Nestled atop a hill two miles south of Galena on Highway 26, you'll find the Southeast Kansas Nature Center overlooking the scenic Shoal Creek valley.

If you find your way to the very southeast corner of Kansas, you might think, “I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.” Many of our visitors from elsewhere in Kansas have indeed joked about the famous line, as it certainly looks different than most other parts of the state. Cherokee County holds the only portion of the Ozark Plateau geologic region in Kansas.

The nature center started out as a scout cabin, built sometime between 1923 and 1933, that hosted many Boy Scout and Girl Scout meetings. Many years later, a local teacher decided to do something about the old, rundown scout cabin. Linda Phipps gathered together numerous volunteers and restored the cabin into a nature center that opened to the public in 2004. In June 2013, the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism took over operation of the Southeast Kansas Nature Center when Ms. Phipps was ready to retire.

Schermerhorn Park - the grounds on which the Southeast Kansas Nature Center sits - is operated by the City of Galena, and the property for the park was gifted to them by Edgar Schermerhorn in 1922.

Inside, the Southeast Kansas Nature Center is full of exploration drawers and hands-on activities for children and the young-at-heart. The center features
Schermerhorn Cave is home to several threatened and endangered Kansas species. The nature center hosts numerous field trips each year.

Long-tailed salamanders, can be found near the stream and cave area. Several displays and facts on mostly native flora and fauna that can be found in the region. Visitors can see several live reptiles, amphibians, fishes and invertebrates, as well as different taxidermy mammals and birds. They can also watch local wildlife through the bird-watching window (a one-way window), view an extensive Native American artifact collection, a rock, mineral, fossil collection, put together puzzles, play nature-theme games and observe the live honeybee hive located in the Big Room.

The nature center hosts numerous field trips each year from area schools, church groups, assisted living facilities, scout groups and more. And, programming and activities are offered throughout the year on a wide range of environmental education topics. While building space is limited, the center makes use of Schermerhorn Park to accommodate larger groups through outdoor activity and hiking opportunities. The nature center is also capable of doing off-site programs when visiting the center and park isn’t an option.

As part of the Ozark Plateau, covering only 55 square miles in Kansas, we see a high diversity of plant, animal and fungi life for the state. This small area of Kansas gets an average of 40 inches of precipitation a year, which encourages a wider variety of plants and amphibians than most other areas in Kansas. Over half of the known species of plants in Kansas can be found in Cherokee County, and some are found only in Cherokee County.

We also have about one-third of the Species In Need of Conservation (SINC), threatened and endangered species for the state – the highest number of any region statewide.

Taking a stroll on the Schermerhorn Park trails, you might see eastern chipmunks running along the rock walls found throughout the park or hear the call of Spring Peeper frogs in the woods.

The walls were constructed as part of the Works Progress Administration (later named the Work Projects Administration) founded by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins in 1935, and provide an extra scenic perk, as well a habitat for many park critters. The trails run through an oak/hickory forest featuring unique plants to Kansas such as Flowering Dogwood, Sassafras, Robin’s
Many bird species such as green herons can be found frequenting Schoal Creek. Schoal Creek runs east to west through Schermerhorn Park near the nature center. Director Jennifer Rader and Brandi Petty take measurements on a western rat snake during a workshop. Plantain and Fourleaf Milkweed. The park is a wonderful place to bird watch, especially during spring migration. Many woodland species, as well as species that like riparian habitat (near a body of water), can be heard and seen here.

Taking the trail to Schermerhorn Cave, visitors might get a rare glimpse at one of three Kansas threatened or endangered species. The cave is comprised of Mississippian Limestone, the oldest surface rock in the state, and includes a spring running down through the park into the much larger Shoal Creek. This stream and cave area are perfect habitat for long-tailed salamanders, cave salamanders and the occasional grotto salamander, all threatened or endangered in Kansas because of lack of habitat elsewhere in the state.

Shoal Creek is an Ozarkian stream that runs east to west through Schermerhorn Park before dumping into the Spring River at Riverton and heading south into Oklahoma. Almost 80 different species of fish are found in this creek, some of which in Kansas can only be found here. Many species of darters, redhorse suckerfish, shiners and more can be seen swimming along the creek. Shoal Creek also holds several species of turtles, including the common map turtle and eastern musk turtle. Remember to tread lightly, clean up after yourself and don’t disturb habitat in the park.

The nature center and park are located just a few miles from the Historic Route 66 Highway, another unique feature that just barely comes into Kansas through the Cherokee County towns of Galena, Riverton and Baxter Springs. Visitors to the area can find all sorts of Route 66-related attractions, such as the Eisler Bros. Old Riverton Store, Cars On the Route in Galena, and the Rainbow Bridge in Baxter Springs. More memorabilia and artifacts related to the route and the area’s zinc and lead mining history can be found at the nearby Baxter Springs Heritage Museum and the Galena Mining and Historic Museum.

Consider visiting ksoutdoors.com to plan a trip to the Southeast Kansas Nature Center, and see what makes this area of the state so unique. You, too, may feel you’re not in Kansas anymore.