Tallgrass Prairie

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve
Strong City, KS

The Nature Conservancy
Protecting nature. Preserving life.™

Hiking Trails Guide

This trail guide was developed to provide our visitors with general information on the trails in the preserve. Trails are open 24 hours, and although hikers are not required to check in at the visitor center, it is advisable to obtain current trail conditions and/or closures before heading out.

From late March through April, controlled burns may be scheduled and some trails will be closed during burning operations. In addition, from April through July, you may encounter cattle in all pastures except Windmill. While these steers (no bulls) can be quite curious, they are not dangerous and pose no threat to hikers. Wherever you encounter a cattle guard, look for a gate off to the side for you to use. Please ensure that gates are closed behind you. Trail junctions are marked with a brown-painted cinder block on the ground with the trail names painted on it.

Cattleguard. Hiking gate to left. NPS photo.

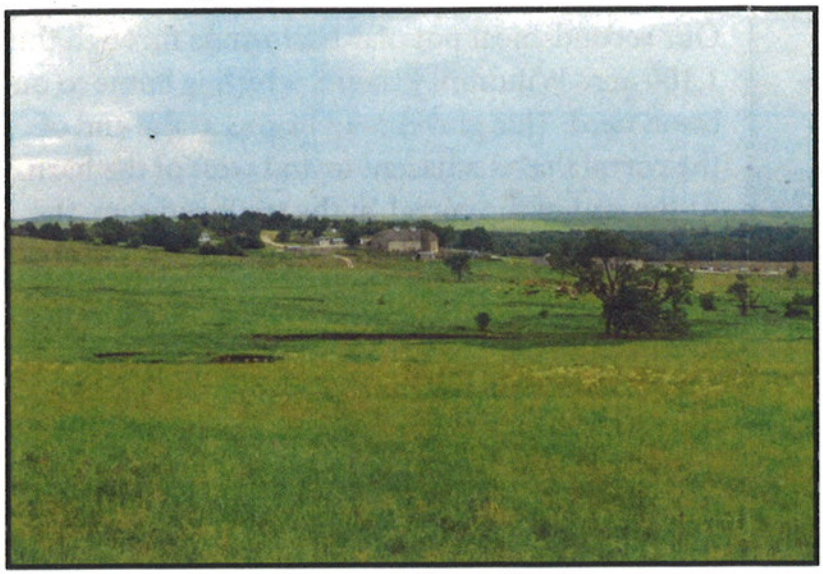
Cinder block trail marker. NPS photo.

Controlled burn in progress. NPS photo.

Still, because cinder blocks get broken or moved, it is highly recommended that you carry the preserve's trail map with you, and remain cognizant of your location as you travel through the preserve. Cell phone coverage is not reliable in most parts of the preserve. Trail maps may be obtained at the visitor center and may also be downloaded from our website.

Observing wildlife adds to the enjoyment of everyone's prairie experience, so please do not handle, harass, or harm the wildlife. Snakes, lizards, birds, insects, opossums, box turtles, bison, coyotes, and deer can all be encountered along these trails. A pair of binoculars is recommended for wildlife observation. Pets are not allowed on any of the backcountry trails. They are only allowed, on leash, on the Southwind Nature Trail, the Bottomland Nature Trail, Fox Creek Trail, and around the Ranch Complex grounds. When cattle are not occupying Two-Section Pasture, dogs on leash are allowed on the Two-Section Trail.

Ranch Legacy Trail



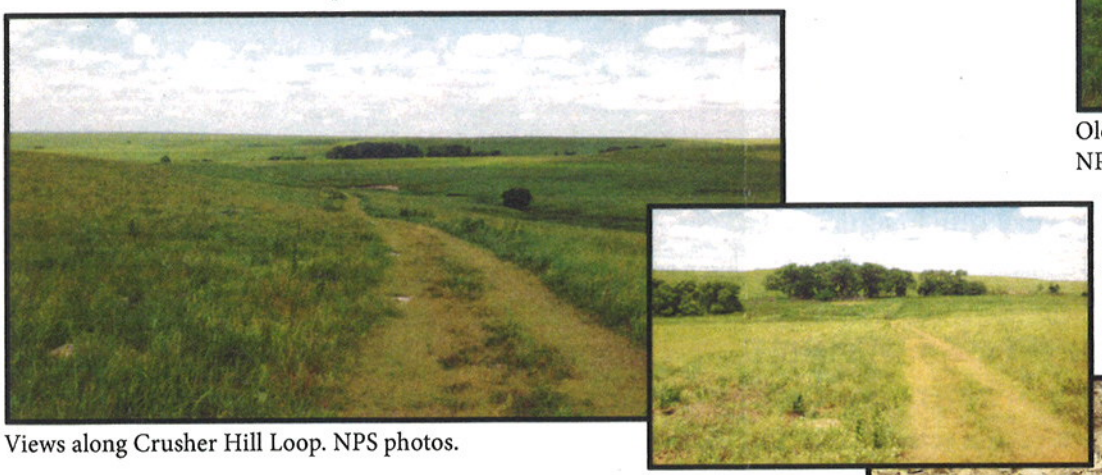
Ranch Complex from Ranch Legacy Trail. NPS photo.

This trail connects the Ranch Complex with the Crusher Hill Loop and the Scenic Overlook Trail. Taking off from the Z Bar Spur (named for the Z Bar Ranch, the last private ranch before becoming the current federal preserve), just south of the visitor center parking lot, it crosses a small creek, and then climbs the hill past the pit silo to the southwest. It then meanders by a cattle mineral site, which is crisscrossed with numerous cattle trails. Pay close attention to the main hiking trail and your map through this area.

Be looking ahead for the old iron posts designating the trail junctions. Disregard the numbers and colored arrows attached to the posts. These are from an old trail system no longer in use. At the next junction the Crusher Hill Loop heads south. The Ranch Legacy Trail continues west and then turns north to connect with the Scenic Overlook Trail.

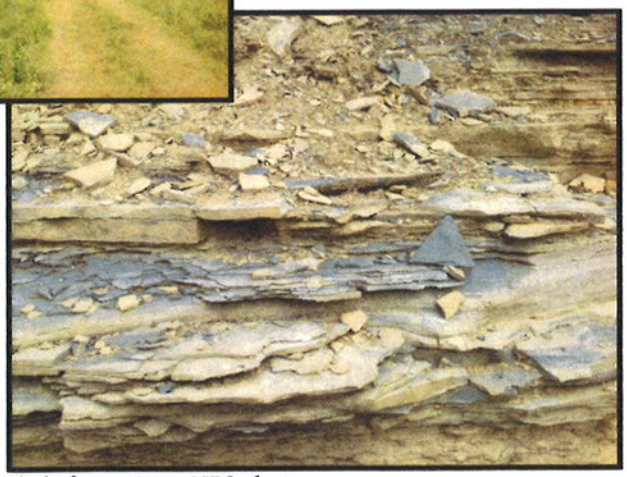
Old trail junction marker.
NPS photo.

Crusher Hill Loop



Views along Crusher Hill Loop. NPS photos.

This 2.2 mile loop departs to the south from the Ranch Legacy Trail and descends into a nice valley with a perennial stream and a cottonwood grove, providing plenty of cool shade in the summer and a nice place for a picnic or rest stop. Substantial rains may make the three stream crossings wide and potentially dangerous. Some of these crossings display excellent examples of the fragile layers of shale formations.



Shale formations. NPS photo.

Scenic Overlook Trail

Bison lounging in Windmill Pasture. NPS photo.

Our second-most popular trail winds through the 1,100 acre Windmill Pasture, which is home to our bison herd. This gravel road begins at the end of the corral that is adjacent to and west of the barn. At the end of the corral, at the trailhead sign, the gravel road turns left and crosses the first of three cattle guards on its 3.2 mile ascent to an excellent overlook. After the first cattle guard, the road curves around to the north and uphill past a pond on the left. Once at the top, you will find another

Pay attention to bison warning signs.

Large pond at start of Scenic Overlook Trail. NPS photo.

cattle guard as you enter Windmill Pasture. Please take note of various bison warning signs. Hikers are cautioned to keep at least 100 yards from the bison. For your safety, do not attempt to pet, harass, approach, or otherwise disturb the bison. Despite their docile appearance, they are very quick, agile, and unpredictable.

Bison on alert and wary. NPS photo.

Several hundred yards before you exit Windmill Pasture, you will pass a stretch of prairie on your left that has quite a plethora of wildflowers in the spring. Shortly, you will exit Windmill Pasture and enter Big Pasture, and by the time you reach the overlook, you've gained 300 ft. in elevation and are standing at about 1500 ft. above sea level, about as high as any other hill in the area. Plan on a stop here to take in the panoramic view, and quite often, you'll be treated to a brisk breeze.

From this vantage point you can see Fox Creek to the east, the cedar trees surrounding the historic buildings to the southeast, and on a clear day, you may spot the Chase County Courthouse in Cottonwood Falls to the south. Interesting to note too, is that there are four distinct layers of limestone deposition within the 300 ft. you've just gained, representing four million years of geologic history. From here, you may return along the road, or if you're up for another four miles of hiking, consider following the Prairie Fire Loop east from the overlook, which will connect with the Davis Trail, bringing you back to the schoolhouse and Ranch Complex area.

Davis Trail

This trail is named after George H. Davis, owner of the Spring Hill Ranch from 1935-1955. You can catch this trail from the Schoolhouse Spur, which begins at the Lower Fox Creek School parking lot. About 1/3 mile from the school, if you take the left trail you descend into a nice little valley before you cross a creek and begin a steep climb up to the Scenic Overlook Trail at the east entrance to Windmill Pasture.

View of Lower Fox Creek Schoolhouse from Schoolhouse Spur. NPS photo.

A right turn from Schoolhouse Spur will lead you north on the Davis Trail past the bison handling corrals, constructed in 2013 for the purpose of isolating the bison for inoculations and other necessary procedures. The Davis Trail continues up and over a rise, and down into a very picturesque valley.

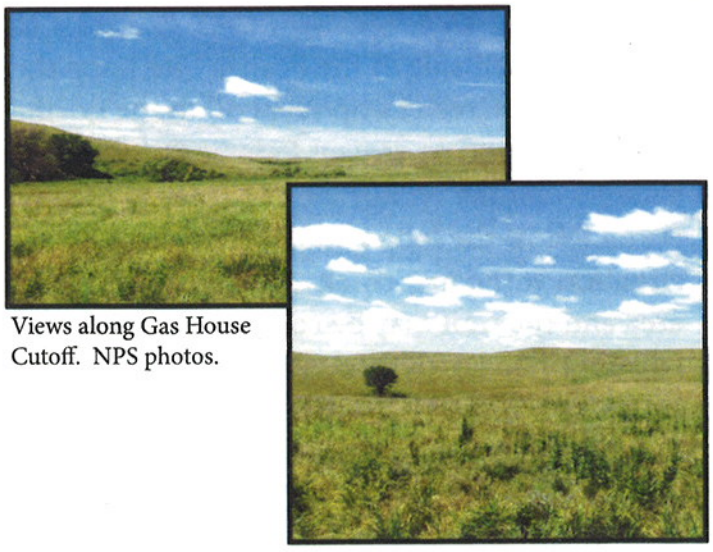
Bison being released from handling corrals. NPS photo.

Several trail junctions with the Prairie Fire Loop and Gas House Cutoff come later. After significant rainfall, expect a couple of minor creek crossings.

View along Davis Trail. NPS photo.

Gas House Cutoff

If you continue on the Davis Trail past the Prairie Fire Loop junction, you'll come to the Gas House Cutoff trail heading to the northwest. This 1.3 mile trail bisects the Prairie Fire Loop in a gradual ascent. For most of this trail, you'll get incredible views of nothing but prairie. Except for the trail and occasional exposed natural gas lines, you'll find nothing to remind you of any human impact on the landscape.



Views along Gas House Cutoff. NPS photos.

Prairie Fire Loop

This 6-mile loop takes you through the heart of Big Pasture, with plenty of endless prairie vistas to the north and west. Big Pasture was once divided into two pastures named Gas House Pasture (on the southern end) and West Branch Pasture (northern end), but the cross fence was removed, taking the pasture back to its original name of Big Pasture.

View from Prairie Fire Loop. NPS photo.

In the 1930's several dozen gas wells were installed throughout the northern portion of this pasture. Some of the old pipelines are now exposed. In 2009 these old wells were capped, just a small percentage of the thousands left in Kansas from those days.

At the junction of the west portion of the Prairie Fire Loop and the northern end of the Scenic Overlook Trail, the Prairie Fire Loop continues north. From here on, the scenery becomes more isolated as you're really getting into the heart of the backcountry now. After approximately one mile, you'll pass the Gas House Cutoff on the right. Continue another mile, passing the West Branch Trail and Palmer Creek Loop on the left and from here the trail heads south, passing the Gas House Cutoff on the right. After about 1/3 mile, you can continue on the Prairie Fire Loop uphill to the right, or catch the Davis Trail (left) back to the Lower Fox Creek School and Ranch Complex.

West Branch Trail

As the western side of the Prairie Fire loop reaches its northern terminus, you'll find the West Branch Trail taking off to the northwest, where, after almost a mile, it crosses and ends about 200 yards north of Palmer Creek, the northernmost point in the preserve accessible by trail.

Palmer Creek along West Branch Trail. NPS photo.

Palmer Creek Loop

On the eastern side of the Prairie Fire Loop the 2.3 mile Palmer Creek Loop veers off to the northeast and crosses and re-crosses Palmer Creek. This loop extends into the far northeast corner of the preserve. If you follow the loop counter-clockwise, pay special attention at the first creek crossing, as this is a wooded area and the trail may be covered and difficult to follow. The trail will continue north through the woods for about 200 yards and then veer off to the west through the grass, running parallel to the creek for about 600 yards before turning southwest and recrossing the creek.

Approach and rough terrain along Palmer Creek Loop. NPS photos.

Two-Section Trail (Dogs allowed on leash seasonally)

This trail is so named because it traverses two sections of 640 acres each. There are two trailheads for this east-west 3.1 mile linear trail on the east side of the preserve, with parking areas on both ends. The eastern trailhead provides a parking area and information kiosk with a map, as well as fishing information. To start at the eastern trailhead, drive on US Hwy 50 to Rd U, a gravel road located about 1 ¾ miles east of Strong City. Follow Rd U north for about ½ mile to a small dirt parking lot beside a corral on your left. The trail climbs the hill to the west, and then levels out for the next two miles. Once you're on top of the ridge, you'll hear US Hwy 50 and see Strong City just to the south, but the expansive views of the prairie to the north and west make up for it. This trail can be used to access the three fishing ponds to the north of the trail. There are no designated side trails coming off the main trail that will connect with the ponds. If you wish to visit the ponds, just make your way over as you come to them.

Shortly after you pass the third and western-most pond, you drop down into a beautiful little valley for the final mile, ending at the western trailhead, which is just .4 mile east of the Bottomland Trail parking lot. As you come off the western trailhead onto the gravel road, turn right and follow the road west over the historic stone bridge to the parking lot located a few hundred yards ahead on your right.

Bottomland Nature Trail (Dogs allowed on leash year-round)

Access this trail by Rd 227, east off of KS Hwy 177, about ½ mile north of US Hwy 50, at St Anthony's cemetery. Follow the road about ¼ mile down to the parking lot and trailhead on the left. One of the early trails of the preserve, it remains a popular trail due to the easy, level, and compacted dirt tread, which is wheelchair friendly when dry. This trail provides visitors an opportunity to experience walking through a riparian prairie, while gaining an understanding of its rarity as a natural plant community and its importance in the human history of the Flint Hills region. The trail area is now a prairie restoration area. There are two loops to choose from, the longer being approximately one mile in length. Along the path visitors will find five interpretive wayside panels and a trailhead kiosk with brochures at the beginning of the trail. For relaxation and reflection, visitors will find benches at appropriate locations along the path. There is also a comfort station available on site.

Southwind Nature Trail (Dogs allowed on leash year-round)

This most-popular trail is just north of the historic ranch house and is very convenient for those visitors wishing to hike only a short distance, or who have a limited time for their visit. Encompassing an overlook, several exposed limestone formations, a riparian area, and some of the tallest grass around; it's a microcosm of the entire preserve and can give visitors a good feeling for the prairie. It's easiest to start at the trailhead just north of the ranch house, accessed from the old parking lot east of the barn. Here you'll find an information kiosk with the trail forking left and right. The right fork runs parallel to Hwy177 and heads downhill towards the creek. The left fork will follow several hundred yards along a limestone fence that was reconstructed in 2012. After climbing and passing by a wooden fence gateway on the left, the trail continues uphill to an overlook, affording an excellent look in all directions, but especially to the valley east and north. The trail then descends through several switchbacks and levels out into some bottomland prairie with plenty of tallgrass. Once the trail reaches the creek, you may continue to the right and back to the ranch house, or cross the footbridge to the left and continue through the wooded area and up to the historic Lower Fox Creek School. Be on the lookout for poison ivy along the trail through these woods.

Fox Creek Trail (Dogs allowed on leash year-round)

This is a northern extension from the Bottomland Trail, but is not wheelchair accessible. It winds along Fox Creek for six miles round-trip. This trail allows visitors to experience a riparian area, while seeing a range of wildlife such as turkey, white-tail deer, and a variety of bird species. You can access this trail from two trailheads, one at the visitor center and one from the Bottomland Trail. If you park at the visitor center, a trail leads a short distance south from the parking lot to a fence corner. From here you can see where the trail, the Z Bar Spur, travels

Good stand of tallgrass along Fox Creek Trail. NPS photo.

underneath KS Hwy 177 and continues east over to Fox Creek. Once at the creek the trail splits north and south. The north trail crosses a cement low-water crossing, which is dry most of the time, and loops around the trees over to the east side and a very nice stand of tallgrass. The south end of this loop re-crosses Fox Creek, but you will have to make your own way across. Most of the time, it's narrow and shallow, and one can possibly use stepping stones to cross without getting too wet. From here, the Fox Creek Trail meanders south along the forest edge for about 2 ½ miles until you hook up with the bottomland Nature Trail and its parking lot. If you refer to the map, you can see where the Fox Creek Trail splits at two separate meadows along the way. The trails encircle these meadows, so which fork you take makes no difference; they meet up again at the other end.

View of Ranch Complex looking west from Fox Creek Trail. NPS photo.

If starting from the Bottomland Trail, you will find the Fox Creek Trail heading north from the northwest section of the Bottomland Trail. It goes through an old cattle feedlot before heading downhill to a creek crossing, usually very shallow. Once out of the woods, the trail continues north for 2 ½ miles along the creek, ending in a loop over to the east side of the creek, opposite the Ranch Complex.