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## Environmental Summary of Pictured Rocks County Park

### **History**

Pictured Rocks County Park is located in Monticello, Iowa. It is a 1,138 acre wildlife refuge. It's name comes from the beautiful limestone bluffs that offer recreation opportunities and also beautiful scenery for hiking. During the last glacial period, much of Iowa was covered with ice. However, some small areas in Iowa were missed by the glacier, leaving beautiful rock cliffs and a pretty unique landscape. The rock formations and caves located within the park were home to many people of the past and are used today by spelunkers and other recreationists.

### **Flora**

The vegetation in the Monticello area is a mix of forest, prairie, savanna, rivers and rocks. For such a small area, it has a large variety of landscape. Specifically within the park, cedar trees grow out from the rocks. Oak, Walnut, and Maple trees are some of the most common trees that cover the floor of the park. In early spring you can find wildflowers called Hepatia. It is part of the buttercup family. They are known as the first sign of life in the springtime. They bloom even before the trees have a chance to bud.

Other less friendly plants, such as poison ivy and stinging nettles, are also common within the park. While they don't arrive as early as the Hepatia, they also sprout up during the spring. These plants can cause skin irritation and should be avoided by people. However, there are some good uses for stinging nettles. For example, nettles can be used to make tea.

## **Fauna**

Pictured Rocks County Park is home to many types of wildlife. From the fish that live in the Maquoketa River to the birds and the bats, the woods that make up the park are teeming with life. This area of the river is home to a smallmouth bass population. The river is also home to a few different types of turtles. Most common in that area are the Spiny Softshell turtles. These turtle's shells are not hard like your typical turtle shell. As the name suggests, the softshell turtle's shell is soft and more like a human's skin than a shell. It is made of cartilage. The river is also home to Painted turtles, but those are not as common to see.

Within the forest there are many animals living together. Squirrels, mice, shrews, raccoons, beavers, woodchucks, rabbits, opossum and other small mammals live in the downed trees and amongst the rocks. Larger animals, such as turkeys, coyotes and white-tailed deer also live in these woods. Because it is a wildlife refuge, hunting is not allowed within the park. However, people with private property around the area likely hunt these animals.

There are also a variety of birds that live in the area. Large birds, like Bald Eagles, Turkey Vultures, and Herons are pretty common to see along the riverbanks or soaring above the treetops. Geese and ducks also enjoy the river occasionally. Smaller birds, such as chickadees, sparrows, wrens, and mourning doves can also be found in the trees.

## **Geology**

The geology within Pictured Rocks County Park is very unique. The cliff faces that cover the area are made up of dolomite and limestone. Dolomite is a sedimentary,

carbonate rock composed mostly of the mineral, dolomite. Limestone is also a carbonate sedimentary rock and is closely related to dolomite. These rocks are great for things like rock climbing because they are hard, cemented rocks and are not prone to breaking off and crumbling. Limestone and dolomite do not erode very easily which allows them to form tall cliff faces with overhanging areas and caves. They do erode a little from acidic things, such as rainfall, but the erosion is slow and it helps form small pockets which make the cliffs ideal for rock climbing.

The cliffs at Pictured Rocks County park are also home to a few caves. Most notable is the Indian Bluff Cave. This cave is located along the main trail in the park and is clearly marked. Currently the cave is closed to the public in an attempt to slow the spread of White-Nose Syndrome in the bat population there. The cave has been closed without a permit for several years now, however, the permit is free and is not hard to obtain. All you have to do to get a permit is go online to the Jones County conservation website and follow the link posted under the section about the cave. Once you have obtained the permit, you may enter the cave as long as you carry the permit on your person while you are caving. There are a few other shallow caves amongst the rocks that you can explore without a permit.

A unique geologic feature in this area are the Talus Slopes. The word "talus" means loose rock and if you look around the base of the cliffs you will see why. There are large rocks that have broken off and fallen to the bottom. They likely broke off from water freezing and thawing again, and also from things like rain and wind. The cracks and fissures in the rocks also allow water to get into the rock and freeze. Then, when warm summer air enters through those same fissures it reaches the ice and is cooled by

it. The cool air then sinks and is released through “vents” along the ground. The cool air helps create a unique microclimate for the plants and animals that live around it. This effect is especially noticeable around the caves, as you can feel the cool breeze coming from inside of it.

### **Recreation Opportunities**

People seek out places like Pictured Rocks County Park to experience something outside the ordinary. Spelunking (another term for caving) is a popular activity in this area. Camp Courageous, a camp for disabled kids and adults located right outside the park, brings their campers down to the park to cave. From the entrance to the back of the cave is about 632 feet. Most of the cave is traversed on your hands and knees, or crawling on your stomach. There are only two or three places within the cave where you can stand up. This creates a challenge experience that is unlike our everyday experiences. You must take a light with you into the cave because inside you find total darkness. This concept is something you don't find in our world very often anymore.

Another popular activity that you can find in this park is canoeing, kayaking, and tubing. There is a boat ramp that leads down to the Maquoketa River. Monticello Canoe Rental is a company that rents canoes, kayaks and tubes. They allow people to drop in at their facility in Monticello, and then float about 8 miles to Pictured Rock County Park, where they offer pick up and shuttle services. Floating on the river offers fishing options, as well as your classic summertime activity.

As mentioned before, Pictured Rocks offers some great rock climbing options. There are many different routes varying in difficulty, which truly means there's

something for everyone. Most of the routes are set for lead climbing, however there are ways to set up for top-rope as well. Lead climbing refers to clipping your rope to the rock as you climb, while top rope refers to having the rope already anchored to the top of the route before you start climbing. In order to climb at Pictured Rocks you do need to provide your own gear. There are bolts in the rocks, however, most of the gear you will need, you have to bring yourself. There are also bouldering options in the park. Bouldering refers to horizontal rock climbing as opposed to vertical rock climbing. In bouldering, there is no rope required. However, crash pads are a good idea. The rock climbing in the park is some of the best in Iowa, which makes it popular in the climbing community here.

## **Conclusion**

Pictured Rocks County Park is full of wildlife, plants, unique geology, and recreation opportunities. With a rich history and all of the things to do, there is truly something for everyone. This small area in the driftless zone gives Iowa a unique landscape to recreate in. It shows that even in some of the most dull, farm covered land, there are still areas of unique beauty and opportunity. The park is open from dawn until dark every day. In the winter, the road gets blocked off due to the steepness and the sharp turns. However, the park can be accessed any day of the year by foot. In an unlikely location (small town Iowa), this park is a real diamond in the rough. It really begs the question, what unique park is hiding near you?

## References

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\*\*Disclaimer: Some of my information came from the signs posted within the park, as well as personal first-hand experience. I worked at a camp near Pictured Rocks County Park for 4 summers and we took kids into the park to recreate regularly. Some of the information I mention is things I have observed first-hand over the years.