



The Rocky Fork Gorge

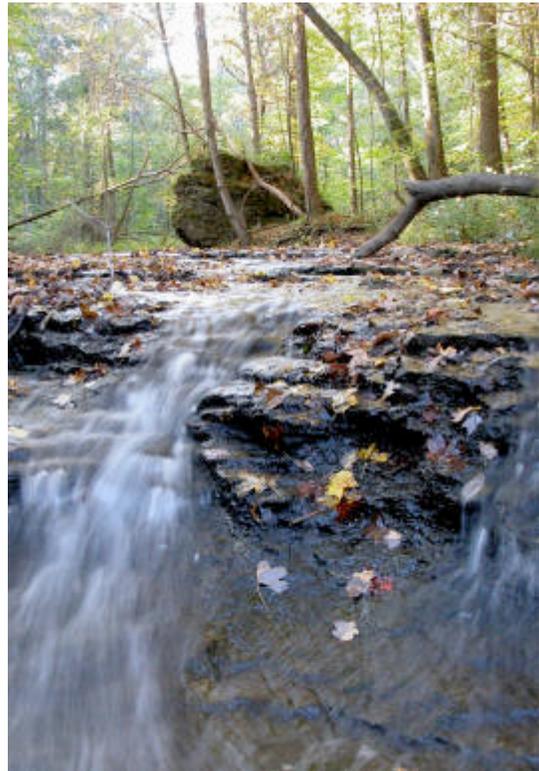
Where it all began . . .

*And this, our life,
exempt from public haunt,
finds tongues in trees,
books in the running brooks,
sermons in stones,
and good in everything.
--Shakespeare*

The Highlands Nature Sanctuary was initially founded in 1995 with the purchase of 47 acres of perimeter land around a private cave-park known as 7 Caves, leaving the 13 acre heart in private hands. Since that time The Highlands Nature Sanctuary has been re-uniting the forest lands surrounding the deep dolomite canyon of the Rocky Fork, growing to its present size of 1600 acres in the watershed. Now, ten years since we first began, we are finally close to unifying the gorge -- and purchasing its heart -- through the acquisition of 7 Caves.

The Rocky Fork Gorge is where the seed-idea of a bio-reserve was born. Early in 2004, the Sanctuary metaphorically climbed to the top of the Barrier Ridge Preserve which runs through the center of the preserve, and looked southward and eastward along the forested foothills of the Alleghenies. What we saw in our mind's eye was a vision of an emerald chain of protected lands along a ninety-mile crescent of land we now call the Arc of Appalachia. Regardless of the Sanctuary's growing breadth, the Rocky Fork Gorge will remain the heart and soul of protected lands along the Arc of Appalachia.

Ohio boasts a number of streams across the state called the Rocky Fork, but none can compare to the scenic beauty and natural diversity of Rocky Fork Creek in Highland County. Originating near the town of Hillsboro in south-central Ohio, the headwaters of the Rocky Fork reach out in westerly directions from the county seat like strands of a great web. Draining both town and country alike, the headwaters have lost much of their wild character over the last two centuries as creek banks were cleared to make room for corn and cattle. Halfway on its journey to Paint Creek, the subdued Rocky Fork spreads out behind a man-made dam to meet another human need, that of providing water recreation to the visitors of Rocky Fork State Park.



Below the Rocky Fork dam, the Rocky Fork alternately stirs in small riffles, and dozes in long pools, until it is dammed a second time at the old grist mill site of Beaver Mill. At this historic point the backed-up water lazily crosses under its last major highway, SR 753, and passes by an ancient gateway of rocks that guard the portal of the lower Rocky Fork. Suddenly the creek comes to life and courses over Beaver Mill dam in a flurry of thundering falls, entering a wild new world. Abrupt canyon walls rise up on either side of the creek, forming a rapidly deepening valley. High dolomite cliffs throw the creek into mysterious shadow, and rare wildflowers begin to dot the rock outcrops — such as sullivantia, starry Solomon's seal, grape honeysuckle and

shooting star. As if awakening from a long and restless sleep, the Rocky Fork seizes the opportunity to freely flaunt its primeval wild beauty. After a heavy rain the restless water swirls around polished boulders and slump blocks the size of small houses. Wood ducks scream in unison as they rise from the waters, and black vultures circle overhead, their flight intersected occasionally by a hunting osprey.

Further downstream the Rocky Fork winds its way into the lower gorge, where it traverses the deepest canyon along its entire route. Over the millennia, huge chunks of dolomite blocks of stone have cleaved away from the canyon wall, creating a labyrinth of rock-scapes. The water sings as it passes through the narrow canyon and slides in and out of the shadows of towering and dripping hemlocks. Vertical cliff walls rise an imposing 100 feet above the waterway. The region abounds in seeps, springs, sinkholes, and true caves — twenty-three caves in all — making up the second densest concentration of caves in all of Ohio. Exploring the lower eight miles of the Rocky Fork before it drains into Paint Creek is truly a wilderness experience. Protecting this beauty by preserving the watershed of the lower Rocky Fork is one of the primary missions of The Highlands Nature Sanctuary.

The Rocky Fork's spectacular beauty would be reason enough to warrant protection, but equally notable is its incredibly diverse plant life. In this relatively undisturbed valley, hundreds of species of wildflowers and ferns can be found, both common and rare. An astonishing array of plant communities are sheltered in the gorge region — miniature prairies on the large slump blocks standing mid-creek, hanging fens along the seeps of the gorge wall, woodland/prairie associations in the thin limestone soils along the upper rock rim, rare acid-tolerant wildflowers on the upland shale barrens, and north-country refugees sheltered in



the cool interior of the gorge.



There is no natural feature that can compare to the Rocky Fork in the spring. Not only do flowers grow in heady abundance in the loamy neutral soils of the canyon floor, but even the vertical stone walls and fallen boulders are covered with a living blanket of flowers: trilliums, bishop's-cap, stonecrop, shooting stars, wild ginger, celandine wood poppy, rue anemone, and columbine, to name a few. Only limestone-based rocks fed with generous rainfall can produce such profusion — giving the mythical appearance of rocks dissolving into flowers — which, in reality, is quite true. Hikers walking in the gorge the third week of April find themselves in an exalted landscape with lush displays of flowers below their feet and above their heads — a floral wonderland vaulted by a splash of blue sky above.

The lower Rocky Fork is one of Ohio's top 4% of clean streams. Yet, to keep the creek clean with the amount of human development in the headwaters will require considerable expansion of protected lands — the thrust of the Sanctuary's master plan for the area. Because the Rocky Fork's upper watershed lies in agricultural and residential lands, the Sanctuary is working to protect as many of the remaining side tributaries as possible that are still forested — enabling these tributaries to revitalize the creek with incoming surges of clean water.

Wildlife in the Rocky Fork is sublime. Blue herons are a common sight coursing downstream, flying with slow wing beats and croaking an ancient reptilian call. Chattering kingfishers buzz down the waterway, looking for fish and establishing their exuberant presence. A higher chittering reveals a large population of rough-winged swallows, diving and banking over the creek's surface as they catch insects on the wing, nesting in the potholes that pocket the dolomite walls. In late autumn, the tinkling ethereal call of the migrating winter wren can be heard echoing between canyon walls. In winter the clear calls of the Carolina wren resounds. In spring come large numbers of Cerulean warblers, Parula warblers, and Louisiana water thrushes — filling the gorge with tropical metallic colors and vibrant music.

Of all the wildlife found in the Highlands, none is more significant than the freshwater mussels that live their extended lives on the creek's bottom. Seventeen freshwater mussels still call the Rocky Fork home. Of special interest is the state-threatened Wavy-rayed Pocketbook, *Lampsilis fasciola*. In a healthy river system, mussels are revitalized from populations located downstream in the larger river corridors. At one time Rocky Fork's mussels would have depended upon Paint Creek's larger and more stable communities for population renewal. Now, it's the other way around. A recent inventory of Paint Creek found mussels in extremely serious decline. The discovery of Paint Creek's recent diminishment of life has been a poignant and sobering event in the continuing story of the Sanctuary. We remember the pioneer stories of how early settlers used to "walk on the back" of large numbers of mussel shells to cross the Paint, bestowing such colorful names as White Heel Splitter. We recall the archeological finds of great mounds of mussel shells, which the native Americans used for food and sacred adornment. And now the mussels are nearly gone on the river highway of the ancestors. The story of Paint Creek is the story of Ohio's rivers all over the state. We pray it will not be the story of the Rocky Fork.



The Sanctuary's holdings along the Rocky Fork is a living jigsaw puzzle with a large number of pieces already put back together. The current 1600 acres of Sanctuary holdings in the watershed is a classic story of conservation challenges unique to the East. To bring the existing preserve together required the purchase of 38 separate parcels ranging from .5 acres to 310 acres in size,

nine having houses, at a value of 5.6 million dollars. Assisting this reunification of the forest is the fact that several of these thirty-eight properties were donated to the Sanctuary, and five were assisted with conservation easement purchases by the Ohio Division of Natural Areas and Preserves. A *Clean Ohio* grant from the State of Ohio paid 75% of the sale price of four of the properties, the largest of which was the 200-acre Sad Song Creek. However, by and large, the largest number of these 38 properties was funded solely by the benevolent philanthropy of the general public through gifts both large and small. In its purest essence the Sanctuary is true grass-roots.



Reeling off the names of all 38 properties is like turning the pages of a Highlands' history book. Each name is a word-poem for a property that was received as one would a cherished relative once thought lost — to be reunited with its kin only after intense effort and considerable drama. Here are a few of their names: *10,000 Trees*, named as a prayer for the forest's return on a ridge that was heavily logged. *Buffalo Springs*, where the bison once stopped for water as they passed through a gap in the gorge on their annual journey north to the prairies. *Boyd's Cemetery* where a one-room hospital was built in the early 1800's for children dying from a wave of diphtheria. Their lyrical gravestones can still be seen among the trees. *Hózhó Canyon* where the Rocky Fork

runs swift and wild, named after a western Indian word meaning the beauty of nature's renewing life force. *Shining Springs* — a wetlands where water pours out of the ground at a constant fifty degrees, clear and refreshing, even on the hottest summer day. *Barrett's Rim* where a palisade of rock walls rim the Rocky Fork for over a mile of its length and shelter one of the most stunning wildflower displays in all the world. (We are serious about this, though we admittedly have not seen all the world.) *Elder's Landing* where a million box elder seedlings recapture a soybean field along the edge of the Rocky Fork Creek. There is also *Ceremony Hill*, *Sad Song Creek*, *Nahele*, *Etidorpha* (Aphrodite spelled backwards), and *Kamelands*. *Talóden Woods* is named after an ancient Malaysian word that means 'guardian of the animals', and *Etawah Woods* was named after a tragic native heroine in a local legend. But the list is not complete. There are many more puzzle pieces to put in place.

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