

WOODS & WATERS

ON THE TRAIL

Cross-country skiing in ANF

By Gary Thornbloom
For the CDT

Laurel Mill Cross-Country Ski and Hiking Trail System is a reasonable drive from State College and includes trails that are friendly to both beginners and intermediate skiers.

The easiest trails are flat, with a lot of straight stretches, and have wide bridges over small streams. Most of this trail system is groomed. Interconnecting loops make it easy to ski whatever distance appeals to you.

Advanced skiers will find more challenging sections of trail that are not groomed, and by skiing the entire 10.7 miles of trail can easily enjoy a day of skiing. A warming hut and restrooms are at the trailhead.

Laurel Mill Trails are located in Elk County three miles west of Ridgway on Township Road 307. You can learn current snow conditions by calling Dave Love of Love's Cross Country Ski Rental at 776-6285. Along with renting ski's and having any ski accessories or essentials that you may need, Dave and volunteers are the ones who groom the trail.

Allegheny National Forest is Pennsylvania's only national forest and it includes 513,300 acres. Laurel Mill is in the southeast corner, and that is the corner closest to State College.

Recently, I skied trails on the south side of the highway; this included Perseverance, One Mile, and Sparrow Nest loops. Kirk Johnson, Friends of Allegheny Wilderness Director, accompanied me.

The area we skied in is part of what www.pawild.org has proposed to be protected as the Clarion River Wilderness Area. Kirk told me that "the Allegheny, like all national forests, is managed for multiple uses, but unfortunately wilderness preservation is the most underrepresented use of this particular forest, and it needs to be significantly increased."

The trails on the south side of the highway are in an area that FAW has proposed for wilderness protection under the Wilderness Act of 1964. This area is currently designated as a Remote Recreation Area. These are relatively large areas where wildlife habitat and recreation are the use. But, the Forest Service can change this designation at any time, whereas Wilderness Areas, designated by Congress, are protected in perpetuity.

As we skied into the mature, mixed hardwood forest I soon noticed that unlike many other trails, this one showed no signs of snowmobile use. There were snow covered ski tracks, but the only other tracks were coyote, deer, porcupine, squirrels, and mice. Older, snow covered, wildlife tracks could have been from other animals. It is always fun to guess the tracks, follow them far enough to often confirm the guess, and then to read any additional story that is written in the snow.

We followed the Cook-Eli Connector, and then went right when we got to Perseverance Loop. Again we stayed to the right on One-Mile Loop and Sparrow Nest Loop. Elevation gain is not much of a factor on any of these trails. Once on Sparrow



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Kirk Johnson, director of the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness, skis recently on the Laurel Mill Trail.

Nest Loop the trail is more rustic, is not groomed, and is described in the ANF brochure as "best suited to hiking."

We found it fine for skiing.

Part of the way around Sparrow Nest Loop there is an area that includes a meadow as well as some large white pines. Hemlocks are the understory.

The trail skirts the hemlocks and meanders through many white pine seedlings. Here we have a pine forest in the making. And it is the forest that once blanketed Pennsylvania. Protection as a Wilderness Area would let this forest return.

Further along we stopped by some large beech trees. As I made my way through a thicket of small beech trees to see if the large beech had bear claw marks on the bark, Kirk told me about the surrounding thicket.

Beech bark disease results when scale, an insect, attacks the bark, and then the scale modified bark is attacked by a fungus.

The tree responds by sending up suckers — the thicket I had pushed my way through — from the roots. This attempt for survival is doomed because the thicket is genetically identical to the original tree, and so succumbs to the same fungus. The scale is native; the fungus was introduced from Europe in the late 1800's. The theme of introduced pests is repeated throughout our natural landscape, and with similar tragic results.

On my next outing to Laurel Mill I may try Hemlock Loop and experience Spillway Hill, Suicide Slide, and Brigg's Dike as well some scenic views. I might also enjoy off trail skiing or snow shoeing in this modestly sized roadless area.

"From the steep oak and mountain laurel-shrouded hillside that drops down to the national wild and scenic Clarion River, to the plateau top where the Laurel Mill trail meanders, FAW's proposed Clarion River Wilderness Area provides abundant opportunity for remote backcountry recreation just a short drive from Centre County," Kirk said.

Remote backcountry recreation is enough incentive for me to drive in order to get on the trail.

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