CANYON FOREST NP

Explore the surprises in these fern-tastic woods

Story & Photos by John Maxwell, OI staff

A hiking trail descends into misty, fern-shrouded ravines at the relatively recently dedicated Canyon Forest Nature Preserve in Greene County.

During May, freshwater springs spout from myriad steep stone crannies. Combined with creek salamanders and creaking tree frogs in a heavily shaded moss-carpeted canyon, the effect gives you the impression of venturing through ancient Earth's humid primordial forest.

Half-seen warblers flit from shadow to sunbeam to shadow again. Towering maple and beech trees that dangle wild grapevines drip summer-morning dew from leaves soaking in the new-day air.

Violet wood-sorrel, wild ginger, jack-in-the-pulpits, and mayapples hang on wherever they can.

"I visited the site in the rain, and the hike does give you a bit of a surprise when you pop out from an old field site near the parking lot and descend into the higher-quality forest," said DNR southwest Indiana regional ecologist Ryan Keller. "The steep ravines and small waterfalls make it a very picturesque setting."

Sycamore Land Trust owns and manages the 68-acre preserve near Bloomington, and its director, John Lawrence, describes having a similar first-impression surprise.

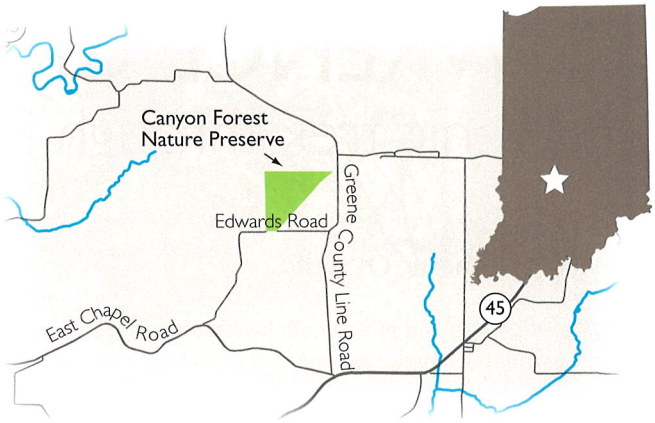
Lawrence says he looked at the tract on map software after families of two Indiana University biology researchers offered to donate the property in 2013, and it looked like the site would be typical Indiana woods. Upon visiting, he walked in the front end, and the woods were typical ...

"But then we got into the ravines," he said. "Amazing! Lots of big trees! It's what Indiana was like a couple hundred years ago."

DNR Division of Nature Preserves director Ron Hellmich described his first visit to Canyon Forest in a similar manner.

"The sense I had, once I got into the high-quality forest, was how immersed into it I felt," he said.

The Natural Resources Commission approved Canyon



(Opposite page) An ephemeral waterfall splashes over lush flora at Canyon Forest Nature Preserve in May of 2020, when these upland woods and scenic canyons in Greene County became a state-dedicated nature preserve. (Above left, then right) A violet wood-sorrel blooms along a hiking trail in the preserve; Sycamore Land Trust created about 1.6 miles of moderate to semi-rugged hiking trails that wind through Canyon Forest's 68 acres. The preserve's floral spectacle transitions into autumn on a mossy deciduous-leaf-covered sandstone outcropping last October.

Forest as a state-dedicated nature preserve in May 2020. The land trust has created about 1.6 miles of moderate to semi-rugged hiking trails. The trails roughly form the shape of a wiggly figure 8 on a map, so hikers can hike both loops or test a shorter one-loop hike.

Lawrence says the land trust plans to upgrade the parking this summer. For now the preserve's parking spot can hold only two vehicles. There is no other nearby parking, so, if they can't park, visitors should have an alternate hiking destination planned.

Alternate nearby exploration sites include Leonard Springs Nature Park, which is about 5 miles west and was covered in the May/June 2015 Destinations story. Other nearby options are Cedar Bluffs and Green's Bluff preserves and Fairfax State Recreation Area on Monroe Lake.

Canyon Forest is open dawn to dusk. Visitors should stay on trails and refrain from disturbing flora and fauna. Leashed dogs are welcome. Camping, off-road vehicles, bikes, and horses are prohibited.

Sycamore Land Trust conserves more than 100 properties covering more than 10,000 acres of natural land in southern Indiana. More information is at *sycamorelandtrust.org.*

GETTING THERE:

Canyon Forest Nature Preserve is in eastern Greene County near the border of Monroe County. From State Road 45 heading southwest past Stanford, after crossing the county line, turn right onto East Chapel Road between the white Greene County Chapel and the graveyard. Take an immediate right onto Greene County Line Road, drive about a mile and turn left on Edwards Road. The preserve parking lot is on the right, just past the railroad tracks. □

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