



2026

TrailLink Unlimited



Guides



Gay Lea Wilson Trail

Iowa



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Nestled in the suburbs of Des Moines and traveling through the towns of Ankeny, Berwick, Pleasant Hill, and Altoona, the Gay Lea Wilson Trail is named for a local advocate who first conceived of a network of trails in eastern Polk County in the 1980s. Eventually, the trail will link several central Iowa communities and open spaces over a 35-mile course. Currently, the trail connects East Des Moines with Ankeny to the north and Pleasant Hill and Altoona to the northeast.

At the northern trailhead in Ankeny, trail users have the option of connecting with the Oralabor Gateway Trail and heading west for 5 miles to just past Northwest Toni Drive, where the [Oralabor Gateway Trail](#) connects with the [Neal Smith Trail](#) and creates a seamless off-road route to Saylorville Lake.

Beginning at the northern trailhead, the [Gay Lea Wilson Trail](#) winds southwardly along rural roads and through suburban neighborhoods that offer many access points for locals. Residents use the trail to walk or bike to recreation facilities, the library, and other town amenities. Benches are strategically placed for taking breaks, spotting birds, and snapping photos of Iowa wildflowers.

After a horizontal stretch heading east along Northeast 54th Avenue—an intersection for the 27-mile [Chichaqua Valley Trail](#), which travels northeast to Baxter—the trail meets with Fourmile Creek and then heads south under I-80. Here, the trail is enveloped by dense, quiet woodland as it follows the creek to Pleasant Hill and Copper Creek Lake, which the trail circles. At the south end of the lake, you'll find a large picnic area, a playground, water fountains, restrooms, and parking. Bring a picnic lunch and enjoy the scenery, or head east, where restaurants are in abundance.

From this central hub of the trail, a segment accessible at North Pleasant Hill Boulevard runs south for 1.5 miles along Fourmile Creek and an active rail corridor to Scott Avenue in East Des Moines. A less-than-0.5-mile trek west along hilly Fairview Drive/Dean Avenue (intersecting this segment's midpoint, before Scott Avenue) leads to the sprawling Iowa State Fairgrounds.

At North Pleasant Hill Boulevard, you can also take the trail northeast approximately 4 miles to the heart of Altoona. Much of this portion of the trail's route parallels an active railroad line.

A planned southern extension of the popular High Trestle Trail will eventually meet the [Gay Lea Wilson Trail](#) at Southeast Oralabor Road in Ankeny. Both trails are part of the Central Iowa Trail Network, which, when complete, will run about 110 miles and will also include the [Neal Smith Trail](#), [Heart of Iowa Nature Trail](#), and [Chichaqua Valley Trail](#).



Gay Lea Wilson Trail

Iowa

States: Iowa

Counties: Polk

Length: 20.9miles

Trail end points: Scott Ave. (Des Moines) to 1st St. E and 8th Ave. SE (Altoona); E. University Ave. (Pleasant Hill) to SE Oralabor Rd./SR 160 east of S. Ankeny Blvd./US 69 (Ankeny)

Trail surfaces: Asphalt, Concrete

Trail category: Rail-Trail

Trail activities: Bike, Inline

Skating, Walking, Wheelchair Accessible, Cross

Parking & Trail Access

The nearest parking lot to the northwestern trailhead is located a half mile south along the trail at SE 54th St. in Ankeny. To reach the parking lot from I-80, take Exit 135 for IA 415 N/

NW Second St., and go 3 miles. Turn right (east) onto NE 66th Ave., and go 0.7 mile. Turn left onto NE 14th St., go 0.6 mile, and turn right onto NE 70th Ave., which turns into SE 54th St. Turn left into the parking area just after passing the marsh and crossing over the trail. The endpoint is located about 0.5 mile north along the trail at SE Oralabor Road, also the eastern endpoint for the Oralabor Gateway Trail.

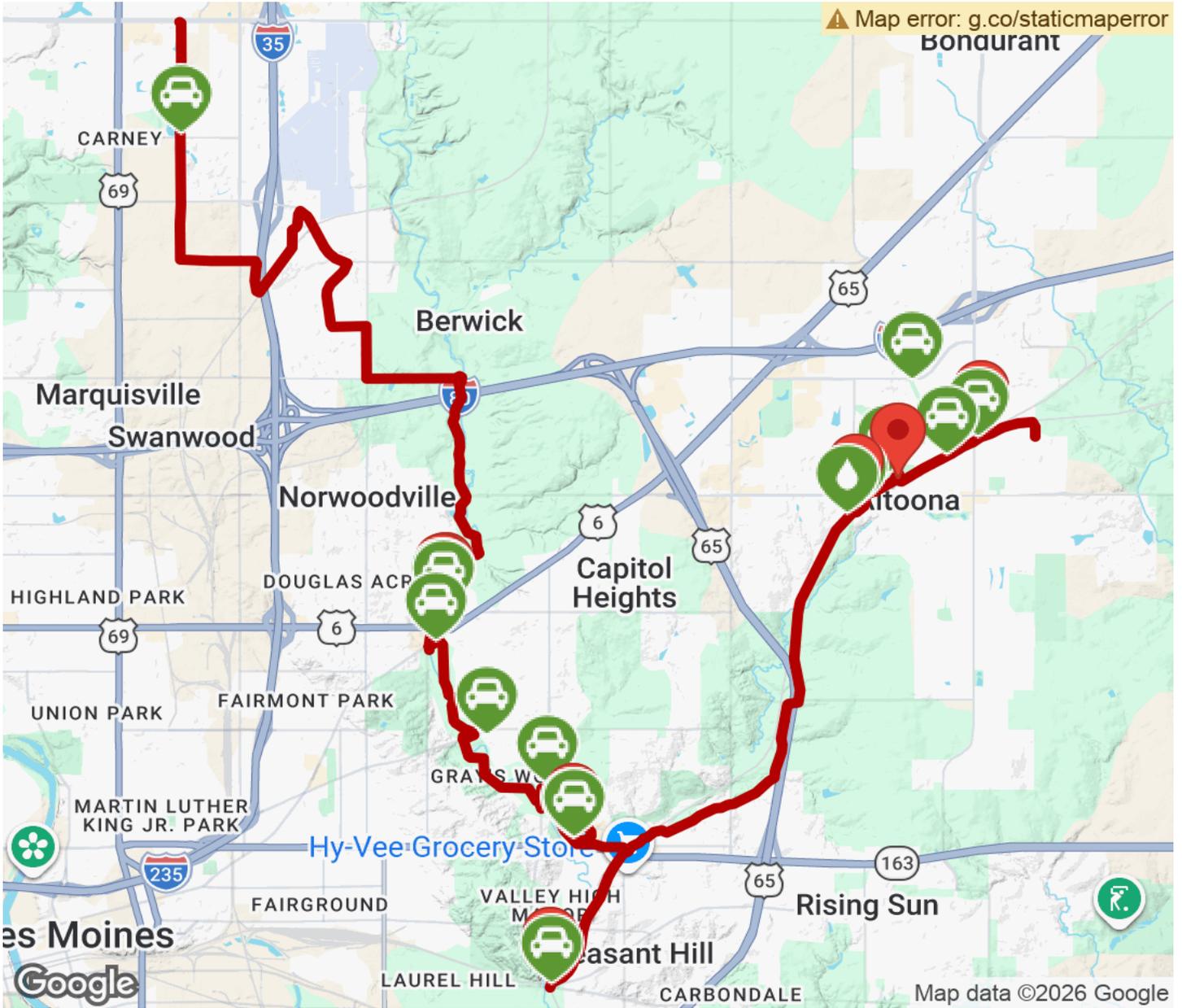
To reach the nearest parking lot to the northeastern trailhead at the intersection of First Ave. S and First St. E from I-80, take Exit 143 toward Altoona. Turn right onto First Ave. N, and go 1 mile. Turn left onto First St. E immediately after the railroad tracks, and turn left into the parking lot. The endpoint is located about 0.6 mile east along the trail at Eighth Ave. SE.

To reach the southernmost trailhead in Pleasant Hill from I-235, take Exit 10A for IA 163 E/E. University Ave. Head east for 1.4 miles, and turn right onto E. 30th St. Go approximately 1.1 miles, and turn left onto Scott Ave. Go 1.4 miles, and turn left onto E. Oakwood Drive. Make an immediate left into the trailhead parking lot.



Gay Lea Wilson Trail

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Trailhead



Restroom



Parking



Water Fountain



Tunnel



TrailLink
by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

TrailLink.com