

# *Explore* **SOUTHWEST MINNESOTA**



**9**  
COUNTRIES  
STORIES

# Explore SOUTHWEST MINNESOTA

Welcome to the prairielands of Minnesota! With numerous parks, abundant wildlife, and picturesque communities, Southwest Minnesota is your invitation to step back, relax and unwind.

Traverse our wide-open prairie landscapes. Visit one of the world's last remaining herds of purebred bison grazing in a 1,500-acre tallgrass prairie, or go on an adventure at one of our stunning parks. Whether it's climbing 100-foot quartzite cliffs, windsurfing, visiting a waterfall, kayaking, or fishing on one of our many lakes and quiet streams, there is so much to experience.

Visit one of our many picturesque communities filled with historic stone buildings, explore local shops and dining, unwind at one of our local breweries or wineries, or enjoy the summer nights at one of the few drive-in movies in the country. Sit on the banks of Plum Creek, where the stories of Laura Ingalls Wilder come to life, take in a play at a local theater, or take a stroll through Jeffers Petroglyphs and let your imagination soar.

## NINE COUNTIES, 80 UNIQUE CITIES & SO MUCH TO EXPLORE

Hi there!

We're Jan and Jen Lasar, the husband and wife team behind the Minnesota Miles Blog at Minnesota Trails Magazine. Traveling around Minnesota brings us great joy and leads us down roads full of discovery and wonder. It took several months of exploring the southwestern parts of the North Star State to produce this guide, and we hope it serves you well in planning your own journey.

Read about our adventures at [www.mntrails.com/mn-miles-blog](http://www.mntrails.com/mn-miles-blog).

Happy Trails!



*Working together to generate travel, tourism and a positive economic impact in Southwest Minnesota*

### 2026

Explore Southwest Minnesota is the regional tourism cheerleader for the wide-open prairies, friendly main streets and hidden gems of this corner of the state. We work alongside local communities, small businesses and attractions to shine a spotlight on everything from scenic bike trails and state parks to family-run cafés, lively festivals and one-of-a-kind shops. Our role is simple: help visitors discover what locals already know, that southwest Minnesota is full of genuine hospitality, unexpected adventures and stories worth sharing. Through creative marketing, partnerships and plenty of hometown pride, we connect travelers to experiences that feel relaxed, real and refreshingly unhurried.

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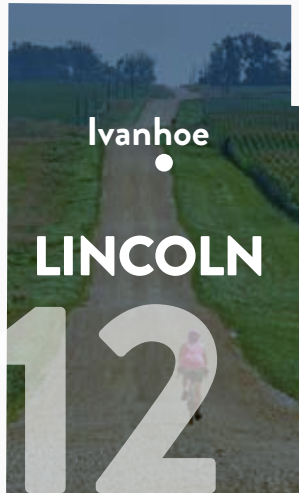
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*Check individual businesses for current hours and operational details.*



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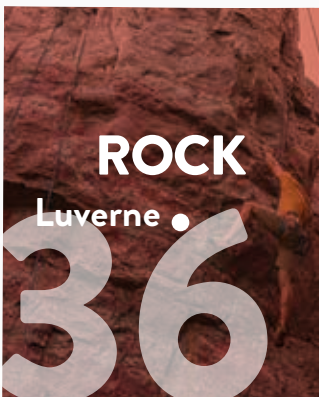
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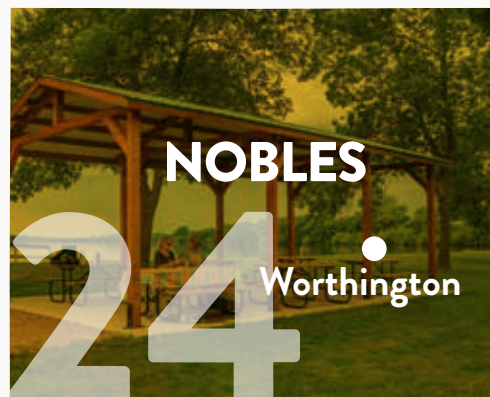
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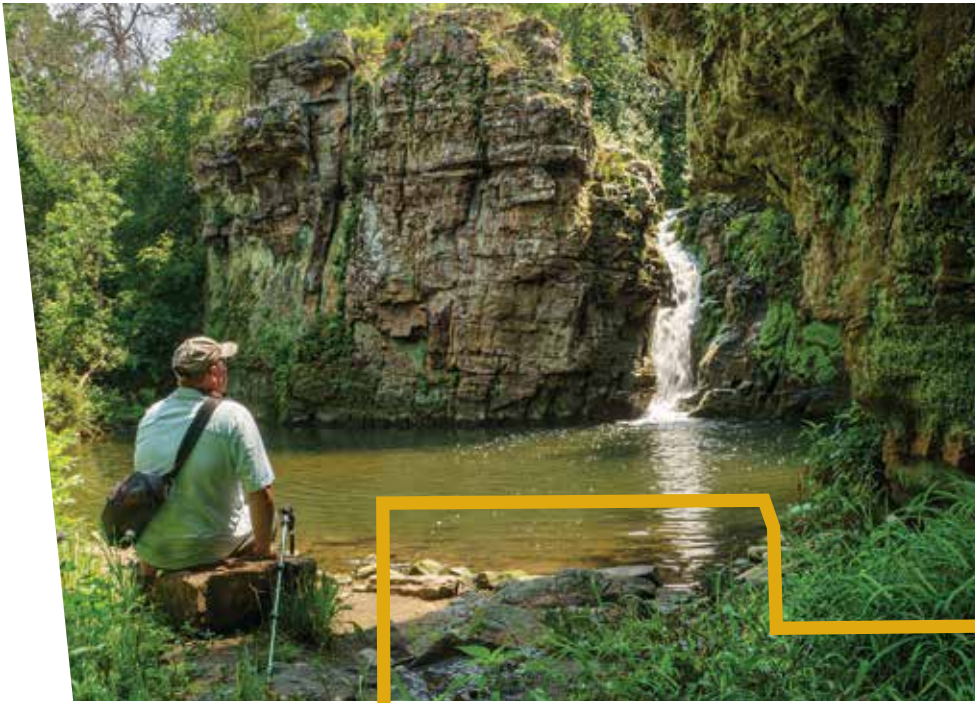
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# Cottonwood COUNTY



*Clockwise from top left: Red Rock Falls County Park; Cottonwood County historic marker; Cottonwood County Courthouse; Jeffers Petroglyphs; Phat Pheasant*

Cottonwood County was one of those places we admittedly knew very little about, and we set out to change that.

Our first order of business was a trip to the **Jeffers Petroglyphs** in **Comfrey**. This place has held special significance for the humans who traveled across the continent in ancient times, and they left their marks in the reddish quartzite that rises from the prairie. Over the millennia, the ancestors of today's Native Americans used stone tools to carve petroglyphs into the hard rock, telling their story through depictions of people, animals, constellations, and



maps. There are more than 5,000 carvings here, and some of the oldest date back 7,000 years.

We stepped out of the visitor center on a hot day and followed an interpretive path to the area where most of the petroglyphs are located. It's a sacred place, so ropes on the ground formed a path for visitors to follow and avoid stepping on the carvings. As a rule, photographing them is not allowed. On a previous visit, we had come for a special evening viewing time, when we were able to walk around barefoot and see the petroglyphs in more favorable light. It was a remarkable experience to be where, thousands of years ago, someone recorded their thoughts in stone for us to see. Feeling the warm rock under our feet and hearing the rustling prairie grasses, it seemed like the walls between now and then became thin enough to see through.

We moved on to have dinner at the **Phat Pheasant**, a local hangout in **Windom**. When you travel this far into southwestern Minnesota, the influence of neighboring states begins to show up on restaurant menus. In this case, it was chislic. Possibly derived from the Eastern European word shashlik, or meat skewer, this dish has morphed into a South Dakotan favorite and spilled into southwestern Minnesota. Call them steak bites or stickless kabobs, these beef cubes were delicious, and Jen's Philly cheesesteak got a big thumbs up too.

When the door opened and an elderly man walked in, the locals at the bar called out "Happy Birthday, Joe!" almost in unison. Unfortunately, we had to move on and miss the 94th birthday celebration.

It was early evening when we arrived at **Talcot County Park Campground** and set up camp in a site right by the lake, next to the swimming beach, which was nicely illuminated by the setting sun. The lake views were unbeatable, and we even had a fishing dock right behind our trailer. The heat of the day was breaking, and we settled into our chairs to relax after a busy day. Toward dusk, the cicadas calmed down, the fish were jumping, and the swallows came out for their aerial ballet. Pelicans circled overhead and splashed down wherever they pleased, their wings whooshing audibly as they passed. When the light had faded, the Milky Way was clearly visible in the sky, and it was our cue to call it a night.

The next day was set aside for sightseeing, and we needed a good breakfast to get us started. The **Shady Drive Inn** has been a staple in rural **Storden** for decades. The car hops are gone now, but they still serve a classic American breakfast. We placed our orders, and soon there was the sizzle of the griddle and the clanking of spatulas in the kitchen. A bell dinged, and our English muffin sausage breakfast sandwiches with hash browns arrived, fresh and screaming hot.

Later, in **Windom**, we visited the **Cottonwood County Historical Society** and wandered their well-curated exhibit hall. Displays ranged from Native American history to early settlers and more modern times. The **Robert Remick Art Gallery** in the same building houses rotating exhibits, and during our visit a talented local woodworker had scale model replicas of farm equipment on display. One display cabinet held a replica of a former Guinness Book of World Records winner for the world's largest apple, which came from Cottonwood County.

## Cornfrey

- Jeffers Petroglyphs

## Windom

- Phat Pheasant
- Cottonwood County Historical Society
- Robert Remick Art Gallery
- Mimi and Papa's Place
- Pat's Grove County Park
- Des Moines River

## Dundee

- Talcot County Park Campground
- Talcot Lake

## Storden

- The Shady Drive Inn

## Mountain Lake

- Lawcon Park
- Mountain Lake State Wildlife Management Area
- Sweet Fields coffee shop
- Share and Care thrift shop
- 10,000 Villages fair trade goods
- King Egg Roll grocery and takeout kitchen

## Jeffers

- Meat Nate Cafe
- Highwater Creek Meat Market

## Westbrook

- South Dutch Charley County Park
- Bonnie and Clyde's bar and grill
- Westbrook's historic train depot

## Sanborn

- Red Rock Falls County Park
- Mound Creek

A trip to Windom wouldn't be complete without a visit to **Mimi and Papa's Place**. If you're wondering whether it's a scrapyards, outdoor gallery, quirky photo op, experimental welding shop, or the fever dream of a metal artist, the answer is yes, every time. We strolled around the grounds, marveling at cast aluminum aliens and other creatures, both terrestrial and otherwise. The Flintstones were on display in a cave with their foot-powered car and a metal tyrannosaurus. Jen climbed into a larger-than-life replica of the pants from the old Ants in the Pants game, and I slid into a bathtub race car. The classic green Sinclair gas station dinosaur appeared in all sizes, alongside giant red metal ants and countless other critters. And yes, most of it was for sale.

In the afternoon we headed to **Mountain Lake** to ride the paved trail around the namesake 220-acre lake. Starting at **Lawcon Park**, we made our way around the five-mile loop in a counterclockwise direction. The northwestern corner of the trail passes through the grassy knolls of

*Bonnie and Clyde's*



*Mimi and Papa's Place*



*Westbrook historic train depot*

the **Mountain Lake State Wildlife Management Area**, offering unimpeded views of both the town and the lake.

Our next stop was really three in one. **Sweet Fields** is a coffee shop and bakery with a funky vibe, **Share and Care** is a thrift shop, and **10,000 Villages** features fair trade gifts and goods. We grabbed a smoothie from Sweet Fields and browsed the other two shops.

Down the road we stopped at **King Egg Roll**, a tiny grocery with an even tinier takeout-only kitchen. A young woman took our order at the register and disappeared into the kitchen to fire up a wok. A short while later, we took our treasures to the city park, where we sat at a picnic table, watched kids play basketball in the afternoon heat, and dug into some very tasty shrimp pad thai, chicken curry, and egg rolls.

The next day I was on my own while Jen stayed behind at camp. The plan was to visit several Cottonwood County parks, but breakfast came first. **Meat Nate Cafe** on Whited Street in Jeffers is tiny, with room for maybe 30 guests, but the cheery interior with its wood floors, walls, and bright yellow Formica booths is inviting. I had missed the breakfast rush, which I learned happens around 6 a.m. in these parts. The decision didn't take long. The Stacker was a pile of incredibly crispy hash browns, sausage, and eggs topped with cheese, and it hit the spot.

After breakfast, I strolled across the street to **Highwater Creek Meat Market**, picked up some provisions, and hit the road toward **Westbrook**. According to MNopedia, German immigrant Carl Zierke was the first settler in Cottonwood County in the late 1850s, and the Dakota people who lived here gave him the nickname Dutch Charley. The area near Westbrook where his log cabin once stood is now **South Dutch Charley County Park**, a small 24-acre park with a campground and picnic area. I wandered through the park and crossed the namesake creek on a wooden bridge.

Another early settler, Pat Conlin, built a stone house from the remains of a partially finished flour mill near **Windom**. Today, **Pat's Grove County Park** covers about 80 acres along the **Des Moines River**. The restored stone house, with its 20-foot-tall and one-foot-thick walls, is open for visitors, while the rest of the park has been left largely undeveloped to preserve its rustic character.

Just down the road near Sanborn is **Red Rock Falls County Park**. Here, little **Mound Creek** tumbles from a 30-foot rock cliff, forming a roaring waterfall and collecting in a pool below. An interpretive sign explained that, much like the Jeffers Petroglyphs only four miles away, the falls were an important site for Indigenous people thousands of years ago. A footpath led me around the gorge to another tiered waterfall farther upstream, where I met a father and his young son. The man told me that when he was younger, he used to jump off the cliff into the water on hot summer days. Now it was his son's turn. On the count of three, the teenage boy jumped and splashed into the pool below. Teenage me might have joined him, but middle-aged me was content to watch from across the gorge.

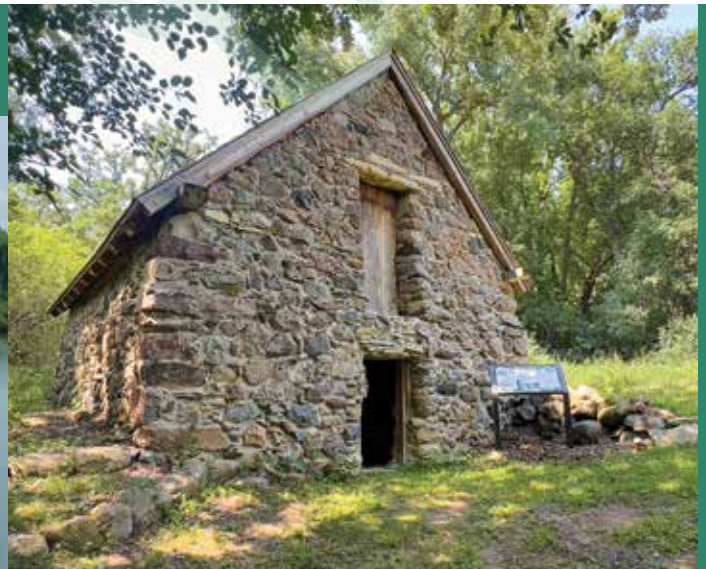
Later that evening, I picked up Jen and we drove to **Westbrook** for dinner at **Bonnie and Clyde's**. Plain on the outside, the inside had an inviting roadhouse feel. The jukebox played country music, neon signs lit the walls and windows, and old gas station collectibles lined the room alongside a couple of arcade-style skill games. Our food came out quickly, and since it was happy hour, we received poker chips to redeem for another drink on top of their generous specials.

Right next door was Westbrook's **historic train depot**. During our visit to the Historical Society, we learned that it's the only Cottonwood County depot still in its original location, which made it worth a stop.

On our last day in Cottonwood County, we were up early and decided to get out on the lake first thing in the morning. We carried our kayaks down to the beach and hopped in. **Talcot Lake** was smooth as glass, and the sun washed the western shoreline in bronze light as it rose. Even the ever-present pelicans hadn't roused from their roosts yet, making for a peaceful paddle until the growing heat chased us back to shore.

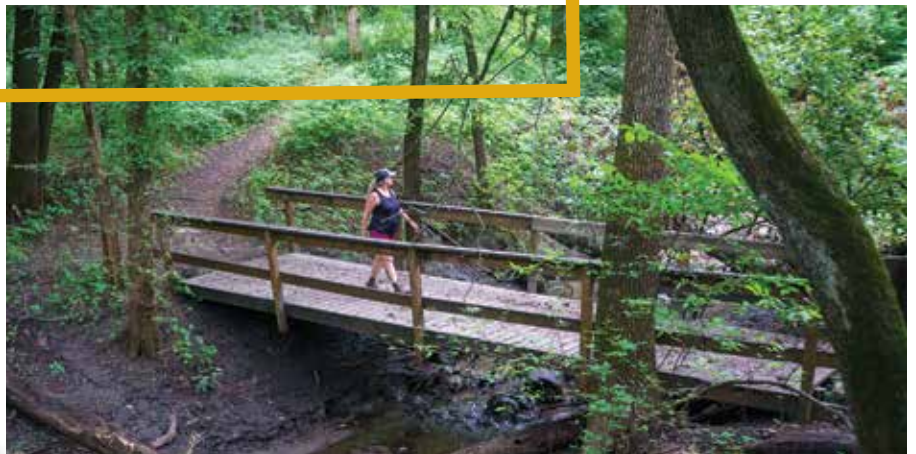
Our farewell meal was a hearty breakfast featuring the delicious bacon from **Highwater Creek Meat Market**. Cooking outside and eating breakfast with a lake view never gets old. We packed up camp slowly, reluctant to get back on the road and return to reality.

*Clockwise from left: Mountain Lake trails; Pat's Grove; Sweet Fields coffee shop and bakery*





# Jackson COUNTY



*Clockwise from top left: Historic Fort Belmont; Jackson city trails mural; Jackson County mountain bike trail; Kilen Woods State Park; Hi-Lo Supper Club*



When my wife, Jen, and I pulled up to our campsite, we immediately felt at ease. It was right on the water and, besides a few dragonflies hovering around the reeds, there was very little going on. Under tall oaks, the heat was tolerable and a light breeze flowed up from the lake. This would be home for the next few days as we explored.

Jackson County operates nine parks and recreation areas, four with camping. Three of them, **Brown, Anderson and Robertson**, are clustered around **Loon and Pearl lakes**, southwest of **Jackson** near the Minnesota-Iowa border. Our

base camp was at **Robertson Park** on **Loon Lake**, with water and electric hookups and a bathroom building with showers. We couldn't have been much closer to the lake and had great views. With nothing on the docket, we watched fish jump and listened to cicadas. At dusk, fireflies danced before the sun slipped behind the lake.

The next day Jen stayed to tend camp while I explored nearby **Lakefield**. First stop was **Simply Sweet Cheesecake** on Highway 86. Owner Megan sells scones, cookies, donuts, coffee and smoothies, but cheesecake is in the name and that's what I came for. She had full-sized cakes in over a dozen flavors, but I grabbed a personal one to go. Best of all, it happened at a drive-through window.

Down the road, I visited **SoJo Coffee Company**, a coffee shop, eatery and roastery in a square red brick building on Second Avenue North. It was busy, with patrons on the patio. Inside, owner Brent worked the espresso machine, making me a cup to go, and chatted briefly.

I took my treasures to **Sparks Park** on the northwest edge of town. It's small but has trails with interpretive signs, maintained by the Prairie Ecology Bus Center, a nonprofit focused on natural science education. On the **Naturalist Loop**, I found a bench overlooking a creek and enjoyed my coffee and turtle cheesecake. I took half home to Jen.

Back downtown, I shopped for provisions. When I opened the door to **Kiehl's Bakery**, the smell of baked goods hit me. The display case gleamed with sweet treats of every shape, baked, fried, sugared, frosted, sprinkled, stuffed, dipped, dusted and chocolate-chipped, but I showed restraint. I was there for bread. I chose a one-pound whole wheat loaf and stepped away from the donuts.

A bit farther down Main Street was **The Butcher Shop**. Cases were filled with chops, roasts, steaks, hamburger, snack sticks, jerky, summer sausage and brats. I came for bacon. "Best bacon in the world," employee Brady said from the back. That was all I needed.

Back at **Robertson Park**, I picked up Jen and we headed to Jackson's evening **Riverside Farmers and Makers Market**. A stretch of Second Street was closed off and we browsed vegetable and craft stands. At **Brandt Gardens & Greenhouse**, we picked up fresh tomatoes.

Next, we rode the mountain bike trails at **Belmont County Park**, an 80-acre system along the **Des Moines River**. Three loops with Lakota names total five miles of singletrack. **Wowahwa** is an easy, flat beginner trail just under a mile. **Ian Shasha Wapka** is a 1.8-mile intermediate ride and **Thaththanka** is a 2.7-mile advanced trail.

Our bikes were out of commission, but the Jackson County Parks Department rents a few with prior arrangements. We warmed up on the easy loop, then dropped into the ravine for the harder stuff. The terrain was anything but flat and recent rains had it looking lush. It was a hot evening and we worked hard climbing switchbacks out of the river valley. After a couple of hours, we were gritty, sweaty and worn out, but happy.

Such effort called for a special dinner. After cleaning up in our camping-friendly attire, we drove to **Lakefield**. South of town, a vintage 1940s Oldsmobile sits permanently in the driveway of the **Hi-Lo-Club**. The historic supper club dates to 1945 and continues the tradition of fine dining.

## Jackson

- Robertson Park
- Loon Lake
- Pearl Lake
- Anderson Park
- Riverside Farmers and Makers Market
- Belmont County Park
- Des Moines River
- Wowahwa, Ian Shasha Wapka, Thaththanka Loops
- Loon Lake Trail
- Brown Park
- Santee Crossing restaurant
- Fort Belmont
- Lysgard Home
- Delafield Church
- Kat's Hog Heaven restaurant
- Cosmos and Clover boutique
- Smokin' Java
- Ashley Park
- Des Moines River, Sunset and Nelson Creek loops
- Round Lake Vineyards
- Round Lake

## Lakefield

- Simply Sweet Cheesecake
- SoJo Coffee Company
- Sparks Park
- Naturalist Loop
- Brandt Gardens & Greenhouse
- Kiehl's Bakery
- The Butcher Shop
- Hi-Lo-Club supper club
- Kilen Woods State Park
- Sioux, Riverside, Ox Cart and Rock Creek trails

## Heron Lake

- Nena's Bar and Grill

## Okabena

- First State Bank 1933 Robbery legend

Inside, guests sat at white marble tables on yellow swivel chairs with brass rivets. In front of a mirrored wall of liquor bottles, a bartender rattled a shaker and poured cocktails. The dining room had booths with black tablecloths and napkins. A huge blue vintage neon sign confirmed we were at the Hi-Lo-Club.

Jen ordered the lobster mac and cheese. I had the chicken Cordon Bleu. Both were fantastic. We paired them with a Raspberry Lemon Drop and an Aperol Spritz. It was my first time seeing a digestif menu in a Minnesota restaurant, complete with espresso and Fernet Branca.

The next morning was lazy. It felt good to sit by the lake in the shade of oaks. Eventually, we biked the paved **Loon Lake Trail**, which connects **Brown** to **Robertson Park**, then drops south through farm fields and prairie to Iowa's Mini-Wakan State Park. It was a pleasant five-mile ride.

Back at camp, I made BLTs with ingredients sourced in Lakefield and Jackson. There's nothing like a camp sandwich made with local ingredients.

In the afternoon, we launched the kayaks on **Loon Lake**. The southern end is bordered by **Robertson** and **Brown county parks** and a Waterfowl Production Area, so there's little shoreline development. We paddled lazily and watched pelicans.

*Simply Sweet Cheesecake*



*Jackson Farmer's Market*

Dinner was at **Nena's Bar and Grill** in **Heron Lake**, where colorful murals greeted us. It was lively, with servers darting between tables. Before food, the menu featured pages of drinks decorated with everything from shrimp to lollipops, served in bowls, jars or glasses. There were spicy micheladas and mojitos, margaritas and cantaritos, even a margarita tower with a spigot at the table.

The food menu spanned cultures, quesadillas, burritos, chimichangas and Honduran dishes, plus burgers, wings and fusion creations like a carne-asada-with-fries-pizza-quesadilla. There was even a flaming hot dog topped with cheese and Flaming Hot Cheetos. A seafood boil menu offered crab legs and crawfish made to order.

I chose carne asada con tajadas with grilled beef and plantains. Jen had cielo, mar y tierra over rice. We briefly envied a neighboring table tearing into steamer bags of seafood, but forgot that when our food arrived. It was awesome.

On the way back, we stopped in **Okabena** for a photo. A rusty 1930s Ford frame at the old creamery, occupied by two skeletons, commemorates a long-running debate. On May 19, 1933, was the First State Bank robbed by Tony, Floyd and Mildred Strain, or by Bonnie and Clyde? The legend lives on with a staged robbery and shootout during Okabena's Fourth of July celebration.

The next day we rose early for a packed itinerary in **Jackson**. **Santee Crossing** was a good breakfast choice. Despite the rush, our server was on top of it and our omelet and breakfast sandwich arrived hot and fast.

Afterward, we toured historic **Fort Belmont**, run by the Jackson County Chamber. The museum houses artifacts and several historic buildings across the grounds. Our volunteer guide detailed items in the main building, from a rare 1900s Brush automobile to a pre-electric pinball machine, all tied to county history.

We spent another hour exploring outdoor exhibits, including the **Lysgard Home**, an antique pharmacy exhibit and the old **Delafield Church**. On our own, we walked mowed paths to the replica stockade and log cabin known as Fort Belmont, one of two civilian-built forts in the Midwest in the 1800s. A sod house, watchtower, grist mill and blacksmith shop rounded out the story of early settlers.

Lunch was at **Kat's Hog Heaven**, where pork rules, grilled, fried, smoked, pulled, glazed and smothered. It was a quiet midday. Jen loved the grilled pork tenderloin melt. I ordered fresh pork rinds, which arrived sizzling and crackled.

After lunch, we strolled Second Street seeking coffee and found **Cosmos and Clover** next to **Smokin' Java**. Jen disappeared among the racks and emerged torn between two dresses. The powder blue twirl dress won and she spun as the skirt flared into a circle.

Next door at **Smokin' Java**, the hiss of the espresso machine greeted us. Though they offer smoked meats, we only had room for a scone and iced drinks. We studied the Jackson bike trail map. Since the late 1990s, Friends of Jackson County Trails has expanded bikeable and walkable paths. **Jackson** now has about nine miles of city trails and earned silver-level Bike Friendly Community status from the League of American Bicyclists in 2021, a first in southwestern Minnesota.

We started at **Ashley Park** and rode the **Des Moines River, Sunset** and **Nelson Creek loops**. The Sunset Loop nearly circles the city, the Des Moines River Loop runs along both banks with scenic views and part of the Nelson Creek Trail winds along the creek.

That night felt a bit melancholy, but another sunset over **Loon Lake** eased the sting of our trip nearing its end.

On our last day, we broke camp and headed to brunch at **Round Lake Vineyards**, a 70-acre estate on **Round Lake**. A long driveway leads to the main building with a bistro, patio and tasting room, plus a ballroom and outdoor bar. The vineyard grows Frontenac Blanc, Marquette and Itasca and produces eight wines, but it was too early

for tasting. We were there for brunch, fruits, meats, vegetables, quiche and lasagna. Owner Scott stopped by to welcome us and chat.

To work off the meal, we hiked at **Kilen Woods State Park**, a quiet 200-acre park along the **Des Moines River** with five miles of trails through prairie, river bottom meadows and oak forest. Monarchs gather there in September for migration, but it was early. We pieced together an easy hike on the **Sioux, Riverside, Ox Cart** and **Rock Creek trails**. Like Belmont's trails, these paths descend slopes carved by the river into glacial drift.

Refreshed from our hike, it was finally time to head home, though it wouldn't be our last visit.



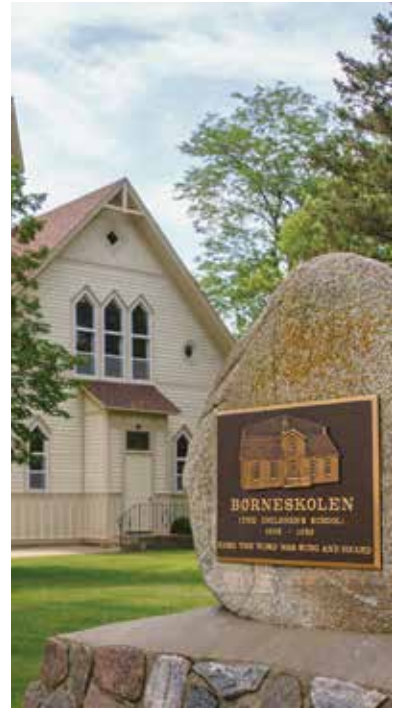
*Jackson County bike ride; Nena's Bar and Grill; Smokin' Java; Loon Lake; Cosmos and Clover*



Explore  
SWMN



# Lincoln COUNTY



*Clockwise from top left: Lake Benton kayaking; Lincoln County gravel ride; Danebod Campus Children's School; Aebleskiver Days; Kronborg Inn lunch*



Minnesota's network of scenic byways snakes across the state, comprising about 3,000 miles of designated roads with scenic, natural, recreational, cultural, historic, or archaeological significance. At **Lake Benton**, the King of Trails, Highway 75, meets another scenic road, the **Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Highway**. This area of the state is full of small towns with rich histories, and we decided to hitch up our wagon to take a closer look.

Our base camp was Lake Benton's **Hole in the Mountain Park Campground**. The well-manicured, quiet park is tucked

into a small valley and is made up of an east and west campground and a lodge building with showers and restrooms. Right behind our campsite was a log cabin once occupied by John Snyder, one of the founders of Lake Benton. We later learned it was once used in a McDonald's television commercial.

After we set up camp Friday afternoon, we took some time to wander around the campground and explore the valley that gives the park its name. Tall trees shaded the campsites and the quiet setting made it easy to settle into the rhythm of the weekend. From the campground it was only a short walk to open views across the surrounding prairie. The breeze that swept across the **Buffalo Ridge** carried the sounds of birds and the occasional vehicle passing along Highway 14 above the valley.

We followed one of the short trails that loop through the park and paused to take a closer look at the **Snyder Cabin**. The simple log structure sits only a few steps from the campground and serves as a reminder of the early days of Lake Benton. It is easy to imagine the founders of the town living and working here when the surrounding prairie was still largely unsettled. As darkness settled in, the campground grew still. We spent the rest of the evening relaxing at our campsite and enjoying the peaceful setting. Besides the occasional car passing along Highway 14, the only sound was the rustle of the breeze across the prairie.

Our busy Saturday started with a hearty breakfast. As we expected, we found the **19 & 75 Cafe** at the intersection of Highways 19 and 75 in **Ivanhoe**. We stepped through the automatic sliding doors of the truck stop, gas station, cafe, and convenience store and were transported back in time. The chrome swivel stools at the breakfast counter, orange Formica booths, and black and white checker tile floor gave the small cafe a vibe like the 1950s, but it had a modern edge to it, too. Owner Marty, a former engineer and bike racer, told us he brought the formerly abandoned place back to life 12 years ago, and it's going very well.

We were not surprised to hear that. Jen's trucker's omelet and my breakfast sandwich came out fast, sizzling hot and delicious. While we ate, we watched the trucks go by on Highway 75, the King of Trails Scenic Byway, hauling their cargo north and south. At that moment, there was something very American, very nostalgic about this ribbon of tar between Canada and Texas and this new old-fashioned diner.

We were happy we stocked up on calories because the next itinerary item took some work. Back at camp, we took a short walk on the trails around the campground, then got the bikes ready and turned our wheels toward **Tyler**, for a very special celebration.

When Danish colonists came to the recently platted town in 1885, they established a Lutheran congregation and constructed a church, folk school, and other buildings on what they called the **Danebod campus**. Of course, some of the Danish culinary traditions have made their way into the fabric of Tyler over the years, and the town celebrates **Aebleskiver Days in July**. The word literally translates into "apple slices," which once filled this spherical pancake. Modern recipes omit this ingredient, and today it is apple only by name.

## Lake Benton

- Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Highway
- Hole in the Mountain Park Campground
- Snyder Cabin
- Country House supper club
- Lake Benton

## Hendricks

- Lincoln County Pioneer Museum

## Ivanhoe

- 19 & 75 Cafe

## Tyler

- Danebod campus / Cross Church
- Aebleskiver Days in July
- Buffalo Ridge / Coteau des Prairies
- Kronborg Inn restaurant



*Aebleskivers with Sausage*



*19 & 75 Diner*

It was a hot and breezy day, but the gravel riding was great. We were on the **Buffalo Ridge**, which is the Minnesota part of a geological feature called the **Coteau des Prairies**, a massive plateau 200 miles long and 70 miles wide that covers the eastern Dakotas and southwestern Minnesota. It sits significantly higher than the surrounding area, which we noticed while climbing out of Lake Benton, so it's always windy here. Wind turbines dotted the landscape near and far in the corn and soybean fields. Riding close to one of these gigantic towers, we actually heard the whooshing of the blades as they turned.

Eventually, Tyler's water tower appeared on the horizon, and after a few more turns of the cranks, we rolled into the county fairgrounds where the party was in full swing.

We locked up the bikes and went straight to the pavilion,

*Hole in the Mountain Park walking trails*



where a small army of volunteers was serving Aebleskivers to the crowd, lunch-line style, with sausages. We retreated to a bench outside to eat, then started strolling the grounds. There were numerous vendors selling anything from jewelry to hot sauce, a classic car show, outdoor bingo, face painting, and rides for the kids. The band NeonGypsy played hits from the last 50 years on a stage outside under blue skies and a hot sun. We plopped down on an oversized Adirondack chair to take a break but couldn't resist the draw of the horse-drawn wagon. Slowly, the two Belgian draft horses pulled us around town, which was deserted because every one of the 1,100 people who live in Tyler was at the fairgrounds.

After that ride, we swung into the **Kronborg Inn** for lunch and to cool down for a bit. I cannot resist a clever quip, so I had the Kronburger, a bacon cheeseburger with all the fixings, and Jen ordered the patty melt. Both hit the spot.

Just up the road from all the action was the decidedly quieter **Danebod campus**. As part of Aebleskiver Days, some of the buildings were unlocked, and we wandered in and out of the gym hall, the folk school, and the stone hall and its museum exhibits. At the **Cross Church**, we learned that volunteers stripped and refinished the inside of the wood-clad building in recent years, a monumental task. The volunteer in attendance also told us that the miniature replica of a sailing ship hanging from the ceiling was a votive ship, a common practice in Nordic countries. Given as a gift, it was supposed to ensure a safe voyage for a ship and its crew.

We had to eventually say goodbye, get back on the Buffalo Ridge, and find our way back to Lake Benton. The winds were not in our favor, and by the time we got back to town, we were ready for dinner.

The **Country House in Lake Benton** is an old-fashioned supper club where a hostess seats you and the steaks come out sizzling on a platter. It was early, and we were the first customers, so we struck up a conversation with our host. While the complete history of the place is lost in the annals, we learned that Bill and Marge Williams ran the Country House for many years. When they passed, the family took it over and is still involved with it today. "They're in the kitchen right now," we were told. Sensible Jen ordered the chicken salad, but I just had to get the prime rib. It was delicious, and I stand by my decision.

We spent the rest of the evening enjoying the view from our campsite. The quiet valley at **Hole in the Mountain Park** felt even more peaceful after a day in the wind on the open ridge. As the sun dipped lower over the prairie, the campground settled into a calm rhythm again. Besides the occasional car on Highway 14, it was wonderfully quiet in our little valley.

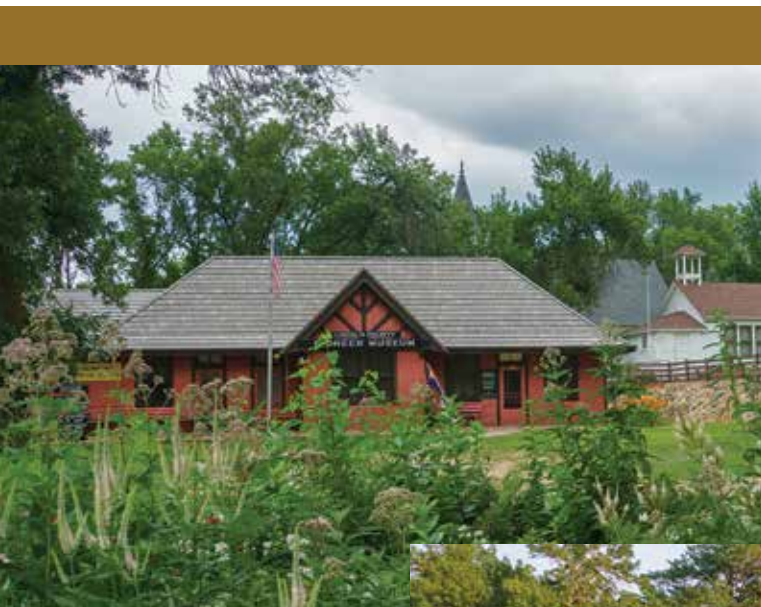
On Sunday morning, we put the kayaks into **Lake Benton** and explored the scenic shoreline for a while. The lake is about five miles long, a mile and a half at its widest, and besides a couple of resorts and small neighborhoods, the shore is undeveloped. After giving the legs a good workout the day before, it felt good to use our arms for a change. Near the boat landing on the western end of the lake, a narrow strip of land reached out into the water. It was wide enough for some benches and would be a great spot to watch a sunset, we thought.

When the sun had grown strong enough to be hot, we got off the water, broke camp, and headed to our final destination on this trip.

Back in **Hendricks**, we stopped at the **Lincoln County Pioneer Museum**. The idyllic grounds of the museum comprise the main museum inside the old Hendricks train station, an old schoolhouse, a historic Sears and Roebuck house, and various outbuildings with a dizzying array of artifacts. All buildings were moved to

this location to preserve them, including a white, wood-clad church built by Icelandic immigrants. “Usually, I ring the bell when we open,” the volunteer on duty told us and invited us to try it out. It took a few pulls to get the heavy church bell to start swinging, but Jen eventually muscled it into ringing out loud. We milled around the buildings and marveled at the fully furnished historic home on the property. The rooms were small, and the stairway was narrow, but it was certainly a mansion in its time.

As much as we would have loved to stay longer, it was time to pull our own mansion on wheels back home and get ready for another adventure.



*Clockwise from top left: Lincoln County Pioneer Museum; Danebod Church on the Danebod Campus; Historic Snyder Cabin at Hole in the Mountain Park; Aebleskiver Days car show*



*Clockwise from top left: Camden Regional Trail; Garvin Park Tower; Brau Bros Tapn Truck; Wheels Across the Prairie Tracy Locomotive*



Fall had rolled across southwestern Minnesota, and we chased color into Lyon County. Tucked into the wooded valley of the **Redwood River**, **Camden State Park** promised prairie winds, whispering trees and the faint scent of campfire smoke. The valley long provided refuge for Native Americans, fur traders, settlers and travelers. Now it offered refuge to weekend wanderers like us.

**Camden State Park** is rich in history. Centuries ago, Native Americans stood at **Sioux Lookout** with commanding valley views. In the 1830s, fur trader Joseph LaFramboise established

an American Fur Company outpost. A few decades later, the town of Camden grew along the river with shops and a sawmill before fading by the 1930s. Today, remnants remain, marked by interpretive signs.

The park's campgrounds stretch from prairie to shaded riverside. We set up in the lower campground beside the **Redwood River**. The park's 80 sites are divided between the valley woods and the upper prairie plateau. Horseback riders, mountain bikers and hikers share 16 miles of trails, with five miles open to bikes and ten to horses. A one-mile paved connection links to the **Camden Regional Trail** leading to Marshall.

We arrived Thursday evening to a quiet campground with just three other campers. There was enough daylight for a campfire and time to listen to the river beyond our site. As darkness settled, a pair of owls called through the woods, their hoots echoing across the valley. It was a perfect fall evening.

Morning arrived cool and still. When we pulled back the curtains, a flock of birds erupted from the trees in a flurry of wings. Wrapped in blankets, we sipped coffee and watched them scatter. Around eight, a train rattled through the park, its rumble mixing with the river's gurgle.

We headed for **Tracy** on a quiet Friday morning. Wide streets were lined with old storefronts and brick buildings. **Squatch Coffee and Eats** was our first stop, housed in a two-story sandstone building on Third and Morgan. The window read "Support Your Local Caffeine Dealer." Inside, we found a café that hinted at a former bank, with cubicle-like booths and a vault turned playroom. I ordered the Squatch Bagel Sandwich loaded with sausage and bacon. Jen chose Al's Oasis Omelet. Strong coffee worked its magic.

Next, we wandered into **Lights and More**, a two-story store bursting with used treasures and antiques. Owner Lauri Hebig greeted us before flicking on basement lights, her "More." Antique tools, fishing tackle, teacups, street signs and a rocking horse filled the space. Jen unearthed a vintage board game called Stadium Checkers and grinned.

Across the street, **Tattle Tales** offered children's clothes and toys in a nostalgic storefront. We browsed before heading to **The Cinnamon Hen**, filled with repurposed furniture and home décor. Owner Nancy Dobson and her husband, Tom, were the creative team. He handled woodworking; she painted. After admiring a refurbished dry sink, Nancy invited us into a back room to reveal a miniature fantasy world built by hand for a children's book she was writing for her grandkids. Dragons, castles, mountains and caves were meticulously crafted. The castle opened to reveal tiny furnished rooms, cobwebs included.

Before lunch, we stopped at the **Wheels Across the Prairie Museum**. The grounds were dotted with vintage farm machinery, trains and historic buildings in various stages of restoration.

That afternoon, we hiked at **Garvin County Park** north of **Garvin**. Fall colors were in full swing, the **Cottonwood River** glinting between golden leaves. We climbed to **Merton's Lookout** for sweeping views, then followed the **River Trail**.

Lunch in **Marshall** was at **Sazón Catracho**, a Honduran restaurant that smelled heavenly. I ordered baleadas, thick tortillas stuffed with beans, eggs and cheese, topped with spicy crema. Jen tried pastelitos

## Lynd

- Camden State Park
- Sioux Lookout
- Redwood River
- Camden Regional Trail
- Hiking Club Trail
- Lyndwood Antiques

## Ghent

- KB's Bar and Grill

## Marshall

- Camden Regional Trail
- Sazón Catracho  
Honduran restaurant
- Main-Stay Coffee
- The Bike Shop
- 9-11 Memorial Park
- Marshall Area Fine Arts  
Council gallery
- Lyon County History  
Museum
- Schwan's beginnings
- Hindi Store
- Noble Woman Boutique
- Rlee's Emporium
- Walnut Grove  
Mercantile
- Brau Brothers Brewing
- The Wooden Nickel  
restaurant

## Tracy

- Squatch Coffee and Eats
- Lights and More
- Tattle Tales
- The Cinnamon Hen
- Wheels Across the  
Prairie Museum

## Garvin

- Garvin County Park
- Cottonwood River
- Merton's Lookout
- River Trail
- Bitton's Roadhouse



Main-Stay Cafe & Coffee Co



Cinnamon Hen miniatures

de maíz, golden corn turnovers filled with savory meat. We washed it down with Piña, a sweet pineapple drink.

Later, we rode **Camden's** five miles of shared mountain bike paths looping through forest and prairie. The route began with a steep climb out of the river valley, rewarded by prairie views. Grassy trails carried us across the ridge, then ducked into woods near the ravine. A descent through deep leaves brought us back to camp refreshed.

That night, we drove to **Bitton's Roadhouse** in **Garvin**. The place was packed. Owner Sissa Bitton told us how her husband, David, once declared, "We gotta buy the place," when the former bar was closing. Eight years later, their menu remains a list of things they love to eat. Jen chose smothered chislic, cubes of steak drenched in melted cheese. I dug into a sirloin steak sandwich. A sign above the door read, "Believe in Miracles."

Saturday dawned cold enough for hats and gloves. We rode from the park to **Marshall** via the **Camden Regional Trail**. The first mile climbed steadily out of the valley, warming us quickly. Then came a descent into **Lynd**, which borders the park. The paved trail stretched ahead, and a light tailwind carried us past fields and neighborhoods. Benches and kiosks told stories of the land's history.

Our reward was breakfast at **Main-Stay Cafe & Coffee Co.** in **Marshall**. The open space buzzed with conversation. We ordered breakfast sandwiches that arrived hot within minutes.

Down the street, the farmers market was in full swing. Vendors sold vegetables, honey, crafts and pottery. Thai peppers spilled from buckets, and a Hmong farmer convinced us to try bitter melon and ribbed gourds that become loofahs when mature. We left with rolls, kimchi focaccia and Thai peppers for winter hot sauce.

At **The Bike Shop**, owner Chad Kulla greeted us and showed off a fatbike trike.

Next was **9/11 Memorial Park**, a small but moving tribute. The **Redwood River** bisected the park, crossed by a pedestrian bridge. At its center stood a ten-foot iron beam salvaged from the Twin Towers, surrounded by nearly 3,000 bricks bearing stars for lives lost.

We shifted to art at the **Marshall Area Fine Arts Council gallery**, where local artist Jessica Stölen displayed portraits of costumed models in wild places, paired with information about the public lands where they were taken.

The **Lyon County History Museum** brought us back to mid-century Minnesota. A restored 1950s ice cream shop with jukebox paid homage to **Schwan's beginnings** in rural Lyon County. Jen pressed A6, and the old Seeburg machine clunked to life, playing "Lady" by Kenny Rogers. She sang along, and it felt like a time-machine moment. I have known Jen for over thirty years, and this is how I discovered my punk rock girl loves The Gambler.

Lunch was at a tiny spot behind a grocery store with a sign reading **Hindi Store**. Inside were two rows of shelves and a single table. Jen ordered a lamb and rice gyro platter; I chose goat meat and rice. For dessert, we shared coconut qumbe, caramelized coconut balls that melted on the tongue.

That afternoon, we browsed Marshall's boutiques. **Noble Woman Boutique** offered neutral pieces, minimalist jewelry and unique finds. A few doors down was **RLee's Emporium**, a playful shop blending clothing, gifts and quirky décor. Marshall's downtown had an energy that made us linger.

Before leaving, we stopped at **Walnut Grove Mercantile**, known for homemade fudge. The porch had wooden benches and hitching rails. Inside, the air smelled of sugar. Owner Steve Klein carried on a family business that began

as his father Ray's honey farm in the 1950s. We sampled Mustang Spirit Fudge, a homecoming special for Southwest Minnesota State University. "It's breakfast fudge," Steve joked. We bought a box for Aunt Margaret.

With bike bags bulging, we pedaled back toward the park, stopping in **Lynd** to browse **Lyndwood Antiques**. Owner Brian Mock had opened a week earlier and was still arranging vintage signs, tools and curios.

With more than thirty miles under our belt, we flew down the hill to the campground.

That evening, we drove to **Ghent**. **KB's Bar and Grill** was packed, and next door the ballroom hosted a community event. Our server Jo, there for thirty years, brought our food with a smile. "I like it here," she said. "I like people." Jen had a classic patty melt. I tackled a triple-decker pork sandwich stacked with pulled pork, bacon, ham, Swiss and bourbon sauce.

For a nightcap, we stopped at **Brau Brothers Brewing** in **Marshall**. Orange hats filled the taproom during pheasant opener weekend. The centerpiece was a cherry-red 1950s fire truck turned beer dispenser, pouring more than two dozen varieties. We lingered over beers before returning to our quiet river valley campsite.

Sunday came too soon. While other campers packed up, we walked

the two-mile **Hiking Club Trail**. Breakfast was at **The Wooden Nickel** in downtown **Marshall**, a bar by night and breakfast joint by day. The specials board listed Hangover Burgers and Bloody Marys alongside hash browns. Jen ordered Breakfast Tatchos, tater tot nachos we endorsed. I had a classic breakfast sandwich and watched a few regulars chalk their cues at the pool table.

Afterward, we turned toward home. Camden's valley disappeared behind us, the river winding through woods as birds gathered in the maples. We talked about the people we met and the meals we shared. It was one of those weekends that reminded us why we love exploring small-town Minnesota.



*Clockwise from top left: Marshall Area Fine Arts Exhibit; 9/11 Memorial Park in Marshall; Camden State Park Mountain Bike Trail scenery; Camden State Park Hiking Trail bridge*



# Murray COUNTY



*Clockwise from top left: Painted Prairie Vineyard charcuterie board; Lake Shetek State Park-Loon Lake Causeway; Lime Lake Park; Casey Jones State Trail; End-O-Line Railroad Park Steam Engine*

At just over 1,100 acres, **Lake Shetek State Park** is one of the smaller parks in the system. It sits on the southeastern shore of 3,600-acre **Lake Shetek** (Ojibwe for Pelican) just north of **Currie**, and offers plenty of hiking, biking and water recreation. Lake Shetek is southwestern Minnesota's largest lake and a favorite destination. Locals and tourists spend days at the beach, hiking wooded shores or riding the **Currie Loop** section of the paved **Casey Jones State Trail**.

We arrived late afternoon to set up camp in the **Sunrise Campground**. Kids on bikes roamed the grounds amid the



thud of bean bags and the smell of burgers on grills. Summer was in full swing, and we were right in the middle of it.

After pitching the tent and unloading the bikes, we set out for an evening ride on the **Casey Jones State Trail**. The paved path leaves the park and threads its way along the lakeshore through pockets of prairie and trees. Pelicans drifted across the water while red-winged blackbirds clung to cattails along the shoreline.

The ride into **Currie** is short but scenic. The trail slips between **Lake Shetek** and smaller wetlands before entering town near the historic railroad corridor. Currie has the quiet feel of a place where time moves a little slower. A few people sat outside visiting while others drifted along the sidewalks as the sun began to lower toward the horizon.

We pedaled slowly through town, taking in the historic storefronts and the steady rhythm of a summer evening in a small Minnesota community. Eventually the light began to soften and stretch across the pavement, and we pointed the bikes back toward the park.

The three miles back to camp on the Casey Jones State Trail were easy riding. The breeze had cooled and the sky turned shades of orange and pink over Lake Shetek. By the time we rolled into the campground, lanterns glowed beneath canopies and quiet conversation drifted through the trees. It was the kind of evening that makes it easy to settle into camp life.

Morning came with birdsong and the rustle of campers beginning their day. With coffee finished and the bikes ready again, we headed back toward **Currie** to explore more of the trail system and the town itself.

In daylight the landscape looked different from the evening before. Prairie grasses shimmered in the sun and dragonflies darted over the water. The trail followed the shoreline before curving toward town.

From there we wandered through **Currie** at an easy pace before stopping at one of our planned destinations, **Mo' Than Antiques**. Owner Ramona offers a very eclectic selection, and that was no exaggeration. Antiques share space with crafts, woodworking, art, and jewelry from more than 60 vendors. The building has its own varied history. The first floor was once a hardware store that offered mortuary services in the basement. Upstairs was a car dealership, and a functioning elevator in the back once lifted Model A cars to the showroom. Jen started Christmas shopping early, picking up locally made earrings for her niece from a 13-year-old artisan.

Down the road, we stopped at **End-O-Line Railroad Park and Museum**. We hitched the bikes by the historic church and explored railroad artifacts, including a steam engine and historic buildings from Murray County's past. The main attraction is a manual turntable once used to rotate engines 180 degrees before sending them back east. Currie was literally the end of the line for the Chicago Western Railroad, which abandoned the route in 1980. Today, rusty tracks disappear into the woods at the park's edge.

Back on the trail, we rode to the **Currie Dam**. Here, water flowing over the concrete wall becomes the **Des Moines River**, which winds across

## Currie

- Lake Shetek State Park
- Lake Shetek
- Casey Jones State Trail Currie Loop
- Sunrise Campground
- Currie Dam
- Des Moines River
- Smith Lake
- Painted Prairie Vineyard
- Buffalo Wildlife Management Area
- Hiking Club Trail
- Loon Island Causeway and Loon Island
- Mo' Than Antiques
- End-O-Line Railroad Park and Museum

## Slayton

- The Grain Exchange restaurant and saloon

## Fulda

- Fulda Heritage Society
- She Brews
- The Store
- Seven Mile Lake Park
- Fulda First Lake
- The Plaid Moose
- Fulda cannon
- Tallgrass Tackle

## Avoca

- Lime Lake County Park
- Lime Creek



*Lime Lake Kayaking*

Minnesota and Iowa before joining the Mississippi. The final miles carried us through a scenic stretch between **Smith** and **Shetek lakes**, past oak and walnut stands and restored prairie. We had ridden this segment near dusk the night before, and it was just as beautiful in daylight.

After a morning of riding and exploring around Currie, we returned to camp for a short break before setting out to see more of Murray County. With the afternoon ahead of us, we pointed the car south toward **Fulda**.

On this hot day, a smoothie felt essential, so we stopped at **She Brews** on Paul Street. The coffee shop offers drinks, beans, and smoothies and shares a storefront with **The Store**, which features gifts made by “people you know,” as the sign said. After browsing the shelves and cooling down for a few minutes, we continued toward one of the county parks.

*Tallgrass Tackle lures*



*Murray County MN-33*

**Seven Mile Lake Park** is one of seven Murray County parks. This one-acre park on **Fulda First Lake** offers a swimming beach, fishing dock and small campground. Cottonwoods shaded the shoreline and cicadas buzzed overhead in the afternoon heat.

We found a shady shelter and unpacked lunch from **The Plaid Moose**. Jen had the Buffalo Plaid, a buffalo ranch chicken sandwich. I chose the Yayoubetcha with bacon and pesto mayo on turkey. We ate slowly, listening to the wind move through the trees and watching the lake ripple in the sun.

On the way to the depot, we stopped to see the **Fulda cannon**. The 800-pound, three-inch ordnance rifle sits on a concrete pad near the fire department. Built in 1863, it is rumored to still work and was last fired in 2021.

Marge Winter of the **Fulda Heritage Society** greeted us at the depot, and we joined a group celebrating the Fulda High School class of 1979 reunion. Inside the museum, it was as much fun watching the class reminisce as exploring the exhibits. There were constant oh-my-goshes and do-you-remembers as spouses flipped through yearbooks to see who their sweetheart once crushed on. After the laughter settled, we toured the depot, moved here from across the street. Restoration is ongoing, but the wood shingle roof has been returned to glory.

Before leaving Fulda, we picked up a special package at **Tallgrass Tackle**. Logan, a college student, makes fishing lures, and we had to have one for Sunday’s outing. We could not wait to unwrap our Flippin Jigs and admire the sparkly hooks.

Back at camp, we set out again for an evening gravel ride toward **Painted Prairie Vineyard**. It was hot, but sunscreen and water did the trick. We climbed rolling hills and coasted down the other side, catching a breeze. Alongside corn and soybean fields were parcels of wildlife management and waterfowl breeding areas filled with wildflowers. With little traffic, we heard only our tires crunching gravel and the buzz of insects and red-winged blackbirds in the grasses.

After a few turns, we rolled into the winery and settled into shaded patio chairs. The vineyard backs up to **Buffalo Wildlife**

**Management Area**, and the views were wide open. A gentle prairie breeze kept us cool. Once another table left, we had the patio to ourselves. A charcuterie board arrived, perfect for dining outside. We lingered over meats, cheeses and olives and toasted a good ride, good food and our 28-year wedding anniversary. The house-made cold sparkling apple and pineapple cider suited the occasion. Eventually, we headed back to camp after Jen signed the memory wall in the foyer.

Sunday morning, we stepped into the **Grain Exchange** in **Slayton** and were greeted by the smell of pancakes. The laid-back restaurant on Maple Street was quiet with only a few diners. We slipped into a booth and quickly decided on chicken fried steak and eggs Benedict. While waiting, I asked a neighboring diner how the restaurant got its name. He guessed it might be tied to the Minneapolis Grain Exchange, and the question sparked a round of reminiscing about town history.

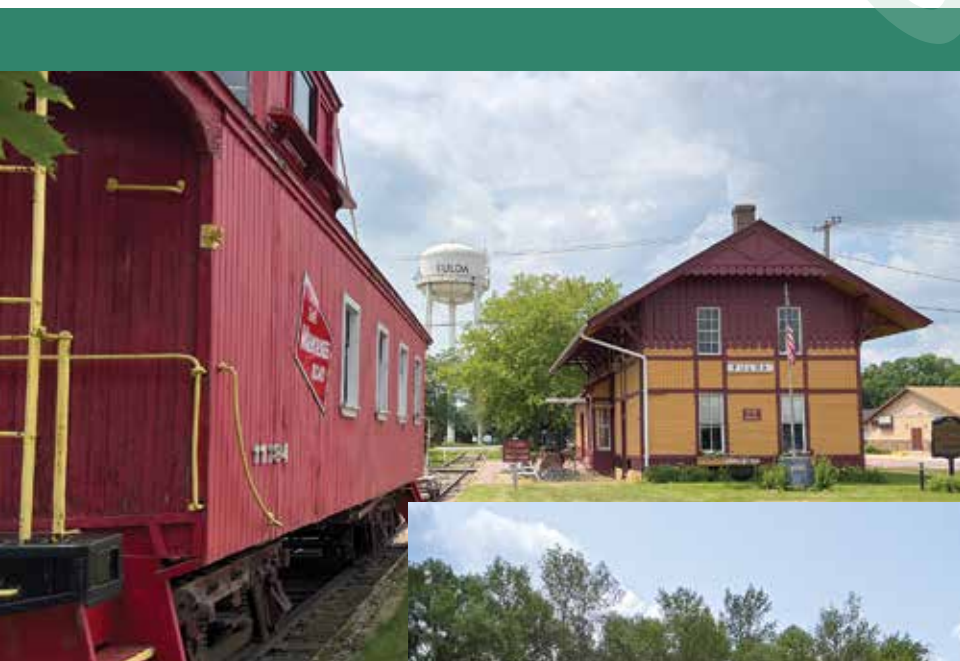
When the church crowd began to trickle in, we moved on to **Lime Lake County Park** near **Avoca**. We unloaded the kayaks to paddle and fish. With our new lures tied on, we pushed off. The morning was calm, and we cruised along the natural shoreline. The fish were not cooperative, but we blamed our skills, not them or the lures.

**Lime Lake Park** spans just four acres yet offers three campsites with electrical hookups, a bathroom building, shelter, boat landing and

fishing dock. At the southern end, **Lime Creek** flows over a natural rock dam, a future picnic spot, we thought.

Before heading home, we walked the **Hiking Club Trail** at **Lake Shetek State Park**. It follows the **Loon Island Causeway**, a narrow 1,000-foot land bridge, to **Loon Island**. The island is small, and the loop trail is less than a mile long, but it is worth it. Interpretive signs explain the area's natural history. We spotted a hawk, garter snake and toad that seemed to come out to bid farewell, unbothered by us.

As usual, we were among the last to leave the campground. It is hard to depart early when there is so much to see, and we were glad we came.



*Clockwise from top left:  
Fulda Heritage Society  
Historic Depot; The Plaid  
Moose lunch; Red Tailed  
Hawk at Lake Shetek State  
Park; Lime Lake Dam*





# Nobles COUNTY



*Clockwise from top left: Maka-Oicu Park picnic; Worthington Windsurfing Regatta grilling; Centennial Beach along the Worthington Bike and Hike Trail; Worthington Windsurfing Regatta; Kayaking at Maka-Oicu Park West Graham Lake*

I've always believed that the best kind of travel stories start at the edge of something unexpected like rolling into a small town on a sunny Friday with a pair of bikes, a travel trailer, and no firm plans except to say yes to whatever comes next. That's how we found ourselves pulling into **Olson Park campground** on the shores of **Lake Okabena**, ready for a weekend in **Worthington**.

We arrived in the late afternoon; the kind of golden hour that makes everything look like it's part of a travel brochure. Olson Park campground turned out to be far more spacious than I



imagined, with rows of sites nestled beneath the wide arms of stately cottonwood trees. The grass was freshly mowed, the bathrooms and showers spotless, and we were surprised to discover just how close we were to the bike trail. Mere feet from our site was the **Worthington Bike and Hike Trail** that would become the spine of our entire weekend.

Setting up camp was quick, and soon we were off, pedaling toward town along a wide, paved path that curved gently through parks and greenways. Within minutes, we were swept into the early bustle of the **Worthington Windsurfing Regatta**, an annual event that draws a lively crowd. As we reached the edge of **Sailboard Beach**, the smell of barbecue and wood smoke hung in the air like an invitation. Food trucks were prepping for Friday night's kickoff, and we caught a glimpse of stage crews assembling the sound system for Saturday night's headliner, Cooper Alan.

Before giving in to the sensory overload of fair food, we made a cultural stop at the **Nobles County Historical Society**, housed in the former armory building. Inside, we found Director Beth Rickers guiding a group of women through displays that sparked laughter and old stories. Clearly, these were locals visiting familiar ground. The space still had the bones of its earlier lives; originally built for indoor military drills, it later hosted basketball games, blood drives, even a traveling circus and polio vaccine clinics. With its hardwood gym floor and mezzanine track above, the building felt like a time capsule with rotating exhibits that continue to tell Worthington's evolving story.

Dinner that night was at the **Forbidden Barrel Brewing Company**, located just a few blocks from the lake. The name itself is a nod to a story from ages ago, when the town's founder, Professor Ransom Humiston, destroyed a keg of beer during a Fourth of July celebration in 1872. The space had a modern, open layout, with high ceilings and garage-door-style windows that opened to a bustling street view. We sat at a bar rail and watched the town come alive as the sun dipped behind the buildings.

We ordered pepperoni pizza from their wood-fired oven, and it arrived fast and blistering hot. Paired with two pints, it was a fitting kickoff to a weekend of exploration. Satisfied and a little sun-drunk, we coasted back to camp under a lavender sky and turned in early, with the low hum of weekend excitement in the air as more and more campers trickled into Olson Park.

Saturday morning greeted us with a veil of fog. It softened the lake into frosted glass and muffled the campground chatter. We made it into town again, this time heading for **The Mav**, a sports bar that opens bright and early for breakfast. The soundtrack was pure 1990s nostalgia, and the brunch menu didn't disappoint. I went for the Spicy Chorizo Hash with mango salsa and a fan of avocado, while Jen dug into the Big Mav Hash, which came smothered in their tangy house-made Mav Sauce, a zippy mustard-based blend that she immediately wanted the recipe for.

The Mav also had a "Brunchtails" menu, offering morning cocktails like maple-bacon Bloody Marys and pineapple mimosas. We skipped the booze but admired the creativity. As we left, the fog was lifting and revealing a town stretching its arms wide for a busy day ahead.

## Worthington

- Lake Okabena
- Olson Park campground
- Worthington Windsurfing Regatta
- Sailboard Beach
- Nobles County Historical Society
- Forbidden Barrel Brewing Company
- The Mav Grill
- Pioneer Village living museum
- Worthington Bike and Hike Trail
- Centennial Park and Beach
- The Thompson Mexican Grill
- El Rinconcito Nevería y Dulcería ice cream and candy shop
- Jebena Ethiopian restaurant
- Blue Line Cafe
- El Mexicano grocery

## Kinbrae

- Maka-Oicu Park
- West Graham Lake

Next, we visited **Pioneer Village**, a living museum run by the Historical Society. It's laid out like a small town frozen in time, with preserved buildings from all over Nobles County: doctor's office (complete with iron lung), dentist's office, blacksmith shop, jailhouse, and even a mock cemetery. Walking through, you get that mix of reverence and amusement. It's a quiet place to learn but also full of strange little details that stay with you, like a 1961 book of wallpaper samples that are en vogue again today. Back at camp, we decided to loop around the lake in the opposite direction from Friday, taking the full circuit of the **Worthington Bike and Hike Trail**. The loop spans just over 5 miles, all paved and mostly flat, winding through neighborhoods and a chain of city parks. We passed **Centennial Park** with its beach and splash pad, where kids were already squealing under fountains of water. Eventually, we rolled into Sailboard Beach again, now transformed into the full regatta experience.

Crowds milled through food truck rows while the sound of live music drifted from the main stage. There was a bean bag tournament underway, the scent of ribs and corn dogs hung thick in the air, but so did more unexpected aromas: pupusas from El Salvador, Galbi Korean short ribs sizzling on

Worthington Bike & Hike Trail



Forbidden Barrel Brewing Co. pizza and beer; Worthington Windsurfing Regatta concert

charcoal. It was global cuisine with a Minnesota lakeside vibe, and the mood was pure summer.

Before we let our appetites carry us away again, we made a detour for lunch at **The Thompson Mexican Grill**, tucked into the old red-brick **Thompson Hotel** on 10th Street. It's the kind of place that still feels like a hotel lobby but hints at its new identity with colorful carved booths and a framed painting of the Aztec legend of Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl. I went for a trio of tacos: carnitas, beef, and chorizo, washed down with a creamy horchata, while Jen ordered the Alambre Mexicano, a sizzling skillet of steak and cactus leaves that had a deliciously unique, almost creamy flavor.

Just next door, we found **El Rinconcito Nevería y Dulcería**, an ice cream and candy shop in bold neon colors. The inside looked like a party, with shelves of sweets, colorful piñatas, and huge windows letting in afternoon light. Besides a mile-long dipping cabinet filled with exciting varieties of ice cream, they also make their own popsicles in every flavor imaginable. I had the pepino con chile, a cucumber cream pop dusted with chili powder. It was sweet, spicy, cold, and totally unforgettable. Jen's blueberry bar disappeared almost instantly, so I think she felt the same.

The Worthington Windsurfing Regatta continued to unfold with casual flair. From shore, the windsurfing competitions looked peaceful, like sails gliding over silver water, though I'm sure out there it was all intensity and skill. We chatted with one of the volunteers who explained the event's long legacy—2025 marked its 25th anniversary—and how Worthington has become a surprising hub for windsurfing in the Midwest.

Dinner that evening was something special: **Jebena**, a new Ethiopian restaurant in a modern building on the edge of town. We biked there just before dusk. The space was bright and clean, with a loft overhead and a cozy, welcoming vibe. We shared a platter for two, a colorful spread of meats, lentils, potatoes, and collard greens all served atop soft, tangy injera bread made from teff flour. Every bite was rich with spices and textures. My favorite was the collard greens, perked up with a spoonful of mitmita, a fiery red blend of birdseye chili, cloves, and cardamom that made me blush despite the AC.

We pedaled back to camp and found a little detour that took us over a skinny ribbon of road near the campground. The

Regatta crowd was still buzzing across the lake, but we heard none of it as we slipped into sleep beneath the trees, bellies full and legs tired.

On our final morning, we went classic: breakfast at the **Blue Line Cafe** inside a local truck stop off I-90. It was bustling at 8 a.m., and our server was the picture of efficiency, refilling coffee cups, dropping off plates of bacon and eggs, and somehow managing to remember every order in the room without writing a thing down.

There's something undeniably comforting about truck stop breakfasts. No pretension, no frills. Just honest food and coffee strong enough to launch you into your day.

We packed up and headed east to **Maka-Oicu Park**, a little-known gem tucked into the farm fields near **Kinbrae**. We slipped our kayaks into **West Graham Lake** and paddled quietly along the shore. There were birds overhead, frogs plunking into the water, and not another soul in sight. That kind of silence is rare.

Dark clouds rolled in sooner than expected, and we reluctantly headed back to shore. At the picnic shelter, we steamed tamales we'd picked up at the **El Mexicano grocery** back in **Worthington**, setting up a makeshift camp kitchen and enjoying a final, simple meal. We toured the campground and peeked inside the rental cabin, just rustic enough to feel like you'd earned a weekend away.

We lingered longer than necessary. That's always the sign of a good trip. We weren't quite ready to leave, but Monday waited just beyond the clouds.

Our weekend in Worthington had everything: good food, unexpected cultural gems, diversity, live music, and scenic biking by the lake. But more than that, it had a rhythm and warmth that reminded me why these small-town escapes are so special. You don't need flights or five-star hotels to have a memorable adventure; sometimes all you need is a trail and a town ready to surprise you.

We'll be back. Maybe next summer, maybe sooner. But Worthington definitely earned a spot on the map.



*Clockwise from top left:  
Pioneer Village main  
street; Fishing at Maka-  
Oicu Park; Old Thompson  
Hotel in Worthington*





# Pipestone COUNTY



*Clockwise from top left: Spronk Bakery Stroopwaffels in Edgerton; Winewissa Falls at Pipestone National Monument; Clothier By Dawn in Pipestone; Casey Jones State Trail; Dari King in Pipestone*



Sometimes, the best adventures don't require a passport or a plane ticket, just a full gas tank, a couple of bikes, and a sense of wonder. That's how our weekend began, with a travel trailer loaded with camping gear, an eagerness to chase a slower pace, and a copy of the Pipestone visitor guide on the dashboard.

It was a typical Friday afternoon when we pulled into **Pipestone Family Campground**. The wind carried a faint campfire smell, and kids cruised the gravel roads on bikes. We set up under a shade tree, then pointed the car southeast

toward **Edgerton**, a quaint town that wears its Dutch heritage with pride. With tidy brick buildings, cheerful planters, and a main street that invites hand-holding and window shopping, Edgerton charmed us immediately.

Our first stop was **Tally Ho Koffie**, housed inside the old Edgerton State Bank. The high ceiling and tall windows still hinted at its past. A vintage adding machine stood on a shelf, and the old vault, now storage, showed off its mechanics through a clear door panel. Where customers once cashed checks, they now gather for dinner, and on Wednesdays the café serves liver and onions, old-school style. Jen ordered a taco salad, I chose a brisket sandwich, and, like the average checking account, our plates were soon empty.

Fueled up, we wandered to **Spronk Bakery and Confectionery**, where the air smelled of sugar and new beginnings. Co-owner Danielle Spronk shared how she and her husband, Nick, opened the shop in September 2024. We left with chocolate-dipped stropwafels and a bag of homemade sour lemon candy.

We popped into **Katie's Closet**, a cheerful boutique with locally made home goods, jewelry, and clothing. Across the street, **Edgerton Bakery** tempted us with apple fritters and glazed donuts. We bought one of each, for science.

**Edgerton's city park** was our last stop, home to a replica Dutch windmill. We sat on a bench, watching kids tumble across the playground as we enjoyed dessert.

Back at the campground, more tents had sprung up and more voices joined the rustling leaves. There's something comforting about laughter around a campfire, though we turned in early to be ready for another busy day.

Saturday kicked off on two wheels.

We pedaled into town for breakfast at **8th Avenue Diner** in **Pipestone**, a local hotspot with coffee strong enough to launch a day of pedal revolutions. Jen's sausage omelet arrived fluffy and generous. I had a breakfast sandwich stacked on an English muffin with crispy hashbrowns. It was the kind of meal that makes you want to do something ambitious, like bike 30 miles and sightsee.

At first, we stayed close and took the **Indian Lake Trail** around **Pipestone National Monument**. The trail starts at the campground and loops through prairie and stone, offering a glimpse of the monument grounds. At **Keepers of the Sacred Tradition of Pipemakers**, we met Bud Johnston, a soft-spoken elder with calloused hands and a sparkle in his eye who shared some of his story. His collection of hand-carved black and red pipestone pipes was breathtaking, each piece holding the history of a tradition much older than us.

A short ride later, we reached **Pipestone National Monument**, where American Indian tribes have quarried soft red pipestone for centuries to carve ceremonial pipes. The monument protects the ancient quarries and surrounding tallgrass prairie and offers walking trails, exhibits, and scenic **Winnewissa Falls**. We parked the bikes and walked the **Circle Trail** through prairie and past the red stone quarries that gave the monument its name. It led us to Winnewissa

## Pipestone

- Pipestone Family Campground
- 8th Avenue Diner
- Indian Lake Trail
- Pipestone National Monument
- Keepers of the Sacred Tradition of Pipemakers
- Winnewissa Falls
- Circle Trail
- Pipestone Creek
- Casey Jones trailhead
- The Clothier by Dawn
- Down Home Bliss Boutique
- Casey Jones Trail
- Dari King
- Walking tour of historic Pipestone
- Calumet Inn
- Pipestone County Courthouse
- Stonehouse Supper Club
- Los Tulipanes Mexican restaurant

## Edgerton

- Tally Ho Koffie
- Spronk Bakery and Confectionery
- Katie's Closet
- Edgerton Bakery
- Edgerton's city park

## Woodstock

- Staci's Bar and Grill

## Ihlen

- Split Rock Creek State Park
- Fish & Chips cafe
- Split Rock Lake

Falls, where **Pipestone Creek** tumbles over hard quartzite, the rock ancient people broke through to reach the softer pipestone. We paused at an overlook and enjoyed a quiet moment in a place visited for thousands of years.

On the way to the **Casey Jones trailhead**, we were sidetracked by a couple of shops. At **The Clothier by Dawn**, owner Dawn Heidebrink has offered fashion and advice for more than 35 years, and we struck up a conversation. We stopped at **Down Home Bliss Boutique**, too, before moving on.

Then we caught the **Casey Jones Trail** toward **Woodstock**. One of Minnesota's first state rail-trail corridors, it rolls through the countryside like the trains it once carried. It slices through the Prairie Coteau, a highland ridge rising through southwestern Minnesota, eastern South Dakota, and northwestern Iowa. The name translates to hillside prairie, and that is exactly what it feels like, wide, undulating hills clad in grass and farm fields. The air up on the coteau is cooler and always moving. Wind turbines dot the landscape, and you can see forever.

Somewhere between Pipestone and Woodstock, we needed a break and, like kids, lay flat on the trail. Lifting my chin, I watched the ribbon of tar narrow and disappear on the horizon between my feet. I hoped anyone coming from Woodstock would spot two brightly colored lumps in time to slow down. We lay there watching clouds drift by. I can recommend this open-eyed trail shavasana.

By the time we coasted into Woodstock, dust-coated and



*Dinner at Pipestone Stonehouse; Courthouse on Pipestone History Walk*

grinning, we were ready for lunch at **Staci's Bar and Grill**, where we ordered chislic, cubed, fried, seasoned meat, usually lamb or beef. Rustic, salty, and delicious. We chose the deluxe version with fried onions. We chatted with Dan Timmer, a lifelong local with memories tied to the barn-like building. Staci's once served as the community hall. "You can still see the basketball hoops up there," he said, pointing toward the drop ceiling.

The ride back earned us frozen treats at **Dari King**, a local tradition since 1951. We both ordered Glaciers, their version of the upside-down shake. Jen's swirled with peanut butter cups, mine with Kit Kats. After 35 miles of biking, it felt necessary.

With legs buzzing, we followed the **walking tour of historic Pipestone** using a map from the chamber of commerce. The route wound past stately Sioux quartzite buildings glowing pink in the late afternoon sun. Many dated to the late 1800s and early 1900s during the quarrying boom. Some featured elaborate cornices and Romanesque arches; others had modest facades and intricate stonework.

The three-story **Calumet Inn**, with its red stone façade, looked like something from a classic Western, a luxury hotel in its day with hot and cold running water and windows in every room.

We also admired the **Pipestone County Courthouse**, its clock tower rising over town, topped with a blindfolded Justice holding her scales. A local called it the highest court in the state, as far as elevation goes. Pipestone sits at 1,739 feet above sea level, second only to Eagle Mountain in Cook County. The walk felt part history lesson, part treasure hunt.

Then we noticed stone faces peering down from above. Not snarling gargoyles, but playful, expressive creatures carved into the Moore Block, some wide-eyed, some puckered, others staring mid-thought. They seemed like guardians of history with a touch of Minnesota Nice.

As the sun softened and shadows stretched across alleyways, we headed to **Stonehouse Supper Club**. We found a patio table and watched the moon rise as quartzite buildings caught the last golden light. Jen's Monte Cristo, a raspberry French toast twist, came with a zingy dipping sauce that widened her eyes on the first bite. My French Dip was rich and savory,

layered with tender roast beef and served with au jus that was practically drinkable.

Sunday started with gravel.

We rode about 12 miles toward **Split Rock Creek State Park**, tires crunching over gravel past wide fields, leaning barns, and weathered fences. Breakfast awaited at **Fish and Chips** café, which, despite its name, serves a breakfast that rivals any diner.

Owners Ericka Jackson and La’Ron Tivis handled the morning rush. Ericka greeted us with coffee and a welcoming smile. La’Ron worked the griddle. We ordered loaded omelets and shared hushpuppies, golden and crisp.

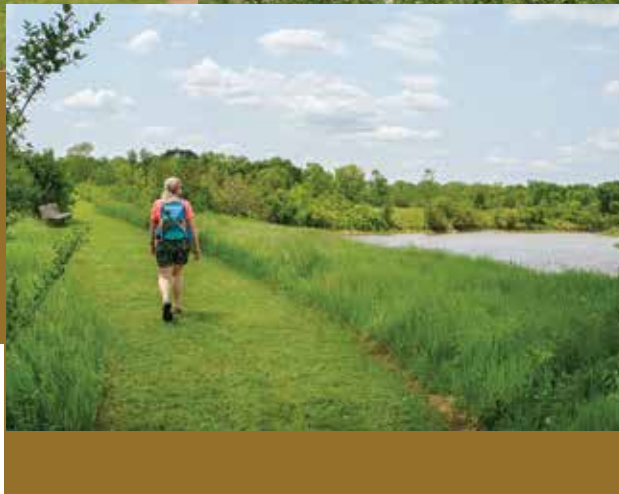
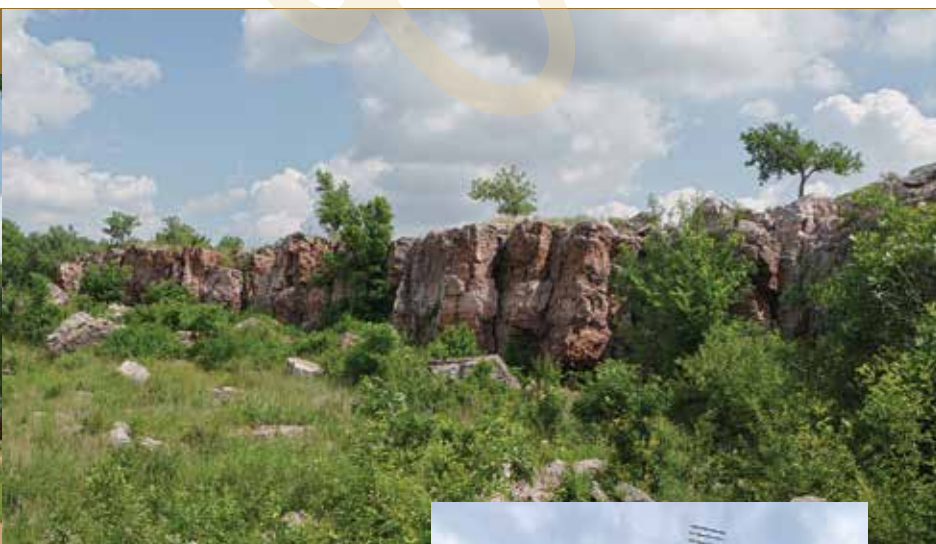
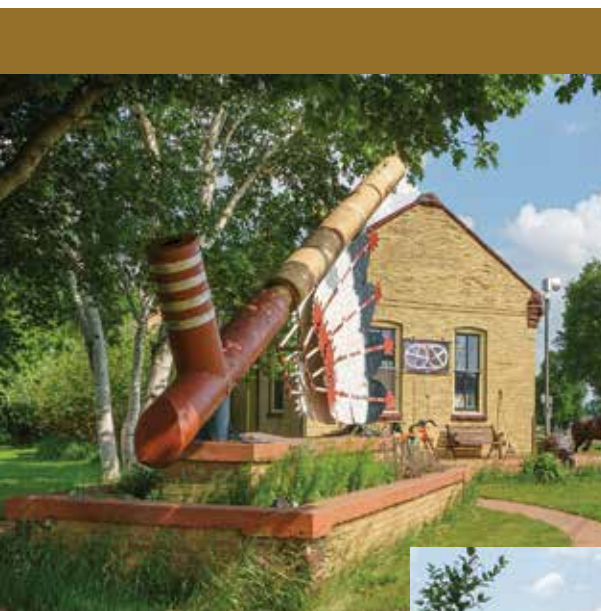
At Split Rock Creek State Park, the dam created **Split Rock Lake** in 1938, the only lake in Pipestone County. We hiked the trail through forest and wildflowers along the lake for about two and a half miles. From a hill near the historic water tower, we enjoyed an aerial view of the lake. Before leaving, we admired the restored stone arch bridge near the dam.

Back in **Pipestone**, we cleaned up and rested while our bikes leaned against a tree at our campsite, sun-warmed and dusty.

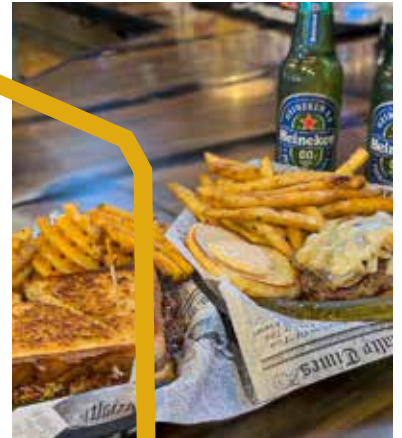
For dinner, we headed to **Los Tulipanes**, a Mexican restaurant with colorful walls and the sound of sizzling meat and blenders. Jen ordered the Changa Tulipanes, deep-fried burritos stuffed with beef

and vegetables and covered in cheese sauce. I chose Carne en su Jugo, thin slices of steak simmered in tangy green salsa with beans and bacon. It brought on a sweat, but I smiled through every bite. We also discovered two new favorites, horchata, a creamy cinnamon rice milk, and agua de Jamaica, a bright hibiscus tea that tasted like summer.

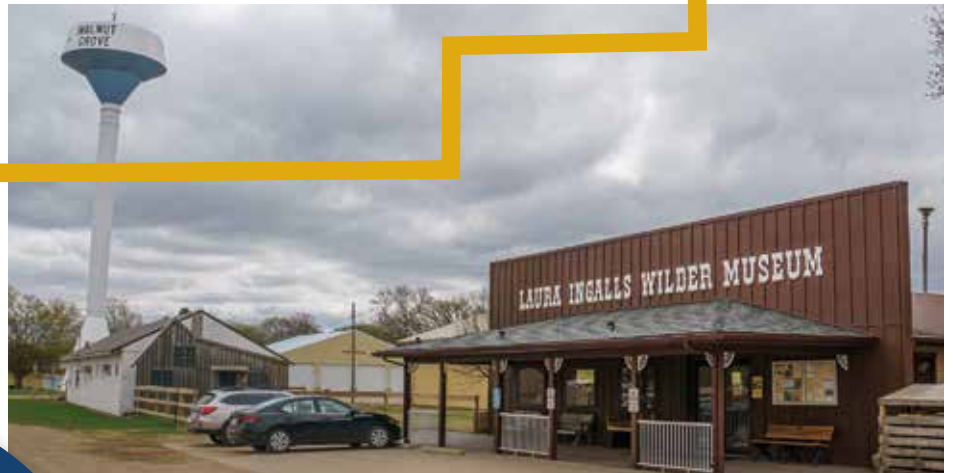
As night settled over Pipestone, we sat quietly in camp chairs by the trailer, letting tired legs and full bellies do the talking and turning the weekend into memory. We came to camp. To ride. To eat. To explore. Sometimes you just need a good sandwich, an open trail, and someone to share it with.



*Clockwise from top left: Keepers of the Sacred Tradition of Pipemakers in Pipestone; Pipestone National Monument rock cliffs; Edgerton windmill; hiking at Split Rock Creek State Park*



# Redwood COUNTY



*Clockwise from top left: Night Falls at Cansayapi Park Redwood River Falls; Lower Sioux Agency exhibits; lunch at The Spotted Bear; Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum in Walnut Grove; Plum Creek Park pink bluebells*



If you could fly high above southwestern Minnesota, it wouldn't take long to spot the **Minnesota River**. It begins at Big Stone Lake on the Minnesota and North Dakota border and joins the Mississippi River at Fort Snelling State Park in Saint Paul some 330 miles later, traveling through the state like a reverse check mark. Along the way, the Minnesota is fed by many tributaries.

Near its confluence with the **Redwood River**, my wife, Jen, and I set up basecamp at **Ramsey Park**, also known as **Cansayapi Park**, in **Redwood Falls** to explore Redwood

County. Redwood Falls snuck up on us. We cruised through flat farm fields with only a steep grade sign as warning. Suddenly we dropped into the valley, crossed the Minnesota River, and found our campsite at Ramsey Park.

The park's history dates to the late 1890s, when it was privately owned but open to the public. The 1900s brought a hydroelectric dam that created **Lake Redwood** upstream, along with grist and flour mills. In 1911, it became a Minnesota state park named for the first territorial governor, Alexander Ramsey. Ownership reverted to the city of Redwood Falls in 1957, and renamed **Ramsey Park** became the state's largest municipal park at 256 acres. It features two waterfalls, a historic hand-cut granite bridge, a small zoo, campground, playground, shelters, and 3.5 miles of paved trails. In recent years, the Dakota name Cansayapi has been used alongside Ramsey Park. The word describes their homeland along the Minnesota River and translates to "Where they mark the trees red."

Our campsite sat broadside to the Redwood River, and we spent the afternoon listening to the gurgle of cold water and birdsong. Across the river, an impressive cliff rose sharply, and we watched two deer navigate the steep hillside. Muskrats, woodpeckers, and eagles soon appeared, creating a wildlife diorama from our camp chairs. Trees were just beginning to bud, and Dutchman's breeches and bloodroot dotted the riverbanks with early blooms.

The next day, I drove about 40 miles to **Walnut Grove**. First came lunch in tiny **Vesta** at the **local café** run by Dave and Molly Wagner, who pride themselves on a Friday night walleye special. It was too early for that, so I ordered shrimp and tater tots. Just before I left, the first call for the Friday dinner came in.

In **Lucan**, I stopped at **South Forty Meat Market** for provisions. Cases were stocked with beef and pork cuts, brats, and specialty items. Their best seller is the farmer's ring, a smoked Polish-style sausage. I chose marinated pork steaks and, as always at meat markets, bacon. Outside, I noticed an old train station and metal sheds with a sign listing a phone number. Within ten minutes, Joyce Prechel of the **Lucan Area Historical Society** arrived to let me in. One building held town artifacts. Another recreated the office of the late Rep. John Zwach, who represented Minnesota's Sixth District in Congress from 1967 to 1975 and also served in the state legislature. After peeking into the restored Chicago and Northwestern depot, I headed to Walnut Grove.

**Laura Ingalls Wilder** made Walnut Grove famous through her Little House books, later adapted into the television series that ran from 1974 to 1982. Though the Ingalls family lived there only briefly, thousands visit each year and attend the **Laura Ingalls Wilder Pageant in July**. It was quieter when I visited, aside from a class of second graders seated on the museum floor listening to an interpreter tell the Ingalls story. I browsed the gift shop and explored the grounds, which include historic buildings resembling those from the family's era, including a schoolhouse, store, settler's home, and a replica dugout.

I strolled through town and stopped at **Fond Memories**, housed in the former Walnut Grove Creamery Association building. Owner Doreen Osland and her mother, Millie, told me how a hobby grew into

## Redwood Falls

- Minnesota River
- Redwood River
- Ramsey / Cansayapi Park
- Lake Redwood
- The Golden Rule Coffee Shop
- Bridge Street Bargains
- Overjoyed
- Redwood Area Arts
- Redwood County Historical Museum
- Westside Park on Lake Redwood
- NightFalls

## Walnut Grove

- Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Home & Museum
- Laura Ingalls Wilder Pageant in July
- Fond Memories
- Plum Creek Boutique
- Half Pint Coffee Co. coffee shop and roastery
- Plum Creek Park
- Laura Lake

## Vesta

- Vesta Cafe

## Lucan

- South Forty Meat Market
- Lucan Area Historical Society

## Belview

- Grandview Valley Winery / Rivendell lounge
- Prairie Fire Pizzeria

## Morton

- Lower Sioux Agency

## Morgan

- Spotted Bear Ale House

## Milroy

- Milroy Irish baseball



*Rivendell at Grandview, Grandview Valley Winery*

a business that draws people from an hour away for greeting card classes. At **Plum Creek Boutique**, I was tasked with photographing items Jen might like and texting them to her. I left with flowery pajama pants and felt successful.

By mid-afternoon, I needed coffee. **Walnut Grove's Half Pint Coffee Co.** coffee shop and roastery occupies the former Ferguson Clinic building. Owner Crystal Knakmuhs opened in June 2024 and offers drinks and more than a dozen freshly roasted beans. I ordered coffee with a shot of espresso. Crystal recommended **Plum Creek Park** as a good place to see Virginia bluebells in bloom, so I headed there.

The 215-acre park offers camping, camper cabins, disc golf, hiking trails, and kayak rentals on **Laura Lake**. Along Plum Creek's shaded banks, I found the bluebells, mostly bluish-purple with a few pink patches mixed in.

Jen and I reunited for a date night at **Grandview Valley Winery** in nearby **Belview**. The Rigge family has produced wine from Brianna, Itasca, and Sabrevois grapes since 2011, offering whites, reds, and rosés. They later added **Prairie Fire Pizzeria**.

Our first stop was **Rivendell**, a lounge attached to the

vineyard. A granite bar anchored the two-story room, backed by a mirrored liquor display tall enough to require a ladder. Oak beams, shimmering upholstery, and a chandelier added flair. We ordered alcohol-free Rivendell Smash drinks made with lemon juice, honey, blackberries, ginger beer, mint, and a bourbon substitute, then moved to the tasting room for pizza.

The tasting room felt more casual with its pine ceiling and exposed beams. The menu listed nearly three dozen pizzas. We chose the crab rangoon variety with sesame sauce, crab, and wonton strips. It was a good call. We turned in early for a busy Saturday.

We began the next morning at **The Golden Rule Coffee Shop** in downtown **Redwood Falls**. The long, narrow space featured exposed brick and warm tones. Our coffee came in real cups and breakfast sandwiches on real plates, garnished with parsley. We added an apple fritter for good measure.

Caffeinated, we explored local shops. **Bridge Street Bargains** was busy with deal hunters. At **Overjoyed**, owner Amanda Mathiowetz, a former arts teacher, showed us a watercolor by local artist Karen Hammerschmidt that came home with us. At **Redwood Area Arts** on East Second Street, we purchased a linoleum block print by Nan Karr Kaufenberg while volunteers prepared for a workshop.

Next, we toured the historic **Lower Sioux Agency** in **Morton**. Established in 1853 as an administrative center for federal efforts to relocate Dakota bands and encourage farming, it became the site of the U.S.-Dakota War in 1862, which lasted six weeks and cost hundreds of lives. In its heyday, the agency brought together Dakota people, traders, farmers and settlers at the edge of the Minnesota River Valley, with the Redwood Ferry transporting goods and passengers.

We studied interpretive exhibits, including a replica birch bark house used seasonally by Dakota families. The only remaining original structure is a stone warehouse near the interpretive center. Walking the trails overlooking the Minnesota River Valley, it was difficult to imagine the events of more than 160 years ago.

For dinner, we headed to **Morgan** and the **Spotted Bear Ale House**. Under a wagon wheel chandelier, we ordered beers and studied the menu. I chose the Piggy Melt, a pulled pork twist on a patty melt. Jen ordered the Steakhouse burger and praised the fries as crispy mashed potatoes. We traded bites as usual.

Back in **Redwood Falls**, we made an impromptu stop at the **Redwood County Historical Museum**. Though not officially open for the season, president Scott Larson gave us a preview. The 1908 Spanish-style brick building originally served as a poor farm, where residents worked fields in exchange for housing. It later became a nursing home and, in 1978, the museum. Thirty rooms brimmed with artifacts from the area's past.

On a warm spring afternoon, we launched kayaks from **Westside Park on Lake Redwood**, just upstream of the dam. As the roar of falling water faded, city noises disappeared. Eagles soared overhead, fish swam below, and turtles basked on logs. Our only regret was leaving the fishing poles behind.

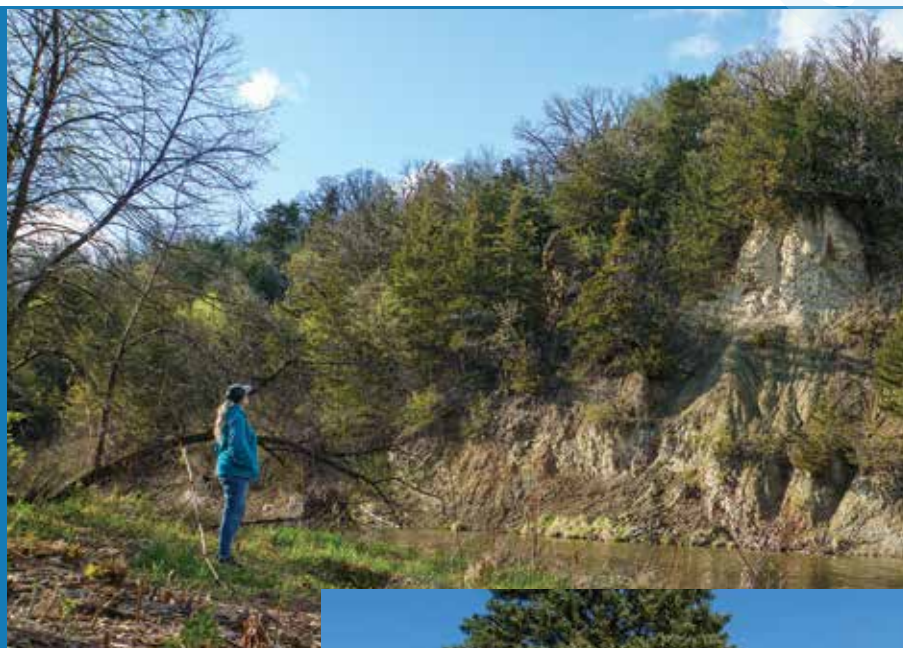
Dusk approached along with **NightFalls**. Celebrate Redwood Falls hosts this annual spring event at **Ramsey Park**, transforming it into an after-dark display involving about 100 volunteers and nearly half a million lights. At dusk, displays flickered on and cars streamed into the valley. Families walked miles of illuminated trails and crossed glowing bridges. Couples posed for photos, teenagers wandered the woods, and a DJ filled the night with music. The Lower Sioux Community drum circle echoed through the trees. Redwood and Ramsey Falls glowed in shifting colors as visitors watched from observation platforms. At 11 p.m., the lights blinked off, and the magic ended for the night.

The next morning, volunteers were already packing up. After breakfast at camp featuring bacon from South Forty, we drove about 30 miles to **Milroy** for the season opener of the **Milroy Irish town ball team**. In this part of Minnesota, amateur baseball thrives. The 250-person town fields two teams, each with its own stadium.

Like a scene from Field of Dreams, the floodlights appeared on the

horizon before the field itself came into view. We sat in the 72-seat bleachers and watched. Though not sports enthusiasts, we appreciated the ritual: the pitcher winds up, the batter waits, the crack of wood against leather sends the ball into the outfield or beyond into soybean fields, and the crowd cheers. Kids retrieved foul balls, someone updated the scoreboard, and neighbors caught up over burgers and beers. In their 2025 opener, the Irish defeated Sleepy Eye 7 to 4.

On the drive home, we talked about how much we enjoyed Redwood County. Over three days, we met people who gather for walks in the park, drum circles, history, and ballgames, reminders that community still matters.



*Clockwise from top left:  
Cansayapi Park Bluffs;  
Milroy Irish baseball;  
kayaking Redwood River  
in the spring; Redwood  
County Museum*





# Rock COUNTY



*Clockwise from top left: Bison tour at Blue Mounds State Park; kayaking on Rock River in Luverne; wiener dog racer in Luverne; Blue Mounds State Park rock climber; GrandStay tandem bike rental in Luverne*

It's not every day you get asked to judge a wiener dog beauty pageant, but that's how our trip to Rock County began.

My wife, Jen, and I had returned to **Luverne** after such a great visit a couple of years back. This time, we arrived just in time for their famous **Hot Dog Nite in July**. Dreamed up more than 60 years ago by the local Chamber of Commerce, the event has grown into a beloved tradition. That night they handed out around 15,000 hot dogs, a mile and a half of sausage. Naturally, no celebration of this scale is complete without a **wiener dog beauty contest**, which is how we found ourselves

judging one of the most adorable competitions we've ever seen.

We rolled into town on a sunny Thursday afternoon and checked into the **GrandStay Hotel**. Just a mile from downtown and right along a scenic bike trail, it was the perfect basecamp. The place was more suite than room, with a full kitchen, cozy living room, fireplace and separate bedroom.

But we didn't come to sit indoors. Thanks to the **Roll On Luverne Bike Loan Program**, we borrowed a tandem bike from a mini-garage behind the hotel, free of charge, and hit the **Luverne Loop**, a 7-mile paved circle around town with spurs connecting to **Blue Mounds State Park** and the **Ashby Memorial Trail**. Together they make about 15 miles of scenic riding through prairie, neighborhoods, and open sky. The trail carried us straight into downtown, where energy was already building.

It was **Hot Dog Nite**, and though we arrived early, the smell of grilled meats lingered in the air. As the evening wore on, Main Street transformed. Families, couples, and friends strolled the sidewalks, collecting gourmet hot dogs from businesses and community groups. Each put its own spin on the classic: chili or bacon, melty cheese sauce and jalapeños, even pizza topped with wiener wheels.

The crowd was just as entertaining. People wore punny shirts and costumes dedicated to the beloved hot dog. An older gentleman tipped his hat to us as he passed. It read, "It's a bad day to be a hot dog."

As judges of the wiener dog contest, we took our job seriously. Ten dogs paraded through the fenced arena, and we scored confidence and costume creativity. Extra points went to owners who matched their pets, which led to inspired pairs.

Then came the races, chaotic and delightful. Pairs lined up as their humans tried every trick to coax them across the finish line. At the shout of "Go!" the dogs were off, some bolting straight ahead, others veering off or stopping to sniff. The crowd roared with laughter. It was a hoot.

After the final heat, we coasted to **Take 16 Brewery** for a celebratory pint. A street dance still to come, but after a full day of judging, riding, and hot dogs, we were tuckered out. We pedaled back to the hotel as fireflies lit the grasses beside the trail like tiny lanterns. Somewhere back in town, the music played on, but we drifted off to sleep with full bellies and big smiles.

The next day we fueled up with lunch at **Los Bravos**, steps from the GrandStay. Jen ordered a lunch chimichanga, while I opted for huevos con chorizo. A cold horchata rounded things out. Our server sang along to a sad love song, but there was nothing melancholy about our joyful midday meal.

We took our own bikes out and pedaled around town. Our first stop was **Deuschle Studio**, a beacon of art on the prairie, tucked inside a former horse barn that houses a pottery studio. Jerry Deuschle welcomed us into his world of clay and fire and gave us a tour. His specialty is Raku pottery, a dramatic process where red-hot vessels are removed from the kiln and placed into combustibles like sawdust or newspaper. The glazes shimmer with iridescent purples and metallic

## Luverne

- Hot Dog Nite in July / wiener dog beauty contest and races
- GrandStay Hotel
- Roll On Luverne Bike Loan Program
- Luverne Loop trail
- Blue Mounds State Park / bison tour
- Christopher Martin Ashby Memorial Trail
- Take 16 Brewery
- Los Bravos restaurant
- Deuschle Studio
- Redbird Field baseball
- JJ's Tasty Drive-In
- Wildflowers Coffee Boutique
- Sassy Seconds high-end thrift store
- World's largest nutcracker statue
- Rock County History Center
- Those Blasted Things souvenir shop
- Rock River Relics
- The Bullpen restaurant
- Rock River / Rock River Reservoir / Rock River Wildlife Management Area
- Luverne Ice Arena
- Kolbert and Hawkinson Parks
- Lower Cliffline Trail / rock climbing
- Howling Dog Saloon

## Hills

- Green Rail Bar and Grill

greens, unexpected and mesmerizing.

That evening, we headed to **Redbird Field** to watch the Luverne Redbirds face the Brandon Belugas in an exhibition game. In honor of the upcoming nutcracker statue dedication, the Redbirds wore custom Nutcracker jerseys, and the crowd turned out in style. Luverne clinched the win with a last-inning surge, and we each bought Luverne souvenir ball caps.

Dinner at **JJ's Tasty Drive-In** was pure Americana, meaning bacon cheeseburgers all around, mine with fries, Jen's with chili cheese fries. The ritual is always the same: grab a napkin for that messy first bite. The ketchup will find a way.

We returned to the field for a concert by 10 Miles from Nowhere, a country band with a loyal following who knew every lyric. As twilight settled, the band played on, locals kicked up their boots, and we called it a night.

Saturday morning, we biked back into town. In Luverne, the bike is king, and you can get anywhere on two wheels. **Wildflowers Coffee Boutique** was bustling and we ordered breakfast sandwiches and espresso.

We popped into **Sassy Seconds**, a high-end thrift store and browsed vintage and designer finds before heading to one of the most anticipated events of the weekend.

At 11 a.m., the crowd gathered for the nutcracker dedication ceremony. While the full 65-foot tallest nutcracker in the world is still a work in progress, the base, boots, and legs were

on display. Striped in red and white, the towering legs hinted at what's to come: a star-spangled giant with a moveable jaw and light-up eyes. With more than 6,000 nutcrackers already housed in the **Rock County History Center**, this tribute will soon tower over Highway 75. Undeterred by delays, the crowd took selfies and rallied behind the dream. Next door at **Those Blasted Things** souvenir shop, Jen picked up a nutcracker T-shirt, and we continued on.

We biked to **Rock River Relics**, a small studio filled with stained glass art from salvaged wood. Earrings, sun catchers, and glass flowers hung in the windows like jewels. The craftsmanship was beautiful, and the history made it even more special.

For lunch, we stopped at **The Bullpen**. I had chislic, skewered and seasoned beef fried to perfection, a South Dakota tradition with just the right bite. Jen's sandwich, the raspberry fritter, was turkey, bacon, and chipotle sauce between slices of deep-fried raspberry toast. We chatted with owner Ryan Bullerman while the local high school prom aired on TV in the background.

We rode the rest of Luverne's trail system, including the **Christopher Martin Ashby Memorial Trail**, a scenic out-and-back through City Park and past the **Rock River Reservoir**. The trail climbed to the highest point in the system, offering a panoramic view of the quartzite cliffs of **Blue Mounds State Park** rising from the prairie.

From there we continued clockwise along the Luverne Loop, past Redbird Field beside the Rock River and into an open grassy stretch. After crossing Highway 75, the trail led around the **Luverne Ice Arena** and onto the west side of town. We cruised past **Kolbert** and **Hawkinson Parks**, the disc golf course, and several ballfields before climbing atop what looked like a flood diversion berm.

The trail continued into the northern stretch, where a long downhill made for an easy ride. After crossing North Blue Mounds Avenue, we turned south toward **Blue Mounds State Park**.

Our afternoon adventure was a **bison tour** at the park. Along with 10 others, we boarded the safari mobile that rumbled across the prairie in search of bison. The herd stayed hidden in a far corner of the 500-acre enclosure, and seeing the bison is not guaranteed. But naturalist Tiffany Muellner filled the ride with stories about prairie restoration, native wildflowers, the role bison play in the ecosystem, and what it takes to manage a herd.

On the way back, we spotted **rock climbers** scaling the red Sioux quartzite cliffs on the **Lower Cliffline Trail**, silhouetted against the sun. We stood in awe, intrigued about trying it someday.

Dinner was at the **Howling Dog Saloon**, where burgers are named after locals. I had the Vircalicious with jalapeños, and

Jen had the Joe Burger, also spicy and delicious. It was that kind of place, where your favorite flavor might carry your name.

A full day and 30 bike miles later, we were back at the GrandStay, ready for a dip in the pool and some rest.

On our final morning, we traded pedals for paddles and floated down the **Rock River** in perfect kayaking weather. The calm water twisted gently, flanked by tall grasses and wide skies. We passed the **Rock River Wildlife Management Area**, saw one barn, and heard nothing but birds and breeze. The longer version runs nearly five hours from Blue Mounds State Park, but this shorter float was perfect, a soul cleanser in slow motion and a fine way to spend a Sunday morning.

For brunch, we drove to nearby **Hills**, population 800, to the **Green Rail Bar and Grill**, set in a former train depot. We dined on the back patio and met owner Kyle Knobloch, who made sure our roast beef hit the spot. It was so tender we didn't need a knife. The whiskey menu tempted us, but we stuck with coffee.

Our final stop was the tri-county marker where Minnesota, Iowa, and South Dakota meet. A battered metal monument stands on a rural road where few stop unless they're looking for it. It has been banged up, welded, and relocated since 1859, but still marks the spot, more or less.

We stood with the sun beating down, cicadas singing, and wind

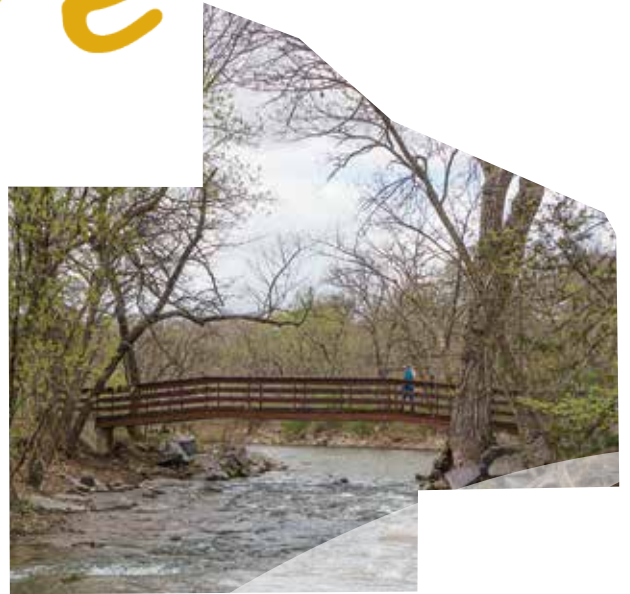
rustling through soybeans. We had run out of state to explore and it was time to turn north. It felt like we should have held hands and had a moment, but we said nothing and got back in the car.

We had visited one of those places that sneaks up on you, where a burger might be named after your neighbor, where you can chat with the owner of every shop, and where your car can stay parked all weekend while you explore by bike. The people here celebrate hot dogs with joy, dream big with giant nutcrackers, and find beauty in clay, glass, and prairie grass. We came for a weekend but left with full bellies, sore legs, and a deep appreciation for this corner of Minnesota.



*Clockwise from top left: Nutcracker Days kids race; Nutcrackers baseball; Hot Dog Nite; Deuschle Studio Raku pottery; Take 16 Brewing; flowers along the Ashby Trail*

# Explore



Top left to right: Hole in the Mountain Trail walking paths, Lake Benton;  
Camden Regional Trail, Marshall; Ramsey/Cansayapi Park, Redwood Falls;  
Middle left to right: Split Rock Creek State Park, Ihlen; Casey Jones State Trail  
Lake Shetek, Currie; Jeffers Petroglyphs, Comfrey; Bottom left to right: Luverne  
Loop Trailhead, Luverne; Maka-Oicu Park, Kinbrae; Loon Lake, Jackson