

McCONNELLS MILL: SLIPPERY ROCK GORGE TRAIL

KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

LENGTH: 12.4 miles (6.2 miles if using car shuttle)

CONFIGURATION: Out-and-back or car shuttle

DIFFICULTY: Moderate to difficult

SCENERY: Slippery Rock creek and gorge, old-growth oak, hemlock, maple, and beech trees

EXPOSURE: Mostly shaded

TRAFFIC: Light

TRAIL SURFACE: Dirt, sometimes very rocky

HIKING TIME: 4 hours one way

ACCESS: Open year-round

MAPS: Available at park office (see Nearby Attractions following Description for phone numbers); PDF maps are also available online via the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Web site, www.dcnr.state.pa.us; USGS Portersville

FACILITIES: Nearest restrooms are located at McConnells Mill.

SPECIAL COMMENTS: Wear sturdy boots or trail shoes due to the rocky terrain. Stop in and tour McConnells Mill (see Nearby Attractions).

McConnells Mill
Slippery Rock Gorge Trail

UTM Zone (NGS84) 17T

Easting 563991

Northing 4531410

IN BRIEF

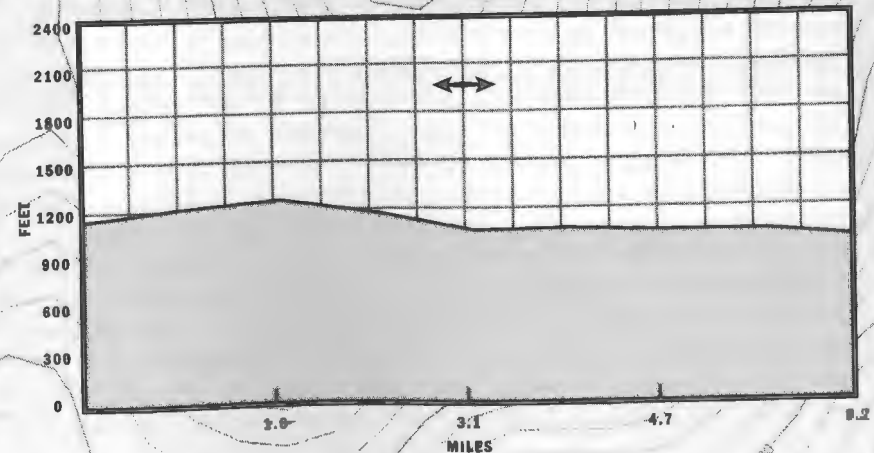
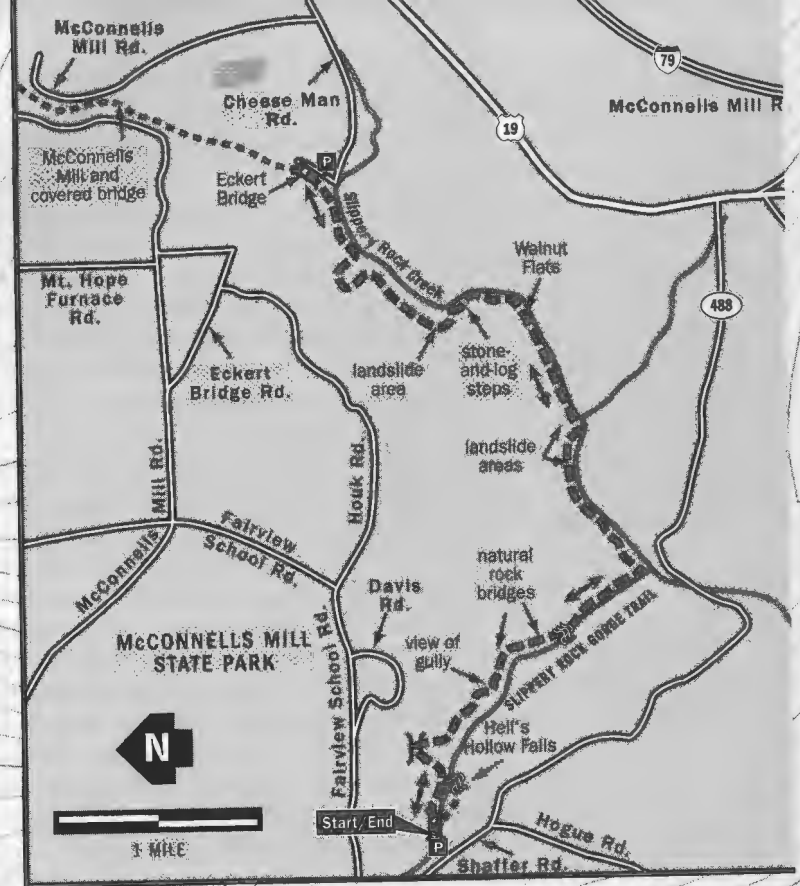
Bring your camera. The gorge itself, cut in just a few thousand years by the force of the meltwater of three glacial lakes, is surrounded by large trees (some virgin), waterfalls, and at least 69 species of wildflowers. Its rugged beauty made it one of the selections of trails that make up the North Country National Scenic Trail.

DESCRIPTION

McConnells Mill State Park encompasses 2,546 acres around the Slippery Rock Creek Gorge. The 930-acre Slippery Rock Creek Gorge was designated a Natural National Landmark in 1974 and became a State Park Natural Area in 1988. Through the gorge flows the 49-mile-long Slippery Rock Creek, which begets its name from a time when a Native American trail crossed the creek across a sandstone shelf over which a natural oil seep flowed. The shelf is located below the Armstrong Bridge on the southern end of the

DIRECTIONS

From Pittsburgh, take Interstate 279 North to I-79 North. Take Exit 96, Prospect-Portersville; turn left onto US 488 and right onto US 19. If hiking from Hell's Hollow, at 2.7 miles turn left on Johnson Road, drive to mill, then follow directions below. To hike from Eckert Bridge, about 0.5 miles from US 19 turn left onto Cheese Man Road; follow about 2 miles to turn right into Eckert Bridge-Breakneck Bridge parking area. If setting up a shuttle, drive back up Cheese Man Road, turn left on Kennedy Road, and follow past mill and over covered bridge. At about 1 mile from bridge, turn left on Mount Hope Furnace Road; at about 0.4 miles, turn right on Eckert Bridge Road; at about 0.2 miles, turn left on Houk Road; and at about 3.2 miles, turn left on Shaffer Road. At about 0.5 miles, turn left into parking area for Hell's Hollow.



gorge; and the oil seep was drained by oil wells drilled in the late 1800s, which were shortly abandoned as groundwater swiftly invaded them.

Credit for the existence of this spectacular trail goes to the Keystone Trails Trail Care Team, the Shenango Outing Club, and various Pittsburgh volunteers who conceived the trail and completed it from 1990 to 1994. Having done some trail work myself, I appreciate the difficulty of cutting this one.

The trail can be hiked from either end, but I started it at the trailhead at Hell's Hollow. The trail begins jointly with the Hell's Hollow Trail on a wide, flat path and over a small footbridge that crosses Hell Run. The Slippery Rock Gorge Trail departs to the left just before the second footbridge. If you don't mind an extra mile added to the hike, take the 0.5-mile level walk back to admire cascading Hell's Hollow Falls, enjoy a wide array of wildflowers, and look for an old lime kiln.

Upon returning to the Slippery Rock Gorge Trail, you'll find it continues to remain relatively flat until about 0.6 miles where, after crossing a small bridge over a water runoff that flows to Hell Run, a short but steep climb takes you to the ridge of the hillside. Mountain laurels and chestnut oaks can be found along this section. For almost a half mile, descend approximately 150 feet to an opening that affords a nice view of the ravine. The trail then leads through hemlocks growing so closely together and to the trail that they appear to form a tunnel. Hiking with a significant other turns this into a great spot to steal a kiss. A break in the hemlocks allows another view of the ravine before a turn in the trail at 1.4 miles leads to yet another visual treat. Stop here to take a look at the natural-rock bridge before crossing it. As you cross the bridge, take in the view of the water rushing underneath. Following is another section of hemlocks and another natural bridge where a side stream has dissolved the limestone underneath the trail. Rock outcroppings and shale are found along this section, and a waterfall on the right of the trail cascades down a steep drop in the terrain. The trail becomes more cumbersome with rocks and roots.

At approximately 2.4 miles is a short side trail on the right that you can descend for a view of Hell Run entering Slippery Rock Creek. Return to the trail and follow it carefully. You may find yourself following reroutes around blowdowns.

The trail has a lot of sun exposure in this section, even this deep in the gorge. At 2.6 miles, you'll find a series of cross-sections of trees placed to keep your boots out of the mud. At about 3 miles emerge into an area in which the trail has been somewhat washed away by mudslide. Round a narrow curve heading left, and tread carefully over water running down a shelf of rocks. Look for the blue blazes to regain the trail. Make a sharp right, dropping down to cross over more water runoff. Slippery Rock Creek comes into better view. Initially it is wide and calm, but quickly shifts into high gear as the depth changes and the water crashes around the boulders in the creek. Once again make your way over water runoff, and then you'll head back into the woods to be surrounded by mixed forest with a floor where moss-covered rocks and logs are frequent. The trail is flatter here and easier to navigate.

At 3.6 miles the land is separated in sections on the hillside, caused by more landsliding; the packed earth is literally cracked in sections horizontal to the hillside. Hikers are well rewarded for the navigation around cracks and fallen trees by the pure beauty to be found here. Be sure to avoid the thorny underbrush and look closely near the water's edge for evidence of busy beavers. At 4 miles, you'll reach Walnut Flats; there's no sign here to indicate it, but it should be evident by the rather level

walk along the creek. Across the creek and up the side of the gorge is Cleland Rock. About 140,000 years ago, small Lake Prouty was formed by a glacial dam and eventually spilled over the ridge to begin the carving of the gorge. This caused Lake Watts (a smaller version is what we now know as Lake Arthur in Moraine State Park) to eventually spill into the channel. The third contributor, Lake Edmund, finally scoured the gorge to its 400-foot depth.

After another mile, the ascent away from the water is marked by a climb up stone steps supported by some logs. At the top, look for the double blue blazes marking the sharp left turn in the trail. Continue the steep ascent from Walnut Flats. The climb lets off a little where large flat boulders come into view. I also noticed a number of pretty wildflowers blooming in early spring. At about 5 miles there is a waterfall caused by water running from the top of the ridge. This kind of water flow is partially what is responsible for the number of landslides that occur along this trail, including the one you should be arriving at now, which occurred in 1990 and has devastated the hillside. Beyond it, reaching unaffected forest provides a reference for the magnitude of the damage.

Eventually you'll round a bend toward the west, and the sound of the creek greets your approach. Looking down to try and see it gives an appreciation of how far you have now climbed above it. Enjoy the brief level section, crossing a few more runoffs and switching back left and then right to reach 5.6 miles. A steep descent leads back to the creek along which most of the remainder of the hike takes place. The trail along the descent is well supported to avoid its collapse. Notice the trail construction as you descend, and also the waterfalls along the way.

A set of double blue blazes at the bottom marks an obvious but sharp left turn. Pass another waterfall and pay attention to the trail, as the many rocks and tree roots require careful footing. At almost 6 miles, flatter rocks cover the trail and it is worthwhile to look around and take in the waterfalls, conifers, and deciduous trees that complement the sound and sight of the beautiful Slippery Rock Creek. Just after, the trail veers once more away from the creek affording another viewpoint and then rejoins it again following a stone trail. Not long after being on this section, at 6.05 miles, look across the creek for an inlet to see a low but wide waterfall flowing over boulders into the creek. The trail ends as scenically as it had begun. An old millstone mounted on a pedestal marks the trailhead on the Eckert Bridge side. If you shuttled a vehicle, make the 0.4-mile walk up to the parking area. If not, take a nice break and retrace the trail back.

▶ NEARBY ATTRACTIONS

Guided tours of the restored gristmill are daily, 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., from Memorial Day through Labor Day, and off-season by appointment. Call (724) 368-8811 (McConnells Mill State Park care of Moraine State Park) for more information, or e-mail morainesp@state.pa.us. The covered bridge next to the mill is a registered National Historic Landmark. For other attractions, visit Moraine State Park. Additional tourism opportunities can be found at www.lawrencecounty.com/tourism or by calling (724) 654-8408.