

TRANSCRIPT

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Episode #4: Woodlands Trace National Scenic Byway

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Narrator: Jenni Veal (00:10):

In this episode we'll be exploring the **Woodlands Trace National Scenic Byway**, a 43-mile scenic roadway located at Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area at the Tennessee and Kentucky border. Land Between the Lakes is a giant thumb-shaped inland peninsula nestled between the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, which today make up the reservoirs of Kentucky Lake and Lake Barkley.

Bison, elk and deer have inhabited the ridge line and the two valleys between these two rivers for millennia. Indigenous people lived and hunted there until settlers move westward into the area in the early 1800s. For most of the 19th century, the area was called Between the Rivers as communities built up around the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. Then in the early and mid-1900s, dams were constructed on the rivers to create two reservoirs: Kentucky Lake and Lake Barkley. The area eventually became known as Land Between the Lakes.

This transformation of the name is due to the transformation of the land and the rivers and the people who had lived between them. Today, Land Between the Lakes is the largest inland peninsula in the United States, and its an outdoor playground for those looking to get outside and hike, camp, fish and Paddle, and the Woodlands Trace National Scenic Byway provides access to it all.

Music: "The Land Between the Rivers" by Bawn in the Mash

Speaker: Carlin Lewis (01:45):

I'm Carlin Lewis, Public Affairs Specialist at Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area, part of the US Department of Agriculture Forest Service.

So the Woodlands Trace National Scenic Byway is so unique in that it leads to so many different places that visitors can explore. I can't think of any other stretch of road that leads to two different bison herds, one that has elk and bison, a variety of camping opportunities, a planetarium, three different visitor centers, endless roads and trails for hiking, biking, horseback riding, off-road vehicle riding, wildlife viewing, boating, fishing, hunting. All of these recreation activities, this road will take you and be the starting point to all these endless adventures and starting points for your time at Land Between the Lakes. There's just so much that awaits you from this one road all in one place.

Narrator: Jenni Veal (02:48):

To guide us along our exploration of the Woodlands Trace National Scenic Byway at Land Between the Lakes, we're including the voices from the Kentucky band Bawn in the Mash and their song, *The Land Between the Rivers*. Living in the heart of the Mississippi River system, Bawn in the Mash's sound was forged in the ancient tones of Western Kentucky.

Check them out on Instagram and Facebook at Bawn in the Mash.

Music: "The Land Between the Rivers" by Bawn in the Mash

Narrator: Jenni Veal ([03:44](#)):

Welcome to the Travel Embers podcast, where we explore small towns and outdoor destinations to unearth some of the history and stories that have faded into the past or have been overlooked with time. But once uncovered, flicker to life like the embers in a fire, adding a deeper layer to the landscape of both our minds and our travels. I'm your host Jenny Veal and I'm an explorer, creator and storyteller. Let's go!

Sponsor: TN Department of Transportation's Scenic Roadway Program ([04:16](#)):

Support for this episode of the Travel Embers Podcast is provided by the Tennessee Department of Transportation's Scenic Roadways Program. Tennessee features more scenic byways than any other state east of the Mississippi River with a collection of 10 nationally designated roadways that weave through the state's charming small towns, state parks, and the natural landscape. These routes highlight the history, culture and scenic beauty that are all Tennessee trademarks. Learn more about scenic byways by visiting tn.gov/tdot/scenicroadways

Music: "The Land Between the Rivers" by Bawn in the Mash

Narrator: Jenni Veal ([05:06](#)):

Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area is one of the country's first national recreation areas, established in 1964 as a demonstration site in the rural south for outdoor recreation and economic growth. The area is an outdoor playground with 170,000 acres of land and miles of public access on Kentucky Lake and Lake Barkley. The main road through the park was designated as the Woodlands Trace National Scenic Byway in 2010. The roadway follows a historic trace or trail that has existed for centuries along the Tennessee Ridge.

Richard Lomax manager of the Environmental Education Center Land Between the Lakes - Brandon Spring Group Center - helped in getting this historic roadway designated as a National Scenic byway.

Speaker: Richard Lomax ([05:51](#)):

So we started seeking designation of the Trace, as we all called the road back in the 2000s, we started seeing that designation for the National Scenic Byway. I was part of that team, but there's a large team of folks and folks that helped make the decisions and so forth as we saw that opportunity to get to the various recreation and education sites here as being a unique situation. So the Trace itself, of course, has been here a long time. We think that parts of it - Trace means trail basically - and parts of it has probably been used for hundreds if not thousands of years by animals and Native Americans and European settlers. It's that natural landform that gives you easy access. It's easy to walk a ridge. The Trace is located along the Tennessee Ridge. Basically, the road has been modified somewhat for ease of traffic, but a lot of the roadway probably was that initial easily traveled route along that ridge. And that's that separation of the Tennessee River and the Cumberland River. So rain that falls on one side of the Trace goes to the Tennessee and falls on the other, it goes to the Cumberland.

Narrator: Jenni Veal ([07:19](#)):

Land Between the Lakes is the country's largest inland peninsula - and you can experience it all along the Woodlands Trace National Scenic Byway.

Speaker: Carlin Lewis ([07:27](#)):

We have a pretty extensive trail network here - over 500 miles of trails - and depending on what type of use, trail use you want to pursue, we probably have a trail for that. So we have about 106 miles of equestrian trails, one of the only designated trails for equestrian use in the area, so only horseback riding or wagon use is allowed on these trails. And that's through our wranglers horse trails network. We also provide a guided horseback riding trail experiences for those visitors who wish to ride on horseback but didn't bring their own. So that's also operated out of our wranglers campground by one of our contractors who operates the trail riding service.

And then we have the Turkey Bay off highway vehicle area, which has 100 miles of trails designated for off-road vehicle use. And that is the only area within Land Between the Lakes that allows off-road vehicle riding.

So that's also a designated area for side-by-sides, ATVs, all trained vehicles, Jeeps and other such vehicles. And we have primitive camping there.

And then we have hiking trails and biking trails. So we have about 70 miles of trails designated for mountain biking that are also shared with our hikers. We have a backpacking trail, several backpacking trails. Our longest runs the entire length of Land Between the Lakes - it's about 58 miles long and it's the North/South trail. And so that's our longest trail that we have. And our shortest trail is less than three-tenths of a mile long. So we have options for all kinds of trail opportunities, from just a short jaunt through the woods to a multi-day backpacking experience.

Narrator: Jenni Veal ([09:33](#)):

As is the case with most histories of land, the development of this federal outdoor recreation area is complicated. We would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge the long history of occupation and removal. In the 1700s, the US government negotiated a treaty with the Chickasaw people to transfer the land between the two rivers. They were ultimately removed to the West. As westward expansion exploded in Tennessee in the early 1800s, settlers moved westward into what became known as Between the Rivers. Many moved after receiving land grants for their service in the Revolutionary War. Small rural communities and family farms formed in the area until the early 1900s when the land and rivers were monumentally changed by the construction of two dams on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers to create Kentucky Lake and Lake Barkley. Families were forced to sell their land and move. Today there are remnants of former home sites and 217 documented family cemeteries at Land Between the Lakes.

Here is Carl Fagans, who has been an archeologist at Land Between the Lakes for almost 10 years and oversees the historical and cultural aspects of the recreation area.

Speaker: Carl Feagans ([10:42](#)):

So we have occupation zones that are inundated now because of the dams on the lakes. So TVA and the Works Project Administration... Kentucky Lake was dammed up from about 1938 to about 1941 or 42. Contrary to what you might see on television, if you watched movies like *O Brother Where Art Thou*, where they dammed up something and you got barns and cows floating by, it's not like that. It inundates really slowly and just kind of creeps on in. And some of it can happen pretty quickly overnight, but you might have a shed underwater where it wasn't yesterday, but by and large it takes a few years for it to really form the lake. And so Lake Barkley was formed about 1964 to about 1966. That lake was filled. Right or wrong - which I tend to agree that it was wrong for them at the time - but right or wrong, this is what happened. They ended up moving 2000 families, 2000 plus families off the Land Between the Lakes. And they either had to sell their land or have their homes moved or rebuild elsewhere. As you can imagine, there were a lot of people who were upset at the time.

But one of our interest groups that we're most concerned with is the families and descendants and the actual people who lived here. Many of them are still alive. We call them the former residents of the Land Between the Lakes. They call themselves Residents of BTR - Between the Rivers.

Music: "The Land Between the Rivers" by Bawn in the Mash

Speaker: Carlin Lewis ([13:00](#)):

Being one of the largest inland peninsulas in the country also provides access to 300 miles of undeveloped natural shoreline. So being in between Kentucky and Barkley Lakes - together forming one of the largest manmade reservoirs in the country - provides endless opportunities for water recreation, wildlife viewing, especially birds with our proximity to the Mississippi Flyway. We have over 260 species of birds that pass through here each year. So it being a peninsula between these large bodies of water not only provides recreation opportunities for people, but it also provides very important resting and feeding areas for wildlife.

Narrator: Jenni Veal (13:52):

Birdwatching is a great reason to visit Land Between the Lakes, which is home to more than 250 species of birds. The lakes provide excellent habitat for waterfowl and gulls - and bald eagles nest in the area. And every August, the nature station at Land Between the Lakes hosts a Hummingbird Festival to celebrate the annual hummingbird migration through that area.

Here's a member of the Kentucky Birding Society to explain.

Speaker: James Wheat (14:16):

My name is James Wheat. I'm president of the Kentucky Ornithological Society, and I started birding when I was a kid when I was in the mid-70s. This is a unique part of the state physiographically where you just don't have the habitat in the other parts of the state that you do here. There are some real astounding birds like white pelicans - they're giant white pelicans with pinkish orange bills with black wing tips when they fly together and migrate together, they're just stunning to see.

They winter here, but they're expanding. So you might see them different times of the year. Chiefly, I associate them with winter because of the Christmas Bird Counts that we work on on a regular basis. There are tons of eagles here. I believe that there are vendors who hire out their pontoon boats to take people up and down the river to just count eagles and lots of eagle nests and things. So I think eagles are one of the things that people are most awed by, a lot of non-birders. But in springtime, the migration of songbirds - little warblers and other songbirds - here is astounding. Well because of the land set aside for conservation. I come here all year long.

Narrator: Jenni Veal (15:45):

Did you know that millions of bison once roamed throughout most of North America, including Tennessee? Today you can see two bison herds, as well as an elk herd, at Land Between the Lakes. This is important because bison were almost wiped out in the early in the early 1800s during what became known as "The Great Slaughter," when hunters would endlessly kill bison for hides and to control native tribes that relied on the bison for their culture and survival. Bison populations plummeted from millions to fewer than 1,000 animals by the 1890s.

The earliest efforts to rescue bison began in the late 1860s, when a handful of private citizens began to capture and shelter bison, saving the species from extinction.

Those bison served as the foundation stock for most modern bison herds today.

Speaker: Carlin Lewis (16:39):

Yeah, the bison are just an incredible example of resilience and a species brought back from the brink of extinction. So bison almost - which are our national mammal, our symbol of conservation success efforts as our bald eagle and otter and other animals that we have here at Land Between the Lakes. So our bison herds really exemplify what the landscape would've looked like here prior to European settlement. At our elk and bison prairie, we're trying to bring back some of that landscape, that historical landscape with our native tall grass prairies and restoring those native grasses and forbes, as well as larger mammals that used to live here in this area, including our elk and bison. So we manage the landscape here with our bison herds to give visitors a glimpse into what life looked like here prior to settlers coming.

Narrator: Jenni Veal (17:47):

And there's so few places in Tennessee where you can see bison. So how do people experience that?

Speaker: Carlin Lewis (17:55):

Well, there's two ways that you can see our bison here at Land Between the Lakes. One way, on the Tennessee side, is at our South Bison Range. We have about 200 acres of pasture there where our bison herd roam. And then on the north side of Land Between the Lakes, more located in the central part of Land Between the Lakes on the Kentucky side, we have our Elk and Bison Prairie. So many times in the mornings or toward the evening, if you're driving along the Trace, if you look over at the South Bison Range, you can often see them out in the pasture grazing. And we do have a pull-off

area there as well as a picnic area. So you can bring a lunch and enjoy a nice picnic in our shaded picnic area right off the Trace, and then watch the bison from afar. It is free. There's no entrance fee to Land Between the Lakes to come into the recreation area.

If you wish to get up closer to the bison, safely from the comfort of your vehicle, as well as see elk, you can travel up the Trace to the Elk and Bison Prairie. The Elk and Bison Prairie is a little under 700 acres and there's a 3 ½ mile paved loop that visitors can traverse in their vehicles - enclosed vehicles only for their protection and the protection of our animals.

Speaker: Carlin Lewis (19:26):

No motorcycles, pedestrians, bicycles. Don't bring your horse trailer through there or a cattle trailer. We want everyone to have a safe experience and we want our animals to, we want to keep them wild and keep them safe.

Narrator: Jenni Veal (19:44):

You may be wondering, when are the best times to see bison? Two hours after sunrise and two hours before sunset. I know this because it's taken me a couple tries to see them myself.

Speaker: Carlin Lewis (19:57):

We encourage people to come to the Elk and Bison Prairie throughout the year if they're able. Each season brings something new.

In the winter it's a great time to explore the Elk and Bison Prairie because the leaves are off the trees so you have better visibility of these animals. It's cooler temperatures and so they can be more active and there's less visitors. So that solitude is a great time - take advantage of it in the winter.

And then you go into the spring and the wildflowers start appearing, and then you have the elk calves and the bison calves. They start making their debuts in May and early summer. And so if you want to see elk calves or bison calves, coming out in the summertime is a good chance. The elk calves are a little more elusive and they tend to be hidden by their moms until they get big enough to join the herd.

And then the fall is a very popular time to visit the Elk and Bison Prairie because that's when our elk are bugling - their mating songs. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity. If you haven't heard their bugle, it's really cool and it's kind of haunting and eerie, but it's just a sound you'll never forget.

Narrator: Jenni Veal (21:22):

Not to spoil it for you, but here's what elk bugling sounds like.

Sound: Elk Bugling Sound

Of course, it's always better to hear in person. And it's another reason to visit the Woodlands Trace National Scenic Byway at Land Between the Lakes.

Here's Carl Feagans again, with all the other types of wildlife to be seen along the Woodlands Trace National Scenic Byway.

Speaker: Carl Feagans (21:56):

What you will see is people start slowing down. If you're on the Woodlands Trace - the trace is a 50-mile an hour zone, although some curves you may not want to take 'em at 50 miles an hour, but it's a 50 mile an hour zone. But don't be surprised if you get behind somebody who's doing 35 because they're looking. And especially this time of the year in the spring, red buds are starting to pop. The dogwoods are starting to come up. Mayflowers are coming up, the ferns are growing in the forest. You can still see in the forest because the leaves haven't greened out yet. Usually by mid-April, beginning to mid-April, it's difficult to see through the forest. But right now, in February, March, it's easy to see through the forest. But the birds are getting active, animals are getting active, deer are moving around. I've seen in the last

month, I've seen at least one bobcat, a couple of coyotes. A fox crossed the road in front of me the other day, just not far from here. Lots of really great wildlife here.

And bison!

And bison, yes, we have the bison and elk. We have the Tennessee water trails and Cumberland River water trails. You could put in a boat, you could put in a kayak, you could put in a canoe. Canoeing and kayaking are really popular here because you can get in some small creeks and things and you see wildlife that you wouldn't see out on the lake. Or if you want to go fishing, you can get out on a lake and do the fishing.

We do have river otters. We do. In fact, our river otters were almost all gone. There were a handful on the lakes, but they were all but completely wiped out by hunting and trapping. Then TVA in 1982 went to Chattanooga and they traded some Turkey for river otters. They're pretty cute.

Fishing is very popular here. We do have Asian carp, although I think that is less of a problem than it was a few years back. Right before Covid, we had a really big problem with Asian carp. They would just, you could start a boat and 50 of 'em would jump out of the water, but now it's not quite as bad. We have also Beaver. One of the largest beaver dams I ever encountered was the second year I was here. We have fox. We have helped to reintroduce the duck nationwide. So we took part in that.

I think one of our biggest successes though, and this is one of the things that I find even as an archeologist, because we have an archeology of the reintroduction of eagles to the United States. I can show it archeologically because we have the remnants of the hacking towers. So there is this process, it's called hacking. This is before computers, the term hacking. Different meaning.

Hacking is a way of introducing fledgling eagles back into a new environment by controlling how they're reintroduced. In other words, you put them on a tower and you limit their human interaction. You send food up on a little elevator, a little dumb waiter and fish or quail or something like that. And as they get older, they're in a nest and they're in a gate, they can see everywhere, it's as if they have a nest without parents basically. And we're their parents, but they just never see us. And then you raise the gate when they're old enough, when they're starting to fledge, when they become fledglings and they can get out and they can open their wings and wing rising, they're exercising their wings and they eventually learn how to hover. They've got a little stick out that they can stand on like a tree branch and they can catch the wind and learn how to hover. And they have a safe place they can go back to.

They learn to do it themselves without a parent. And we started that in, I believe, 1980. We brought in a couple of eaglets from Alaska. They were flown in and put on these hacking towers. And so the hacking program, that's when it started. And I don't know how many they ultimately brought in, but the population of eagles quickly grew in the area.

Gosh, I don't know how many eagles we have in the area now, but they're very, this is one of the best places to come look at bald eagles - at Land Between the Lakes.

Narrator: Jenni Veal (26:39):

The best way to get started on your journey along the Woodlands Trace National Scenic Byway is to make a stop at the Golden Pond Visitor Center at Land Between the Lakes. The center includes a museum and the Golden Pond Planetarium and Observatory, which offers planetarium shows daily about the planets, stars and constellations in the night sky above Land Between the Lakes.

And if you're looking for camping... Oh, there's a lot of camping.

Speaker: Richard Lomax (27:05):

I would say that majority of our visitors probably are campers. We have two major family campgrounds that have right at 400 sites a piece, one in each end of Land Between the Lakes, north and south. We have an equestrian camp for folks that enjoy riding horses - that's Wranglers Campground. We have an OHV area for folks with Jeeps, four wheelers, Razors, side-by-side, those type of off-road vehicles. And they have camping available in that spot as well. Then we have other backcountry camping areas or self-surface camping areas that folks can get kind of away from the crowd, enjoy a little more rustic adventure, if you would. So we have everything from full service camping all the way to backpacking and providing your own foot transportation to your site.

At Brandon Spring Group Center we cater to the needs of most any organized group, whether it be a family reunion, small conferences, church youth groups. Our main reason for being really is our environmental education mission, which we share that mission and perform those educational duties for regional school groups.

Groups are our main audience. Most of our groups come from Nashville, but we also have groups from Paducah, Kentucky, and every now and then from Memphis,

Well, most of our groups will visit some of the other Day-Use facilities, the nature station, which is our nature center up in the Kentucky portion. They might go through the Elk, bison prairie and enjoy seeing those animals. Or they'll go to the Homeplace 1850s, which is our living history farm. So a lot of our groups will visit all of those facilities, plus spend a day or two with us here.

We have eight dormitory units - they have 16 beds in them each so we can sleep 128 people in beds here. We have slept more than that for those folks that decided to throw mattresses on the floor or what have you. We sleep considerably more than that at times.

We have a full service cafeteria. We have a lake, canoes, ball fields, all the amenities for recreation.

One of our main things and favorite things is taking the kids out in the woods and teaching them about the outdoors.

How unique and how active the Trace, as we all call it - the history is so deep and long lasting and Land Between the Lakes. And you get folks, the visitors that ask you about that, and you get to share some of that with them. And you get to point out those little spots go into little tucked away areas off the trace that they might go and enjoy a scenic view of the lake, which is off the Trace but not far. The places they can go fishing and so forth. So the variety of the experiences is what really makes the Woodlands Trace a unique experience in this part of the country.

Narrator: Jenni Veal ([31:05](#)):

Thanks to the Tennessee Department of Transportation's Scenic Byway program for their sponsorship support of this episode. Each Travel Embers episode is written and recorded by Jenni Veal and produced by Brad Carpenter. Thanks to the Kentucky band Bawn in the Mash for the use of their song, *The Land Between the Rivers* in this episode. Learn more about Bawn in the Mash by following them on Instagram and Facebook.

Music: "The Land Between the Rivers" by Bawn in the Mash

Narrator: Jenni Veal ([31:55](#)):

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Music: "The Land Between the Rivers" by Bawn in the Mash

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Show Notes:

Learn more about the **Woodlands Trace National Scenic Byway** at www.tn.gov/tdot/scenicroadways

Credits:

- Each Travel Embers podcast episode is written and recorded by Jenni Veal and produced by Brad Carpenter.
- **Travel Embers Theme Music:** *The Phoenix Song* by Ed Brown and the Cumberland Band

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Music:

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