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Hiking the North Country Trail

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Times photo by KEVIN LORENZI

The North Country Trail, a 4,600-mile path from North Dakota to New York, weaves through the Beaver Valley. Blue marks called "blazes" are painted on trees to clearly mark the trail.

America's longest footpath has put Beaver County on the map. Wampum, too.

The North Country Trail, a 4,600-mile path from North Dakota to New York, threads its way through the

Beaver Valley, providing hikers a place to enjoy scenic views and the sounds of nature.

From the Ohio-Pennsylvania line in South Beaver Township, the trail travels northeasterly through state game lands and reclaimed strip mines, past a picturesque creek and eye-catching rock formations, periodically piggybacking with rural roads before reaching the Beaver River in Wampum and then onward to Moraine State Park and beyond.

"The use of it is growing locally, which is great," said Lee Fairbanks, president of the North Country Trail's Wampum chapter. "It's becoming more well-known, in part because we had highway signs put up. Now when you mention the North Country Trail, people say, 'I remember driving by that big sign.'"

One prominent sign bearing the North Country Trail emblem — an eight-sided yellow star on a blue background — stands along Blackhawk Road (Route 251), a stone's throw from the Ohio line. The sign marks the entrance to a moderately challenging 4.1-mile stretch of trail that snakes through the woods of State Game Lands 285, climbing the top of Booth Hill and a grassy, shale-covered former strip mine offering a panoramic vista with nary a building in sight.

Around one bend where blackberries grow is a marsh near the crest of a hill with a lovely view of the valley stretching toward Negley, Ohio. Advancing eastward, the trail crosses rural Watts Mill Road, to embark on another moderately challenging 2.5-mile stretch of wooded splendor that hugs a hillside high above the North Fork of Little Beaver Creek where a beaver dam can be spotted. In springtime, a splash of color is provided by an abundance of flowers, chiefly white trillium. In rainy seasons, a 5-foot high rock formation turns into a waterfall.

The trail traverses an abandoned clay strip mine, passing an abandoned metal bridge before climbing upward via "switchbacks," the hiker term for long, angled, trench-like steps used to reduce the steepness of a hill. Passing by craggy cliffs, the trail reaches to summit of Indian Rock Hill with its locally cherished landmark, a 19th century rock carving that resembles a face. Nobody knows who carved the rocky face, though one legend suggests it was a broken-hearted Indian brave. Descending another set of switchbacks, the trail heads back through state game lands before dipping down a hill past Sterling Lake, a former fish hatchery.

For the next 9.4 miles, the trail follows rural roadways shared by the occasional car, starting with the gravelly Sterling Road and then Hodgson Road, turning left onto the busier but still rural Route 168. The trail turns onto Roslyn Road in Big Beaver, crossing a bridge over the Pennsylvania Turnpike on to Britton School Road and Edwards Road in Lawrence County. The trail goes "off-road" again at the Edwards Road Trailhead under a Toll Route 376 bridge, four miles southwest of Wampum.

From there, the journey once again is mostly woods, strip mines and game lands, traipsing briefly through 600-acre Mines & Meadows ATV resort past the Gateway underground storage mine.

A short spur trail, marked with white-painted trees, takes hikers to an overlook with a view of the Beaver River valley and the town of Chewton. The regular trail crosses the river atop a vehicular bridge in Wampum, continuing on its journey to Slippery Rock Gorge and McConnell's Mill State Park.

Only the heartiest of hikers ever will make the full-length trek from North Dakota through Minnesota and Wisconsin, along Lake Superior in Upper Michigan, to the grassy plains of Ohio, up to the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania and past the Finger Lakes deep into upstate New York.

Conceived in the late 1960s and federally designated by Congress as a national scenic trail in 1980, the North Country Trail itself, has been on a lengthy journey. It has taken decades for supporters, and governing body the National Park Service, to negotiate land easements, while volunteers have shouldered the load of clearing trees and brush and crafting signs and trail markers. Some portions of the trail remain unfinished, supplanted by local roads, though theoretically, a person could walk a seven-state journey entirely on the North Country Trail.

The regional volunteer groups that maintain the trail might need to switch some of their emphasis to

publicizing that it exists.

“I haven’t heard a word about it,” said Carol Miller, the South Beaver Township secretary. “I understand a group is working on it, but lately I haven’t heard anyone talking about it.”

Big Beaver borough secretary Jennifer Wichryk said the townsfolk there aren’t talking much about the trail, either.

That’s the motivation behind Sunday’s “pumpkin pie hike,” where trail volunteers will lead the public on a guided walk along the 2.5-mile stretch between Sterling and Watts Mill roads in South Beaver. At the end of the hike, participants get a slice of pumpkin pie. The event is modeled after the successful “cherry pie hike” used by volunteers along the better-known McConnell’s Mill portion of the trail.

Fairbanks and a few other local volunteers hit the Beaver Valley portions of the trail twice a week, weather permitting, to build and perform routine maintenance on the path.

“We just keep plugging away,” said Fairbanks, a former Michigan resident who became president of the Wampum trail chapter two years ago.

In the past year, he’s regularly spotted hikers and backpackers.

“I had never felt this was a walking area, though I think that’s changing as people become more aware of the trail,” Fairbanks said. “That’s what we’re hoping for with the trail; that more people find it and use it.”