

## Whitewater State Park (Winona County)



**DISTINCT TOPOGRAPHY** is what led Whitewater to become a state park. It was chosen not so much for its beauty but because farming its steep hills in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries proved disastrous for both the environment and residents in and around its valleys.

Whitewater State Park lies within what is known as the Driftless Region, an area in southeast Minnesota and southwest Wisconsin that was relatively ice-free during the last glacial period. Unlike the surrounding terrain, the region's karst topography of limestone, caves, and cold-water springs was left untouched by the grinding mass of the glacier and, therefore, free of till—also known as drift—the rock and sediment a glacier leaves in its wake. As the glacier retreated from the surrounding area, torrents of meltwater helped to further sculpt its deep river valleys, which became tributaries to the Mississippi River.

When non-native settlers first moved into the region, they quickly cut trees and plowed the steep hills or used them for grazing cattle. Beginning in 1900, due to the lack of vegetation, floods repeatedly besieged the Whitewater Valley, leading settlers to abandon their farms and towns. Local residents petitioned to have the area designated as

a state park, which finally occurred around 1921. In the 1930s, state and federal conservation agencies—including the Civilian Conservation Corps—made significant improvements to the park. Today, the 29 rustic-style CCC buildings and structures are on the National Register of Historic Places.

For Minnesotans, the 2,700-acre park is a popular camping and hiking destination, as is the adjacent 28,000-acre Whitewater Wildlife Management Area. Its network of spring-fed streams, including the east, west, and central branches of the Whitewater River, are considered some of the best trout-fishing locations in the state.

—Steven R. Kinsella

Sources: Anthony C. Runkel, *The Geology of Whitewater State Park*, Minnesota Geological Survey Educational Series, 9 (St. Paul, 1996); Minnesota Dept. of Natural Resources, Whitewater State Park, [www.dnr.state.mn.us/state\\_parks/whitewater/index.html](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_parks/whitewater/index.html).

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*Crew working on Whitewater State Park improvements, July 1936 (MNHS COLLECTIONS)*



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