

# Park

Hocking Hills belies notion of Ohio as all-flat

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caves. Quackenbush said they are actually giant sandstone recesses.

In a true cave, he said, an explorer must be able to walk far enough inside to lose sight of the entrance - but this technicality doesn't make the park's awesome rock formations seem any less spectacular.

## Heart of the Hocking

The ideal spot to start exploring the land and its lore is Old Man's Cave, the heart of Hocking Hills.

With its gentle Upper Falls at one end, its somewhat tumultuous Lower Falls at the other, and a cavernous sandstone recess dominating the trail between, the main park site provides immediate orientation for the rest of the spots to be discovered.

It's clear from the first glimpse into the gorge that utmost caution should be exercised and children closely supervised.

But the beaten path won't bore the younger set; children are inevitably drawn to plaques relating the hermit-in-the-woods legend of pioneer settler Richard Rowe. With a little time for exploration, they can try to spot a natural rock formation that resembles Egypt's famed Sphinx and search for a deep, narrow pool known as the Devil's Bath-tub.

Old Man's Cave is also an excellent starting point because it is ringed by the park-managed accommodations: a visitor center, a seasonal dining lodge, 40 rental cottages and several campgrounds.

"Hocking Hills bills itself as a family place," Quackenbush said, and its cottages and campgrounds provide plenty of options to satisfy each family's preferences for a getaway.

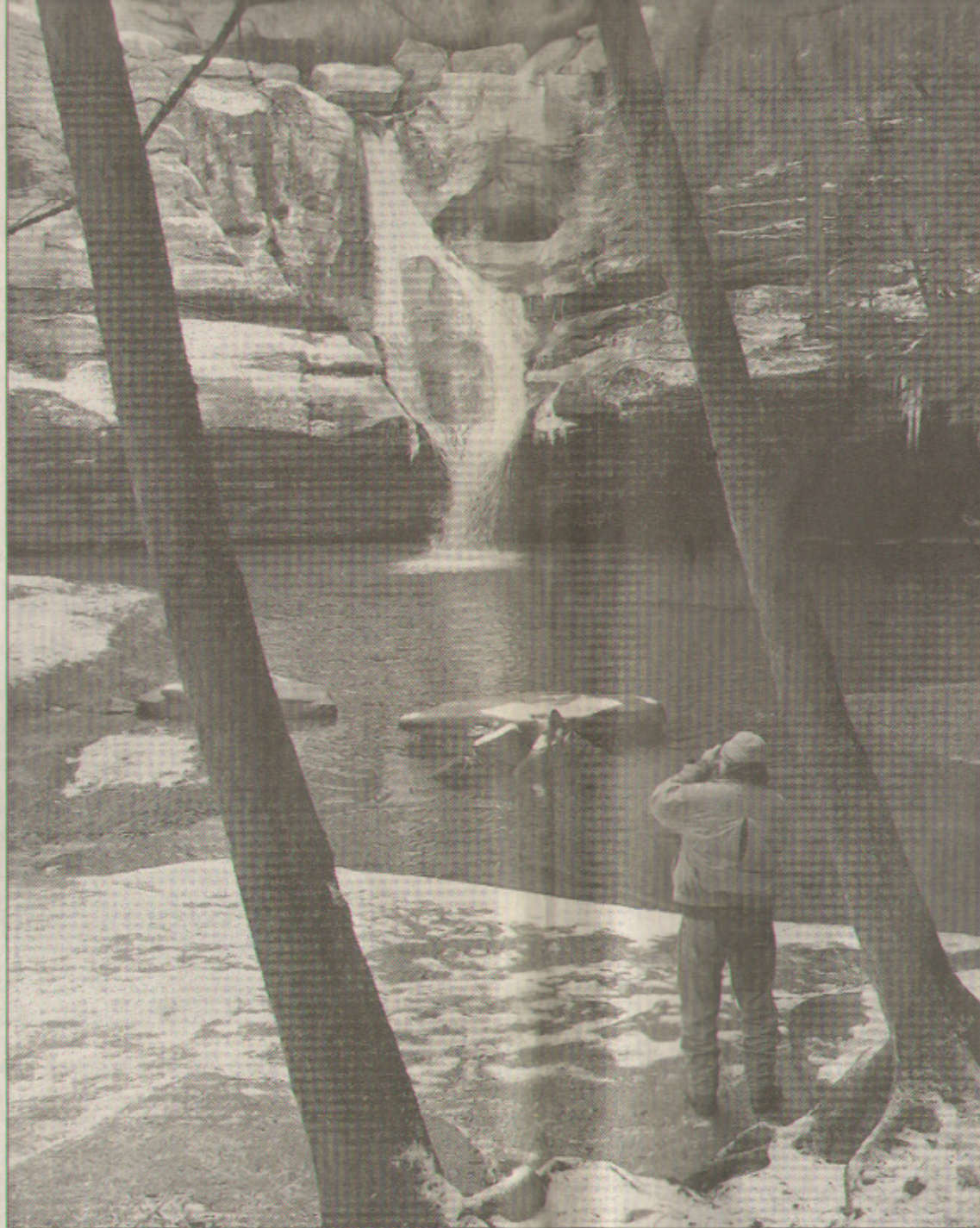
The main campground accommodates RVs and tents, with access to electrical outlets, a bathhouse and a swimming pool. The die-hard outdoorsy types also can opt to rough it at the more remote primitive campgrounds.

Campsites can be reserved but are otherwise rented out on a first-come, first served basis.

"During summer weekends, the campgrounds are busting at the seams," Quackenbush said.

Reservations for the park's cottages also should be made as far in advance as possible, he said.

Families can settle in for a weeklong stay with most of the creature comforts of home in the cottages. Each unit contains two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom



Jack Swerens of Bridgeport, Ohio, takes a photo of Cedar Falls in Hocking Hills State Park.

KAREN SCHIELY/Akron Beacon Journal

with shower, a screened-in porch, and a living room with a gas fireplace, television and sofa bed.

It's a good idea to plan meals and bring preparations for the length of the stay; the nearest full-service grocery stores are a drive of more than 20 minutes into Logan.

From April through October, the park's dining lodge is open to park visitors. The lodge also operates a game room, snack bar and giant outdoor swimming pool in the warmer months. Visitors also will notice something missing from the building that's found in Ohio's other popular park lodges - overnight lodging.

The original plan for the building called for 25 rooms, Quackenbush said, but the state never got around to building them. From time to time, he said, debate is rekindled over whether the idea should be revisited.

The need for additional accommodations in the area has been met with a surge of growth in the private sector. That's where visitors should turn, he said, if they're looking for a more secluded romantic getaway.

## A place to get away

There is a sense of retreating from the hustle and bustle of modern living that envelops Hocking Hills' visitors, said Ellen Grinsfelder, innkeeper at The Inn at Cedar Falls.

"It's a place where people come to get away from the stresses and noises of everyday life," she said.

Her inn is a short walk from its namesake, Cedar Falls, a favorite cascade for many park-goers. A grist mill once operated near the crest of the falls, naturalist Quackenbush said, but the forest has repossessed the site and left virtually no trace of the

long-ago industry.

Photographers who flock to Cedar Falls often make nearby Ash Cave their next stop.

Ash Cave offers one of the more easily navigated trails, with a wheelchair-accessible path leading to the massive sandstone recess. Its mighty walls amplify even the quietest of voices, and a simple, ribbonlike waterfall that tumbles over its edge creates a shallow pool that's an oasis for frogs.

Another popular site in the park is Conkle's Hollow Nature Preserve, one of the deepest gorges in the state. The climb to the rim is one of the park's more difficult ascents, and the trail along the ledges is one of the most dangerous - but the view is an amazing payoff for the careful climber, especially at the peak of fall colors.

The park also offers two other remote hiking spots: Rock

House is Hocking Hills' closest match to a true cave. Known as a bandit hideout in its frontier days, the huge cavity in the high cliff wall gives hikers a commanding, picture-window view of the ravine below.

The road least traveled goes to Cantwell Cliffs, which Quackenbush described as "a little more rugged" than the other sites, but also one of the best spots in the state to enjoy spring wildflowers.

## Visitors treasure park

With so many visitors who keep coming back, the park always faces the danger of being worn away like other natural landmarks.

But Quackenbush, Adam and Grinsfelder each noted that Ohioans seem to have a special relationship with their "secret" park, and are respectful of rules aimed at preserving the parkland.

"There is no feeling like making that first set of footprints in the snow back to a frozen waterfall," Adam said, and people who take away that kind of feeling want to make sure they can experience it again when they come back.

As long as that mentality en-

ing Hills should be able to absorb the growing interest. And it will continue to give visitors a new appreciation for Ohio, Grinsfelder said.

"So many people have this perception that the state is nothing but flat land," she said. "I don't know how many times I've heard people come down here and say, 'I can't believe I'm still in Ohio.'"

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