

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The gorges of Mohican Park in Ohio create a hiker's paradise

Sunday, May 22, 2011

By **Bob Downing, Akron Beacon Journal**



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Big Lyons Falls drops 80 feet into a shady U-shaped amphitheater in Mohican State Park and the surrounding Mohican Memorial Forest. Only a trickle of water was coming down on a visit last fall.

LOUDONVILLE, Ohio -- If you are a hiker, you might want to consider heading to Mohican State Park in north central Ohio, about a three-hour and 160 mile drive west of Pittsburgh.

In the park and the surrounding Mohican Memorial State Forest, you'll find one of the best one-day hikes in Ohio.

The white-blazed Hemlock Gorge Trail runs from the state park campground off state Route 3 to the west and north. It connects with the Lyons Falls Trail that runs to Pleasant Hill Dam.

The trail includes a covered bridge, two waterfalls, hemlock-lined ravines, a rare stand of white pines and a bubbling stream, the Clear Fork of the Mohican River.

It also includes Big Lyons Falls, where water was trickling over the drop on a fall visit. The water drops 80 feet in the rocky U-shaped amphitheater. Nearby is Little Lyons Falls -- visible mainly from above -- where the water drops 25 feet into a box-shaped canyon.

You can return to the campground via the yellow-blazed Pleasant Hill and Hemlock Gorge trails in southern Ashland County. They both run along the picturesque stream with its riffles and pools.

That makes a 6.75-mile hike. But there are shorter hiking options available, beginning at the covered bridge over the Clear Fork of the Mohican. The bridge can be reached off state Route 97.

The hike takes you into the heart of the heavily forested Clear Fork Gorge that is up to 300 feet deep and 1,000 feet across at the top. It is the deepest gorge in Ohio.

Glacial melt carved through the Blackhand sandstone, exposing huge outcroppings and steep cliff walls. The glacial advance 15,000 years ago stopped just north of where the gorge sits and melting water from the glacier gushed through the canyon.

Found in the east-west gorge are towering hemlocks and yellow birches that like cool, moist environs and surviving virgin stands of white pines.

The gorge has been named a National Natural Landmark.

A 29-acre wild area, Clear Fork Gorge State Nature Preserve, is found on the south slopes above the Clear Fork.

Information

- Mohican State Park

3116 State Route 3, Loudonville, OH 44842; 1-419-994-5125; camp office, 1-419-994-4290; cottage and camping reservations, 1-866-644-6727.
www.ohiodnr.com.

- Mohican State Park Lodge

1098 CR 3006, Box 429, Perrysville, OH 44864; 1-419-938-5411 or 1-800-282-7275; www.ohiodnr.com.

- Mohican Memorial State Forest

Ohio Division of Forestry at 3060 County Road 939, Perrysville, OH 44864; 1-419-938-6222; www.ohiodnr.com.

- Loudonville-Mohican Convention & Visitors Bureau

131 W. Main St., Loudonville, OH 44842, 1-419-994-2519 or 1-877-2-MOHICAN; www.loudonville-mohican.com.

- Mohican Tourist Association

Box 24, Loudonville, OH 44842; 1-419-994-5225 or 1-800-722-7588; www.mohicancountry.org. It covers five counties: Wayne, Ashland, Richland, Knox and Holmes.

It became a state nature preserve in 1990. It was closed to the public for many years, but a rustic loop trail was built in 1996. You can get to that trail by parking at the fire tower, crossing the road and following the signs.

The two waterfalls are the big attractions on the Mohican hike.

You can approach Big Lyons Falls from down low or up high. You can hop from one trail to the other via rough-hewn steps.

The water drops over the edge atop a recess cave. You can stand behind the falls and not get wet.

But the flow is generally low, unless there's been a heavy rain.

There are piles of wood at the bottom of the drop, evidence of what the tiny stream can move when water levels are high.

Green is the dominant color at Big Lyons Falls. Moss and ferns are heavy in the shaded gorge.

It is where Jonathan Chapman, or Johnny Appleseed, once carved his name and date in the rock. Those carvings have long since disappeared. Some graffiti remain on the rock.

Little Lyons Falls is narrow and deep with limited access and viewing. Some rocks have collapsed into the box canyon and shortened views of the falls from below.

The two falls were named after local Indian Tom Lyons, according to some reports.

Others say the falls were named for early settler and squatter Paul Lyons, who built a cabin nearby. He was a recluse or hermit, according to some reports, although he had a wife and son. He didn't farm, but he did hunt and fish. He died in an 1856 logging accident and was buried on a hillside near the two waterfalls.

But there are stories circulated by the state of Ohio that Lyons, searching at night in a storm for his milk cow, fell to his death into the gorge by Big Lyons Falls.

You can get to the trails at the northern terminus at the earthen dam that is 113 feet high, 775 feet across the top and 550 feet wide at its base.

It was completed in 1937 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to control flooding in the 197-square-mile watershed in north-central Ohio.

The dam flooded one of the prettiest sections of the gorge and created 850-acre Pleasant Hill Lake with 13 miles of shoreline. It is managed by the Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District.

It is a moderate hike to the two waterfalls because of the length and a few steep sections -- from the south at the covered bridge and from the north at the dam.

If you start at the campground, the trail parallels the stream on its north bank. The trail generally runs along the wooded flood plain, although the gorge narrows in places.

It is two miles to the iconic covered bridge, built in 1963. Cross the river on the bridge and pick up the two-mile Lyons Falls Trail on the south bank. That will take you to the west and north to the dam.

There are steps on the grassy face of the dam that will take you to the Pleasant Hill Trail. It runs on the stream bank, is 0.75 miles long and returns you to the covered bridge.

Foot traffic on the trails can be heavy on weekends, especially around the covered bridge.

You can also get to the Hog Hollow Trail, a hiking and mountain biking trail.

The Mohican, an Ohio wild scenic river, is more noted for the eight canoe liveries and an estimated 2,600 campsites in and near Loudonville in southern Ashland County.

In fact, the first area canoe livery is celebrating its 50th anniversary. In 1961, Dick Frye opened the Mohican Canoe Livery (now Mohican Adventures).

The Mohican River flows through Wayne, Holmes, Ashland, Richland and Knox counties for about 30 miles. It joins the Kokosing River in Coshocton County to form the Walhonding River. The Mohican was added to the state scenic river system with 32.3 miles of the Clear Fork and the main stem included.

The state also stocks trout in the Clear Fork, and that makes it especially popular with anglers. The state park includes five miles of the Clear Fork.

Mohican State Park offers 13 miles of hiking trails and seven miles of mountain biking trails.

The 1,110-acre state park offers 123 campsites, 25 cottages and a 96-room lodge.

The state forest that surrounds the park covers an additional 4,525 acres.

Before 1949, there was no state park -- just Mohican State Forest. In 1949, Clear Fork State Park was created, although its name was changed to Mohican State Park in 1966.

The state forest's 80-foot-tall fire tower is a popular place for up-high vistas.

The tower, off state Route 97, reopened in 2005 after being closed for three years. The galvanized steel tower with its 106 steps was built in 1934 and is one of 14 still standing in Ohio.

Between the state park and Loudonville off state Route 3, you can get onto the Wally Road State Scenic Byway.

The 10.5-mile route stretches from near Loudonville through Holmes and Knox counties to state Route 514 at Greer. Along the way are several canoe liveries, more than 1,800 campsites and festival sites.

It roughly follows the path of the old Walhonding Valley Railroad that connected Coshocton and Loudonville.

Wally Road has its own website at www.wallyroad.com.

Read more: <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/11142/1147849-37.stm#ixzz1S64BAFMU>