

Fred Woods Trail — On Top of the World

By Gary Thornbloom

The Fred Woods Trail includes an enchanting meander through large rocks and rock slots as well as several great overlooks above the Bennett Branch of Sinnemahoning Creek. The longest rock slot is about two hundred feet long with the top of the rocks looming twenty feet above. Narrow nooks invite exploration. Wider nooks with moss covered walls, and hemlocks towering from an open center invite meditation. Overhangs create various sized caves, some dry, some with pools of water. Shafts of sunlight illuminate moss covered walls. Tall hemlocks filter light into other small spots. The trail winds through all this and soon you are not certain which crannies you have already explored.

It is easy to see why the trail's namesake, Fred Woods had this as one of his favorite places. The trail, created by the Camp Quehanna Young Adult Conservation Corps in 1980, is named in memory of Fred Woods, a Bureau of Forestry Foreman, who died while performing his duties in 1975. The trail is a splendid memorial.

The hardest part of this hike is the 3.9 miles of narrow dirt road that you will drive as you climb up Mason Hill from Bennett Branch. The entire trail is laid out on the plateau top and has no elevation gains for the hiker to deal with. The trail is rocky in one short section, but overall this is an easy hike that the entire family can enjoy. The promise of vistas and exploring in and about the rocks will keep the kids walking.

The trailhead is at the edge of a stand of hemlocks. Orange blazes mark the trail. An easy .8 mile of trail gets you to a 3 mile loop. Bear left when you get to the loop. You are soon on the section of the trail with the roughest footing. At this time of year there are constant views through the bare trees and out over the stream below. Three vista points along the trail provide openings with clear views of Bennett Branch. From the first you look out across the stream to Miller Run, from the second, ridge after ridge rolls away to the northwest, and the third looks out over Water Plug Hollow.

Dogwood and mountain laurel in bloom would be highlights of this section of trail in spring and summer. In late fall striped maple, small trees with green and white striped bark, are often rubbed smooth by bucks as they get a feel for the antlers they cannot see. Numerous buck rubbed trees are one thing to look for along this trail.

However, the rocks are the highlight of this hike. At many places along the trail you can look back into the woods and see large rocks that would be highlights of many other hikes. Many are fern and moss covered islands. Many have trees growing on them. Some, along the trail, have raised curving ridges. Others appear to have been shaped by moving water. Shortly after leaving the second vista the trail enters a narrow rock slot. This short slot between eight foot high rock walls would again be a highlight elsewhere. But the best is yet to come! Just down the trail from here is the Rock Loop.

The Rock Loop is a half mile meander that will work its magic on any explorer, young or old. On or off the trail this is an area where you will want to spend some time looking around and eventually just finding a quiet spot to sit.

Along with the imposing presence of the rocks are many subtle delights. I have never seen larger lichens hanging in green and gray flaps on rock faces. Emerald moss covers rock walls twelve feet high. Thin tree roots emerge from seemingly solid rock and crawl over the rock face searching for earth. Tree roots thicker than a person wrap themselves over rocks. Hemlocks seem to emerge from solid rock and tower overhead. Crannies everywhere invite exploration. Silent rock rooms invite lingering. Ferns and rhododendrons fill several of the rooms. The third vista is also on the Rock Loop, on a natural rock outcropping.

After the Rock Loop the trail heads back into the woods, although more rocks along the trail and off in the woods are reminders of where you have just been. Make sure to bear left when you come to the section of trail that takes you back to the trailhead.

The Fred Woods Trail is one more magical place preserved in the State Forest Lands of Pennsylvania. One more place that once you have taken the time to get on the trail you too can enjoy and explore!

Gary Thornbloom is the Chair of Sierra Club Moshannon Group and can be reached at bearknob@verizon.net. The website for the Moshannon Group of the Sierra Club is www.sierramsh.org.

Fred Woods Trailhead Directions

Moderate Difficulty (Distance and some rocks – 125 feet elevation gain)
35 – 45 min drive from cabin driveway to trailhead
4 hr / 4.0 mile loop hike

Elk State Forest Public Use Map available at:
Bureau of Forestry, Elk State Forest
P.O Box 327
Emporium, PA 15834
814 486-3353

...Directions to Trailhead

Choose either of the directions below based on winter road

...via Castle Garden/Mason Hill Rd (which is not recommended in winter as there's no winter maintenance after the first 1/4 mile of Castle Garden/Mason Hill Rd and it is edged by many unguarded steep drop offs):

Turn right out of the parking lot onto SR 555 E. Castle Garden Rd. will bear off to your right at 19.2 miles. You need to continue for another .5 m and at 19.7 m turn left onto Mason Hill/Castle Garden Rd. It will be signed for Mason Hill Rd only. Go ~ 1.2 m to 20.9 m and bear left continuing on Mason Hill/Castle Garden Rd. Lookout Rd. will bear right. If you've got a spare moment, the panoramic view from up there is spectacular...the village of Driftwood, the Sinnamahoning Valley and the Allegheny Mountains are spread at your feet! At 23.4 miles you'll find the small parking lot on your right and the trailhead on your left.

...via Houston Hill Rd:

Turn right out of the parking lot onto SR 555 E. At 13.0 miles turn left onto Houston Hill Rd. Go 1.4 m and at 14.4 m turn right onto Mason Hill Rd. (unsigned). Go 1.8 m and at 16.2 m bear right onto Sheddy Rd. (unsigned). Go .2 m and at 16.4 m keep right onto T349 - Mason Hill/Castle Garden Rd. (unsigned). Go 2.3 m and at 18.7 m you'll find the small parking lot on your left and the trailhead on your right.