

Definitive Destination

Upper Natchez Trace Parkway Tennessee

by Rita Venable

The Original Natchez Trace

Many years ago, when bison migrated in great herds through the land which is now Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi, trails were formed. Prehistoric Native Americans found and followed these animal trails.

Historic Native Americans continued to use the trails and established routes between their towns and villages along the way.

In the late 1700s, farmers, settlers and merchants began using these trails as well. Having floated their livestock, produce and products on longboats down the Mississippi River to Natchez, Mississippi (not far from New Orleans), they needed a way to get home. This posed problems, since rowing the Mississippi upstream was not recommended.

The most sensible way home was via walking or riding horseback about 450 miles, and the Natchez Trace, actually a series of trails through what was then the old Southwest, was the primary overland route. Much of the land surrounding the Trace was still controlled by the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations as hunting grounds.



The Jackson Falls area usually has a variety of swallowtails. Nov. 8, 2002.

In 1800, the Trace was designated as a mail route and the Army improved it. As the numbers of users grew, as many as 10,000 people in 1810, enterprising souls opened inns along the way to provide food and shelter for overnight travelers. James Audubon, Meriwether Lewis, Davy Crockett, Sam Houston and Andrew Jackson all traveled the Trace at one time. Thieves also traveled the Trace, preying upon merchants carrying large sums of money.

The use of the Natchez Trace declined and finally died not long after the invention of the steamboat in 1811. Steamboat travel was far safer, faster and easier. The Natchez Trace and the inns were no longer needed, and both disappeared into brambles and vines.



Bicyclists on the Parkway sometimes reach the vanishing point and disappear without a trace.

June 16, 2001.

The Parkway

Since 1909, people have been interested in commemorating the unique place that the Trace held in American history. The Natchez Trace Parkway is a two-lane scenic roadway which approximates the route of the original Natchez Trace. It took many decades to plan and build, but one milestone was in 1996 when the National Park Service completed the northern terminus in Pasquo, Tennessee (near Nashville).

I live near this northern end of the Trace, and exploring it has been a joy. There are a variety of habitat and topographic changes from the Central Basin with an average elevation of 600-750 feet, to the Western Highland Rim where there are extensive areas higher than 1,000 feet. Both the Central Basin and the Western Highland Rim are characterized by rolling terrain and numerous streams. Both areas are known for their wildflower arrays.

Whatever the season, there is scenic beauty and wildlife to be found. Mid-March brings the first spring wildflowers, which brighten the woodland trails, as Falcate Orangetips and Spring Azures appear. Zebra Swallowtails nectar on Jacob's ladder (*Polomonium reptans*) beside the trail at Burn's Branch, and black locust trees drip with white fragrant blossoms along the parkway.

Summer brings heat, humidity and a fever of butterflies mating, laying eggs and nectaring. The butterfly season extends into late October and early November, when dogwood, red maple, sumac, sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), and swamp chestnut oak (*Quercus michauxii*) paint the landscape with scarlet, and Monarchs, Gulf Fritillaries and Cloudless Sulphurs abound. Hickory, river birch (*Betula nigra*), redbud, beech, American elm and tulip poplar trees try to outshine the red leaves with their yellow ones. These sites can be enjoyed on foot or by auto, although you get a better "feel" for the Trace and see more butterflies, if you go on foot.

Historian James Crutchfield once wrote in a local newspaper, Williamson AM:

"Today, cruising down the Parkway in air-conditioned comfort, it is difficult to have much sympathy or understanding of the dangers and other inconveniences and discomforts, which afflicted the weary traveler of yesteryear. Torrential rains, biting insects, flooding rivers and steams, torrid heat, and bitter cold teamed together at times to make a journey along the old Natchez Trace nothing short of a miserable experience."