

National Natural TREASURES

By Diana Kile Green

Our February 2014 issue featured two special places in West Virginia—Lost World Caverns and Gaudineer Scenic Area—with historical, biological, and/or geological features so exceptional, they have been named National Natural Landmarks. There are 15 such places in our state. This month we're pleased to present two more from that impressive list.

ORGAN CAVE

Located in southern Greenbrier County, Organ Cave is one of the state's most historic and well-known caves. Based on its rich history, as well as its fascinating archaeological and geologic features, the Organ Cave system was designated a National Natural Landmark in 1973. Organ Cave is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is also an attraction on the West Virginia Civil War Trail.

The Organ Cave system is one of the largest cave systems in West Virginia, covering 2,082 acres. It has 11 entrances and more than 45 miles of known, mapped passages. Organ Cave is the third longest and ninth deepest cave in the state. It was formed in the lower Greenbrier Group limestones of the Mississippian era, approximately 323-354 (experts differ by a few million years!) million years ago.

"Organ Cave is a very rich paleo cave," says George Dasher, a director of the West Virginia Speleological Survey and editor of *The West Virginia Caver*. "The first brown bear found east of the Mississippi River was found in the cave's Waterfall Room, and a saber-toothed cat and a dire wolf were found in the western part of the cave. Organ Cave's was the first saber-toothed cat find in West Virginia."

Dasher, who worked on the project to map Organ Cave, further notes that mastodon teeth have been found there, as well as the remains of the extinct *Dasyops bellus*, or beautiful armadillo. Archaeological evidence indicates that American Indians used the cave as early as 800 BC. European settlers found it much later, in the early 1700s. The cave is named for a distinctive calcite formation inside that resembles a pipe organ.

After its discovery, Organ Cave had a series of private owners. According to the *West Virginia Encyclopedia*, by 1822, it was open to the public and was a popular stop for guests from the various sulfur spring resorts in the area.

Organ Cave was mined for saltpeter, used for making gunpowder, during the War of 1812 and the Civil War. Some saltpeter hoppers and vats from both wars remain inside.

A fascinating place to visit anytime, Organ Cave can be an especially welcome retreat on a hot summer day. Guided half-mile walking tours are offered year round. Reservations are required for large groups. Extended Exploring Expeditions, or Wild Cave Tours, are also available. Check the website for fees and other information: organcave.com. Organ Cave is located on Route 63 at Hoke's Mill in Ronceverte. For more information, call 304.645.7600.



Fisher Spring Run Bog is an unspoiled wetland with deep moss hummocks. © Kent Mason



FISHER SPRING RUN BOG

Located in the Dolly Sods Wilderness area of the Monongahela National Forest in Grant County, the Fisher Spring Run Bog is a fine example of a rare peat moss-haircap moss bog. Covering 135 acres, it is the source of the headwaters of Red Creek.

Fisher Spring Run Bog supports a northern bog ecosystem, including plants such as mannagrass, cottongrass, bracken fern, cranberry, goldthread, death camas, and sedges. Tree species in this bog include red spruce, yellow birch, red maple, serviceberry, and mountain ash. Among the rare resident fauna are the pink-edged sulfur butterfly and the meadow jumping mouse. Cheat Mountain salamanders have been reported from the surrounding red spruce forest.

Fisher Spring Run Bog contains very large moss hummocks, which are quite unstable and make walking very difficult. According to Elizabeth Byers, a Natural Heritage ecologist with the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources Wildlife Diversity Unit, “The tops of the hummocks are a foot and a half above the saturated hollows. Like most wetlands, this one is truly best viewed from the edge.”

Further describing this unspoiled wetland, Byers adds, “My favorite aspect of Fisher Spring Run Bog is the way it appears suddenly out of the dense spruce forest—a vast, sunlit opening that looks today almost exactly the way it would have looked to Native Americans thousands of years ago.”

Fisher Spring Run Bog was designated a National Natural Landmark by the National Park Service in 1974. While there is no easy route to it and it is a challenge to find, it is connected at some distance to Alder Run Bog, which can be visited via the Northland Loop Trail and boardwalk. 🌿

Author Diana Kile Green is a Charleston native who has hiked, camped, fished, and skied cross-country in and around the Dolly Sods/Canaan Valley area, including Red Creek. Her interests in caves, geology, and fossils have taken her from Grant County to the Greenbrier Valley area.