a sharp turn to the south next to the not-for-profit Forest Relief of Missouri. If you are interested in heading out for the Katy Trail there is a connector trail to your left across from Forest Relief. Underneath the Page Avenue Bridge that crosses a portion of Creve Coeur Lake
Meadows Trail meets with the Lakeview Trail. Here the Meadows Trail just follows the existing Lakeview Trail to the south. This portion of the trail parallels the lake for a distance of about 1.3 miles. Good views of the lake and seasonal waterfowl birding opportunities abound. The trail makes a sharp turn back to the south and it is approximately a half mile back to the parking lot and the beginning of the trail. Suitable for cross country skiing.

**Creve Coeur Connector**

2.8 mile  Flat  Paved Treadway  Hiker & Biker

Creve Coeur Connector is a 2.8 paved multi-purpose one way trail connecting Creve Coeur Park with the Katy Trail in St. Charles County. The trail parallels Page Avenue the entire way. But don’t let that discourage you from taking this trail. A segment of the trail goes past Little Creve Coeur Lake. This is the upper lake as identified by plats and maps of the 1800’s. The marsh is located on the left as you come off the bridge that crosses Maryland Heights Expressway. This remnant wetland is one of the largest surviving wetlands in the County. This shallow wetland is a glimpse back into the far distance past as to what the Missouri River Valley looked like before highways and levees. During the summer months the wetland abounds in wading birds, soras, bitterns. The shallow water levels are a haven for cattails, sedges, bulrushes and water__. The bright yellow blossoms of the ___ are a sight to see.

Just past the Little Creve Coeur Wetland is an area planted with native prairie grasses and wildflowers. Named after the Native American Princess Memetonwish this area is a mosaic of shallow wetlands and prairies. Memetonwish wetland/prairie complex is about 100 acres. Elevated above the wetland/prairie complex the trail offers a good vista for birding. Spring and fall the occasional Northern Harrier can be seen as it floats over the land in its recognizable undulating fight in search of prey.

This portion of Creve Coeur Park was purchased through mitigation and the running of Page Avenue across a portion of Creve Coeur Lake. This 600 acre parcel of the park is being restored to wetlands, prairies and woodlands. The Parks Department has partnered with the Missouri Department of Conservation, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, St. Louis Audubon Society, the Howard Bend Levee District, the U.S. Corps of Engineers, the City of Maryland Heights and the Saint Louis County Highways and Traffic Department to make these changes happen. Prior to becoming parkland nearly the entire 600 acres was farmed.

The trail continues on. A parking lot to access the connector trail is located just off of River Valley Road. At this parking lot there is one more mile of park trail and 1.3 miles over the Missouri River until the Katy Trail is reached. Suitable for cross country skiing.

**Mallard Lake Loop Trail**

2.6 mile  Flat  Paved Treadway  Hiker & Biker

Mallard Trail is a 2.6 mile loop trail around Mallard Lake with a portion of the trail for hikers only. The best place to access the trail is from the Lakehouse Café parking lot. Lakehouse Café is a great place to finish a hike and top it off with a cool drink.

Mallard Lake was constructed as a large detention basin for Creve Coeur Creek. The creek was rerouted into the basin where the water can be slowed and any sediments being carried by the creek water settle out to the bottom of the lake. Cleaner sediment
reduced water passes on out of Mallard Lake into Creve Coeur Lake. This should prolong the life of Creve Coeur Lake putting off another dredging of the lake for years and years to come.

From the Lakehouse Café and heading toward the north the trail is paved and is multi-use. The trail offers good views of Mallard Lake with its summertime egrets, herons, geese and ducks. The trail takes a bend to the left and crosses Creve Coeur Creek. Here the landscape of the trail makes a drastic change. Left behind are the open spaces and old fields of the Lake House Café; meadowlarks, swallows are left behind as well. Now the trail changes from pavement to rock surface. Bikers and roller bladders are prohibited from going any further.

For the next 1.6 miles the trail will take you through a bottomland woodland with seeps, creeks and marshes. Not to mention the trail will be alongside the old Missouri River Bluffs. The trail follows the old railroad line where ice was hauled from the lake to an ice house that disappeared long ago. This elevated plateau provides a good view of the surrounding woodlands. The upland bluffs and surrounding hillsides are a constant source of water as the water seeps from the hills to the bottomlands. As this water accumulates it forms pockets of interconnected pools of water creating an ideal habitat for marsh plants such as: bulrush, spike rush, sedges, cattails and a host of other species.

At the end of the long bluff run the trail again turns into pavement as the trail intersects with the Lakeview Trail. Continuing on now to the west the Mallard Trail and the Lakeview Trail will overlap for about ½ of a mile. Then the trail goes to the left (west) and overlaps the Meadows Trail for about 3/10 of a mile. Now on the home stretch to the south the Mallard Lake Trail returns to the Lakehouse Café parking lot. Suitable for cross country skiing.

The portion of trail running along the bluff is hikers only no bikes are allowed.

**Bootleggers Run**

2.5 mile Slight Hilly Natural Treadway Mt. Bikes/Hikers

Bootleggers Run is a natural single track trail that is completely within the upper portion of Creve Coeur Park off of Dorsett Road. The trail was laid out and constructed by GORC and their army of volunteers.

The Bootleggers Run Trailhead is located at the gravel parking lot just pass the tennis courts in the upper portion of the park. There are no water or restroom facilities immediately at the trailhead but facilities do exist nearby.

When you think of Bootleggers Run what thoughts do you conjure up in your mind? Are you traveling some dark, quiet, winding back road far away from people? Well if that is how you like to travel then Bootleggers Run is the perfect trail for you. Although you are never really that far from people and the park’s other activities.

Shortly after starting the trail just within the woodline the trail splits and you can go to the right or to the left. Going to the left will ultimately take you back to the trailhead parking lot. Going to the right takes you to a dead end loop and then you have to walk the same trail back. For the sake of fun let’s go on the trail to the right.

Not too far after you make this decision to go to the right the trail crosses the old trolley line. Today, from that crossing it appears to be just an old roadbed. The cinders are still packed on the surface of the right away apparently restricting tree growth. At this intersection take a short walk to the left on the trolley right-of-way. Here you will begin to
tower over the valley below. To cross the valley the trolley line had to be built up over the valley as much as 80 feet to make the line nearly level. The original trolley line ran from Creve Coeur Park to Delmar & Kingston. The trolley line was constructed in 1899 and brought people out to enjoy the beautiful lake.

This section of the Bootleggers Run is 1 mile in length. During the time of the year the trees have leaves this trail will be in the shade. The narrow winding trail goes through one of the prettiest woodlands in the park. Majestic tall oaks, hickories, basswood and other tree species tower above the trail. One of the biggest trees in the park is found off of this stretch of trail. This old tree was probably around when the City of St. Louis was founded by the French in 1764. Today it is huge; its first branch coming off of the trunk is bigger than most trees. It appears to be a red oak and has a circumference of 16 feet 2 inches. The height of the tree is an estimated 70 feet. The Missouri Champion Red Oak is in Stoddard County and has a circumference of 254 inches (21 feet, 2 inches) with a height of 101 feet. So not quite a champion tree but it is well worth the short walk down the trail to see this tree. It is right off of the trail, you can’t miss it.

This grandparent tree is not the only large tree along the trail route. On this trail you will experience a mature natural woodland with many tree species that include: white oak, red oak, black walnut, basswood, and sycamore. The trail takes you along the ridge then begins to descend through a series of switchbacks down into the valley. Tree and shrub species and the floristic vegetation begin to change as you get closer to the valley floor. The trail makes a loop then you have to re-trace your steps back to where the trail made the original branching off to the right near the gravel parking lot and trailhead. Now you can go straight ahead at this trail intersection and circle back to the trailhead parking lot or make the short walk back to the gravel parking lot at the trailhead.

This section begins by heading down into the valley through a series of long switchbacks. Although there are a few large trees most of the woodland is much younger. The tree species list adds persimmon, sassafras and black cherry. The shrub species include spicebush, paw paw and the always present honeysuckle. There are stretches of the trail where the understory is dominated by a dense covering of spicebush. This native shrub was used as a source of tea by Native Americans and the early settlers.

Once near the bottom of the hill you can see how much fill was required to construct the trolley line. As you climb back out of the valley the trees get smaller an indicator that at one time this might have been a cleared field that has been allowed to grow up.

As you climb up to the park roadway there is a sign that states the trail ends. However, cross the road and the trail continues. Re-crossing the park road the trail enters another mature woodland. The trail stays along the top of the ridge overlooking the Missouri River floodplain below. It is difficult to imagine that the Missouri River carved these old river bluffs.

The soils in the area are termed Loess (pronounced lust). These wind born soils were laid down at the time of glaciers as they advanced and receded. The soils are erosive as indicated at a number of old creek washes and gullies along the trail.

A dead end side trail comes in on the right. This ½ mile trail is a series of switchbacks and ultimately dead ends with no connection to any trail.

Bootleggers Run continues through the woods until you burst out in an opening and directly across from the trailhead parking lot. You might be tempted to continue on the trail as the pathway does go back into the woods. And you can do this for a short time but
you reach a point where the trail turns steep and is not a finished trail at all. So save
yourself some aggravation and get off of the trail across from the trailhead parking lot.

Bootlegger is a term believed to have first been used during the Civil War when
soldiers would sneak alcohol back into camp by hiding the container in their boot leg. The
term and occupation reached its height during the prohibition days from 1920 thru 1933
when the sale of alcohol was prohibited. Bootleggers would run alcohol from the distillers
to the speak easy trying to evade law enforcement. Enjoy one of the more natural trails at
Creve Coeur Park.