Relatively steep hills in this area.
The Root River and Harmony-Preston Valley State Trails are located in southeastern Minnesota’s Blufflands region. The Blufflands region is a unique, river-dissected landscape with many rivers and streams, such as the Root River, flowing into the Mississippi. Ages ago, these waterways cut deep into the earth resulting in majestic rock outcrops, steep wooded valleys and ravines, and diverse plant and animal communities.

The Root River and Harmony-Preston Valley State Trails are part of the Blufflands State Trail System located in southeastern Minnesota. The Root River segment passes through Houston and Fillmore counties. The Harmony - Preston Valley segment is entirely within Fillmore County.

Photos courtesy of MN DNR, unless otherwise noted.

Scavenger Hunt
Explore the vibrant Root River and Harmony-Preston Valley State Trails. The landscape abounds with a variety of plants and animals and the rocky layers of the distinctive bluffs are a virtual treasure trove of plant and animal fossils. While traveling the trail, keep your ears and eyes open, you may encounter one of the following:

**Brachiopods**
Millions of years ago parts of southeastern Minnesota were covered by a large, shallow sea. Brachiopods — animals that look kids claims — were one of the many animals living in the sea. As the sea level fell, the rock walls along the trail to find fossils of these ancient creatures.

**Turkey vultures**
Like wild turkeys, turkey vultures have bald, red heads. Turkey vultures eat mostly dead flesh, and their heads are covered in hairless skin. Large birds are often seen soaring with V-shaped wings tipping, clumsily, from side to side.

**Red-tailed hawks**
Perched on a branch or soaring through the sky, the broad reddish-brown tail of the red-tailed hawk distinguishes it from other hawks. Even if you don’t see the red-tailed hawk, you may hear its high-pitched screech.

**Little blue stems**
Praireland along the trail is made up of a variety of grasses, including bunches of little blue stem. This grass has flat blush leaves that start growing in late spring and keep growing until winter frost. Little blue stem typically grows to three feet and is noticeably smaller than big bluestem, which can reach up to ten feet.

**Oak trees**
Both northern red oak and bur oak trees grow along the trail. Northern red oaks have leaves with pointy edges while bur oak leaves have rounded edges. In autumn, northern red oak leaves turn a brilliant red while bur oak leaves turn yellow or brown. The gnarly silhouette of the bur oak is easy to identify year-round.

**White-tailed deer**
White-tailed deer are the largest animal most people will see along the trail. The white-tailed deer is the only whitetail deer species in the United States. Deer are often hard to locate because it changes color to blend in with tree bark and leaves. One color that doesn’t change is the bright yellow inner-thigh of the gray squirrel’s hind legs.

**Gray (common) tree frogs**
In wet, wooded areas, listen for the slow, drake-like trill of the gray tree frog. Although common in Minnesota, this frog is often hard to locate because it changes color to blend in with tree bark and leaves. One color that doesn’t change is the bright yellow inner-thigh of the gray frog’s hind legs.

**Turkey vultures**
In the trees and on the ground, watch for the thin, web-like nests of the turkey vulture. Turkey vultures are very large birds and often seen soaring with V-shaped wings tipping, clumsily, from side to side.

**Red-tailed hawks**
The red-tailed hawk is easily identified by its broad reddish-brown tail. Even if you don’t see the red-tailed hawk, you may hear its high-pitched screech.

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