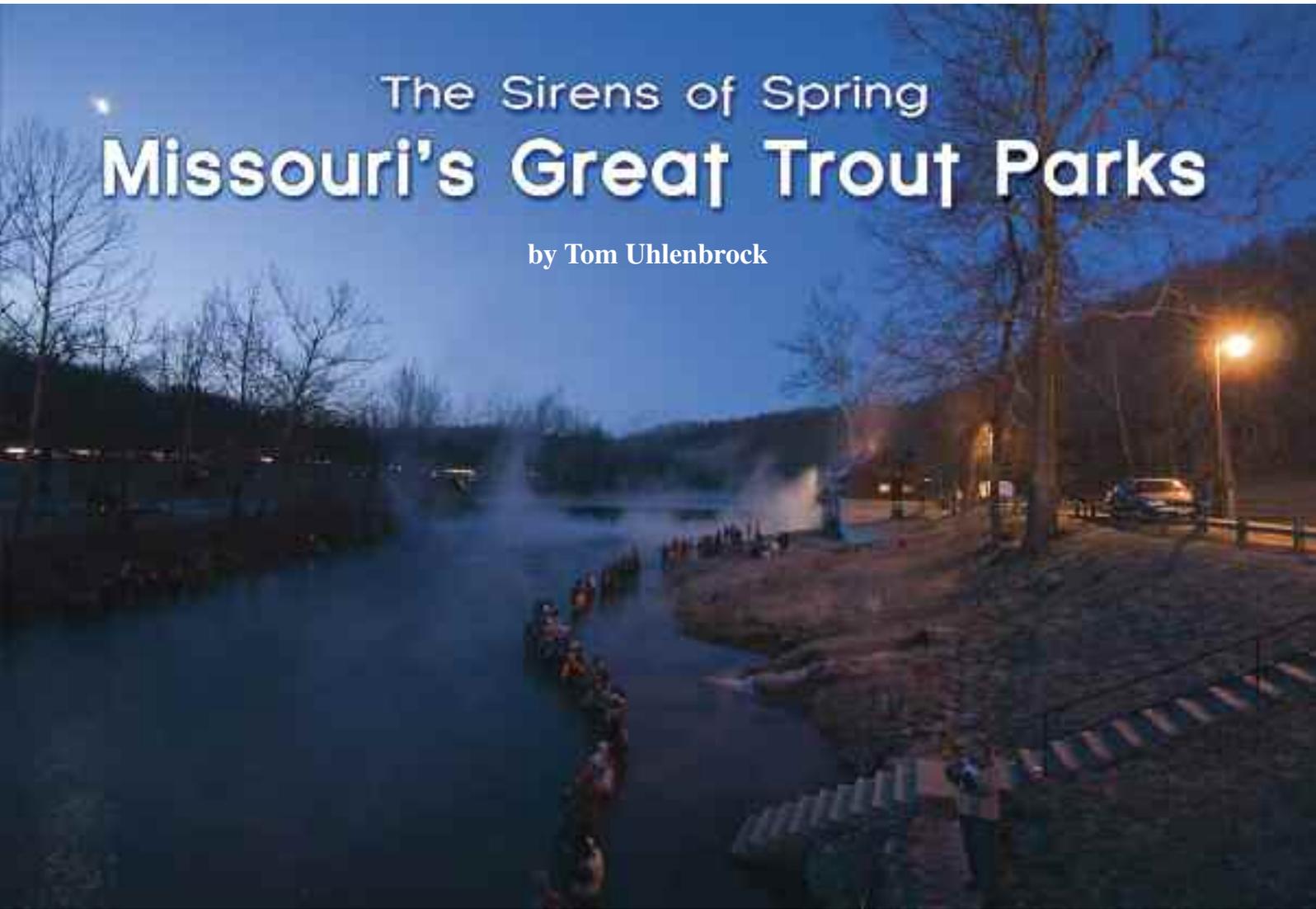


The Sirens of Spring Missouri's Great Trout Parks

by Tom Uhlenbrock



From bluegrass to bald eagles, Missouri's three state trout parks have more than just fish to offer a family seeking a weekend or week-long vacation.

Roaring River State Park near Cassville, Bennett Spring State Park near Lebanon and Montauk State Park near Salem are the "grand old ladies" of the state park system. They were established in the 1920s, among the earliest of state parks.

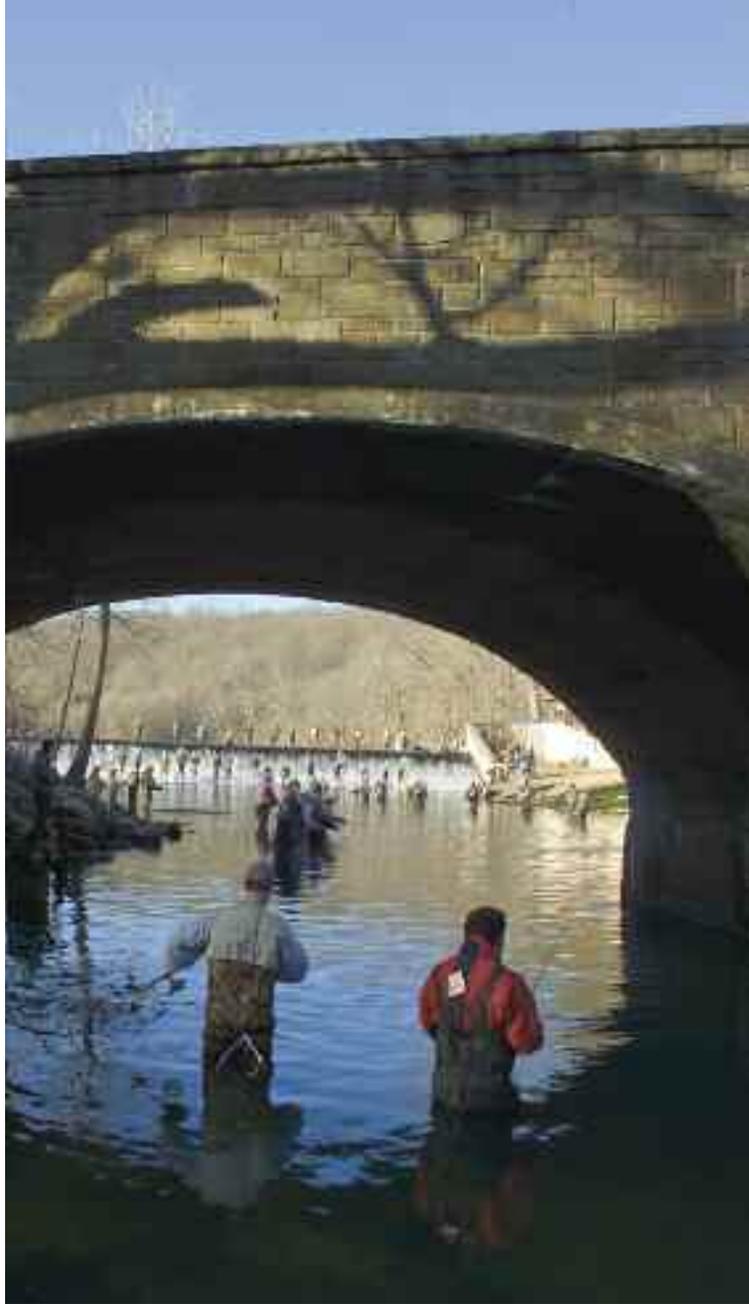
The three are in similar, scenic Ozark settings. Rugged, forested hills line deep valleys that contain azure springs pumping out tens of millions of gallons of crystal clear water daily into sparkling streams.

Fish hatcheries were built to take advantage of the abundant supply of cold, clear water and supply rainbow trout that are stocked daily in the streams.

Each park averages nearly 100,000 fishermen a year. But with miles of river frontage in the parks, an angler can find a quiet spot to claim as his or her own.

(Above) Anglers line the water at Bennett Spring State Park for the opening day of trout season.

DNR photo by Scott Myers



The sounding of the siren at dawn on March 1 marks the opening of trout season when generations of families stand shoulder-to-shoulder to catch a fish. For many, that siren also signals the long-awaited start of spring.

But the parks make attractive destinations for visitors who may never wet a line. They all feature a variety of lodging, good restaurants and plenty of programs that explain the variety of wildlife. Trails and campgrounds are available at each of the parks, and two have swimming pools.

“We do interpretative programs about every Friday and Saturday at the campgrounds during the summer,” said Doug Rusk, superintendent at Montauk State Park. “We have hummingbird banding, usually twice a year, a bear program, owl prowls and night hikes to go and listen to the sounds of nature,” Rusk added.

The springs, of course, are the heart of the three parks. Each has its own personality.

J.D. Muschany, superintendent of Bennett Spring, said many visitors make the short walk back to the spring boil along the base of a hillside. You can peer into the clear water at the trout floating in the reeds along the bank, while the other side is full of anglers tossing lures their way.

“One of the best things to do is just walk across the bridge back to the spring and enjoy the wildlife, the activity of the anglers, the great blue herons and other birds,” Muschany said. “There a lot more to do here than just fish.”

(Left) Anglers are framed by a triple-arch bridge built by the Civilian Conservation Corps at Bennett Spring.

(Bottom) Dave Mulcahy of St. Louis (left) and Don Johnson of Camdenton depart from Montauk State Park on a float down the Current River.



Dusty Reid, superintendent at Roaring River State Park, noted that wet weather can create a waterfall that drops 110 feet from the top of a bluff into the deep blue pool of Roaring River Spring, which bubbles up from a rocky grotto lined with lush ferns and mosses.

“Spectacular,” was his description.

Here’s some of what you’ll find at each of the state trout parks:

Roaring River State Park, south of Cassville:

From the spring at the park, some 20 million gallons of water flow each day into Roaring River, which empties into nearby Table Rock Lake.

The park features the Emory Melton Inn and Conference Center, which offers 26 rooms and a fully equipped store. The park also has more than 180 campsites, a motel and cabins of various sizes.

On Friday nights in the summer, bluegrass bands play at the outdoor amphitheater. Like the other two parks, Roaring River retains the stone-and-timber architecture built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. The park has a swimming pool, and the old rock bathhouse has become a handsome visitor’s center.

“We have wildflower workshops in April and May, and I always enjoy the fall colors down here,” said Reid. “There are a lot of arts and crafts festivals in the area in the fall.”

Bald eagles show up at the park in October, and Reid and other park staffers spotted a special visitor last summer.

“We got to see a black bear,” he said. “He was crossing the highway.”

DNR photo by Kerry Hays



(Above) Wet weather creates a waterfall that drops into the deep blue pool of the spring at Roaring River State Park.



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Bennett Spring State Park, near Lebanon:

Bennett Spring is the fourth largest in the state, releasing an average of 100 million gallons a day that feed into the Niangua River, a favorite for floaters on the west side of the state.

The spring gurgles from deep underground and flows along the base of a steep hill to pass beneath a triple-arched stone bridge that is the handiwork of the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Another vintage CCC building houses a lodge and restaurant. A nearby park store sells tackle and other supplies and offers 64 rental units, including cabins and a 10-unit motel. The campground has more than 190 spaces with four showerhouses. The park has a swimming pool for cooling off on hot summer afternoons.

The six trails total 12.5 miles. The longest trail, 7.5 miles long, takes hikers to an unusual geologic formation called the Bennett Spring Natural Tunnel, an open-ended cave that is 296 feet long.

“It’s a semi-rugged terrain, going through two glades, short scrublands and a variety of tree canopies, including tall oaks,” said J.D. Muschany, park superintendent. “The tunnel is a big rock arch, 295 feet long, 20 feet high and 50 feet wide.”



(Top) A short trail leads park visitors along the Spring Branch and back to Bennett Spring. **(Above)** The swimming pool at Bennett Spring State Park is a great place to cool off on a hot summer day. It is open to park visitors from Memorial Day to mid-August. Both Bennett Spring and Roaring River state parks have swimming pools available to their visitors.

Montauk State Park, near Salem:

The spring at Montauk once was reportedly a deep, blue hole like the others. But a torrential rain in 1892 washed gravel and debris down the clear-cut hillsides and plugged the flow.

Local lore says the ground growled and grumbled for days before erupting and forming seven separate outflows. Montauk Springs now puts out some 40 million gallons of water a day, joining Pigeon Creek to form the headwaters of the Current River, the state's premier float stream.

The two top stretches of the Current – from just outside the park to Cedargrove, and from Cedargrove to Akers – are two of the best day floats, with the narrow river often flowing beneath an arch of trees lined by endless gravel bars and sandbars.

“We have people who come down, float one day, and fish the next,” said Doug Rusk, park superintendent. Many stay in the park, either in the lodging units or in the campground.

An early-morning walk along the misty springs reveals another of the park's attractions. A pair of bald eagles screeched from either side of the stream. The two have built a nest in a ridgetop pine overlooking the park, and have produced chicks for several years.

(Right) Fishermen line the banks of Spring Branch at Bennett Spring State Park on opening day of trout season.

(Below) Montauk State Park visitors enjoy a popular campground along the Current River.



DNR photo by Scott Myers



DNR photo by Scott Myers

Trout production, stocking and enforcement of fishing regulations in each park are conducted by the Missouri Department of Conservation. During March 1 through Oct. 31, which is catch-and-keep season, MDC restocks rainbow trout nightly at each park.



DNR photos by Scott Myers



(Top left) All of the trout parks have a variety of lodging options. Campgrounds, motel rooms, duplexes, four-plexes and cabins – like this one at Montauk State Park – offer options for everyone who wants to spend the night. **(Above left)** There is no guarantee that you will catch a lunker like this 5-pound rainbow reeled in at Montauk State Park. **(Above right)** Roaring River Spring releases an average 20 million gallons of water a day from a deep gorge in the base of a cliff at Roaring River State Park. The spring – off limits to fishing – is home to many of the park’s largest trout.

Naturalist Steve Bost offers a nature program on another resident bird – the turkey vulture – hundreds of which spend fall and winter in the park. The program is called “Roadkill Café” because of the birds’ fondness for anything that smells rotten.

“There can be hundreds of them circling on the thermals over the park,” Rusk said. “It’s pretty amazing to see that many birds just floating around in the sky.”

Montauk State Park has the Dorman L. Steelman Lodge, which has a restaurant, store and 18 motel rooms. There also are 28 cabins and more than 150 campsites with two showerhouses. A gristmill built on the river in 1896 is open for tours in the summer.

“You can stay in any type of lodging,” Rusk said. “We have trails to hike; a lot of people bring bikes down and ride the Lake Trail, where there’s always the opportunity to see wildlife. I saw a momma bobcat with four little ones last summer.”

The state park system’s trout parks have something to interest everyone, whether it’s fishing, hiking, camping or just viewing the diverse wildlife.

For more information about Missouri state parks, visit mostateparks.com.

Tom Uhlenbrock is a writer for Missouri State Parks, a division of the Department of Natural Resources.