TrailLink
by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

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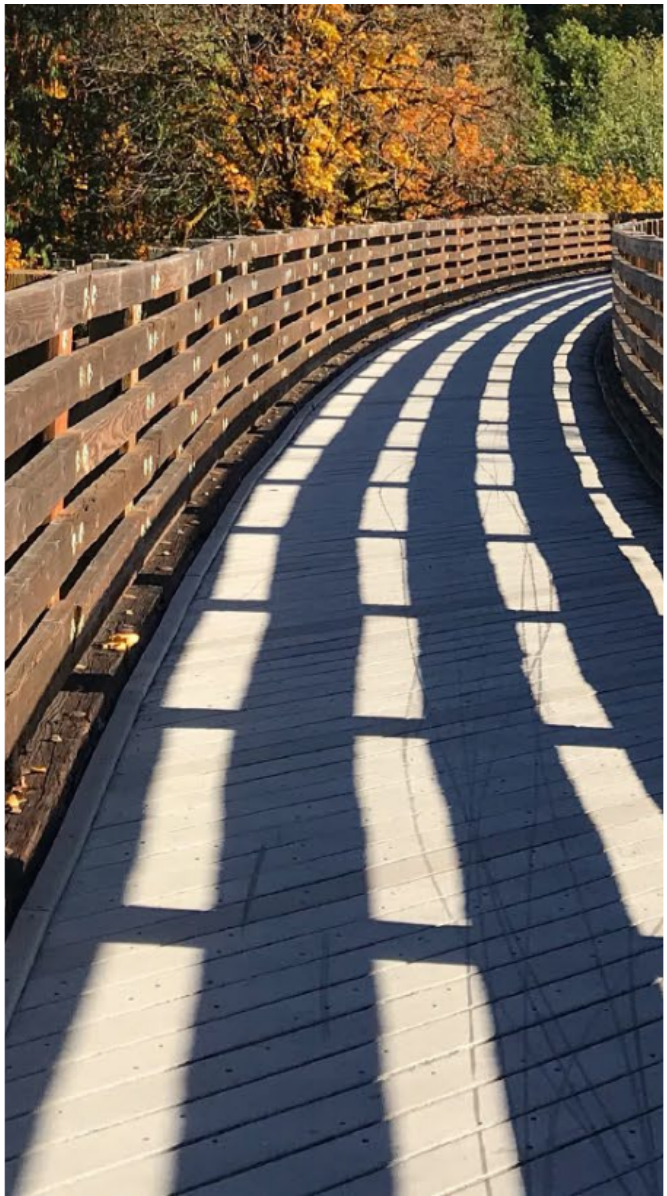
TrailLink Unlimited Guides



Raccoon River Valley Trail

Iowa

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On the western outskirts of Des Moines, the Raccoon River Valley Trail offers a quintessential central Iowa experience. Over its 88.2-mile span, trail users can traverse woodlands, prairie, and agricultural landscapes. The route forms a loop through several rural communities with a long tail coming off the loop on its northern end that heads to Jefferson, as well as another tail on its southern end that heads toward Des Moines.

About the Route

The Raccoon River Valley Trail runs along a former railroad right-of-way that was first built in the 1870s to carry rail traffic between Des Moines and the Great Lakes region. Fully paved and with a level grade typical of a rail trail, it's an easy walk or ride, though trail users may wish to conquer the trail over the course of multiple days due to its size.

Note: Trail use requires a $2 daily fee for individuals age 18 and older. All proceeds go to the conservation boards in the counties through which the trail passes, and the money is used for trail maintenance and improvements. Look for the payment drop boxes at the trailheads.

At the northern trailhead in Jefferson, trail users are greeted by a former Milwaukee Road depot painted a cheerful yellow. Although the building is open only for special occasions, ample parking is available here, as well as a drinking fountain. From the depot, the trail heads south past country homes for a few blocks until the trail dives under a shady tree canopy. The trail opens up to farmland as it approaches the old railroad town of Cooper at mile 7. In the summer, trail users may see a plethora of grasshoppers darting across the pathway. A highlight of this section is the 600-foot-long trestle bridge over the North Raccoon River.

From Cooper, it's 5 miles to Herndon, where the trail crosses its first trail junction. This is where the loop portion of the route begins. Turn left to travel east to the towns of Jamaica, Dawson, and Perry, or continue southward to the towns of Yale and Panora.

Along the eastern leg of the loop, trail users will pass pedal through peaceful, picturesque terrain: farm fields and wildflower meadows interspersed with copses of trees. On either side of the trail, the brushy embankments are also bustling with birds. After 7 miles, the trail passes another depot (circa 1889) sitting trailside in Dawson. Peek inside at the displays of railroad history and the old baggage room. Here, tail users can also find restrooms and drinking water.

In another 6 miles, the trail reaches Perry, one of the larger towns along the route. The community truly embraces the trail, and in the windows of many businesses are signs

Raccoon River Valley Trail

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States: Iowa

Counties: Dallas,Greene,Guthrie,Polk

Length: 88.2miles

Trail end points: W Lincoln Way (Jefferson) to Clive Greenbelt Trail (Clive)

Trail surfaces: Asphalt,Concrete

Trail category: Rail-Trail

Trail activities: Bike,Fishing,Inline Skating,Snowmobiling,Walking,Wheelchair Accessible,Cross Country Skiing

Parking & Trail Access

The Raccoon River Valley Trail runs between W Lincoln Way (Jefferson) and Clive Greenbelt Trail (Clive), with parking at the northern end.

Parking is also available at:

- Brickyard Park, S 18th St. (Adel)
- Heritage Park, 1300 Walnut St (Dallas Center)
- 210 4th St (Minburn)

There are numerous parking options along this route. Please see TrailLink Map for all parking options and detailed directions.

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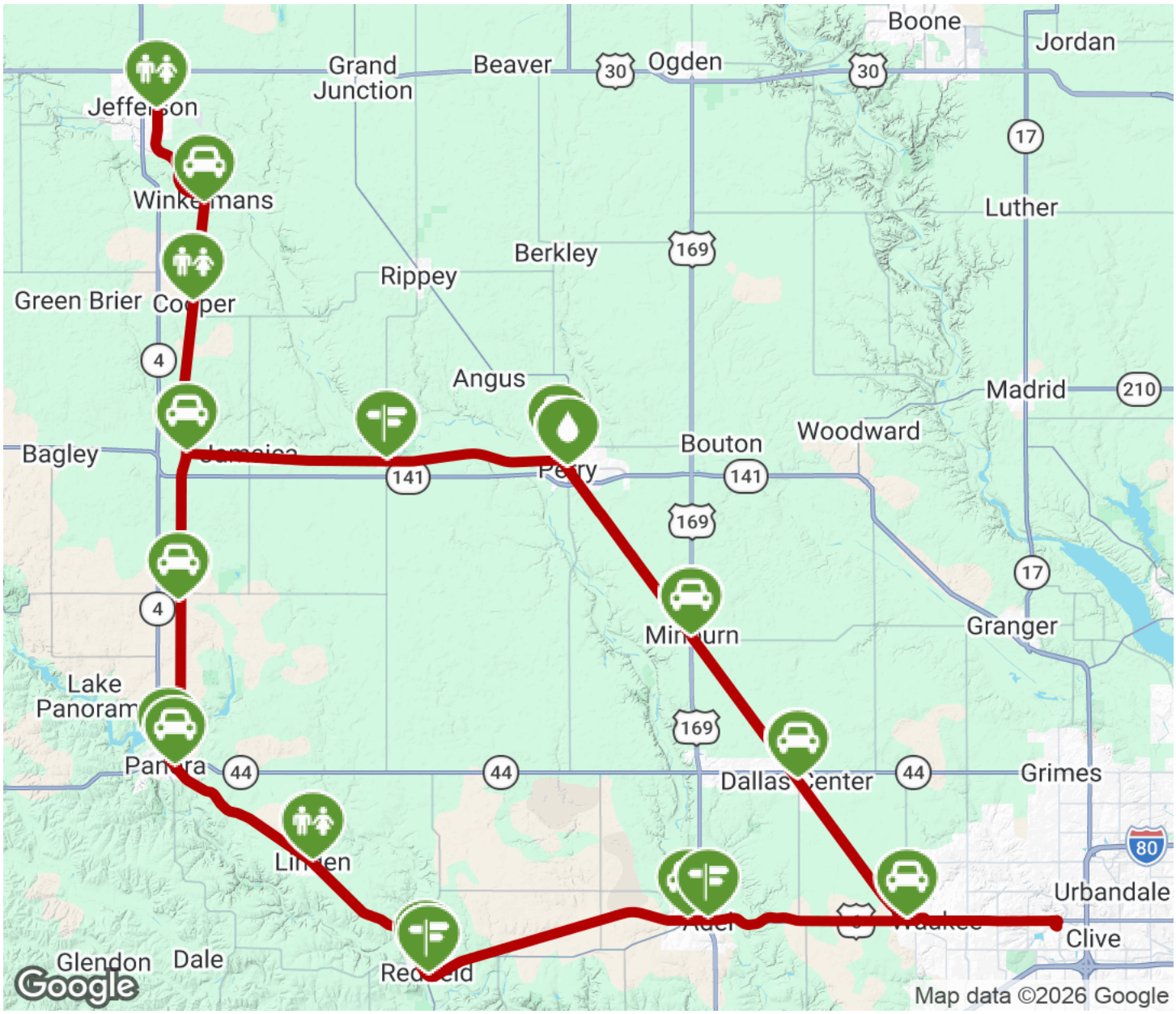

Trailhead Restroom Parking Water Fountain Tunnel

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