

## Exploring the Treasures of Clark Creek Natural Area

Story and Photography by Jim Beaugez

he pockmarked blacktop of Fort Adams Pond Road in Wilkinson County winds up, down, and through a rural scene of mixed hardwoods and pine trees, and weedy flowers dot the overgrown green roadsides. With few exceptions, it could be nearly any back road in Mississippi in the summertime.

Even at the Clark Creek Natural Area trailhead, there are not many signs that just a quick stroll down the path will reveal anything unusual, and certainly not the dramatic land-scape that draws tens of thousands of people down this road each year.

Clark Creek is quietly overlooked in Mississippi's collection of parks. It is conceivable that most Mississippians might not know that here, in the extreme Southwest corner of their state, upwards of 50 spring-fed waterfalls run almost year round.

Clark Creek Natural Area is not a leisurely stop off the Natchez Trace, like the similarly rocky Tishomingo State Park in the state's opposite corner, or the tranquil, lakeside Paul B. Johnson State Park, a respite from the buzz and dash of U.S. Hwy. 49 South of Hattiesburg.

A scan of license tags in the gravel lot indicates that many of the 20,000 to 30,000 yearly visitors are likely from Louisiana, whose border cuts the hills just a few miles to the South. It is an easy trek from downriver parishes and locales like Baton Rouge than most cities in the Magnolia state.

But as the saying goes, nothing worthwhile is easy.

Clark Creek Natural Area comprises 700 acres of the Tunica Hills, a stunning stretch of the narrow Loess Hills region that straddles the Mississippi Delta beginning at the Tennessee line and ending a dozen or so miles into Louisiana.

Wind-blown deposits from the Delta region collected here raising the hills 400 feet above sea level and then carving steep chasms and ravines.

The changes in relief and geography eventually revealed the natural springs that feed Clark Creek, where crystalclear water now spills over ledges up to 30 feet high, and winds over and around sandstone and clay formations that rest on the creek bed.

Park manager Mark Cavin explained that most of the rocks here are actually hardened clay, noting that the waterfalls formed where the water could not cut through the clay. Instead, the water ate away at the sand around and underneath the clay deposits over time and with greater force as the falls grew.

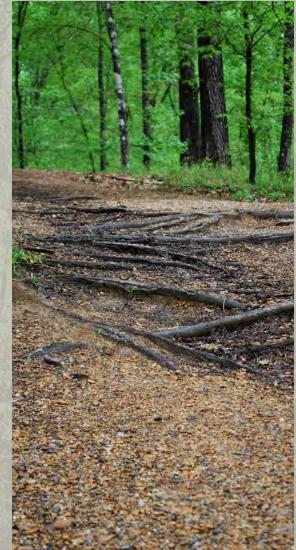
This hidden state treasure was private until 1978, when International Paper and local landowner David Bramlett donated their plots of land to the state for public use.

"It's so rough they couldn't do anything with it," said Cavin. "You can't log it because the land is so hard it's not worth it." Cavin paused, then added: "And it's such a pretty place."













white oak, hackberry, cedar, and poplar specimens, with many of the larger several of the waterfalls. trees towering above the narrow ridgelines from far below.

County, said the land around Clark working at Clark Creek in 2000, often Creek was used for decades as a rec- hauling loads of slag and gravel with only clue left behind is a largely empreational spot for locals, even while it his own ATV and tractor to fortify the ty forest floor situated at the top of a was part of International Paper's hold- dirt and clay trails, which were suscep-

"People hunted the land back then," he said. "You could just go where you fic through Clark Creek. wanted to hunt, as long as it wasn't in the big thing; all the deer were in the before then." swamps back then."

The bounty of hardwoods spared the '90s, when the Mississippi Departax includes a mix of red oak, beech, ment of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks started to improve the trails that lead to nants occasionally peek through the

helped clean them up and bring them Cavin, who grew up in Wilkinson to their current state when he started tible to washout. Now, the improved trails carry the majority of the foot traf-

someone's yard. Squirrel hunting was road," he said. "It was nothing but dirt the 1800s," said Cavin.

The area began to take shape as an carry on after reaching the first two port of Fort Adams, located two miles

ridgeline to bottom and back up again.

Lost settlements and plantation remundergrowth and foliage throughout Cavin knows the trails well. He the greater region, according to Cavin. One known settlement site in Clark Creek is located on the improved trail on the North side of the area, but the ridge. Today, a lean-to shelter marks its

"Every now and then flowers will bloom in places on top of all these "We laid those trails wide like a ridges where houses were built back in

This area was once located on a com-More adventures await hikers who merce route to the Mississippi River officially protected area in the late falls, as the trail works its way from Northwest as the crow flies. First settled in the late 1600s as a Jesuit mis- ers can take on the five-mile primision. Later the site was a territorial fort tive section of trail that takes the long near the international border along the way around the Southern part of Clark river. Fort Adams was the site of the Creek, but it is not for novices. Treaty of Fort Adams signing between ment in 1801.

board Pond Store to water their mules might have to wade through cane, and trek to market.

"When they were taking the cotton to Fort Adams, they took the cotton through this area and put that pond there to water their horses when they came back up through these hills. That goes way back to plantation times."

For more taxing adventures, hik-

"People think they can take off the Choctaw tribe and the U.S. govern- through there and do it, and then they get in trouble and get too hot this time In later years, farmers would stop at of year," said Cavin. "A lot of times the nearby pond outside the white clap- you'll have to climb over rocks, you and horses and then continue on their in the summer you're going to come out with ticks."

"Whatever nature puts there, that's what you have to deal with."

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