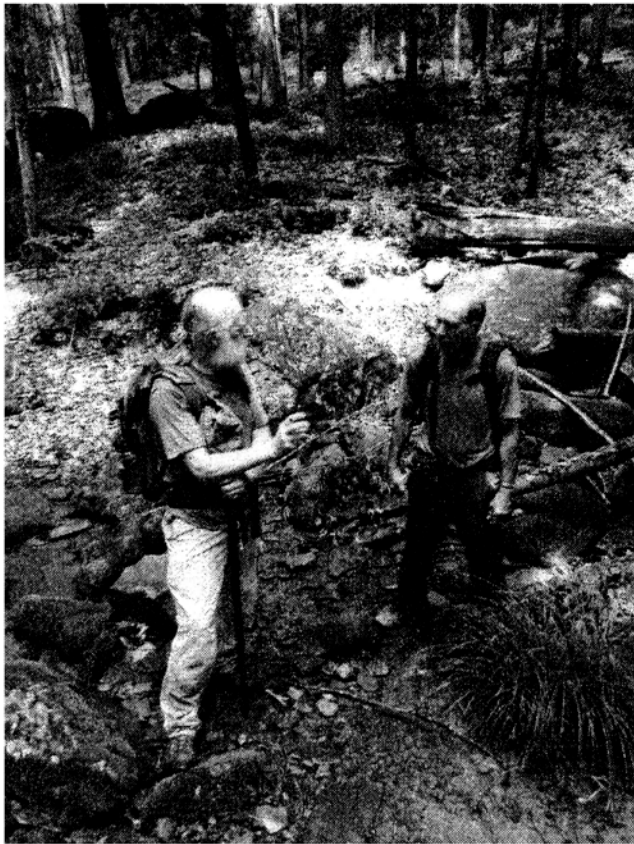


# CENTRE DAILY TIMES

## ON THE TRAIL



KIRK JOHNSON Photo provided

Gary Thornbloom, left, discusses the North Country Trail with Joe Hardisky, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness board member and North Country Trail maintainer.

## North Country Trail gives hikers walk on wild side

BY GARY THORNBLOOM  
For the CDT

From New York to North Dakota, including Pennsylvania, hikers can find great hiking and more on the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT). The trail will stretch 4,600 miles when completed and will link trails throughout the states it traverses. The Pennsylvania section of the trail includes 180 miles running roughly northeast to southwest from New York to Ohio, with 95 of those miles in the Allegheny National Forest (ANF).

Recently I drove north to near the New York border and met Kirk Johnson, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness (FAW) executive director, and Joe Hardisky FAW board member and NCT volunteer/maintainer, to hike 9.7 miles on a section of the NCT that is a prime example of what recovering wilderness in National Forests throughout the eastern United States looks like.

I asked Hardisky what was special to him about the section we were hiking.

"This section of the North Country Trail is truly special because it travels through one of the last backcountry areas in the Allegheny National Forest and that is Tracy Ridge," he said. "Hiking through a wild area is a unique experience, offering the backcountry traveler a chance to escape the mechanization and hype of the modern world. I love it! The North Country Trail along with all of the other foot paths in Tracy Ridge provides us with just that kind of high quality remote hiking."

"High quality remote hiking."

It did not take long to experience what Hardisky found special. We walked away from the trailhead, the hot sun in the opening of the parking area and road. We walked uphill away from Willow Creek and its campground. We walked deeper into the forest and into the silence and coolness in the shade beneath tall trees.

Coinciding with the silence was our crossing into the Allegheny National Recreation Area, which was established by Congress in 1984 by the Pennsylvania Wilderness Act. You can hike and camp here. Part of the intent of Congress was to preserve the natural character of the area. The Forest Service has a policy that motorized vehicles, mountain bikes and horses are currently prohibited, but this is being reviewed with a goal of opening the area up to mountain biking. At risk is part of a very small percent of the ANF that is preserved for travel by foot.

On foot, we continued following the NCT south paralleling the Allegheny Reservoir which was never far from us. At times it was a fairly steep drop to the water, but our path followed a contour line that was fairly level along the mountainside, only dropping or rising as we made our way into, and back out of, hollows containing streams that had cut their way down to what is now the Allegheny Reservoir.

We climbed into and out of Williams Run, Tracy Run, Whiskey Run and Johnnycake Run along with some additional unnamed

streams. On our mid-summer trek, it was mostly dry stream-beds that we crossed. It was easy to imagine the sound of water as we looked up boulder and rock beds where the stream should have been flowing. Although mostly dry, there were some pools of shallow water. Rocks often remained green, moss covered and damp. The beauty of the stream remained.

The stream-beds usually ended at fingers that extended into the reservoir, where there was water. Water easily accessible for a cooling swim. Water easily accessible to filter and drink. Places that were perfect for a lunch stop or a rest stop.

In the summer, you can see the water through the trees as you walk along the mountainside. Once the leaves drop, there will be better views of the large body of water bordered by steep mountainsides. Until then, the best views are looking down the stream-beds and out over the water.

After crossing Johnnycake Run, we stood at the Johnnycake Trail junction. We opened a map and talked about this being one of the trails that wind through the heart of this recreation area.

Johnson later expressed his thoughts on our hike.

"The nine-mile portion of the North Country National Scenic Trail in the proposed Tracy Ridge Wilderness is one of the premier sections of the entire 4,600-mile trail," he explained, "not only for the stark untrammeled beauty of Tracy Ridge, but also because of the extensive Tracy Ridge trail system with dozens of miles of hiking-only trails linking to the North Country Trail within the area that hikers utilize for side trips."

Untrammeled is a word that Johnson uses with precision. He is well aware that one of his conservation heroes, native Pennsylvanian and author of the

1964 Wilderness Act, Howard Zahniser, chose the word untrammeled carefully when he included it in the Act.

Congress dealt with the question of wilderness in the eastern U.S. in 1975 by including for consideration lands that had been affected by man, but that now were healed or in the process of recovering. But it was not until the Pennsylvania Wilderness Act of 1984 that the first Wilderness Areas were designated in Pennsylvania — Hickory Creek and the Allegheny Islands. This act also designated the Tracy Ridge area as a National Recreation Area.

As with most of Pennsylvania's forest land, this is second growth. While much of the ANF has been severely impacted by industrial uses, Tracy Ridge is one of the largest undisturbed areas in the ANF. The trees are tall. The forest is mature. We measured one hemlock that was almost three feet in diameter. There are occasional small stands of giant white pine and hemlock.

Perhaps the most enjoyable aspect of this hike is the relative solitude, the peace, the quiet and the feeling of getting away. Maybe it is more a sense of return. Returning to a landscape that, if only for the day, is big enough and empty enough for a hiker to fit into rather than to dominate.

At the core of the concept of untrammeled, is the free play of natural forces and that is what is at work today and what you will find along this section of the North Country Trail. It is good that we can still find places like this.

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