Looking for a new location for spring wildflower photography? By the middle of April, dogwoods and redbuds are blooming across the Ozark Mountains of northwestern Arkansas. Spring rains fill the streams and the waterfalls. Carpets of yellow and blue wildflowers cover roadsides and hillsides. The last two weeks of April bring the peak of wildflower season in the Arkansas Ozarks.

Would you like to find another great place to photograph autumn color? The Ozark’s hardwood forests are painted with all the beautiful autumn colors that draw millions of visitors to the Smoky Mountains and to New England on fall foliage photo trips. The Ozark Plateau covers five states. I selected the Ozark National Forest in rural Arkansas as a great place to find images of America’s heartland.

Along the back roads of the Ozarks
This spring I traveled east to drive, explore, and photograph the remote back roads through the Ozarks. I wanted to find the best places for nature photography and search for spring wildflowers.

The Ozark Mountains, or the Ozark Plateau, covers much of southern Missouri, eastern Oklahoma, northern Arkansas, and the southeastern corner of the state of Kansas. The Ozarks cover an area of fifty thousand square miles—larger than the state of Florida. When I planned my one-week journey through this region, I selected a small area that is more mountainous and less populated than other regions of the Ozarks.

I decided to explore the Boston Mountains and the Buffalo River Valley in northern Arkansas. This area is south of the Missouri border and north of the Arkansas River, covering an area of 150 miles from east to west. These mountains are covered with forests of hardwood, pine and red cedar. Only a few larger, populated cities dot the boundary of the Ozark National Forest. Many small, remote communities are home to mountain people that still live off their land. The eastern end of the Arkansas Ozarks are lower in elevation than the western end up in the Boston Mountains near the Oklahoma border. I started my trip by flying into Tulsa, Oklahoma, renting a car, heading southeast through Muskogee, to Interstate 40, then crossing the Oklahoma/Arkansas border at Fort Smith.

Just across the Arkansas River, I left the Interstate and drove through the historic Old Town on Main Street in Van Buren where I picked up some road maps and guide books to the Ozark National Forest. I stopped at a general store and bought a plastic cooler, a bag of ice, a six-pack of RC Cola, and a couple of Moon Pies. I was ready, so I headed north on Route 59 into the Ozark National Forest. I wanted to start in the west and work my way eastward, driving the back roads and looking for some great photography.
Natural Dam Falls
Fifteen miles north of Van Buren, Arkansas, I found the Natural Dam Falls on Lee Creek. This spot is a few miles east of the Oklahoma border. A large brown “Natural Dam” sign on the west side of Route 59 points out the falls, six-hundred feet down an unpaved side road. I parked in the official lot, then crossed the creek by walking across the low paved ford (the water level was not too high) and set up my tripod on the flat stones at the top of the falls. This dam looks man-made, but the rim of this natural stone dam zigzags across the hundred-foot length of the falls in a fluted, unnatural design.

Lee Creek drops seven feet over the rim. A large pond backed up above the falls reflects the forest’s autumn colors in late October. On the spring day I arrived, the water level was low. There were six small cascades dropping over the rim. It was a good photo op.

This place is worth several hours of exploring. It was discovered in 1819. There was once a water-powered grist mill at the site. Large foundation stones still stand at the west end of the falls where a store, post office, and campground once stood.

Continuing north on Route 59, I turned right at the junction of Route 45, a mile north of the village of Dutch Mills. This road heads northeast toward the city of Fayetteville, Arkansas. Halfway between the small towns of Clyde and Canehill, I saw the remains of an old gristmill with a large, rusting water wheel along the side of the road.

I drove down to the edge of the stream, parked my car, and moved up close. This is a good wide-angle spot if you set a tripod right up against the wheel. To take advantage of the afternoon light, I climbed down thirty feet to the edge of the stream and shot upward, toward the wheel and the old stone building.

Devil’s Den State Park
Not far from the old mill is Devil’s Den State Park. I followed my map to find the way through the towns of Prairie Grove, Hog Eye, and Strickler, Arkansas, to the park’s entrance on the northern edge of the Ozark National Forest. For the rest of the afternoon, I walked along Lee Creek and photographed blooming dogwood trees and large yellow butterflies on the mountain azalea blossoms. At the western end of a large pond, Lee Creek cascades over a man-made stone dam. There are 148 camp sites in this park located in this narrow, wooded river valley. Devil’s Den State Park is seven miles west of Interstate 540, and a few miles south of the city of Fayetteville, Arkansas.
Highway 71, the historic old scenic route down the western edge of the Boston Mountain, follows the western boundary of the largest section of the Ozark National Forest. Most of the real mountain driving and the remote back roads I planned to explore lie to the east of this line. The western end of the 178-mile-long Ozark Highlands Trail starts at Lake Fort Smith State Park near the town of Mountainburg.

Shores Lake Recreation Area
I stopped to photograph the cascading spillway below the reservoir at Lake Fort Smith, then continued driving east through the mountains on several unmarked dirt roads. I reached Shores Lake Recreation Area late in the day and set up my tripod to photograph the pines along the shoreline silhouetted by the setting sun. There are several trailheads at Shores Lake. One trail climbs seven miles to White Rock Mountain—past several large waterfalls.

After dark, I headed down the mountain to find a motel along Interstate 40, a few miles south of Shores Lake near the town of Mulberry, Arkansas. I returned the next morning to drive to the top of White Rock Mountain for the view from the 2,260-foot summit, one of the highest peaks in the Ozarks. The view of the forests from the top of White Rock Mountain was beautiful early in the morning.

Mount Magazine, the highest mountain in the Midwest at 2,753 feet, is located thirty miles south of White Rock Mountain in a southern annex of the Ozark National Forest. It’s a long drive up there. The views are wonderful from the top of Mount Magazine. I found that the vistas were dotted with many farm houses and barns in the distance. The U.S. Army’s old, deactivated Fort Chaffee is located thirty miles west of the observation point on Mount Magazine.

Mount Magazine is home to 91 species of the 127 known butterflies in the world. National Geographic published an article on the butterflies of Mount Magazine. If you are a butterfly photographer, check out a web site with information on the annual butterfly festival held here each June: www.butterflyfestival.com.

Driving the back roads
There are a half-dozen direct, well-paved north/south routes over the Boston Mountains and through the Ozarks. Start your explorations on these paved roads until you get a feel for the distances and the lay of the land. Pick a short, unpaved county road and drive it. If you have a 4x4 vehicle or a pickup with good ground clearance, you’ll have no trouble. A rental sedan with low clearance, questionable tires, and a compact spare tire may not be suitable for off-pavement travel. I encountered several stream fords and deep, water-filled pot holes while trying to reach back country campgrounds and trailheads in a rented Ford sedan.

Most of the narrow two-lane county roads that wind through the Ozarks are shown on road maps. Not all are paved. These are mostly graded gravel roads that twist and wind through the hills. Some are primitive dirt roads that become muddy bogs during the rainy season.
Others are unmarked logging roads that dead end somewhere deep in the woods. County roads are marked with numbered, keystone-shaped blue and yellow signs. Pick up free county road maps at any of the National Forest Ranger Stations when you arrive in the Ozarks. They will make your back road explorations much more fun and a lot safer.

More than 400 miles of Arkansas highways have been designated as wildflower routes. The Arkansas Highway Department has reduced roadside mowing and spraying along these routes to encourage wildflower growth. Scenic Byway 7 is the fastest paved highway running north and south through the middle of Ozarks. It is a designated scenic wildflower route with coneflowers, penstamen, larkspur, fire pink, sundrops and many other varieties of wildflowers blooming from May through early July.

I started my journey through the Ozarks at the Oklahoma border and continued eastward through the mountains, driving all the back roads I could find. I stayed off the freeways and the Interstates. I drove several hundred miles of dirt roads. There are no paved roads in many parts of the Boston Mountains. When I saw something to photograph, it was easy to pull off the pavement—there was no pavement. I just stopped my car, got out, and set up my tripod. There was little traffic.

Heading north from Mount Magazine, I passed through the town of Ozark, located on the “big bend” in the Ozark River, and headed north on Route 23. When I crossed the bridge over the Mulberry River at Turner’s Bend General Store, I saw hundreds of tents set up along the river. It was midmorning and nobody was around. They were all somewhere upstream, heading this way in their canoes. This is serious canoe country. The paved road led through the community of Cass then turned east on Route 215 to follow the Mulberry River Valley. My map showed Route 215 as an unpaved road, but it has been widened and paved for ten miles east of Cass and almost all the way to the village of Yale. There are some great vistas along the road, looking down at the Mulberry River. I stopped at several of the pullouts along Route 215 to photograph colorful canoes as they bobbed down through short stretches of white water.

I set up my tripod and camera on several low bridges and watched paddlers duck their heads to pass beneath. I skipped the aluminum canoes and waited to photograph only the colorful red and yellow hulls against a polarized, dark blue river.

The pavement ended at Beech Grove, at the entrance to the largest of the canoe concessionaires. Hundreds of cars and several buses were parked in the field by the river. Route 215 continued eastward as a rough and rocky unpaved road.

As I approached a small village marked on the map named “Yale,” a large, white church with a bell tower was visible through the trees. It stood between the Mulberry River and a small cemetery. After trying to find the right angle and a composition that “worked,” I walked back down the road to the spot where I first saw the white church peeking through the woods. That was my first impression and it turned out to be the best viewpoint.
Some of the best wildflowers I found during my week-long exploration of the Ozarks were growing along the road, a half-mile east of the church at Yale. They were growing at the base of a vertical stone wall where the road has been cut into the hill side and were being watered by natural springs that dripped from the wall. The wall was close to the edge of the road. I had to park my car in a wide spot next to the river and walk back to photograph the long strip of wildflowers.

Continuing east along this scenic back road, I stopped to photograph the general store and post office at Oark (they dropped the “z”). The small town of Catalpa has a general store and a gas station that sells and repairs tires, just in case the back roads have damaged your tires.

If you follow this route to photograph autumn color, check the weather forecasts to avoid getting stuck on a muddy back road. Most of the length of this road follows the Mulberry River and is lined with hardwood forests. It looks like a great route to drive in search of autumn color.

**Buffalo River**

When I reached the pavement of Route 21, I followed this north through the small town of Mossville and into the Boxley Valley at the western end of the Buffalo National River. The Buffalo River was preserved by Congress as a National Wild River in 1972. The traditional farm community in the Boxley Valley was protected by the National Park Service and now the farm land in this beautiful valley remains privately owned and farmed by the ancestors of the original settlers.

Some of the more beautiful parts of the Arkansas Ozarks are the deeper stretches of the Buffalo River Valley, lined with vertical limestone bluffs. The Buffalo River drops from the heights of the Boston Mountains as it flows from west to east.

The river starts by cascading down steep mountain slopes through the Upper Buffalo Wilderness for one third of its total length. The Buffalo, one of America’s few remaining wild rivers, flows free and undammed for a hundred-and-fifty miles before joining with the White River, which flows southeastward to join with the Arkansas River before flowing into the Mississippi along the eastern border of Arkansas.

If you have the time and enjoy canoeing and photography, schedule a few days of drifting down the Buffalo River. Canoe trips starting from Pruitt Landing, a few miles south of a village actually named Dogpatch, can take you deep into the Ozark wilderness on an easy float trip through calm pools and only a few riffles and shallow places. The lower two-thirds of the Buffalo River are fairly level and calm. A canoe trip can last a few hours or can fill ten days and take you all the way to Buffalo City and the White River.

You will find concessionaires at several points along the Buffalo River where you can rent a canoe, paddles, and a life jacket. They will provide shuttle service to and from any of the landing spots along the river. There are fourteen campgrounds operated year-round on a first-come basis along the river.
If you are not a canoe enthusiast, you can explore and photograph the Buffalo River at any of the access points, the “put-ins” and “take-outs” along the river that can be reached by roads. This can be a worthwhile journey during the peak of autumn color season, in late October and early November, when all the reds, oranges, and yellows are reflecting in the quiet pools along the river.

Follow the Boston River by driving the parallel road (Route 43) along its western end. Drive north on Route 21 through Mossville to Boxley where you can first see the river. A few miles north of Boxley, take the side road into the Lost Valley Campground, park at the end of the short road, and walk the Lost Valley Trail to Eden Falls. It’s a mile-and-a-half walk along Clark Creek through a red cedar and sweet gum forest to the gentle spray of Eden Falls. Less than a half-mile up the trail, you’ll pass a jumble of fallen boulders that fit tightly together called “Jigsaw Blocks.” The trail climbs slowly to a natural bridge being carved by Clark Creek and then passes under an overhanging rock ledge called “Cob Cave,” for the many corn cobs left there by prehistoric native people. A spur trail leads up to Eden Falls, a 170-foot cascade of four waterfalls.

I walked back down the spur trail from the falls and continued up the main trail. It’s a steep climb up into Eden Falls Cave. There is a thirty-five-foot waterfall 200 feet inside the cave. My small flashlight barely allowed me to explore the cave. My flash unit had gotten wet and was not working. Most of the length of the Lost Valley Trail is an easy walk and an excellent place to find spring wildflowers in the damp spots along the trail.

For the hike up to Eden Falls Cave, I carried only one lens, a Nikkor 24-120mm zoom. Even without a macro lens or an extension tube, I was able to frame small groups of wildflowers along the trail at 1/5 life-size with the lens at its telephoto setting of 120mm. A tripod is necessary for this kind of photography. Buy a tripod that can spread its legs straight out and has an extra-short center column or no center column, so that your camera can be lowered down to ground level.

Back on the pavement of Route 43, a mile north of the Lost Valley Junction, the remains of a log cabin and barn can be seen in the woods on the left side of the road. William Villines built this cabin in 1850. Four years later his son, James Villines, was born here. Known as “Beaver Jim” for his trapping abilities, James Villines lived here until he died in 1948. His farm lies just down the hill along the Buffalo River. His ancestors still farm this valley.

At this point in the Boxley Valley, turn left on Route 43 through the small town of Ponca (a community of canoe outfitters and lodges), head north, and leave the Buffalo River or turn right at the bridge and head east on Route 74 for just over a mile to the sign pointing out the side road to Steel Creek, a campground and access to the Buffalo River. Unless you are pulling a trailer or driving a large motorhome, the steep and winding gravel road down to the Steel Creek Campground is worth the view of the river at the bottom of towering limestone cliffs. You may spot some of the transplanted 300 Rocky Mountain elk that live along the shores of the Buffalo River.
Seven miles east of the Steel Creek Road, another side road off Route 74 leads down to an access point on the Buffalo River. Towards its end, the three-mile road to Kyles Landing becomes very steep as it drops down into the river valley. The view of the river is more dramatic above Steel Creek. From the junction with the side road into Kyles Landing, it’s five miles farther east to the town of Jasper. There along Highway 7 you will find the Visitor Information Center of the Buffalo Ranger Station and all the guide books and maps you’ll need for this trip.

For more explorations along the Buffalo River, fill your gas tank in Jasper, then continue driving east on Route 74. Skip the shortcut over the low-water bridge at Hasty and drive through the very rustic village of Piercetown. Take the right turn at the Carver Cemetery and drive a half-mile down the hill to another low bridge where you can photograph a nice reflection of limestone bluffs along the river from the middle of the bridge. Return to the pavement and continue eastward through the village of Hasty. From there, it’s less than ten miles to Highway 65, a busy, north/south highway located outside the boundaries of the Ozark National Forest. The nearest city, with lodgings, restaurants, and all the other services you’ll need is located twelve miles north at Harrison, Arkansas. It’s the most convenient place to stay on the north side of the Ozarks.

East of Highway 65 there are about eight more access points along the Buffalo River—all the way to its end at the confluence with the White River. The lower two-thirds of the river flows more slowly, especially late in the season when water levels are low. Most of these access spots along the lower river are at the end of long dead-end roads and may not be worth the drive unless you have a canoe strapped to the roof of your car. My favorite viewpoints along the Buffalo River are along the Boxley Valley, at Steel Creek, and near Hasty, Arkansas. If your time is short, limit your explorations to the upper parts of the river and the Lost Valley area.

Highway 7, Arkansas’s first National Scenic Byway, was dedicated in 1994. Its 153 miles stretch from just south of the Missouri border, all the way to Hot Springs, Arkansas, more than halfway down the length of the state. I was most interested in exploring the section through the Ozark Mountains, from Harrison, Arkansas, south to Russellville, Arkansas. I drove it in both directions, stopping at many places where the wildflower displays were most colorful. Five miles south of the Ranger Station in the town of Jasper, I turned east on County Road 374 and found some great scenic vistas as I descended Judsea Mountain. I marked my map to return there for fall color in late October. Back on Highway 7 heading south, my next three stops were at viewpoints above the Arkansas Grand Canyon, looking down into Big Creek Valley.

Alum Cove Natural Bridge
Alum Cove Geological Area in the Ozark National Forest is located one mile off Highway 7. Heading north or south on Highway 7, watch for the junction of Route 16, fourteen miles south of Jasper. Drive one mile west on Route 16 and turn north at the sign pointing the way to Alum Cove Natural Bridge Recreation Area. It’s three miles to the entrance where you can leave your car in a paved lot above the trailhead.
Pedestal Rocks Recreation Area

Back on Highway 7, drive fourteen miles south before turning east at the small village of Pelsor, Arkansas, onto Route 16 (which continues east here). Drive five miles to the entrance of the well-marked Pedestal Rocks Recreation Area. Starting from the trailhead at the parking area, there are two loop trails out through the woods to the edge of the bluffs where falling water has carved deep scallops along the rim of these cliffs. Tall, free-standing mushroom rocks are a few feet away from the edge of the cliffs.

Several trails lead down the face of the cliffs to the bottom of the bluffs where you can enter the caves and walk beneath several arches. Photographers will find the best geological subjects by following the Pedestal Rocks Trail—a two-mile loop trip. Wear long pants for this hike. Watch for poison ivy growing along the trail.

Haw Creek Falls

Drive back to Pelsor and cross Highway 7, heading west on the road marked Route 123 toward Hagarville. Haw Creek Falls are a couple of miles west of the tiny town of Fort Douglas on the south side of Route 123. The side road is well-marked. You’ll have to ford Haw Creek and drive...
Move around to the right (downstream) and step off the stones to the bottom of the falls. Walk downstream far enough to find a good spot for your tripod and camera where you can frame both the falls and the reflecting pool.

After driving south on Highway 7, detouring down all the side roads and filling a whole day with photography, I was ready to find a motel and restaurant. I headed south to Russellville on Interstate 40. Along the southern side of the Ozark Mountains, Interstate 40 is a major east/west route. Visitors will find many motels and restaurants located in the large and small towns at most of the freeway interchanges between Fort Smith on the western edge of Arkansas’s Ozarks to Russellville on the southeastern side. You will find all the major motel chains.

Petit Jean State Park
After breakfast in Russellville, I headed south across the Arkansas River and drove to Petit Jean State Park. Guide books on the area point out an especially beautiful waterfall in the park. A heavy rain prevented any serious hiking, so I took the paved trail from the small parking area down to the overlook above Cedar Falls. My map showed a “Cedar Creek Self-Guiding Trail” down to the bottom of the canyon and the base of the falls. The steady downpour kept me from climbing into the canyon to search for a river trail and a better viewpoint of Cedar Falls.
The East Side of the Ozarks

The narrow, mountainous road between Clinton, Arkansas, and Mountain View, Arkansas, reminds me of rural Vermont. Drive this route for an autumn color photo tour. This is dairy country with lots of old barns and slopes covered with hardwood forests. An eastern annex of the Ozark National Forest is located just north of the town of Mountain View, Arkansas. The “view” is of the Boston Mountains to the west of the town.

Signs at the city limits proclaim that Mountain View, Arkansas, is the “Folk Music Capitol of the World.” I passed through the small town the day before the Annual Arkansas Folk Festival in mid-April. Musicians were tuning up and practicing, and crafts booths were being set up. This event is a great place to shoot local color and interesting characters. I bought several cassette tapes of banjo and mandolin music, classic country tunes that were perfect for listening while driving through the Ozarks.

An eastern annex of the Ozark National Forest is just north of the town of Mountain View. The northern boundary of this section of the National Forest is defined by the White River. Near the southern boundary is Blanchard Springs Caverns which claims to have some of the most beautiful underground formations in America. The caverns are located ten miles north of Mountain View, Arkansas, on Route 14.

At the Blanchard Springs Caverns Visitor Center, I bought a ticket for their “Discovery Trail” tour into the middle section of the caverns. No tripods are permitted on the tours through the caverns. Flash photography is permitted. Later in the day I took the other cave tour—the Dripstone Trail Tour. Because this upper section of the caverns is much older than the caverns along the lower trails, more formations can be found along the route of the Dripstone Trail. More stalactites, stalagmites, more frozen waterfalls called flowstones, and a pool of formations that looks like coral.

There is a book store in the visitor center with a good selection of maps and guide books to the Ozarks, including canoeing guides to the Buffalo River and detailed trail guides for hiking any of the many trails through the Ozarks. Most of the forest near the caverns is covered with pines. I found an unusually large number of flowering dogwood trees along Route 14, just beyond the Blanchard Springs Caverns near a town called Fifty Six.

I was surprised by all the roadrunners crossing the highways in northern Arkansas. These creatures are usually seen much farther south, but have become common through the Ozarks. Rocky Mountain elk and black bears have been reintroduced into the mountains of Arkansas. I saw several red foxes, lots of raccoons, and opossums in the woods. I always enjoy seeing bright red cardinals.

Many small towns are scattered around the Ozarks where you can find stores, gas stations, and restaurants. Except for a few bed and breakfast establishments in remote locations, you will have to drive into the larger towns to find motels. You will find a good selection of motels in Fort Smith, Van Buren, Ozark, Clarksville, Russellville, and Morrilton, all located on Interstate 40 along the south side of the Ozark National Forest. Lodgings can be found in Heber Springs, Clinton, and Mountain View, towns around the eastern end of the mountains. Up on the north side of the Ozark National Forest, are places to stay in Mountain Home, Harrison, and Fayetteville, one of the larger cities in this part of Arkansas.
Eureka Springs

After driving for nine days through Arkansas, I found one of the most fascinating towns I have ever visited. The hill town of Eureka Springs, up near the Missouri border, was built on the site of a spring discovered in 1856. The spring, claimed to have great medicinal value, brought people from far and wide. By 1880 there were two thousand homes, many shops, churches, and mail services. From 1885 until 1910, the town was at the height of its popularity until a series of fires destroyed most of the wooden structures. Starting in 1893, the citizens of Eureka Springs rebuilt the town over a ten-year period with native limestone quarried along the White River. By 1904, when the population of Eureka Springs was over five thousand, the popularity of healing springs began to decline. The town barely survived the years from 1907 through World War II. Most of the old Victorian shops and homes have been restored, The whole town is now listed on the Register of Historic Places.

The architecture is authentic Victorian with many fascinating details. The streets are steep, narrow, and bordered with miles of stone retaining walls. Leave your car in one of the parking lots and walk, or ride the open-air trolleys.

In addition to the large number of picturesque businesses in the area, there’s a large number of excellent restaurants in Eureka Springs, and the old hotels offer deluxe accommodations. Arrive in Eureka Springs during the off season, on a Saturday evening after all the shops have closed early, and concentrate on the unusual architectural photography.

Have a great trip and send me a postcard!

Photograph America Newsletter

is published quarterly (four issues/year) by Robert Hitchman assisted by technical associate/wife, Katherine Post Office Box 86, Novato, CA 94948-0086 1-415-898-9677

www.photographamerica.com

All contents of this newsletter copyright © 1989-2016 Robert Hitchman

Please don’t make copies for your friends. This is a violation of Federal copyright laws. This newsletter survives on subscriptions.