



HIKING THE HOCKING HILLS

Every walk worth the drive, and who each one suits

Six state park areas, two nature preserves and a state forest sit within thirty-five minutes of the cottage. They are not interchangeable. One is paved and flat enough for a wheelchair; another has unfenced two-hundred-foot drops. This sheet sorts them by who they suit, so you can pick well the first time.

Trail lengths and difficulty ratings below are the park's own. Drive times are from our door.

EASY GOING

Ash Cave

35 min from the door · 1/4 mile each way · Easy

Wheelchair accessible · Pushchairs · Grandparents · Waterfall after rain

The gentlest walk in the park and the one we send everyone to first. A flat, paved path runs up a hemlock gorge to Ohio's largest recess cave — a sandstone amphitheatre 700 feet from end to end, with a seasonal waterfall dropping into it from the rim 90 feet above. It is the only trail here rated wheelchair accessible by ODNR, and the only one a small child can walk without being carried. A separate rim trail, also a quarter mile, climbs to the top and is rated moderate.

Conkle's Hollow — gorge trail

35 min from the door · 1/2 mile each way · Easy

Paved at the start · Good with children · No pets · Waterfall

One of the deepest gorges in Ohio, and only 300 feet wide at its narrowest with cliffs rising more than 200 feet on either side. The gorge trail runs flat along the valley floor, paved and accessible for the first stretch, then turns to packed dirt and rock as it narrows to the grotto and the waterfall at the head of the hollow. Ferns, wildflowers and so little sunlight that it stays cool on a hot day. Dogs are not permitted anywhere in the preserve.

Rockbridge State Nature Preserve

20 min from the door · about a mile · Easy to moderate

Quiet · Rarely crowded · No waterfall

Ohio's largest natural bridge — a sandstone span over 100 feet long arching 50 feet across a ravine. A field walk and a wooded descent get you there. Almost nobody goes, which is the point: on an autumn Saturday when Old Man's Cave is shoulder to shoulder, you may have this to yourselves.

THE CLASSICS

The three everybody comes for. All rated moderate by the park, all involve stairs, and all are worth them.

Old Man's Cave

30 min from the door · 1 mile · Moderate

Waterfalls · Stairs and tunnels · Not for pushchairs

The famous one, and deservedly. A mile of gorge takes you past the Upper Falls, the Devil's Bathtub, the recess cave itself and the Lower Falls, by way of stone staircases, a tunnel cut through the rock, and bridges above the stream. Children love it; the steps and drop-offs mean they need holding onto. Start at the Visitor Center, and go early — this is the busiest half mile in the region.

Cedar Falls

25 min from the door · 1 mile · Moderate

The strongest waterfall · Stairs · Good after rain

Despite the name there is not a cedar in sight — early settlers mistook the hemlocks. What there is, is the largest waterfall in the park by volume of water, at the head of a deep gorge. A set of stairs takes you down to the base. After a wet week this is the one to prioritise; in a dry August it can thin to a trickle.

Rock House

30 min from the door · 1 mile · Moderate

The only true cave · Stairs · No waterfall · Quieter

A corridor 200 feet long tunnelled clean through the cliff face, with windows of rock opening onto the gorge below — the only true cave in the park, as opposed to a recess. Steep steps down and back up. It sits at the north end of the park and takes noticeably fewer visitors than Old Man's Cave.

HARDER GOING

Steep, long, or exposed. Read the tag line before you commit — one of these three is genuinely dangerous.

Cantwell Cliffs

25 min from the door · 2 miles · Difficult

Steep · Narrow squeezes · Not for unsteady legs

The most rugged of the six state park areas and the least visited, largely because it is furthest north — which happens to put it closest to us. Deep valley, high cliffs and a notorious narrow stone staircase known as Fat Woman's Squeeze. Rated difficult by ODNR, and the rating is earned: expect steep, uneven descents and a climb out.

Whispering Cave & Hemlock Bridge

30 min from the door · 4.5 miles · Difficult

105-foot seasonal waterfall · Swinging bridge · Half a day

The newest trail in the park and, at 4.5 miles, the longest single loop. It leaves from the Old Man's Cave area, crosses the swinging Hemlock Bridge, and reaches the second largest recess cave in the region with a 105-foot seasonal waterfall falling to the floor below. Because of the distance it stays quiet even when the gorge is busy. Take water and give it half a day.

Conkle's Hollow — rim trail

35 min from the door · circles the gorge · Difficult

Unfenced 200-foot drops · Not for children · Best views

The rim trail runs along the clifftops around the whole hollow, and the views are the finest in the area. It is also the one walk here we would ask you to think hard about: the drop-offs are unfenced, the preserve's own guidance calls the trail extremely dangerous in all seasons, and people are hurt on it. Not with young children, not in the wet, not in the ice, and not in the dark.

THE LONG ONE

Grandma Gatewood Trail

25–35 min to either end from the door · 6 miles · Difficult

One way · Two cars or a shuttle · Links three of the classics

The through-hike: Old Man's Cave to Cedar Falls to Ash Cave, six miles of gorge strung end to end, with the Buckeye Trail and the American Discovery Trail running along it. Named for Emma 'Grandma' Gatewood, the Ohio grandmother who thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail at 67 and said these cliffs were more interesting than anything she saw on it. It is one way, so leave a car at each end — or walk out and back and take the distance as it comes.

QUIETER GROUND, CLOSER TO THE DOOR

Boch Hollow State Nature Preserve

5–10 min from the door · 7 miles of trails · Easy to moderate

Nearest to the cottage · Permit needed for Corkscrew Falls

607 acres and seven miles of trail, barely ten minutes away — the obvious choice for a morning walk when you do not fancy the drive. Corkscrew Falls, the highlight, is permit-only and must be reserved in advance through ODNR; the rest of the preserve is open.

Clear Creek Metro Park

20 min from the door · many miles · Easy to difficult

Ohio's largest nature preserve · Range of trails · Dogs allowed

5,470 acres of hemlock ravine and sandstone cliff, home to more than 2,200 species including Ohio's last wild rhododendron colonies. Trails run from level creekside strolls to genuine climbs, so there is something here for whoever you have with you. Quiet on almost any day of the year.

Hocking State Forest fire tower

35 min from the door · short walk · Easy walk, steep climb

80-foot tower · 360-degree view · Free · Spectacular in October

A working fire tower you are allowed to climb — eighty feet of steel stairs to a view across the whole forest canopy. The walk to it is nothing; the climb is not for anyone uneasy with heights. In mid October it is the best colour view in the county and there is rarely a queue.

Rose Lake

30 min from the door · 1/2 mile each way · Easy to moderate

Inside the state park · Fishing · No crowds

A seventeen-acre lake reached by a half-mile trail off State Route 374, inside the state park but almost entirely overlooked. Rainbow trout, channel catfish, bass and bluegill. A good short leg-stretch if the gorges are heaving.

PUTTING TWO TOGETHER

Most of these are short enough that one is not a day. These pairings work because the driving between them is small.

Old Man's Cave + Cedar Falls

The standard half day, and the right one if you only have a morning. Ten minutes apart on the same road, two miles of walking between them.

Cedar Falls + Ash Cave

Do the harder one first and finish flat and paved. The kindest pairing for mixed ages, and the one to choose with grandparents along.

Rock House + Cantwell Cliffs

Both at the north end of the park, both quieter than the rest, and both closer to us than the main corridor. A good contrarian's Saturday.

Conkle's Hollow + Rock House

Fifteen minutes apart on State Route 374. Do the Conkle's gorge floor, skip the rim, and you have an easy morning with one big view.

Boch Hollow + lunch in Logan

Ten minutes out, an hour or two on the trails, then Weaver's or Millstone on the way back. The lowest-effort good day on this sheet.

IF YOU ONLY HAVE ONE MORNING

With small children

Ash Cave, every time. Flat, paved, and the cave itself is astonishing enough to hold their attention.

With grandparents

Ash Cave gorge trail. If steps are manageable, add Cedar Falls — the stairs are the only hard part.

Using a wheelchair

Ash Cave gorge trail is the one ODNR rates accessible. Conkle's Hollow is paved and level for its first stretch.

If it has rained all week

Cedar Falls, then Whispering Cave. Both are transformed by water, and both can disappoint in a dry spell.

If you want to be alone

Cantwell Cliffs, Boch Hollow or Clear Creek. On a busy autumn weekend these three stay civilised.

If you only do one thing

Old Man's Cave. It is crowded because it is the best. Arrive by nine and it is yours.

If the trails are iced over

Ash Cave, carefully, or none of them. Ice on the gorge stairs sends people to hospital every winter.

BEFORE YOU GO

- Trails are open from half an hour before sunrise to half an hour after sunset. There is no night hiking, and rangers do enforce it.
- Wet sandstone is genuinely slippery and the stairs are unforgiving. Footwear with grip matters more here than anything else you pack — most trail injuries in the Hocking Hills come down to the wrong shoes.
- Many trails are now one way to keep people moving safely. Follow the directional signs even when doubling back looks quicker.
- Stay on the marked trails. The cliff edges are sandstone, they undercut, and they give way.
- Dogs are not permitted at Conkle's Hollow at all. Elsewhere in the state park they are welcome on a leash.
- The Visitor Center at the Old Man's Cave lot is open daily 10 AM to 4 PM and has restrooms, maps, exhibits and a raptor enclosure. Park office: (740) 385-6842.
- There is no cell signal in most of the gorges. Agree a meeting point before you split up.

Conditions change with the weather and trails do close. The park office on (740) 385-6842 knows before anyone else does.