

Lone Elk Park Trail Guide

Once native to the state of Missouri, elk and buffalo had been exterminated from the state by the 1860's. Unregulated hunting and the loss of habitat spelled doom for these large animals. Today elk and buffalo thrive in this little bit of paradise known as Lone Elk Park. This wildlife oasis is a beacon for outdoor enthusiasts, who can travel the roadways or hike the White Bison Trail in search of deer and elk. It is one of the must do destination trips in the area.

The park has an interesting history as a federal ammunition testing area in World War II and again in the Korean War. In 1940 over 2,600 acres of land was purchased by the Federal Government. The tract of land included the present day West Tyson Park, Tyson Research Center and Lone Elk Park. Ammunition was tested at Lone Elk while Tyson Research Center was the storage area. Fifty caliber machine guns were fired from the tower at the entrance to Lone Elk into 3 separate targets. These lean-to's, lined in steel, can still be found in the park today. In between World War II and the Korean War the land was purchased by St. Louis County and became Tyson Valley County Park. Elk were re-established in 1948 and plans were well underway with trails and campgrounds being planned when the Korean War started.

The land was re-taken by the government and once again the sound of machine gun fire echoed through the valley. At the conclusion of the Korean War the War Department maintained ownership. During the winter of 1957 it was decided by the War Department to eliminate the elk herd which now had grown to 104 animals. During the winter 103 animals were killed. Somehow one young bull elk was missed. In 1963 the land was declared surplus land and Washington University acquired what today is Tyson Research Center and County Parks acquired what is today Lone Elk County Park. In addition the County claimed the "big deer" roaming the hills. Additional elk were brought into the park from Yellowstone National Park in 1966.

As you drive through the park you will surely notice the large observation tower, the 3 different bullet traps and other left over structures of a by-gone era. Inside the tower 50 cal. machine guns fired at 3 ranges with the longest nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away. Off to the side of each of the bullet traps is a small building built into the hillside. Here is where someone radioed back to the tower to let them know if they were on target or not.

Historically elk were quite common on the prairies and savannas of Missouri. Primarily grazers elk can adapt their diets to acorns, and browse if need be. Large bull elk can weigh better than 700 pounds while cows generally weigh 500 pounds. Elk are definitely a herd animal. Once the cows give birth the calves are quickly introduced to the rest of the herd. The cows and the bulls remain in their separate herds for the greater part of the year. It is only during the autumn breeding season that the one dominant bull joins the cows. At the conclusion of the breeding season the dominant bull rejoins his bull buddies.

Lone Elk is also home to a large number of white-tailed deer. Unlike elk deer are not herd animals and are often seen by themselves. Deer are browsers eating tree buds, acorns, and other foods found at the park. In the spring of the year deer give birth to fawns with twins being quite common. The does will hide their scentless fawn from predators and return to feed the little one 4 to 6 times a day.

In 1972 the St. Louis Zoo donated its herd of buffalo to the park. The true scientific name is bison as this animal is related to the European Bison. The scientific name of buffalo refers to the water buffalo of Africa and India. The bison are kept in the west end of the park where it is a drive thru only. No one is allowed to get out of their car. Large bull buffalo can tip the scales at over 1,500 pounds. Cows can weigh 700 pounds. Buffalo are primarily grazers and were more common on the prairies and savannas of early Missouri than in the woodlands.

Because of the limited amount of land at the park the elk and buffalo herds are managed to remain at the same number of animals. Each year the elk and buffalo are herded up given shots, worming and the surplus animals are removed from the herd. Most of the animals go to a wildlife auction where they are sold to buffalo and elk ranchers. Elk and buffalo can be herded like cattle with a little encouragement. Deer on the other hand are too flighty and are not herded nor are their populations controlled.

Lone Elk has a history of having too many animals in a limited amount of space. The large population of deer, elk and bison are way beyond the carrying capacity of the land to produce enough food. Consequently, the animals are feed each day. But this has not always been the case. In the early days of the park the animals lived off of the land eating whatever these wooded hills produced. The results of the over grazing and browsing can still be seen in the park today. Very few tree and shrub branches can be found that are not over 6 feet in height above the ground. Anything growing at a height that can be reached by the deer and elk is eaten. The one exception is Paw paw a small native shrub that is flourishing at the park. Apparently paw paw doesn't taste good to the deer and elk. A definite browse line occurs throughout the park. The herbaceous layer (wildflowers, grasses, sedges, etc.) is not well developed as a result of the years of over grazing. Lone Elk is not a park that has a well-developed display of spring wildflowers. It would take literally decades for the land to recover even with drastically reduced numbers of elk, deer and buffalo.

In addition to the large population of deer, elk and buffalo at the park there was a time when the park was home to 70 Barbados Sheep. What this species had to do with a native wildlife theme for the park is unclear. This large number of sheep put additional pressures on the limited resources of the land. The sheep were removed from the park in the late 1980's.

Lone Elk is a great visit any time of the year. Just remember these are wild animals so give them the respect and distance they deserve. Do not approach the animals and certainly do not feed the animals. If you are going on a hike it is a good idea to bring insect repellent. Because of the large number of animals there can be an infestation of ticks.

White Bison Trail

4 miles Steep Natural Treadway Hikers Only

The only hiking trail at Lone Elk is named for the sacred "White Buffalo." Many Native American religions revered the white buffalo with great spiritual importance. It is estimated that one birth in 10 million results in a white buffalo.

White Bison Trail begins and ends at the Visitor Center at Lone Elk. The 4 mile loop trail can be rather steep at times and traverses rocky terrain. The treadway is earthen. The trail is strictly a hiking trail no mountain bikes or equestrians are allowed. Along the trail one may see elk, deer or other critters that call Lone Elk home. While hiking the trail

if you come across the elk give them plenty of room. In some cases this may mean leaving the trail to give them a wide berth. Never approach the elk. Even though they look rather tame they are still wild animals. Elk like most wild animals are programmed to flee or attack when confronted. Even the elk cows are nothing to mess with. They can be extremely aggressive. They can charge; butt you with their head and use their sharp hooves to inflict serious harm or injury. Hikers should be extremely cautious during the autumn breeding season and again when the cows give birth in the spring and early summer.

As you hike the White Bison Trail you will cross numerous different slopes. Some will face the south; some the north; some the east and some will face the west. Each one of the slopes is a different micro habitat. The north slope has the deepest soil and has more available moisture. The south slope receives the sun's hot summer rays and is more rocky and dry with a thin soil covering. The east slope only receives the cool morning sun. While the west slope feels the heat of the summer day. Because of the varied environmental conditions it is not uncommon to find a plant, tree or shrub that can only be found specifically on that particular slope. More adaptable plants can be found throughout the park on every type of slope.

Because of the large number of big animals in the park there are a lot of ticks and chiggers. The wise hiker will use their favorite insect repellent diligently. Ticks and chiggers are more abundant in the tall grass or herbaceous vegetation on the side of the trail. These critters climb the plants from the soil below and wait until a suitable host brushes against the plant. Once aboard they waste little time in getting to where they want to be. Chiggers are virtually invisible but even the smallest seed tick can be felt as it marches about searching for that place to feed.

Although the White Bison Trail has more than its share of ticks and chiggers one thing that you will seldom find along the trail or in the entire park is poison ivy. Yep, that's right! You can't find it! Deer eat poison ivy. So if there is anything good about having too many animals in the park it is this. One thing is for certain if you find any plant in abundance it must not taste good to the deer and elk. Enjoy the hike.

Chubb Trail

6.5 miles Steep/Rocky Natural/Rock Equestrians/Hikers/Mt. Bikers

Chubb Trail is a 6.5-mile (one way) trail connecting West Tyson with Lone Elk County Park. The trail and the trailhead shelter are dedicated to the memory of R. Walston Chubb a St. Louis business executive. Mr. Chubb was a leader in preserving open space and founded the St. Louis Area Open Space Council. This organization has been active in acquiring properties along the Meramec River.

Built in 1984 the trail is one of the most popular multi-purpose trails in the system especially with the mountain bike community. The trailhead is just past the entrance to Lone Elk Park. No water or restroom facilities are available at the trailhead.

Chubb Trail begins as a single tract on a quick descend down a wooded hillside. A couple of switchbacks are used to reduce the grade and make the trail not as steep. At the bottom of the hill the trail utilizes an old rock road bed. This road was used to access the multiple club houses that were found along the Meramec River before the area became part of Castlewood State Park. The trail follows the road and crosses an active railroad.

Just past the tracks Chubb Trail intersects with Castlewood Loop Trail. Chubb

Trail goes to the left and is again a natural treadway. Castlewood Loop Trail is straight ahead.

Chubb Trail parallels the Meramec River while the trail treadway gets narrower and narrower. Meeting oncoming traffic of any sorts could be tricky due to the narrowness of this small segment of trail. Once across the narrows the trail widens as you enter West Tyson Park.

In 1988 nearly 25 acres of land was planted to tall grass prairie through a generous donation of the Epstein family. This unique natural community covered nearly 55,000 acres in St. Louis County at the time of European settlement. Over the years, agriculture, and urbanization have eliminated the original prairies in St. Louis County. This prairie has been planted primarily with big bluestem and Indian grass and a host of native wildflowers. This site is intentionally burned every 2 years to recycle nutrients; kill unwanted woody vegetation and to stimulate the growth of the native prairie component. Prairie plants are not harmed by fire if properly administrated.

At the Epstein Prairie the trail forks and one can take the path that leads down to the Meramec and follows the river for a ¼ mile before merging back with the main trail. Or you can stay along the prairie passing some old river sloughs along the way. Look for herons, or woodducks that frequent these quiet pools. Buttonbush and other wetland plant species can be found in this wet habitat.

After passing the Epstein Prairie the trail user is met with the first real climb. A scenic overlook occurs on top of one of the Meramec River bluffs. The trail continues up the “stairs” and up the hill. The climb is rather steep as the trail climbs through a mature oak woodland. Once the top of the hill is reached Chubb Trail intersects with Flint Quarry Trail (see West Tyson Trail Guide).

Moving further on the trail and on the left are some ancient flint quarry mines (see West Tyson Trail Guide for more information on the mines). The trail continues a long descend with a couple of switchbacks to reduce the grade. Please stay on the trail and do not shortcut the switchbacks as you go up or down the hillsides. Large rock outcroppings can be viewed from along the trail.

Flint Quarry Trail branches off on the left but Chubb Trail continues. The trail terminates at the West Tyson Chubb Trail Trailhead. Parking is available at this location. Water and modern restrooms can be found along the main West Tyson park roadway.

Castlewood Loop Trail

3 Miles Flat Natural Treadway Hikers/Mountain Bikes/Equestrians

Access to the Castlewood Loop Trail is off of the Chubb Trail on the Lone Elk side of the trail. The property is owned by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources and is part of Castlewood State Park. At one time a small village of club houses lined the banks along the river. The trail traverses the Meramec River floodplain so is generally flat. The trail passes through a mix of woodlands and an old field. The trail is a loop trail and will return back to the Chubb Trail.