



2024

TrailLink Unlimited 

Guides



# La Crosse River State Trail

*Wisconsin*



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The La Crosse River valley provides level terrain through a rugged area of western Wisconsin for the La Crosse River State Trail. This screened-limestone rail-with-trail passes through farmland, marshes, and tracts of surviving prairie as it rolls for 21 miles between the Mississippi River town of La Crosse and Sparta.

Railway builders chose this route in the 1870s for the Chicago and North Western Railway (CNW) to carry freight and passengers between St. Paul and Chicago. A century later the railroad discontinued the route, and the state acquired it for a recreational trail that opened in the 1980s. The tracks of CNW's rival during that time, the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad (the Milwaukee Road), still parallel the trail and carry Canadian Pacific Railway trains and Amtrak's Empire

Builder.

The La Crosse River State Trail passes through the old whistlestops of West Salem, Bangor, and Rockland and serves as a middle leg of Wisconsin's Bike 4 Trails route. That course comprises the [Great River State Trail](#), La Crosse River State Trail, [Elroy-Sparta State Trail](#), and [400 State Trail](#) as it rolls along the Mississippi River and through the state's Driftless Area. Snowmobiling is permitted in season.

You'll begin at the Medary trailhead, shared with the Great River State Trail just east of La Crosse. For about the next 3 miles, you're passing through the La Crosse River Conservancy, a privately funded refuge surrounding the marshes bordering the river. Migrating waterfowl frequent the area, which is home to beaver, red foxes, and river otters.

In 7 miles you'll arrive at West Salem, founded in the 1850s. You can find cafés, taverns, and food stores on Leonard Street, which intersects the trail. Farmland borders the trail for the next 5 miles to Bangor, which offers restrooms and a drinking fountain at Veterans Memorial Park, just off the trail at Park Drive and James Street. More services are available in town.

Leaving Bangor, you travel through the La Crosse River Trail Prairies for the next 9 miles, with a brief interruption for the small town of Rockland. Although farms cover large areas, pockets of prairie along the trail represent the extensive grasslands that once covered this part of the state. Looking across this landscape of marshes and grasslands sprinkled with bur oaks, you can see the hilltops, bluffs, and ridges left unscathed in the last Ice Age.

The trail ends in Sparta at a renovated railroad depot, which also serves as the start of the [Elroy-Sparta State Trail](#), widely considered to be the oldest rail-trail in the United States. To understand what bicycling means to this town, head up Water Street for a couple of blocks to "Ben Bikin'," a large statue of a man astride an old-fashioned high-wheeler bicycle.



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**States:** Wisconsin

**Counties:** La Crosse, Monroe

Length: 21 miles

**Trail end points:** County Road B east of SR 16/  
Great River State Trail (La Crosse) to S. Water  
St./Elroy-Sparta State Trail at Hemstock Dr.  
(Sparta)

**Trail surfaces:** Crushed Stone

**Trail category:** Rail-Trail

**Trail activities:** Bike, Fishing, Mountain  
Biking, Snowmobiling, Walking, Cross Country

## Parking & Trail Access

To reach the western trailhead in La Crosse from I-90, take Exit 5 south toward La Crosse on SR 16. Go 1.8 miles and turn left onto County Road B. Go 0.4 mile, and turn left into the trailhead parking lot. The La Crosse River State Trail heads east from here.

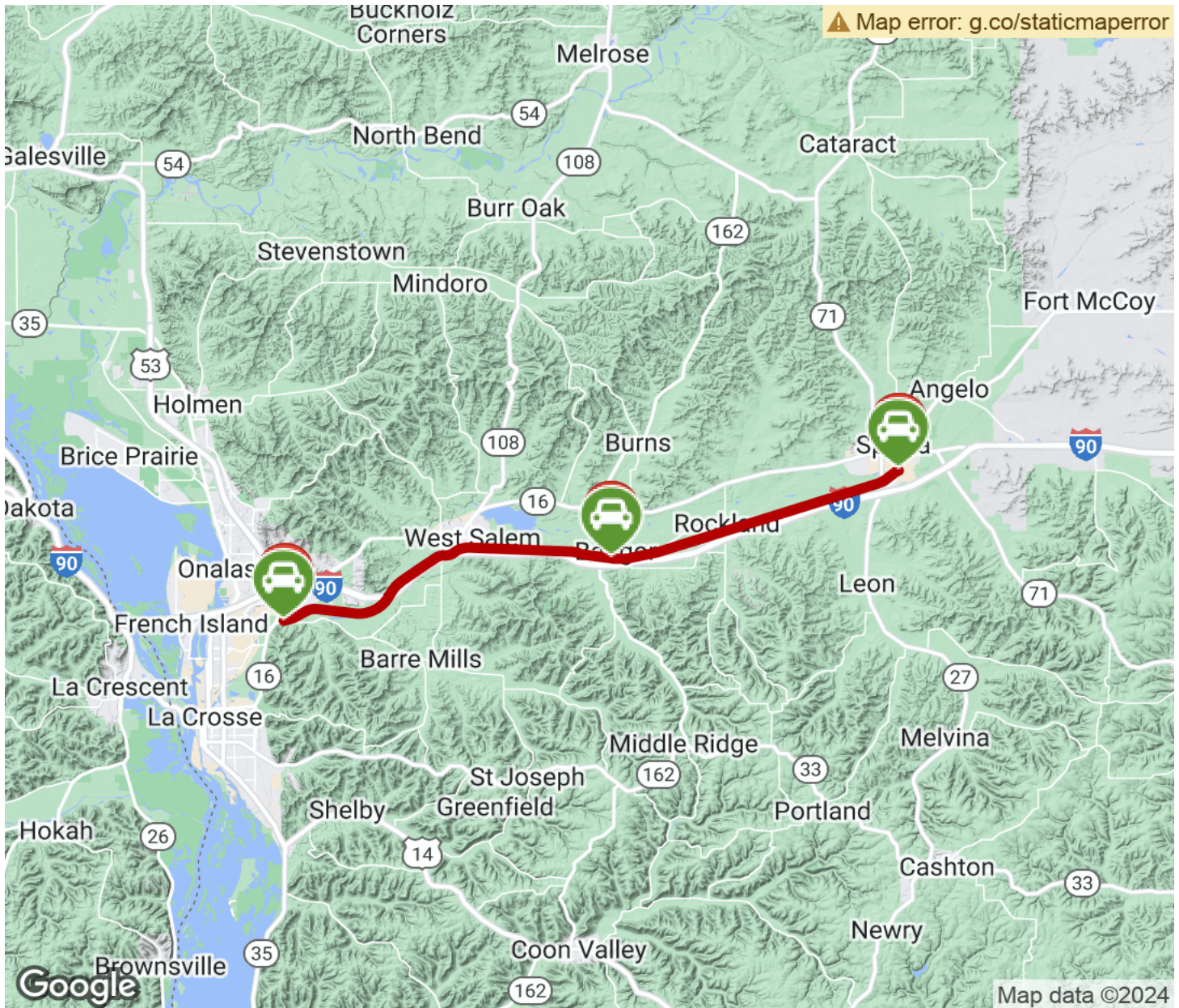
To reach the eastern trailhead in Sparta from I-90, take Exit 28 toward Sparta onto SR 16, heading west. Go 2.3 miles, and turn left onto S. Water St. Go 0.5 mile, and turn left onto Milwaukee St. Turn immediately right into the trailhead parking lot. The trailhead is at the old railroad depot at 111 Milwaukee St.





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Trailhead



Restroom



Parking



Water Fountain



Tunnel



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