



2024

TrailLink Unlimited



Guides



Neal Smith Trail

Iowa



Neal Smith Trail

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Part of an expansive trail network in the Greater Des Moines region, the 26-mile Neal Smith Trail rolls along the banks of the Des Moines River through the Ding Darling Greenway conservation area and makes its way through a variety of landscapes, including riverbanks, wildflower meadows, lakeshores, and dense forests. Plenty of benches offer ample opportunities for trail users to rest and enjoy the deer, rabbits, butterflies, and other critters active along the route.

The trail travels near several campsites and recreation areas with water fountains and restrooms, and parking is available at several points along the way. The trail also connects with several other trails, including the [Oralabor](#)

[Gateway Trail](#), the [Trestle to Trestle Trail](#), and the [Inter-Urban Trail](#). Portions of the trail are maintained by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, and the City of Des Moines for year-round access, but note that only the city-maintained portion is plowed during the winter.

From the southern endpoint at East University Avenue—also the northern endpoint for the 3.4-mile John Pat Dorrian Trail—the Neal Smith Trail flows into Birdland Park along the Des Moines River. Portions of this section of the trail are prone to flooding, and trail users are advised to check the trail's website for closures and detours.

Just outside Birdland Park, the trail enters Riverview Park, where it intersects with the short Kiwanis Nature Island Trail and the McHenry Park Trail. At the north end of the park, you'll come to the eastern endpoint of the 1.3-mile Inter-Urban Trail, which cuts right and then makes a U to cross the Des Moines River, where you can also pick up the 3.7-mile Trestle to Trestle Trail to your right. The Neal Smith Trail continues through wildlife-rich forest and wetlands habitat following the contours of the Des Moines River.

About halfway along the route, you'll reach Saylorville Dam, holding back the eponymous lake on the Des Moines River. Saylorville Lake is host to a diverse range of recreational opportunities—including boating, fishing, camping, and more. The trail also passes a visitor center that offers public educational events, including guided rides along the Neal Smith Trail.



Neal Smith Trail

Iowa

States: Iowa

Counties: Polk

Length: 26miles

Trail end points: E. University Ave./John Pat Dorrian Trail just west of E. Sixth St. (Des Moines) to Big Creek State Park Beach and Marina (Polk City)

Trail surfaces: Asphalt

Trail category: Greenway/Non-RT

Trail activities: Bike,Inline

Skating,Wheelchair Accessible,Walking

Parking & Trail Access

To reach parking at Birdland Park and Marina (near the southern endpoint of the trail) from I-235, take Exit 8B (E. Sixth St./Pennsylvania Ave.). Head north on Pennsylvania Ave. (left turn from northbound I-235, right turn from southbound I-235). In about 1.25 miles, the parking lot will be on your left. Enter from Pennsylvania Ave. or Birdland Drive. The endpoint is about 0.9 mile south along the trail at E. University Ave. Another parking lot is located by going 0.4 mile south on Pennsylvania Ave. and turning right (just before the intersection with Cleveland Ave.).

To reach the Big Creek Marina trailhead from downtown Des Moines, take I-235/I-35 northbound to Exit 96 (Elkhart/Polk City). Turn left onto NE 126th Ave., and follow for 1.6 miles. Turn right onto Ankeny Blvd., and go 2 miles. Turn left onto NE 142nd Ave. After around 7 miles, turn left onto NW Big Creek Drive, and then turn left at the intersection. The marina parking lot will be on your left.



Neal Smith Trail

Iowa



Trailhead



Restroom



Parking



Water Fountain



Tunnel



TrailLink
by Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

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