



# Exploring *the* *Treasures* of Clark Creek Natural Area

Story and Photography by Jim Beaugez

The 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 landscape 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 crystal-clear 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."



The bounty of hardwoods spared the area includes a mix of red oak, beech, white oak, hackberry, cedar, and popular specimens, with many of the larger trees towering above the narrow ridgelines from far below.

Cavin, who grew up in Wilkinson County, said the land around Clark Creek was used for decades as a recreational spot for locals, even while it was part of International Paper's holdings.

"People hunted the land back then," he said. "You could just go where you wanted to hunt, as long as it wasn't in someone's yard. Squirrel hunting was the big thing; all the deer were in the swamps back then."

The area began to take shape as an officially protected area in the late

'90s, when the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks started to improve the trails that lead to several of the waterfalls.

Cavin knows the trails well. He helped clean them up and bring them to their current state when he started working at Clark Creek in 2000, often hauling loads of slag and gravel with his own ATV and tractor to fortify the dirt and clay trails, which were susceptible to washout. Now, the improved trails carry the majority of the foot traffic through Clark Creek.

"We laid those trails wide like a road," he said. "It was nothing but dirt before then."

More adventures await hikers who carry on after reaching the first two falls, as the trail works its way from

ridgeline to bottom and back up again.

Lost settlements and plantation remnants occasionally peek through the undergrowth and foliage throughout 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 only clue left behind is a largely empty forest floor situated at the top of a ridge. Today, a lean-to shelter marks its general area.

"Every now and then flowers will bloom in places on top of all these ridges where houses were built back in the 1800s," said Cavin.

This area was once located on a commerce route to the Mississippi River port of Fort Adams, located two miles Northwest as the crow flies. First set-

tled in the late 1600s as a Jesuit mission. Later the site was a territorial fort near the international border along the river. Fort Adams was the site of the Treaty of Fort Adams signing between the Choctaw tribe and the U.S. government in 1801.

In later years, farmers would stop at the nearby pond outside the white clapboard Pond Store to water their mules and horses and then continue on their 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-

ers can take on the five-mile primitive section of trail that takes the long way around the Southern part of Clark Creek, but it is not for novices.

"People think they can take off through there and do it, and then they get in trouble and get too hot this time of year," said Cavin. "A lot of times you'll have to climb over rocks, you might have to wade through cane, and 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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