

Bad Branch State Nature Preserve

A sensory tour on Pine Mountain

By Joyce Bender
Kentucky State Nature Preserves Commission



the velvet softness of moss cloaking the hollowing shell of a beech tree. It is the rich, earthy scent of needle, bark and leaf moldering into soil and the sharp, spicy fragrance of pine needles, blueberry leaves and sandstone baking in the sun at the summit. It is the bracing chill of the spray from the 60-foot waterfall at the head of the gorge, the delicate curve of the ghostly pale Indian pipe, the dash of crimson on the white canvas of the painted trillium. It is the earth meeting sky along the crooked

to the waterfall is less than two miles round trip). A portion of the Pine Mountain Trail passes through the preserve along the crest of the mountain between the Jefferson National Forest property on the east and U.S. Highway 119 to the west.

Bad Branch is one of eight state nature preserves on Pine Mountain. The site's ecological significance led the Kentucky State Nature Preserves Commission in 1992 to seek partners to work on protecting high-quality natural areas along the entire 120-mile length of Pine Mountain. Targeting gaps between existing public lands and with additions acquired in the ensuing years courtesy of The Nature Conservancy, the Kentucky Heritage Land Conservation Fund, Kentucky Natural Lands Trust, Kentucky Department of Parks, the Kentucky Division of Forestry, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, the Pine Mountain Trail Conference, the Pine Mountain Settlement School and the U.S. Forest Service, we really have something to show for those early dreams.

Come visit Bad Branch and the other public lands on Pine Mountain and give your senses, as well as your legs, some exercise.

TOP: Indian pipe.
Courtesy of Barry Howard

INSET: Painted trillium.
Courtesy of Ellis Laudermilk



As the manager of Kentucky's state nature preserve system for the past 29 years, I am often asked which preserve is my favorite. I have several that I hold close in my heart, but more often Bad Branch comes into my thoughts ahead of the others when I hear this question. It may be that a girl from Ohio found in the mountains of southeastern Kentucky a landscape so breathtakingly different that her first visit in 1987 made a lasting impression. Or it may be that the sights, sounds and scents of this Pine Mountain paradise stayed with

me and can still be easily conjured up whenever I say its name. Rather than taking leave of my senses over this beautiful place, I truly came into them there.

Bad Branch is the sound of tumbling water rushing down the south face of Pine Mountain on its way to the Poor Fork of the Cumberland River. It is the calls of the black-throated green warbler that follow you through the cool, shady forest. It is the sunlight drifting through the lacy boughs of hemlock trees,

spine of Pine Mountain.

There are many distinctions for Bad Branch. The variety of life protected within the 2,639-acre preserve includes the highest concentration of rare plants and animals known from the 63 state nature preserves. Bad Branch was designated a state wild river in 1986. The 7.5-mile roundtrip trail to the falls and High Rock on the crest is one of the most scenic in Kentucky (a hike just