

Lawrence Trail Hawks

Guide to Running Clinton Lake



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LAWRENCE TRAIL HAWKS



Trail and Ultra Runners

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A Brief History of Clinton Lake

The ground that much of Clinton Lake State Park sits on is former farmland. The keen-eyed runner may catch a glimpse of long-abandoned farm equipment in secluded wooded sections of the park. The less keen-eyed runner may catch a piece of the old rock fences with their foot. Both types of runner will generally experience a brief sense of shock, wonder, and/or confusion at their discovery. Well, wonder no more.

The Clinton Dam was built in 1975 to control flooding on the Wakarusa River and to provide Lawrence with an additional water source. Much of the former farm equipment still remains in the woods (or lake). The lake was slowly filled over a five-year period to avoid depriving farmers downriver of irrigation water, and formally opened for recreation in 1980. The park sits on 35 square miles of land, with the lake comprising roughly a third of that. The dam and flood control are handled by the Army Corps of Engineers; the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism (KDWPT) maintains the recreational areas.

Today, Clinton Lake provides water to more people than any other reservoir in the state of Kansas. The lake and surrounding woodland are home to many fish, deer, birds...and Trail Hawks.



Clinton Lake at Sunrise

Getting There

Clinton Lake is located just west of Lawrence, off Clinton Parkway. There are two main entrances to the park, described below:

The Free Entrance/Overlook Park:

Officially known on maps as N. 1402 Rd, this is the first road you'll come to after turning right off Clinton parkway. This short road leads to Overlook Park and the Army Corps of Engineers facilities. Overlook Park is home to the main trailhead for the Clinton Lake North Shore trails, and is free to enter. Note that this entrance is locked from 10pm to 6am; if you're planning on night-running, park at the Nature Center (see map, next page) to avoid having your car locked in.



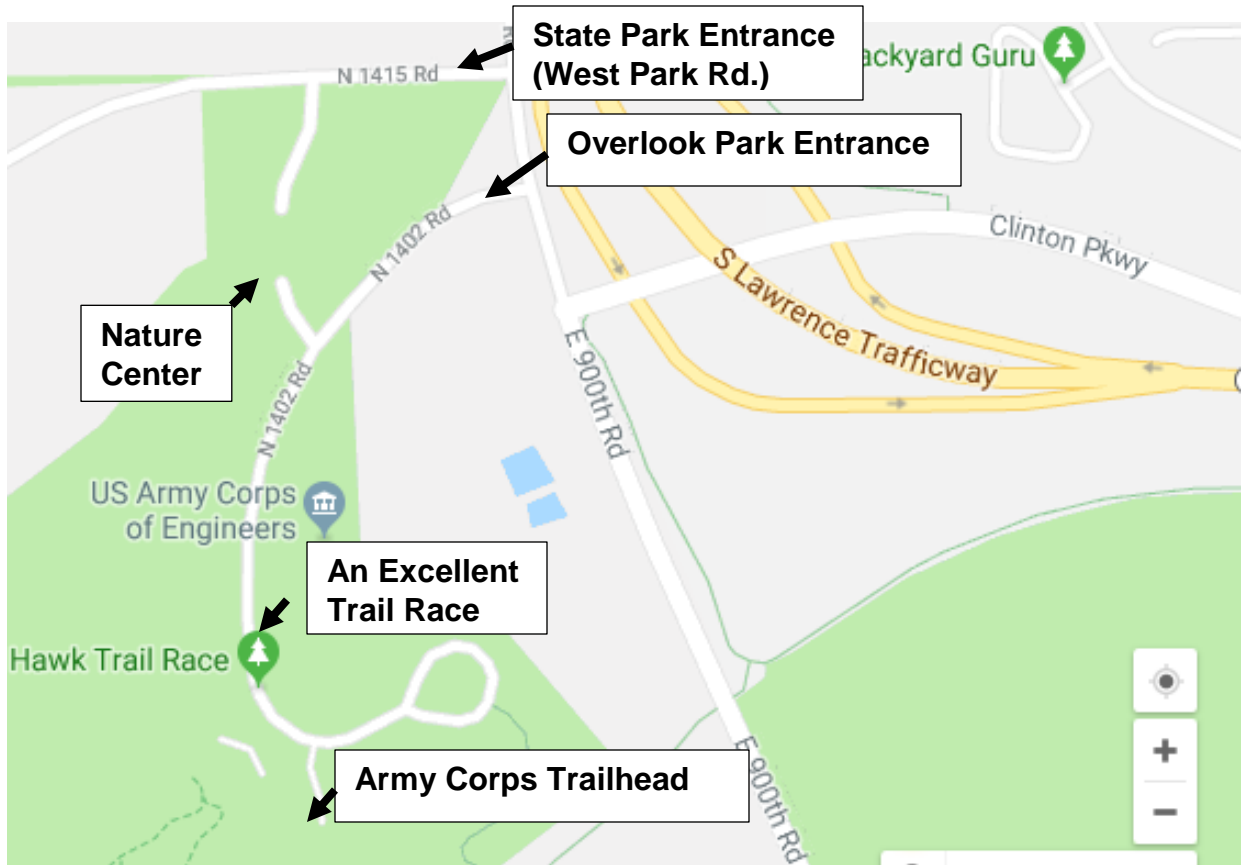
The Army Corps of Engineers sign marking the Overlook Park entrance

The State Park Entrance:

The second road you'll come to (N. 1415 Rd, or West Park Rd.) leads to the state park, including the marina, campgrounds, and swim beach. Entry to this portion costs \$5 per vehicle per day; annual permits are available from the state park or when you renew your vehicle registration, and cost \$15.50 with vehicle registration and \$25 bought separately, according to the state park website ksoutdoors.com (as of December 2017).



The State Park entrance



Map 1: The two entrances to Clinton Lake

The Trails at Clinton Lake

The North Shore Trails

The North Shore Trails at Clinton Lake are home to the vast majority of the trail activities at Clinton Lake. Numerous opportunities are available to the eager trail runner to run on all sorts of terrain, from wooded dirt trails, to rocky jaunts along the shores of the lake, to sweeping grasslands that give the highest vantage point for miles around. A brief guide to the different trails around the lake follows.

The Blue Trail: One of two main trails along the north shore of Clinton Lake, the blue-blazed or “blue” trail runs approximately 8.5 miles through woods, starting from Overlook Park. The blue trail is considered the “easier” trail, but plenty of roots, rocks, and elevation changes will challenge that notion. Most of the trail is singletrack—no side-by-side running!

The White Trail: The more technically challenging cousin to the Blue Trail, the white-blazed or “white” trail runs approximately 12.5 miles, also starting from Overlook Park. The terrain is similar to that of the Blue trail. The white and blue trails often run no more than a hundred yards from each other, and cross over each other at a few locations. The blue and white trails merge at the far end of the trails (Cactus Ridge), forming one giant 21-mile loop. Numerous connector trails provide opportunities to run shorter loops.

The Red Trail: The black sheep (red sheep?) of the trail system, the red-blazed or “red” trail is short but challenging. The 1.1 mile trail breaks off of the blue trail just after Land’s End and runs along the edge of Clinton Lake, providing beautiful views of the lake—or at least I’m told. I haven’t had the courage to take my eyes off the ground for one second while running it. There’s no shame in walking this section of trail. The red trail merges with blue again at the far end of the trail.

Blazes and Connector Trails: The Blue, White, and Red trails are all marked with colored blazes, ensuring nervous runners that they are still on the right path. Connector trails—short lengths of trail running from Blue to White or Blue to Red—are marked with the colors of the two trails they connect.



Trail Blazes, as shown by Gary “Story Hawk” Henry

Bunker Hill / The Goodwin Loop: Separate from the Blue, White, and Red Trails, but accessible about a half-mile past Mile 11 on White, the Bunker Hill cross-country ski trails are open year-round to runners who want a change of pace from the roots and rocks common in the wooded trails. Bunker Hill features 1.75 miles of trimmed grass trails. The path up Bunker Hill is one of the longer sustained climbs on the North Shore Trails, but runners who crest the hill are rewarded with amazing vistas of the surrounding countryside, with Lawrence and KU visible in the distance.

The Goodwin Loop is a 0.75-mile loop separated from Bunker Hill by a gravel road, and is featured in The Hawk trail race. The Goodwin Loop runs through the park's disc golf course, and additional dirt and grass trails are accessible from it. Bunker Hill and the Goodwin Loop sit northeast of Campground 3, and are easily accessible from there for those who do not wish to run out on White.



Bunker Hill

The Nature Center Trails: Similar in terrain to the blue trail, with its trailhead located behind the Nature Center (see Map 1), the Nature Center trails provide about 2 miles of looping paths, with helpful placards identifying the flora and fauna of Clinton Lake. Some placards also identify the wildlife you may see, but the critters are much less cooperative about staying by the signs.

The South Shore Trails: Primarily used by horseback riders, the South Shore trails are, as the name suggests, on the opposite shore of the North Shore trails. These trails are not as well-maintained as the North Shore, and feature tall grass in many places. Runners wishing to explore these trails are advised to do so in the winter months. If a fellow trail runner suggests running there in the summer, they're probably planning on sacrificing you to the ticks and chiggers that call Clinton Lake home. In fact, that fellow-runner may be a giant tick disguised as a trail runner. Watch out!

Trailheads

If the previous descriptions have you lacing your shoes in anticipation, you'll be desperate to know how you can start running on these magical trails. Fear not! Read on to discover the many ways you can access the wonderful wooded paths the Trail Hawks call home.

Major Trailheads (sorted alphabetically)

Army Corps Trailhead (also known as the Overlook Park trailhead or the free trailhead, among others): This is the primary trailhead for the North Shore Trails at Clinton Lake. This is 'Mile 0' on both the Blue and White trails, and is the starting location for the Wednesday and Saturday group runs, as well as several Trail Hawks races: The Hawk, The Night Hawk, The Snake, and Sanders Saunter. As the name implies, this trailhead is located in Overlook Park, just past the gate as you drive in. (It's just west of the playground).



The Army Corps Trailhead

Lake Henry: Located about 2.25 miles out on Blue and 2.5 miles out on White, Lake Henry is best known to non-runners for its trout fishing and is best known to runners for the trout fishing smell. (I kid; it's really quite nice). Access to Lake Henry is off Marina Road.



Lake Henry as seen from the Blue Trail



Lake Henry

The Land's End Trailhead (also known as the Wakarusa Cabin): Located on the southeast corner of Campground 1, the cabin area provides a trailhead access to Land's End (approximately 3.75 miles out on Blue, or 6.25 miles out on White). One of the cabins is typically the base for the Land's End aid station for many Hawk races, and is the gathering location for some of the Hawks' free events throughout the year. To get there, take the State Park entrance in to Campground 1 (see the maps following this section—a sign on 1415 Road will also mark the left turn into Campground 1). Follow the paved road back through the campground—the left turn to the cabins is just before the paved road makes a sharp right turn. The trailhead is located at a cul-de-sac at the end of the road by the Wakarusa Cabin.



The Land's End Trailhead

Marina Road: The Blue and White trails respectively cross Marina Road just before and just after Mile 2. Though not generally used as a starting point for a run, this is a great place to cheer on others at a race. The trail crossing can be a bit tough to spot for those unfamiliar with the area—it is just south of the boat storage area.



Marina Road trail crossing, looking east

Swim Beach: Swim beach is a popular place to start and finish a run for many sweaty Hawks who want to cool off after a hot summer run, and a few crazy Hawks to cool off after a cold winter run. Swim Beach is approximately 6 miles out on the Blue Trail and 9 miles out on White. Swim Beach is located between Campgrounds 1 and 3; the trails are down the staircase behind the brick restroom/shower facilities. If you find yourself standing in the lake, you went too far.

West Park Road: No, the entirety of West Park Road, aka “1415 Road,” is not one giant trailhead. Generally used to refer to the West Park Road aid station featured in The Hawk 100M, 50M, and marathon, this trailhead is located on the western edge of Campground 3, about 11.5 miles out on White. Parking is available at the nearby restroom facility in the campground.

Minor Trailheads: The major trailheads listed previously are not the only way to get on or off the trails at Clinton Lake. Generally speaking, minor trailheads are available roughly every mile along the trails (some more closely spaced than others), and are useful should you find yourself in a minor emergency (low on water, need a bathroom) or a major emergency (injury, frostbite). Most minor trailheads will put you out on 1415 Road or in a campground. These trailheads are generally marked, but are not as well-maintained as the trails themselves, or the major trailheads outlined above. It’s not bushwhacking either though, so if you feel like Steve Irwin, you’re probably not on a trailhead. The most notable of these trailheads are the three concrete stairways just past Land’s End on White and Blue leading into Campground 1; these stairways are also much more conspicuous than most ways off the trail.



Stairway to Heaven



Map 2: Marina Road and Lake Henry



Map 3: Campground 1 and Swim Beach



Map 4: Campground 3 and Bunker Hill

Locations of Interest on the Trails:

Major Locations: These are the locations that are regularly referenced by those who frequent the trails, and are handy for any runner to know about. Hey, it beats getting lost. Locations are listed alphabetically, with location on the trail indicated in parenthesis. All distances are given from the Army Corps Trailhead.

Bunker Hill / Goodwin Loop: (access from Campground 3, or ~11 miles out on White) Previously described in the Trails section (you did read that, didn't you?), Bunker Hill features both a bunker and a hill, making it the only accurately named location in this section. Cactus Ridge has only a few small cacti, and the land doesn't end at Land's End. If you want to know about Bunker Hill, flip back to the trails section. There's a nice photo there and everything.

Cactus Ridge: (About 7.25 miles out on Blue, ~11.5 miles out on White) At the far western edge of the North Shore Trails lies Cactus Ridge, a hilly mix of wooded and grassy terrain. Runners must cross 1415 Road to reach it—the turnoff is particularly easy to miss on Blue. Rumor has it the grassy areas are haunted at night; if nothing else, the trail changes from Blue to White on the westernmost edge of Cactus Ridge, which may be enough to cause confusion, if not an outright haunting.



Cactus Ridge on a sunny, non-haunted day—nobody was willing to take a photo at night

Land's End: (About 3.75 miles out on Blue, 6.25 miles out on White) After several miles of traversing narrow, winding singletrack, the sight of the flat expanse of Land's End is an oddity to many a runner. A relatively wide clearing surrounded by woods, Land's End is an intersection of trails-Blue and White cross at this point, with a trailhead just north of the western White trail, and the Red trail branching off of Blue just south of Land's End. Traffic engineers shudder at the complexity of it; most other people enjoy the view.

Sanders' Mound: (~100 yards out on White or Blue) Shortly after leaving the Army Corps trailhead, both trails cross a gravel path. Following this path will take you on a half-mile trip across some grassland and up Sanders' Mound, a large, naturally occurring hill, named for an engineer who helped build the Clinton Lake Dam, overlooking the lake and dam. A single park bench awaits those who want a break upon reaching the top, or for those who wish to enjoy the view. A trip to the top of the mound and back to the trails adds about one mile to your run.



Sanders' Mound on a foggy day

The Shared Trail/Joint Trail: (~ 1 mile out on Blue and White) Okay, I lied back in the Bunker Hill writeup—this one is also accurately named. For a few hundred yards, both the Blue and White trails share a path that runs alongside 1415 Road. Embrace the unity while it lasts; the Blue trail splits off first, leaving White to plow straight ahead for a short distance before it too dives back into the woods.

Minor Locations: This isn't so much "places you'll visit on your run" as "things you'll see on your run". It is by no means comprehensive, but it gives you a few things to look out for on your next run.

The Arch/The Twig Hut/The Teepee: (~5 miles out on Blue). A large twig hut spanning the Blue trail, it is very likely that more people have taken selfies in front of this hut than in any other location on the trails. If you're tall, duck when running through it-it's lower than it looks. If it's spider season, duck even if you're not tall.



The Twig Hut

The Farm Vehicle(s): (location unknown) More than one runner has reported seeing an abandoned farm vehicle sitting off the trails. Left over from the days when Clinton Lake was farmland, few can agree on the exact location of this ancient truck. The difficulty in nailing down a precise spot suggests this antique is still drivable. The tree reported to be growing where the engine block was suggests otherwise.

The Trash Can: (5 miles on White) On the approximately 21 miles of trails that comprise the main loop (Blue and White), a single trash can exists. Standing sentry right by mile marker 5 on White, this trash can sits ready for your gel wrappers and other refuse. I don't know why it's there, but it is.

Water and Bathrooms:

No water or man-made bathroom facilities exist directly on the trails. (Those wishing to partake of nature's bathroom facilities are encouraged to learn how to recognize poison ivy and deer ticks from one of the many available sources on the topic). That said, there are numerous facilities available near the major trailheads and along both campsites, many of which are accessible via minor trailheads. Both outhouses and flush toilets are available near the Army Corps Trailhead, as well as near the many trailheads leading to Campground 1 and 3. All outhouses and some flush toilets are available year-round. Campgrounds 1 and 3 also have water spigots, all of which provide potable water. To use them, simply lift the handle on the back of the spigot up, and wait. It may take a few seconds, but you'll soon have a plentiful stream of water. Unless, of course, it's winter (see following).



Clinton Lake Spigots-closed (left) and open (right)

Frost-Free Spigots:

To protect against pipe damage in the colder months, the staff at Clinton Lake shuts off many of the aforementioned spigots when freezing weather is a possibility, typically from November to May. Some of the water sources, however, are “frost-free” and are available year round. These can be invaluable to the winter weather runner. These spigots are located throughout the park; some of them are conveniently located near trailheads. These spigots and the approximate trail access point are summarized below.

- Campground 1, Campsite A1: By the third stairwell out from Land's End-its where the Shoreline Shuffle starts and ends (about 4.25 miles out on Blue, or 6.75 miles out on White). The frost-free spigot is about 15 feet from the road.

- Campground 1, South Shower Building: By the first stairwell out from Land's End (about 4 miles out on Blue, 6.25 miles out on White). The spigot is across the road from the shower facility.
- Campground 3, Campsite B4: By the West Park Road's aid station for the Hawk, about 11.25 miles out on the white trail. The spigot is near the outhouse.
- Campground 3, Campsite B48: Just before Mile 11 on White. There's an infrequently-used trailhead that'll take you there. The spigot is across the road you'll come up on.
- Campground 3, Campsite B97: Just before Mile 10 on White. Another infrequently used trailhead takes you to this one, right by the campsite.
- Campground 3, Campsite B264: The second trailhead past Swim Beach going out on White takes you to this spigot, near Mile 8.

Trail Etiquette:

The motto of the Lawrence Trail Hawks is “Kindness to Life and Land.” We ask that you uphold that motto when using the trails, so that we and future generations may continue to enjoy them. As a general guideline:

- Don't litter. Carry out any trash you create on the trails. Secure any food wrappers or trash so it won't fall out of your pockets two minutes later.
- Don't damage the trails or the lands around them. Stick to the existing paths—don't make new trails through the woods. If the trails are muddy enough where you're leaving deep footprints, stay off the trails. Footprints retain water, leading to increased erosion and damage down the line. Volunteers have to repair said damage—and you leave about 1,000 footprints every mile you run.
- Be considerate of fellow users of the trails and campground. Try not to plow through groups of little kids on a nature hike. Also, remember that not everyone considers waking up at 5 am to go on a run to be fun (crazy, but true). If you're meeting for an early run and are near campers, be considerate of their sleep.
- Running with dogs: Your canine companion is more than welcome at Clinton Lake; however, it is important to remember that you are responsible for the safety and well-being of your dog. Make sure you have food and water for your dog, especially in warm weather, and watch for signs of overheating. Check your dog for ticks after you run. While on the trail, keep your dog under control at all times—other users of the trail may be startled or frightened if a strange dog runs up to them.

Trail Maintenance Days:

Periodically, the KDWTP or the Army Corps of Engineers will hold trail maintenance days, which provide runners an opportunity to help give back to the park by clearing weeds, repairing damage, and picking up litter on the trails. These work days are announced through the Trail Hawks social media pages—keep an eye out if you're looking to help.

Tips for New Trail Runners:

New to the trails? Great! Trail running is one of the most rewarding outdoor activities you can do—just ask anyone who’s done it! Okay—maybe don’t ask them when they’re three hours into July long runs and are pulling the sixteenth spider web off their faces. The Trail Hawks have pooled their collective wisdom to provide the following tips for new trail runners (In other words, I absolve myself of any responsibility for this section.)

- Run with a group, especially when you’re first starting out (might we suggest the Trail Hawks?). If you can’t run with a group, let someone know where you’re running and when you’re expected back.
- Know your limits. Don’t judge yourself by what others are doing. Set reasonable goals and plan for steady improvement, so you can stick with it for the long haul.
- Go slow—especially on more technical sections of the trail. Lift your feet up when you run. Walk under low branches; run-and-duck may become run-and-fall.
- Plan on running about 20 percent slower at Clinton Lake than you would on the road. Also, your GPS will short you about 10 percent on your mileage (it loses signal in the trees).
- Never underestimate the power of Mother Nature. Carry hydration, and know where you can refill it (see above)—this is especially important in the summer. Never run alone in extreme weather—better yet, move your workout indoors.
- During summer and fall, ticks, chiggers, and oak mites are a fact of life here. Always use bug spray, wear long sleeves/pants when the temperatures allow, and check yourself for ticks when you finish your run.
- Smile at everyone you meet on the trails, have fun, and get home safely.



Closing Remarks:

It's next to impossible to truly capture the magic of trail running in the printed word. Covering the full breadth and depth of experiences, advice, challenges and successes collectively carried by the Trail Hawks would require a tome far heftier than this. I hope this guide, imperfect though it may be, is useful to you on your trail running journey, no matter where along it you stand. The forests call—happy trails.



The Red Trail



Trail Signage



Cactus Ridge

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