

Wild

Snowshoeing classes, slopes, Wright trips

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gheny River and the surrounding Laurel Highlands.

The trail winds through rhododendron hills or thickets, hemlock forests, mountain tops covered in mountain laurel and maze-like rock outcroppings of sandstone. There are waterfalls, wildflowers, spring-fed streams and shaded hollows.

The mountain laurel blooms in June and the rhododendron in late June and early July. In mid-October, the fall color typically peaks.

The elevation along the trail ranges from 1,200 feet at the northern and southern ends to 2,950 feet at the highest point on the ridge.

The trail ties together state parks, state forest and state game lands.

The Laurel Highlands Trail also serves up some comfort: three-sided Adirondack-style shelters with stone fireplaces, cleared campsites, well water, cut firewood and toilets for backpackers every eight to 12 miles along the trail.

The water is safe but unfiltered with a rusty taste, some say.

Bears can also be frequent campground visitors. Safely suspending food in bags away from bears is recommended.

Rangers are on the trail frequently.

Seven trailheads

There are seven trailheads between Ohiopyle and Johnstown, all along major roads. The trailheads are:

- State Route 351 north of Ohiopyle.
- Maple Summit Road east of Bear Run.
- State Route 653, east of Mill Run.
- State Route 31, east of Donegal.
- U.S. 30 west of Jennerstown.
- State Route 271 west of Johnstown.
- State Route 56 at Seward.

The trail also passes through the heart of Seven Springs Mountain Resort.

The trail was devised and designed in the 1960s by volunteers from the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and state personnel.



Akron Beacon Journal

Laurel Ridge State Park gets about 75,000 visitors a year, of whom 67,000 are hikers and backpackers.

Some of the best scenery is at the southern end in the rugged 11.22 miles between Maple Summit Road and Ohiopyle.

The 11.8-mile stretch from state Route 653 to state Route 31 leads to the trail's highest peaks - with a steady uphill climb for several miles.

The 10.4-mile stretch from state Route 31 to Beam Rocks offers wildlife, wildflowers, waterfalls, great scenery and a chance to wave to motorists on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. It may be the most varied and best day hike along the trail.

Reservations

Hiking the entire trail can take four to seven days.

In general, the ridge is cooler and gets more precipitation than surrounding valleys.

Advance reservations are required for overnights. The fee is \$3 per person per night or \$11 for groups of four or more per night. Call 724-455-3744 for overnight reservations.

No pets are allowed along the trail.

Backpackers cannot stay a second night at the same spot. You must move because of the reservation system.

The quickest way to get to the Laurel Highlands Trail from the Akron-Canton area is to take the Ohio and Pennsylvania turnpikes east to the Donegal exit. Depending on the trailhead you want, use state routes 351, 31 or 711.

Be warned: All the trailheads are atop the ridge, either at the crest or on the western face. Parking areas are marked with small brown signs.

Wear bright colors during the fall and spring hunting seasons.

Laurel Ridge State Park has 70 miles of snowmobile trails, although snowmobiles are banned from the Laurel Highlands Trail.

At state Route 653, there is a concession-run cross-country ski area. Twenty miles of ski trails are available. A fee is charged. Call 724-455-7303 for more information.

The 70-mile Laurel Highland Trail has been added to the prestigious Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail. It is one of eight long-distance national trail networks in the country. It includes the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Towpath Trail.

For more information, write to Laurel Ridge State Park, 1117 Jim Mountain Road, Rockwood, PA 15557; 724-455-3744.

You can also check out the Internet site at www.dcnr.state.pa.us/stateparks/parks/laurelridge.asp.

A handy guide is *A Hiker's Guide to the Laurel Highlands Trail* (Sierra Club, \$6). It is available at P.O. Box 8241, Pittsburgh, PA 15217.

For information on local attractions, contact the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau, Town Hall, 120 E. Main St., Lionier, PA 15658; 800-925-7669.

Winter fun

Cleveland Metroparks' Institute of the Great Outdoors is offering an array of winter classes, starting in January.

The classes include snowshoeing for adults, children and families at the South Chagrin Reservation.

There is also a weekend hike/snowshoe trip on Jan. 30-Feb. 1 at Hocking Hills State Park in southeast Ohio.

The pre-trip organizational meeting will be 7 to 9 p.m. Jan. 19 at the Garfield Park Nature Center in the Garfield Park Reservation. The fee is \$195 a per-