

OVERLOOKING THE RIVER

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Stone Arch Bridge from the Guthrie Theater

Even if you can't get away from it all, you can stand above it all. A Mississippi River overlook is a perfect place to daydream, watch clouds and be at peace with the world.

We have been keeping an eye on overlooks for many years, and we keep adding to our list, as long-time overlookers may notice.

River overlooks are worth a visit any time of year, but September and October are especially good, with the cooler weather, turning leaves and the peppery odors of fall. An early morning visit may be rewarded by standing above a river valley filled with slowly churning fog.

There are great overlooks within a short drive from anywhere in the Big River area. Some demand an arduous climb or a long hike, other equally beautiful platforms are a short walk from a parking lot. We note if parking is more than a short walk from the overlook. There are many more overlooks than the ones listed here. There's probably one or two nearby you that you haven't visited yet.

We have no way of knowing whether Native Americans built so many burial mounds at or near scenic overlooks for the benefit of the dead or the living or both, but when you visit these places bear in mind that overlookers have been enjoying them for thousands of years.

All of these sites are marked on the Big River Travel Map, and you can find trail maps for many of them on the internet. Most of these overlooks are free and open. Illinois and Iowa state parks are free, but most Wisconsin and Minnesota state parks charge admission. You may need to get a pass before you visit, because park offices may be closed.

Enjoy.

Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis

Yes, this is a little weird, but the theater's cantilevered observation deck provides a stunning view of the urban river and St. Anthony Falls. You don't have to buy a ticket to a play to get up there, and it's one of only two overlooks on the list with an elevator.

Summit Avenue, St. Paul

A viewing area at the west end of Summit, next to Shadow Falls Park, provides a great view of the only official gorge on the Mississippi River.

Fort Snelling, Minneapolis

The fort was built here to keep an eye on the confluence of the Minnesota and Minnesota rivers, an important trade crossroads and a sacred Dakota site. The Minnesota Historical Society charges admission to visit the fort.

Two Rivers Overlook, St. Paul

Another overlook, across the river from the fort just downriver of the Fort Road Bridge (West Seventh Street), has a good view of the fort and the confluence.

High Bridge Overlook, St. Paul

This overlook, at the south end of the High Bridge on the east side of Smith Street, provides a great view of the river and downtown St. Paul, including the cathedral.

Indian Mounds Park, St. Paul

This has been a special place for at least a couple of thousand years. To your left a row of Hopewell mounds line up along the bluff. Below, Wakan Tipi Cave, decorated with many petroglyphs, stretches back underneath the bluff. The cave is closed to the public.

Today you can go there and watch towboats make and unmake tows; railroad trains switch cars; airplanes take off and land; cars, trucks and trains cross bridges; and bicyclists and walkers travel dedicated paths. If you get tired of all this coming and going, you can watch the shadows of clouds sweep across the downtown St. Paul skyline.

Pine Bend Bluffs Scientific and Natural Area, Inver Grove Heights, Minn.

This secluded natural area overlooking Baldwin Lake and Grey Cloud Island is a little difficult to find. You need to exit Highway 55 at 117th Street East and drive past the truck stop on the service road to 111th Street. Turn right and drive to the parking lot, which also serves as a trailhead for the Mississippi River Regional Trail.

Schaar's Bluff, Spring Lake Regional Park, Hastings, Minn.

A pedestrian and bike path parallels the bluff overlooking Spring Lake in this sprawling park upriver of Hastings.

Freedom Park, Prescott, Wis.

This overlook sits on a bluff of modest height just downriver of Prescott and the confluence of the St. Croix and Mississippi rivers, across from Prescott Island. Sometimes you can see a clear demarcation separating the clear-greenish waters of the St. Croix on the east side of the river and the muddy brown waters of the Mississippi on the west side.

The Great River Road Visitor and Learning Center in the park hosts interesting displays and events.

Barn Bluff, Red Wing, Minn.

From downtown Red Wing, Barn Bluff looks like a formidable climb. However, if you can find your way to the trailhead, on East Fifth Street, you'll find that the trail is wide and not too steep, though it's a good walk. Once on top, the



Indian Mounds Park — You can see the High Bridge in the distance on the left.



Pine Bend Bluffs Scientific and Natural Area — The sand and gravel piles are on Grey Cloud Island.

height and open space can be a bit overwhelming. If so, look down at your feet and appreciate the prairie plants. Walk out to the end and you'll see the city and plenty of river, islands and bluffs.

Frontenac State Park, Frontenac, Minn.

You can drive to one overlook and hike to several others on the bluffs overlooking Lake Pepin between Frontenac and Wacouta. You'll see most of Lake Pepin and the dramatic Maiden Rock Bluff, in Wisconsin.

Maiden Rock Bluff State Natural Area, Maiden Rock, Wis.

On the bluff top between Stockholm and Maiden Rock, much of this 263-acre natural area is mostly restored prairie on former cropland, but there are areas of dry prairie and forest with many native plants.

It's a pretty level walk from the parking lot to the bluff's edge. Trees block the view in many places, but follow the path to an opening with a poetic view of Lake Pepin and Frontenac on the other side. The trees grow right up to the edge of a long vertical drop.



Left: Great River Bluffs State Park

Below: Buena Vista Park



Thrive! Park, Nelson, Wis.

Drive toward the bluff on Cleveland Street. Signs will show you the way to a sculpture studio and gallery at the trail head. Maps are available on paper and on signs, with trails color coded for difficulty. You'll need to do some steep climbing to reach either of the two overlooks — Pikes Peak and Three Sisters — though there are other less challenging trails in the park.

The park was donated to the village by Gary “Chris” Christopherson, who creates sculptures in the studio next to the park.

Buena Vista Park, Alma, Wis.

If I had to pick my two favorite river overlooks, Buena Vista would be one of them. The views are broad and interesting — the Dairyland Power Plant downstream; Wiggle Waggle Slough and the Finger Lake backwaters; downtown Alma; Lock and Dam 4; the long dike and Minnesota bluffs across the river; and the broad river upstream of the dam.

On a really hot, sticky weekday you can sit and watch the river and clouds while a cool breeze carries your thoughts out across the broad valley.

On a nice Saturday or Sunday, it can get busy.

If you feel the need to earn the pleasure of this view or you just want to stretch your legs, you can walk up from town on a comfortable, though sometimes buggy, trail. Park on Second Street, then walk up Elm Street and take a left.

Mossy Hollow Trail, Alma, Wis.

It will take about 20 minutes to walk to the Dairyland Point, where a bench overlooks the site where an old power plant stood until a few years ago. However, there's still plenty to see in the panoramic view upriver to Alma, Lock and Dam 4 and the Minnesota bluffs.

The trail begins near the maintenance building in the Alma Cemetery, on the south end of town. After a moderate climb the trail comes to a “t” where a sign points to the the Main Trail to the left and Dairyland Point to the right. The Main Trail just climbs up a ways and dead ends in the woods where a sign marks private land.

John Latsch State Park, Minnieska, Minn.

In the early 20th century, Winona businessman and weekend river rat John Latsch bought thousands of acres of land in and along the river in order to preserve it for public use. His namesake park is one of many that owe their existence to his generosity. What used to be a steep challenging climb up the bluff has been replaced by a steep challenging stairway up the bluff. However, the climb is now safer and view at the top has not changed.

You can see Lock and Dam 5 and the maze of Whitman Backwaters across the Main Channel. A trail continues on the bluffs downstream.

The stairway climbs Charity Bluff, one of three distinctive bluffs — dubbed Faith, Hope and Charity by river pilots — that are a river landmark.

Garvin Heights, Winona

Be careful driving up to Garvin Heights, bicyclists use the steep winding road for training or just to prove they can climb it. Turn left at the top and drive to the parking lot. A short walk brings you to the overlook, where a sign identifies

some of the many features you can view from here.

On a clear day you can see the flashing lights on the smokestack of the power plant upriver at Alma. The bluffs across the river downstream are in Perrot State Park, at Trempealeau, which means you're looking at about 35 miles of the river.

Bradys Bluff, Perrot State Park, Trempealeau, Wis.

Three different paths lead from the bottom to the top of this bluff. One, from the former park headquarters, goes through the woods up the backside of the bluff. The shortest begins near the boat launch on Trempealeau Bay and follows a narrow path switchbacking up the hill to a stairway over a rocky stretch. The third begins a bit downstream and climbs up through the woods and across a steep goat prairie. All three converge on an ancient little log shelter lined with graffiti and smelling faintly of moss, soil and urine next to an even more ancient Hopewell mound. Unless it's raining, you'll want to be outside where you can see the full scale of the river, islands, Trempealeau Mountain and the steep bluffs across the river. The view from the top of this bluff has probably inspired more photographs than any other on the river.

Great River Bluffs State Park, Dakota, Minn.

Moderate, fairly level paths connect parking lots to a series of four overlooks, with views of Queens Bluff and across Wisconsin bottomlands veined with creeks and the delta of the Black River. The two middle overlooks are a short walk. The other two are longer.



Miller Bluff

Miller Bluff, Hixon Forest, La Crosse, Wis.

This rocky overlook has great views of the La Crosse River Marsh and the city.

This area is at the northeast corner of the Hixon Forest system of walking and mountain-biking trails. There are trails going every which-a-way, some to other overlooks.

The trailhead is at the end of Rim of the City Road, but you can't park there. Park at the end of FA and walk back to Rim — an easy walk. From the lot to the overlook is a 20-minute walk. The trail continues beyond Miller Bluff down a hill to the north.

Grandad Bluff, La Crosse, Wis.

You can see the flag flying atop Grandad from much of La Crosse and vice versa. The drive is kind of fun and the parking lot is near the overlook. The last set of "improvements" to the park added more concrete, as well as nice restrooms and native plant gardens. It also feels safer and more developed. The view is great, but you don't get to see much of the river. You do get a great view of the city, La Crosse River marsh, the Main Channel bridges, many other landmarks and the Minnesota bluffs.

Quarry, Reno Recreation Area, Minn.

Reno may or may not be on your map, but the cluster of houses near the end of the Lock and Dam 8 spillway is Reno, Minn. Drive past the parking lot and campsites and uphill on Hillside Road to a very small parking area on the right side. Follow the path a short distance to the top of the bluff, turn right and walk a short way to an abandoned quarry with great views of the river, dike and the Reno Bottoms below.



Grandad Bluff



Wyalusing State Park. (Sara Millhouse)



Pikes Peak State Park — Wyalusing State Park is on the bluff on the right. Below it a railroad bridge spans the Wisconsin River.

Mount Hosmer Park, Lansing, Iowa

Drive up the steep stretch of North Sixth Street to this gem of a park overlooking the town, Black Hawk Bridge and the river.

Sugar Creek Bluff State Natural Area, Ferryville, Wis.

Take North Buck Creek Road, at the south end of town, uphill to the trailhead. You can walk from the small parking area at the gate to the goat prairie at the overlook in about 20 minutes, but you may want to take longer to look at wildflowers along the wooded trail.

Paint Rock Unit, Yellow River State Forest, Waukon Junction, Iowa

A little way up Paint Rock Road, there are a few parking spaces across a dry wash on the right. The trail climbs from there to the bluff top, past Indian mounds and a campsite to quiet overlooks of an island-studded stretch of the river.

Luster Heights Unit, Yellow River State Forest, Waukon Junction, Iowa

There was a minimum-security prison on Luster Heights Road until a few years ago. The trail map for this state land is confusing because it doesn't mark the driveway and buildings of the former prison. Just walk around the gate and follow the road until it takes a sharp right to the cluster of buildings. Continue straight onto the trail until you get to the first marker post. From there follow the map.

The North Overlook is a 20-minute walk from the parking lot, which includes a gentle climb downhill to the overlook.

Effigy Mounds National Monument, Marquette, Iowa

The switchback trail behind the visitors center and museum climbs up to the bluff top to miles of trails to many Indian mounds and four overlooks.

Another unit of the park is just downriver, on the other side of the Yellow River. Park in the picnic area and walk across the highway past the gate and up the work road. The overlook is not very dramatic, but the bird mounds and the group of bear mounds are well worth the climb.

Emma Big Bear Trail, Marquette, Iowa

The former bridge approach leads to a pleasant overlook, which doesn't tower over the river from a bluff top, but does provide a stunning view of the bridge and the double parade of bluffs stretching downriver.

Pikes Peak State Park, McGregor, Iowa

This is my other favorite overlook. It looks across the river to the bluffs of Wyalusing State Park towering over the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin rivers; McGregor lake and countless sloughs and islands; and a lot of river. A prow-like viewing structure juts out from the bluff, which opens up the view even more.

Wyalusing State Park, Prairie du Chien, Wis.

This park is like an amusement park of overlooks. You can even get a campsite with a view of the Mississippi, Prairie du Chien and Marquette. One end of the park has a great view up the Wisconsin River valley. An overlook on the other end of the park looms over the confluence of the Mississippi and Wisconsin, with a big view that includes Pikes Peak State Park across the Mississippi.

Highway Overlooks, Guttenberg, Iowa

On Highway 52 north of town, a small parking lot has a broad view of the river and Esmann and Abels islands.

On the highway south of town, you can get a fine view of the river, town and Lock and Dam 10.

Nelson Dewey State Park, Cassville, Wis.

You can get a walk-in campsite with an overlook here. The park has several other overlooks, including a short goat-prairie trail.

Cemetery, North Buena Vista, Iowa

The cemetery presents a view of both the river and the town. There's a grotto on the way up.

Scenic Overlook, Balltown, Iowa

You can see a sliver of river two miles away, but the stretch in between highlights the breathtaking views of wooded hills and farmland in the rolling topography of the Driftless Area.

Eagle Point Park, Dubuque, Iowa

Though the views of Lock and Dam 11 and the river upstream are lovely, the amazing architecture of the buildings and amenities of the park will provide stiff competition for your attention. Cars pay \$1 admission. Bicyclists and pedestrians enter free.

North Gramercy Park, East Dubuque, Ill.

This park on the hill above downtown protects eight Indian mounds — some quite large — overlooking the river. You also get a good view of Dubuque across the river.

Julien Dubuque Monument, Dubuque, Ill.

It's a little tricky for out-of-towners to find, but the bluff overlooks the river, Catfish Creek and the Mines of Spain State Recreation Area.

Casper Bluff Land and Water Reserve, Aiken, Ill.

You can reach this beautiful bluff dotted with prairies, stout oaks and Indian mounds via Pilot Knob Road or the Galena River Trail.

Bellevue State Park, Bellevue, Iowa

The park, on the south edge of town, has an overlook of the river, town and Lock and Dam 12. A trail along the bluff passes Indian mounds and views of the river.



Balltown, Iowa

Rall Woods State Natural Area, Hanover, Ill.

It takes about 10 minutes to make your own way to the top, without a marked trail. Once there you can revel in native remnants of Falling Down Prairie and look out over the floodplain.

Mississippi Palisades State Park, Savanna, Ill.

This park offers six overlooks, many trails and interesting geological formations.

Eagle Point Park, Clinton, Iowa

You'll find several overlooks in this beautiful park, which faces the widest part of the Upper Mississippi. It became the widest when Lock and Dam 13 flooded wetlands and bottomlands upstream. The views from the castle tower and in front of the park lodge are the most impressive.

A bike trail links the park to the levee downtown.

Skybridge, Davenport, Iowa

This is more than just a scenic way to get across River Drive. The Skybridge, which is a transparent tunnel 50 feet high, offers a broad view of the downtown riverfront, LeClaire Park, Lock and Dam 15, Centennial Bridge and the river. You can step outside onto an observation deck at the river end.

Mark Twain Overlook, Muscatine, Iowa

The towering bluffs of the Driftless Area pull back from the Mississippi on the Illinois side downriver of Savanna and from the Iowa side downriver of Clinton, but Muscatine's Mark Twain Overlook is perched on a small scenic bluff near the bridge. 🌳

Dedicated to Dick and Helen.