



# Trout Talk

**Start planning  
your 2022 visit  
Page 3**

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# Start planning your 2022 trip now

Outfitters tell 2022 visitors to get those reservations in before the end of 2021 because they fill up fast

## CHRISTY DIEMAN • TROUT TALK

Much of the busy season at Bennett Spring State Park is coming to an end when catch-and-keep trout season ends at the end of October, but some of the park will continue to stay open during the winter months as catch-and-release fishing is still available to anglers on certain days beginning the second Friday in November until the second Monday in February.

Inside the park, a limited number of cabins are available to rent throughout the winter with December and January being the easiest times to get rooms. November cabins normally fill quickly and as February nears, anglers start heading back to the park for early season catch-and-release before the opening day on March 1.

The dining lodge at the park will close after Oct. 31, but the park store will remain open during certain hours and days and usually provide some food and beverages, along with a place for anglers to warm up during the winter months.

Another opportunity for park vis-



itors is the hiking trails that remain open to visitors during the off season. Park employee Susan Eckmann hikes the trails and considers the winter months to be the best time to use them.

"I'm a hiker. To me that's the perfect time. No ticks or weeds," Eckmann said.

It's never too early to start planning to visit Bennett Spring next year when the trout season opens back up

in March. Among the many lodging options in the Bennett Spring area for regular season is Weaver's Tackle and Campground. Weaver's offers eight cabins with charcoal grills, kitchenettes with linens, dishes and a mini fridge. Also available on a first-come-first-serve basis are 180 RV sites. The business also has a saltwater infinity edge pool available to guests during the warmer months.

Located just east of the main park entrance, Weaver's has been a staple in the Bennett Spring area since 1973. Current owner, Rick Kirchberg, has owned the bait and tackle business for 13 years. According to Kirchberg, they stay very busy from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

"Usually, they book when they check out the year before," Kirchberg said of annual guests to the campground. "You have to call to reserve. We don't have any online booking."

Online shopping is available from Weaver's website for most of the products they carry in store. Traditional trout fishing gear like fly tying supplies, waders, vests and fly rods can be found both in-store and online from their website. They also carry some kitchen supplies like coffee, jams and pickles. Kirchberg said they carry live bait for those fishing on the Niangua. On Nov. 1, Weaver's will close for the season.

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Trout Talk photo/Christy Dieman  
**Rick Kirchberg, owner of Weaver's Tackle, talks** to a customer at his store near Bennett Spring State Park.

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Another option for Bennett Spring visitors is Hidden Valley Outfitters. Located right on the Niangua River, Hidden Valley offers an RV park, cabins, primitive and electric campsites, float trip accommodations, and a general store with a variety of hot foods to order.

Matt Buhrman, the general store manager for HVO, said the original, smaller store was on the opposite side of Missouri 64 for several years. In 2018, the business built a newer and larger retail space to go along with their expanding business. The general store carries the typical fishing supplies but offers some different merchandise that's not typical of the area.

"We do a food service. We have St. Louis style pizza, burgers and things like that," Buhrman said. Visitors can also find old fashioned wooden toys, games, etched glass stem ware and Christmas ornaments. During regular season the store is open seven days a week.

Buhrman added that they are typically open on weekends only for the first few weeks in November, weather permitting, but will close

everything before Thanksgiving. "Our weekends are the busiest time. We always encourage advanced reservations," Buhrman said of the campground. Certain RV camp sites can fill a year in advance, he added.

HVO offers extended-stay RV parking where guests can leave their RV over the winter. While guests are not allowed to stay on the site in the off-season, it's an option that Buhrman said quickly caught on and sold out for the winter.

"That's actually full right now," he said.

Joe Ahmann, the general manager for HVO, said that while the business had humble beginnings, it continues to grow. By the beginning of next season, Ahmann said HVO plans to have about 200 full hook-up RV sites, 170 primitive camp sites with some of those including electricity, and several more fully equipped one and two-bedroom cabins.

"That's where we're starting to put a lot of energy into lately, is cabins. We should have at least four more by next season," Ahmann said.

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Trout Talk photo/Christy Dieman  
**General store manager Matt Buhrman, left, and campground manager Joe Ahmann, right, greet** customers from behind the counter at Hidden Valley Outfitters.



Shower houses are available at the RV park and the campground and include coin operated laundry machines.

HVO continues to add to their miles of hiking trails located on the property for guests to enjoy. Playgrounds and pavilions are available to guest, along with a disc golf course. Pavilions are also available to rent for special occasions. Throughout the property are hand-built timber framed pedestrian bridges and waterfalls. One special feature is the rustic log and timber framed chapel that is available to reserve for special occasions like weddings. Ahmann mentioned that the resort strives for a family friendly environment which includes an extra effort to include everyone.

"We try to make everything as handicap accessible as possible in this type of setting," Ahmann said. This includes the cabins, general store, and the

chapel which are all equipped with ramps.

One of the long-term amenities offered at HVO is float trips on the Niangua River. A service since 2011, canoe, kayak and rafts are available for rent on two different private access points. One access is five and a half miles upriver, floating back to HVO campground and the other is eight and a half miles down river where you are picked up and brought back to HVO. While float trips can be reserved online, floaters will need to call the store to arrange a scheduled time.

One of the goals of Hidden Valley Outfitters is to become a destination inside the resort. The beginning phase of a larger multipurpose building is in the works, along with other family friendly activities.

"We're trying to give people a little bit more to do besides just float and fish," Ahmann said.



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# Ladies fish free at Bennett during event

**LAURA VALENTI**  
**TROUT TALK**

Female anglers from all over the state flocked to Bennett Spring State Park Sept. 25 for a day of free fishing.

Sept. 25 marked the state park's fifth Ladies Free Fishing Day, according to Ben Havens, Bennett Spring Trout Hatchery manager.

"Last year was our biggest year with 630 ladies enjoying a day of free fishing, despite COVID-19 and social distancing," Havens said.

According to Havens, that because the global pandemic has kept many people in doors, outdoor activities have become very attractive to people "just wanting to get out of the house," looking for something fun to do. Despite having six weeks of no tag sales and a general shutdown at the park, the state still saw above average atten-

dance and that has continued into this year, according to Havens.

"This year has been a good solid season so far," he said.

Havens said that one of the reasons for special events like Ladies Free Fishing Day is to help introduce people into the hobby of trout fishing.

"Trout fishing can be somewhat overwhelming to those who have not done it before, with the extra rules that are involved, the zone fishing and so forth. Our hope in establishing a free fishing day for the ladies is to encourage them to come out and give trout fishing a try," Havens said.

Although help was still a little short handed compared to previous years, Havens said there was still a section of the river roped off for beginner anglers, so people could assist them in fishing.

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Trout Talk photo/Laura Valenti  
**Julie Gibson of Rockport fishes** near the Gauge House at Bennett Spring during the Ladies Free Fishing Day.

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Trout Talk photo/Laura Valenti

**Terri Vermillion of St. Charles** waded into the spring to catch a trout on Ladies Free Fishing Day in September.

"We hope if some women will come and get their toes wet, so to speak, this weekend and try their hand at trout fishing, maybe they will come back another time," he said.

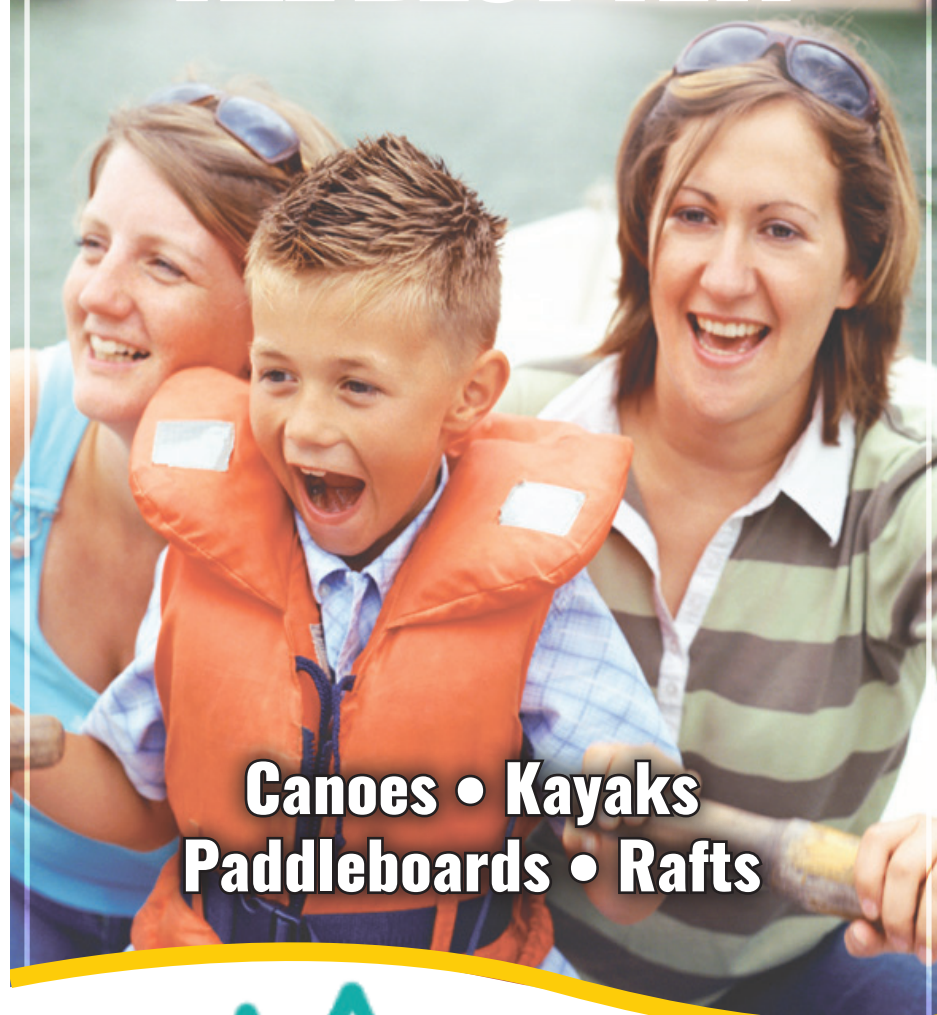
Julie Gibson was one of nearly 600 women who fished on Ladies Free Fishing Day. She traveled from Rockport, Mo, which is near the Iowa/Missouri border. She said it was only her second time fishing at the state park.

"My husband, Jacob, has come here

plenty of times," she said with a laugh.

If you missed Ladies Free Fishing Day but are interested in learning about fly fishing, Havens also mentioned that a few local fly tying gentlemen have been meeting 8 to 10 a.m. on Wednesdays down by the main hatchery building to share tips on tying flies, and talk about trout fishing, what works and what doesn't. The group is open to anyone and Havens added, "they always have a coffee pot going."

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# A Spiritual Spring

Bennett Spring has long been considered a special place for faith and worship

**LAURA VALENTI  
FOR TROUT TALK**

Beginning with the first peoples to visit what we now know as Bennett Spring, faith and religious beliefs have long been a part of this strikingly beautiful valley.

The original Native American tribes to come through the area were the Osage, the Delaware and the Kickapoo. According to those who have studied their histories, it is believed they camped, fished and passed through the area but never actually lived here, believing the valley to be too sacred a place for day-to-day living.

According to their legends, the first water source where today's Bennett Spring is found was a small but very deep pool. Their best divers could not reach its original source but it produced only a small amount of water. According to their oral traditions, members of those ancient tribes, began to forget their daily prayers and neglected their responsibilities as stewards of the land that had been entrusted to them. They killed members of other tribes, and, in general, acted in ways that made them unworthy.

One night, after they had returned

from yet another shameful raid, the Sacred One's wrath erupted and was felt by all as the ground shook, nearby trees tumbled and the earth as they knew it was changed forever. The quiet pool became a boiling spring, as ceaseless tears began to flow from the eye of the Sacred One, creating a full, flowing stream that followed the valley floor all the way to the Niangua River, over

a mile away. What we would come to know as Bennett Spring many years later, was born and now produces 100 million gallons of fresh spring water on a daily basis.

By the 1830s, stories of forced evacuations of several tribes, mostly notably the Cherokee by the US Army in other parts of the country, began to reach this area. Local indigenous peoples left the Bennett Spring valley voluntarily for the new Indian Territory in what is modern day Okla-

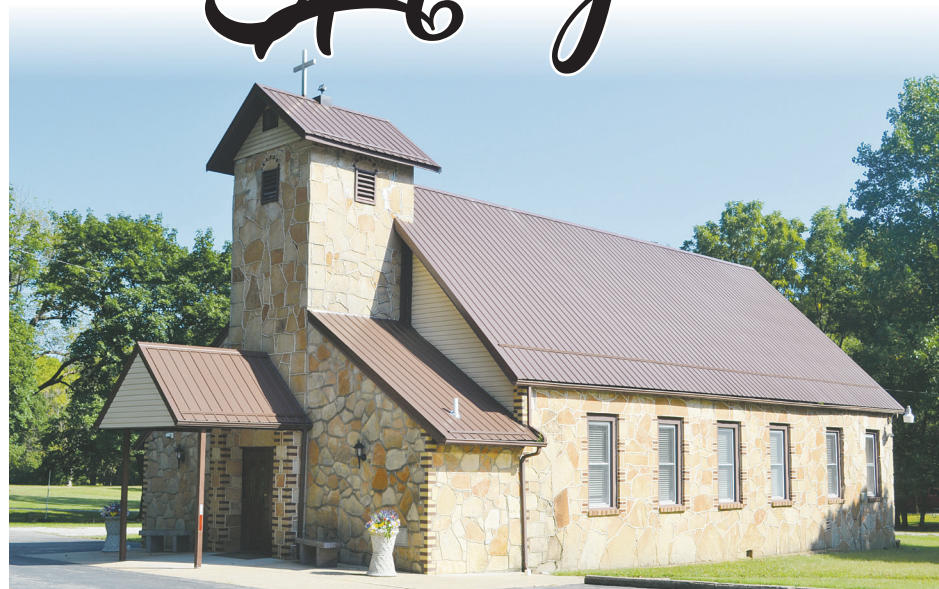
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In 1837, James Brice and his wife, Jane, of Kentucky, became the first white settlers to settle in the valley. They built a series of mills, as did the Bennett family, one of the next families to move into the area. The village of Brice sprang up in approximately the



Trout Talk photo/Laura Valenti

**Local Catholics established** the Sportsman's Chapel at Bennett Spring in the 1970s.



Trout Talk photo/Laura Valenti

**The Bennett Spring Church of God** has been spreading the faith for more than 100 years. It is the only church inside a state park.

same location as the current Bennett Spring Park Store and included a mill for grinding area farmers' corn, a blacksmith shop, a carding mill for processing wool from local sheep, a general store and, eventually, a small hotel known as the Brice Inn.

The town of Brice survived the Civil War, in part, no doubt, due to its remote location and its significant distance from the nearest railroad station, located in Lebanon, more than 10 miles away. While the tiny community held onto the name Brice, over the years, mills in the area were destroyed more than once by either floods or fire. By the early 1860s, the primary mill belonged to Peter Bennett, who was known for dealing with both the Union and Confederate forces. While some saw this as traitorous activity, it was undoubtedly a pragmatic approach since the area was not only isolated from any significant form of law enforcement, but like other parts of Missouri as a border state, the area often changed hands during the war, from North to South and back again.

Years later, in 1917, the Rev. George Bolds and his family arrived in Brice

and held a week-long tent revival, saving and baptizing a couple dozen area residents. Amongst the new Christians was William Sherman Bennett, Peter Bennett's son, whose family owned the land on which the village of Brice set. At the end of the revival, the Bolds became permanent area residents and built a church, the Bennett Spring Church of God. George Bolds' 17-year-old daughter Louie married William Sherman Bennett. Over the years, she and her son, Paul became well-known local preachers. The church, which celebrated its 100th anniversary just a few years ago, is the only building remaining from the town of Brice. It sits on a single acre that is actually owned by the church.

In 1924 and 1925, Josephine "Josie" Bennett-Smith and her brother, William Sherman Bennett, the only two surviving children of Peter Bennett sold their acreage to the state of Missouri, to establish Missouri's first state park. In doing so, they deeded a single acre to the church, making it the only church in the nation, located in the center of a state park.

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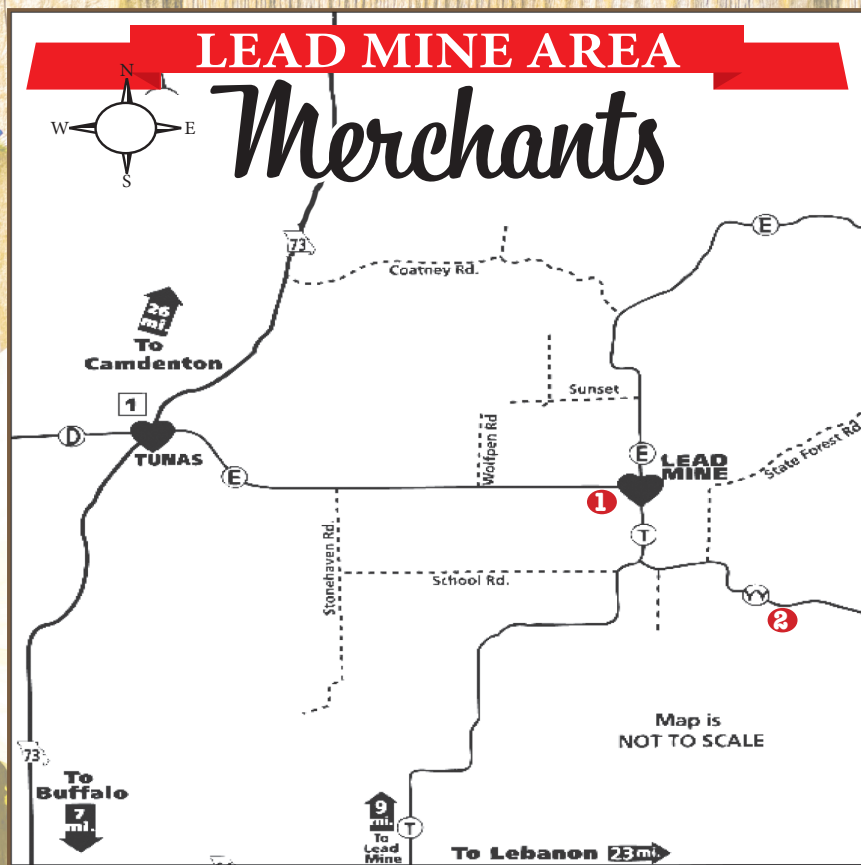


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Two decades later, other Christians began to recognize the power of Bennett Spring's beauty to inspire an appreciation of God's natural creation. A Christian camp that was first established in Christian County, not far from Springfield, in 1937 was moved to eastern Dallas County, a few years later. Located just a mile or so west of the now famous park, overlooking a part of the Niangua River valley, Bennett Spring Christian Church Camp's exquisite Vesper Point features a small outdoor chapel, a part of which can be seen from the river down below and the farm on the far side. Sharp-eyed canoeists passing below can catch a glimpse of the chapel's concrete cross situated on a cliff at the edge of the church camp, high above.

In the early 1970s, Father Clem Ilmberger of Lebanon's St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church began hosting Mass on Saturday afternoons along the Spring Branch, bringing the weekly sacrament to visiting fishermen, so that they would not have

to choose between the few hours they had available in a weekend of fishing or their required attendance at weekly worship. Within just a couple of years, devoted Catholics, both locals and others from outside the area, had collected enough donations to build a chapel of their own on donated land, next to the park.

For nearly fifty years, the Sportsman's Chapel has welcomed Catholics to a Saturday afternoon Mass, performed by the local Lebanon priest, between Memorial Day and Labor Day, each year. Both locals and visitors are welcomed to a come-as-you-are worship, including those who choose to attend in their fishing waders.

From the Native Americans who once trod this land in moccasins to fishermen who now tramp through in hip boots and waders, with many a child in sandals and tennis shoes in between, Bennett Spring has long been a place of faith and worship, appreciation of nature, relaxation and most of all, of peace.

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**Above, Richard Reinhart of Crestview, Fla.,** caught this three pound trout in Zone 2 using a black and yellow jig on Sept. 27. Right, Nick Padgitt of St. Louis, Mo., shows off his 4.5 pounds trout caught in Zone 2 on a Marabou on Sept. 26.

# Fish Stories

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**Above, Brenda Lavery of Freeman, Mo.,** caught this three pound trout on Ladies Free Fishing Day in Zone 2 using a black and yellow fly.

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