

Our National Natural TREASURES

By Diana Kile Green

Our beautiful state is blessed with many special places. Some have great scenery, some have extraordinary history, and a few have exceptional biological or geologic features. Fifteen such places—some quite obscure—are so remarkable that they have been recognized as National Natural Landmarks.

To be selected as a National Natural Landmark, a site must be thoroughly evaluated and judged to be one of the best examples of a certain type of landscape or natural feature. Sites are first identified through a scientific inventory of a region, carried out with landowners' permission. Then an evaluation is made by scientific experts from the National Park Service.

This information is then reviewed by an additional group of scientists. After obtaining comments from the landowner and the public, a National Park Service advisory board determines whether a site meets the standards, and whether to recommend it as a National Natural Landmark. The Secretary of the Interior gives final approval.

Some of the landmarks are on private land and others are on federally or state-owned land. They may or may not be open to the public, depending on ownership. Some privately owned landmarks may be visited with the owner's permission.

All of West Virginia's National Natural Landmarks are lo-

cated in the eastern one-third of the state. They include caves, old-growth forests, rare geologic formations, swamps, bogs, and a karst landscape. Here is the complete list of landmarks:

- Big Run Bog, Tucker County
- Blister Run Swamp, Pocahontas County
- Canaan Valley, Tucker County
- Cathedral State Park, Preston County
- Cranberry Glades Botanical Area, Pocahontas County
- Cranesville Swamp, Preston County
- Fisher Spring Run Bog, Grant County
- Gaudineer Scenic Area, Pocahontas and Randolph Counties
- Germany Valley Karst Area, Pendleton County
- Greenville Salt Peter Cave, Monroe County
- Ice Mountain, Hampshire County
- Lost World Caverns, Greenbrier County
- Organ Cave System, Greenbrier County
- Shavers Mountain Spruce-Hemlock Stand, Randolph County
- Sinnott-Thorn Mountain Cave System, Pendleton County

The first of our landmarks to be recognized was Cranesville Swamp in 1964. The latest was Ice Mountain in 2012. This article, the first in a series of occasional articles on our state's National Natural Landmarks, features two renowned areas.

LOST WORLD CAVERNS

The Lost World Caverns are located two miles north of Lewisburg in Greenbrier County, an area famous for its caves. Designated a National Natural Landmark in 1973, the caverns were truly “lost” until their discovery in 1942 by cavers from Virginia Polytechnic Institute. The original access into this cave was through a hole with a 115-foot drop, navigated with ropes and rope ladders. The cave now has a walk-in entrance that leads to a wonderland of amazing geologic formations. There are about 6,000 feet of known passages, 600 of which are illuminated for tours. Lost World is one of the largest caves in the state that is accessible to the public; one room is 1,000 feet long by 300 feet wide and 12 stories high.

There is no word other than *spectacular* to describe the size and variety of stalagmites, stalactites, and columns housed in these caverns. Some stalagmites are up to 80 feet high. One stalactite, dubbed The Snowy Chandelier, is estimated to weigh 30 tons. The War Club stalagmite is 28 feet high and said to have begun forming 500,000 years ago. Other notable and interesting features include dome pits (vertical cavities), waterfalls, rimstone (a type of crystallized build-up of minerals that form a dam), curtains (wavy formations that resemble curtains or draperies), and flowstone (sheet-type calcite deposits that form when water flows down walls or other surfaces). The Ice Cream Wall is colored by several different minerals.

Parts of the cave floor are strewn with hexagonal blocks of stone from the surrounding Greenbrier Limestone, which is 320 million years old. In 1967, the remains of a prehistoric cave bear were discovered.

Underground streams have led to the formation of many limestone caves in West Virginia, and a vast subterranean system carries water under large areas of Greenbrier County. The waters that flow through Lost World eventually enter the Greenbrier River several miles to the south at the famous Davis Spring at Fort Spring.

Lost World Caverns is privately owned and open daily for tours. For more information, visit lostworldcaverns.com or call 866.228.3778 or 304.645.6677.



Read more at e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia. www.wvencyclopedia.org

This massive formation inside Lost World Caverns is called Goliath. Photo by David Fatalleh courtesy of the West Virginia Department of Commerce

GAUDINEER SCENIC AREA

The Gaudineer Scenic Area extends from Pocahontas County into Randolph County on Shavers Mountain. Access is from Route 250 between Cheat Bridge and Durbin. Situated within the boundaries of the Monongahela National Forest along a 4,000-foot-high ridge, Gaudineer is renowned for its exceptional stand of virgin red spruce. According to the *West Virginia Encyclopedia*, the site is “an example of a high boreal island in the Allegheny Mountains with two forest types: ... red spruce and northern hardwoods.” Many of the plants and animals here are more commonly found at more northern latitudes.

In his famous book *The Appalachians*, Brooks describes the precipitation on Gaudineer as “so abundant that vegetation from ground cover to forest crown grows in layers, each of which shelters its appropriate animal species....” He goes on to say, “The region is ... at the center of the highest and most extensive mountain mass between the White Mountains [of New Hampshire] and the southern Blue Ridge....”

Entirely on public land, Gaudineer was designated a National Natural Landmark in 1974. Some trees there are more than three feet in diameter and estimated at 300 years old. These forest giants survived the massive clear-cutting of the last century because a pre-Civil War surveyor made an error in his survey. According to Maurice Brooks, the legendary naturalist and West Virginia University professor of wildlife management, a subsequent surveyor noticed the mistake and was able to claim the inadvertently excluded seven-mile strip of trees for his own.

The Gaudineer Scenic area covers 140 acres, about 50 of which are virgin red spruce. The other 90 acres include old red spruce and exceptional native northern hardwoods: yellow birch, beech, and red and yellow maple. The great trees are home to the snowshoe hare, a remarkably wide variety of northern and southern birds, and the endangered Cheat Mountain salamander and northern flying squirrel.

Look for more of West Virginia's National Natural Landmarks in upcoming issues. 🌲

Diana Kile Green has hiked, camped, and cross-country skied in and around many of the landmarks, including the Cranberry Glades, Gaudineer Scenic Area, Canaan Valley, Shavers Mountain, and Germany Valley.



Read more at e-WV: The West Virginia Encyclopedia. www.wvencyclopedia.org

The Gaudineer Scenic area is renowned for its old-growth red spruce forests. © Kent Mason

