

Subject: PABIODIV: PPG - Wild About Winter
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Date: Mon, 28 Feb 2005 21:08:24 -0500 (EST)

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/05058/463494.stm>

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Sunday, February 27, 2005
Outdoors: Wild About Winter
By Ben Moyer

Most Western Pennsylvanians have never heard of a place called Morrison Run, but you can get there if you want to badly enough. Wild places are like that. Ten members of the Butler Outdoor Club and the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness saw Morrison Run at its wintry best last weekend. They backpacked 12 steep, snowy miles and camped out through a 9-degree night to learn things about the place that a map can't reveal.

Morrison Run is a 6,887-acre wedge of deep woods folded into a hollow near the northern edge of the Allegheny National Forest in McKean and Warren counties. At its heart is a clear stream with the same name that tumbles around huge boulders and under dark hemlocks.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection designates Morrison Run, the stream, as a "High Quality Coldwater Fishery," and it looks the part. It flows into Kinzua Bay of the much larger Allegheny Reservoir, formed when Kinzua Dam blocked the Allegheny River in 1965.

The group of hikers assembled Saturday morning at the Morrison Run trailhead along Route 59 about 10 miles east of Warren. Their plan was to reach the Morrison Campground on the shore of Kinzua Bay after one day of hiking, camp there and return by a different route the next. Along the way, they would view the tract's forests, wildlife, boulder fields and jungles of mountain laurel, and listen to FAW executive director Kirk Johnson's reasoning as to why Morrison Run should be granted congressional designation as a wilderness.

In 2003, FAW prepared a proposal advocating wilderness status for 54,460 acres in Morrison Run and seven other tracts within the Allegheny National Forest. FAW's other proposed wilderness areas are Allegheny Front, 6,906 acres; Chestnut Ridge, 5,191 acres; Clarion River, 6,009 acres; Cornplanter, 3,022 acres; Hickory Creek Wilderness addition, 1,780 acres; Tionesta, 14,960 acres; and Tracy Ridge, 9,705 acres.

Two Allegheny National Forest sites, Hickory Creek and Allegheny River Islands, are currently designated wilderness, amounting to two percent of the total Allegheny National Forest acreage. Johnson explained that if all the proposed areas were to win wilderness status, wilderness would occupy about 12 percent of the Allegheny National Forest's 513,000 acres. Nationwide, 18 percent of national forest land has the wilderness designation.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 prohibits activities such as logging, mining, road building, oil and gas development, and the use of motorized vehicles on designated lands. It maintains and protects low-density, non-motorized recreation such as hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding and nature study, as well as providing undisturbed habitat for native wildlife.

Johnson told the group that FAW is aware of the value of logging and oil and gas production on the forest to the local economy, but that places such as Morrison Run were irreplaceable.

"Our goal is not to impede or reduce timber production or other multiple uses of the forest, but simply to permanently protect the remaining wild areas here for the benefit of current and future generations of Americans," he said.

The Western Pennsylvanians who assembled for the hike were Johnson, Bryan Drescher of Warren; Karen and Bill Greenawalt (plus dog Annie), Ellwood City; Joe Hardisky, New Castle; Jerry Heckathorn, Slippery Rock; John O'Hara, Oil City; Tia Rulander, Scandia; and Bill Wallin, Warren. The group departed the trailhead in bright sunshine, planning to follow the 12-mile loop trail counter-clockwise. But downed trees and snow on the white trail blazes obscured a critical right turn and the hikers decided to continue around the loop in the opposite direction. Snow was about eight inches deep at the crest of the plateau (a scanty snow pack for mid-February on the Allegheny Plateau, Hardisky said) but thinned to a couple of inches as the group descended 1,100 feet to the lake.

Signs of wildlife were scarce. The route crossed about a half-dozen deer tracks, but evidence of past over-browsing by deer was impossible to miss. All the hemlocks are browsed up to the height a deer can reach, and few seedlings of any kind reached above the snow. Besides the few deer tracks, the hikers saw tracks of a fisher, red squirrels, a bobcat, as well as several young pine trees stripped of their bark by porcupines.

At the Morrison Campground, around a reluctant campfire, the group watched knots of ice fishermen far up Kinzua Bay to the south and listened to coyotes calling at dusk. At dawn, the campers found coyote tracks coursing among the tents.

The return hike Sunday was a challenge, as the climb grew steeper and the snow got deeper toward the top. The path wound through impressive stands of white oak on the southern slopes facing the reservoir. Big tulip poplars, more common farther south, also grace the route.

Tulip poplar is not an especially valuable timber species. Black cherry, which is harvested throughout the forest, is by far the most commercially important forest product.

"We support the traditional range of uses of the ANF including timbering and drilling for oil and gas which are important components of the local economy," Johnson said. "However, we believe that there is a clear need to protect new federal wilderness in the Forest in areas such as Morrison Run where timbering is not a significant activity."

Another confusing juncture in the trail resulted in the campers covering the last mile of the hike via three different routes. All eventually arrived at the parking lot safely.

"I just love it outdoors and being in the woods. I feel like I belong there," Karen Greenawalt said. "Places like this are so quiet, and there is so much to see. It is good to have places where you can get away from everyday things. There is so much beauty in places like Morrison Run that not many people ever see, but it's there."

"Once the Morrison Run Wilderness Area is designated, I'd love to come back in 100 years to see the emerging old-growth and the native wildlife benefiting from such a wonderful protected area," Johnson said. "Though I won't be around to do that, my grandchildren and their grandchildren will be. We have to plan now for what future generations will need in their lives."

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