

A photograph of an open clam shell on a rocky shore. The clam is in the foreground, showing its iridescent interior. The background consists of a rocky beach and a body of water under a clear sky.

Lifelong Kansas journalist and outdoor enthusiast Andra Bryan Stefanoni continues her quest to explore all of Kansas' state parks — this time at **Eisenhower State Park**.

Ike's Park

Text and photos by Andra Bryan Stefanoni

I love my family. I love my job. I love my home. But there are some times a person just has to get away — away for a few hours, away for a day, to recharge, take a deep breath, and then return to real life.

One week in early March, when I had reached maximum capacity with just about everything, I pointed my car northwest to Eisenhower State Park. It was on my to-visit list as part of my quest to spend time in each of our state parks. It offers something especially appealing to harried individuals who seek solitude: miles of hiking trails, and a lake with miles of shoreline that in early spring, was likely to not yet be busy.

My companions for the trip were not my usual family members; this time, I took a field guide, a pair of binoculars, my journal, camera, a sack lunch, and the one companion I knew would go anywhere I wanted to go and wouldn't care about talking: Raven, our lab.

Day Tripping

Located on the eastern edge of the Flint Hills, Eisenhower State Park previously was known as Melvern State Park,

but in 1990, the Kansas Legislature approved renaming it to honor the only U.S. President from Kansas. At 1,785 acres, the park graces the north shore of Melvern Lake, a man-made flood control project for the Marais des Cygnes River basin.

Each area of the park is named for something that played a role in Eisenhower's life: Abilene, for his hometown in northcentral Kansas. Blackjack, for John Pershing — a general from neighboring Missouri who served in World War I, then mentored Eisenhower in World War II. Churchill, for the prime minister of Britain during World War II. Doud, for the maiden name of Eisenhower's wife, Mamie. Five Star, for the number of stars Eisenhower earned as a general. West Point, for the school Eisenhower attended. Omaha Beach, for the place U.S. troops invaded under Eisenhower's command during World War II. And Sailboat Beach — perhaps for the sailboat paintings he did?

I was there for a day trip, but should I have wanted to stay longer, there are 186 utility camping sites and five shower houses. Primitive camping can be enjoyed in four areas, and

camping with horses is available in Cowboy Camp and the north loop of West Point Campground. Four cabins, similar to those at other state parks, are also available for visitors. What I really was interested in, though, was something I'd only seen in photos: yurts.

A modern yurt is a portable, round tent stretched over a wood frame and based on a design used by nomads in central Asia. When I arrived at the park office and inquired about the yurts and other interesting features of the park, staff member Terri Neill was happy to jump in my car with keys to a yurt so I could go check one out of the two available for rental.

Located in West Point with a view of the lake, the yurts were just as intriguing on the inside as



the outside. They're perfect for those who want a simple but comfortable and clean place to bunk at night, and don't need amenities like a kitchen or indoor plumbing. A shower house is available nearby, and a water pump just steps from the door. Both yurts have a heating and air conditioning unit.

Neill said the cabins and yurts are rarely empty once camping season begins, and, thanks to shotgun and archery hunting in the undeveloped west side of the park, they're full through late fall, too.

The hunting area at Eisenhower State Park is unique and open to shotgun and archery hunting by written permission. Interested hunters should inquire at the park office. There is also a 9,000-acre public hunting area surrounding the upper portion of Melvern Reservoir.



"We have hunters coming here every fall like clockwork," Neill said. "They come in from Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, Minnesota, Wisconsin, every November. People travel to come stay here. We have a lot to offer."

The same undeveloped area is also open to exploration throughout the year for those interested in hiking and wildlife watching, as well as equestrians seeking to ride the 20-mile

Crooked Knee Horse Trail system. An avid equestrian, Neill grew up on the other side of the lake, still lives there, and rides horses and camps at the park as often as she is able.

"It's a favorite of riders from across the region," she said, pointing out the park's numerous corrals for use by riders. Riders also show up to the annual trail ride each October — a fundraiser for the park that brings in thousands of dollars for amenities.

The trails were calling to me, and with a day made for hiking, I set off with Raven to explore the prairie grasslands common to this area, the lakeshore, and the woodland that separates the two.

Finding Solitude

The trails are well marked with frequent orange and blue posts indicating routes, and those that cut through grasslands mowed for ease in traversing them. I chose blue in order to follow the trail along the shoreline; I kept the water to my left on the start of my hike and the water to my right on the return trip.

What I discovered along the way was the solitude I had been seeking. The trail wasn't physically demanding, but had just



enough gradual climbs and rocky areas to make it technically interesting. I stopped every mile or two to wander off the trail and down to the rocky beach to give Raven a chance to get a drink, and eventually stopped for awhile to enjoy my sack lunch with nothing but the sound of songbirds and waves lapping the shore.



Neill had advised me that the first southernmost part of the trail I'd come to afforded a beautiful view of the lake, and that there would be a neat rocky formation carved out on the shore from years of geologic change and erosion. I easily found the spot, and after exploring it, let Raven off her leash for a few moments of splashing in the water, then took off my hiking boots and joined Raven, dipping my tired and hot feet in the cold lake water.

I could have stayed there with my boots off the rest of the day, but needed to find out if there was anything other than the lake and trails that made this park one to visit again. After all, Neill had told me people from Kansas City visit often, and that there are numerous repeat campers year after year.

A drive through each campground revealed playgrounds, a well-stocked kid's fishing pond, an archery trail, a shelter house named for Ike, several awning-covered picnic areas, a boat dock

with eight slips, basketball and volleyball courts, horseshoe pits, and an 18-hole disc golf course.



Best Kept Secret

At Ike's General Store, I found Gene Hoyle, who was tending to chores, getting ready for the date he's been looking forward to since last October: April 1.

"That's our jump-off date for the season," he said. "I just love it."

Hoyle and his wife, Debra, own a home in Emporia, but spring through fall they're residents of Eisenhower State Park. They volunteer as camp hosts, based out of their RV parked next to Ike's Store, where they sell flip flops, sunscreen, fishing gear, ice cream, and cold drinks.

"When we took over, this store sold \$2,000 in products each year. Last year, we did \$30,000 in sales," Hoyle said proudly.

The couple also operates a kayak and canoe rental in a shack next door to the store.

They're members of Friends of Eisenhower State Park, which Hoyle described as an active group of volunteers focused on raising funds for needful items at the park.

"Our goal has always been to make it better, better, better," Hoyle said.

They recently purchased a Polaris with a hitch, for example,

so that Hoyle can pull the kayaks and canoes on trailers to the lake when park users rent them.

"For the last five or six years, I hauled them for people in the back of my own truck. The Polaris is a great addition," Hoyle said.

Six kayaks were available his first year at the park. Now, there are eight kayaks and four canoes, as well as donated items like a croquet set and kneeboards.

"We do a tremendous business in them," said Hoyle, who added that he is always willing to give tips to users and to help advise first-timers. "People come out and love getting out on the water."

The Friends Group also paid for water to be installed in the center loop of the Churchill Campground, where it previously was limited to the campsites on the perimeter. And in the future, they're planning to refresh gravel in campsites.

Others have invested in the park in their own ways, like a man who owns an iron works business in nearby Osage City. He fabricated and installed horse corals at West Point Campground in honor of his dad.

Some return campers make homemade ice cream for ice cream socials, and one man likes to make dutch oven cobbler to share with friends and strangers alike. And a couple with a knack for children, plans scavenger hunts and sidewalk chalk contests, while Hoyle provides push-up popsicles to youth who ride their bikes to the large parking lot in front of Ike's Store.

Next year, Hoyle said, the Friends group might plan a "drive-in" movie on a projection screen and invite campers to bring not their cars, but lawn chairs.

"There's a lot of people who put a lot of effort into this park," he said. "Each one of us — we all feel like, 'this is MY park.'"

As he talked, I could picture it all — the season starting and people arriving.

"I've heard people say, 'This is the best kept secret in all of Kansas'," he said as I turned to leave. "It's such an awesome job when we start seeing people coming back for the season. They're friends. They're people we've laughed with, joked with. That's what really makes this park."

On future trips to Eisenhower State Park, my to-do list includes:

—Take Raven down to a gravel bar Hoyle described near the day use area. It's a perfect spot for dogs to swim and not get muddy.

—Try my hand at disc golf. Neill made it sound fun. But I'll bring extra sunscreen, since it's in a wide-open spot without a lot of shade.

—Bring along my sons and our bows and arrows to try out the archery trail. Perhaps the winner will get an ice cream at Ike's Store.



Things to Know

Maps and online reservations for cabins and the yurts can be found at ksoutdoors.com. Since these are popular features of the park, don't hesitate to make your reservation. They're well worth it. 🐾