If you were to visit Effigy Mounds National Monument in northeastern Iowa for no other reason than to walk the magnificent hiking trails that wind through its 2,526 acres, you would not come away disappointed. The 14 miles of immaculately groomed trails, four feet wide, of fine gravel or wood chips, hairpin up and along 400-foot-high river bluffs for views of the Mississippi and its dozens of lush islands — as stunningly dramatic as any vistas you’ll see anywhere.

The trails are also configured such that you can choose the length of your hike. But what sets Effigy Mounds apart, beyond the sheer beauty of its rugged, thickly wooded landscape, is the fascinating history you pass as you walk. It is a world of ancient mounds beginning some 2,500 years ago (during the Early Woodland Period and continuing into the Late

Mound groups include Sny Magill (outlined, at top, left) and Marching Bear (top), the gem of the monument. Effigy Mounds is laced with hiking trails — the bluff trail (above) leads to a series of mounds at the top. Views from the bluff (left) are well worth the hike.

Featuring earthen designs intended “for the eyes of the gods,” this little-known treasure is a hiker’s delight!

Pamela Selbert
Effigy Mounds

Woodland, around 1250 A.D.)

Walking the sometimes steep trail that zigzags through what could be a forest primeval, you pass many of the mounds: cones, “linears” that resemble giant green twinkies, and the more intriguing “effigies” of bears and birds, although the animal shapes are a little difficult to decipher from the trail. All lie under lush, carefully mown grass with nary a weed in sight.

A typical effigy mound — the effigies date from between 600 and 1250 A.D. — is about 80 feet long, while compound mounds (cones linked by linears, and believed to be the transition style between the two), can stretch to nearly 500 feet.

Ken Block, chief ranger at the monument, admitted that he can’t explain why the huge earthen structures, particularly the effigies, were designed to be seen best from high above. He stated that many suggest they may have been intended “for the eyes of the gods.” Whatever the reason, you must be high up to fully appreciate the remarkable shapes, created from dirt hauled here one basketful at a time.

Today, the dense canopy of hardwoods grown tall pretty well blocks a bird’s-eye view. But aerial photos taken several decades ago, and displayed at the monument’s visitor center, show a procession of fetish-style bears trudging across this craggy landscape. Many of the 10 earthen bears in this bruin parade, known not surprisingly as The Marching Bear Group, measure more than 100 feet in length.

Effigies of three huge eagle-like birds with wings spread wide “flap” among the bears, and trailing along behind are a pair of the linear mounds, which from above resemble boxcars. Despite the centuries that have elapsed since these earthworks were tamped into place, each retains its distinct original shape.

The marching bears may be the monument’s most photogenic group of mounds, but it comprises only a fraction of the number that once stood here, said Block. Of the 206 known mounds on the monument, 31 are effigy mounds, representing bears and birds (effigy mounds elsewhere in the region also take the shape of reptiles and humans). These most recent of the earthen structures were probably used mostly for ceremonial purposes, unlike the round or conical shaped mounds built earlier, which served as burial sites, he said.

Excavations of early conical mounds (burial sites) have yielded such artifacts as a copper breastplate, obsidian spear point and bear tooth ornament, while few such items have been found in the effigy mounds. When the effigies do contain burials or artifacts, they are usually located in the heart or flank areas, Block explained, adding that 35 mounds on the monument were thoroughly probed before
Effigy Mounds

For More Information

Effigy Mounds National Monument
Harper's Ferry, Iowa
(563) 873-3491, nps.gov/efmo.

Iowa Tourism Office
(800) 345-4692, traveliowa.com.
Circle 224 on Reader Service Card.

Local Points of Interest

Country Heritage Community
(877) 463-4692, silosandsmokestacks.org/chc.

Herbert Hoover National Historic Site
(319) 643-2541, nps.gov/heho.

Kickapoo Indian Caverns
(608) 875-7723, kickapooindiancaverns.com.

Silos and Smoke Stacks National Heritage Area
(319) 234-4567, silosandsmokestacks.org.

Coach Camping

There are no overnight camping facilities on the monument, but nearby campgrounds are available:

Pikes Peak State Park
McGregor, Iowa
(563) 873-2341, iowadnr.com/parks/.

Spook Cave and Campground
McGregor, Iowa
(563) 873-2144, spookcave.com.

Wyalusing State Park
Bagley, Wisconsin
(608) 996-2261.

Yellow River State Forest
Harper's Ferry, Iowa
(563) 586-2254, iowadnr.com/forestry/yellowriver.

Consult your 2005 Trailer Life Directory for other campgrounds.

Driving Directions

Located in northeast Iowa, Effigy Mounds National Monument is situated three miles north of Marquette, Iowa, along State Highway 76. It sits near the banks of the Mississippi River almost directly opposite Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin.
Effigy Mounds

the federal government prohibited further excavating in 1990.

He explained that this part of the country — the southern half of Wisconsin, southeastern Minnesota, northern Illinois and northeastern Iowa (where the terrain is so unlike the flat cornfield stereotype) — is an archaeologist's treasure trove. Of the perhaps 10,000 effigy mounds built in Wisconsin, only 10 percent survive today — in Iowa, less than 10 percent remain. In 1949, to "preserve and protect" what remained, Harry Truman, by presidential proclamation, established Effigy Mounds National Monument.

"More effigy mounds were built and survive today in this four-state area than in any other region in the United States," Block pointed out.

The large visitor center here includes a small museum with displays of early pottery (developed in the area some 2,500 years ago), stone tools and a variety of implements made of bone. Also here is a diorama of the monument showing the trails which arc along the river bluffs to the north and south from the visitor center. In addition, there's a bookshop with archaeology-related tomes for all ages, and a theater where a 15-minute video provides a brief history of the mounds and their builders.

The video notes that trade among the early woodland people was wide-ranging. As far back as 2,000 years ago, copper was being brought from upper Michigan, shells from the Gulf Coast, obsidian from the Yellowstone area, and mica from the Appalachians; all have been found at this site.

The film also provides crucial background information about the huge earthen humps. Conical mounds, round domes of earth used for burials, stand between two and 10 feet high, and measure 10 to 20 feet across. Soil taken from the oldest of these during excavations contained traces of red ocher, or iron oxide, placed in the ground with the dead in ancient times.

Linear mounds, which date from about 1,700 to 1,300 years ago, stand two to four feet high and six to eight feet across — but can span up to 100 feet in length. Compound mounds, comprised of cones linked by linears — which from the air look like green barbells with regularly spaced bumps along the bar — probably were the transition between the two styles. The longest of the compounds, which includes seven cones, measures nearly 500 feet long.

The concept of mound-building is intriguing, particularly when you consider the time and effort involved. We found all three types of interest, but particularly the effigies, which Block said may have been clan symbols used in seasonal ceremonies. Evidence of long-ago fires has been found in several of the effigies.

Early tribal stories refer to the
bear as guardian of the Earth and the bird as guardian of the sky. Thus, the mounds may have provided a symbolic means of connecting these early people to the land and the spirit world of their ancestors. Or, they may have symbolized the spiritual relationship between the people and the animals they represented.

According to Block, the building of effigy mounds stopped around 750 years ago. Major cultural changes were occurring, with people beginning to live in larger, more permanent villages, and growing more dependent upon agriculture than on hunting and gathering. The prehistoric folks who adopted the newer way of life are called Oneota, and are believed to be the ancestors of today’s Iowa and Otoe tribes.

We wanted a closer look at these amazing earthworks, and took Block’s suggestion to hike the two-mile Fire Point loop in the monument’s North Unit; it offers the best quick overview. It hairpins up a bluff that’s statued with antique oaks of a half-dozen types, walnuts, maples, honey locusts and box elders. The air here is quiet but for a gentle rustle of wind in the trees and occasional call of a bird.

The trail funnels hikers past conical and compound mound groups — Little Bear Mound and Great Bear Mound — to Fire Point overlook, high above the Mississippi. Views are wide and sublime, encompassing the shimmering river, its thickly-treed islands, lushly green Wisconsin to the east and the hills of Iowa (and a narrow river road, State Highway 76) to the south.

A 1,500-year-old burial mound at the overlook was excavated in the 1930s by amateur archaeologists Ellison and Fred Orr. Their findings are recorded on placards at the site. The manner of burial discovered by the Orrs showed a deep, square pit dug within a scraped circle of leafy humus; within it, four bodies were laid in it face up, arms folded, bird-bone needles placed under the right arm. Earth was then heaped on, covered with rocks, and additional bodies were placed atop, these decorated with copper ornaments. Next, layers of clamshells, limestone pebbles, and earth were added, “till all was covered.” Ashes, mixed with baked red clay, were scattered over the site as the final step.

The South Unit trail is similarly dramatic, passing several mound clusters, and leading at the far southern end to Marching Bear Group, the gem of the monument. Of this eighth-mile-long procession, Block said there is no other like it that remains intact.

This little-known national monument historically attracts fewer than 85,000 visitors annually. Those that make the trip, however, are afforded an extraordinary glimpse into the past. As Ranger Block noted, “It may be the best preserved effigy mound group left anywhere.”