

Kentucky's Nature Preserves

Jesse Stuart State Nature Preserve

An Appalachian appreciation

By KSNP Staff
Kentucky State Nature Preserves Commission



“Kentucky Is My Land.” With his growing success as a writer, he began to slowly purchase the property that included all the hill farms that he and his family had sharecropped for years. He spoke of restoring his beloved land that others had left bruised and broken from poor logging and abusive farming practices, “I’ll fill the washing ruts and care for those acres like they were so many long-starved friends – so much taken away from them by ruthless strangers and nothing returned to them,” Stuart wrote.

In his last years Stuart was approached by timber companies who wanted to buy his land for logging purposes. Stuart, who had been a self-described “fighting man,” and an avid admirer and advocate of his homeland, immediately sought a solution. Through a gift purchase agreement with Land and Water Conservation, the Kentucky State Nature Preserves Commission received 715 acres of Stuart’s land and his legacy lives on today. Situated just outside of Greenup County on the rugged hills of the Cumberland Plateau, the Jesse Stuart State Nature Preserve is bisected by W-Hollow Road and spreads across several broad ridges and encompasses numerous deep ravines on both sides of the narrow, meandering road. Oak and hickory crown the ridge top forests, ravines are shaded by towering tulip poplar and

sycamore trees interspersed with tall pines that Stuart himself planted more than 50 years ago. Old bottomland pastures are turning into young blossoming forests with signs of wildlife such as turkey and deer that are evident in the scratched up leaves under the oak, hickory and persimmon trees. His “long-starved” hills are not only recovering, but prospering.

A hike through the nature preserve presents an opportunity to live his poetry and breathe in firsthand his teaching. Walk the paths that overlook Greenup County, the Ohio and Little Sandy River Valleys. Take in the picturesque views and as in Stuart’s words, “read the landscape, the streams, the air and the skies.” Hike the Shingle Mill Hollow Trail and you are transported into the poem Shingle Mill Symphony, walking, “...a cattle path... that parallels a winding, dwindling stream. On either side there is a rugged hill; to walk this valley is to dream a dream.”

The preserve is open from sunrise to sunset daily. Recently a case of Lyme disease has been reported. Please make sure to take necessary precautions when visiting, such as checking your clothes and body after hiking. Please visit <http://naturepreserves.ky.gov/naturepreserves/Pages/jessestuart.aspx> for more information.

Life can take you many places, but there is no place like home—especially for one “country boy” named Jesse Stuart. Renowned for his literary works and educational efforts, Stuart, grew up in Greenup County and coined the phrase, “If these United States can be called a body, then Kentucky can be called its heart.” But, Stuart was also an early contributor to the preservation of land that today makes up some of Kentucky’s thousands of acres of nature preserves.

a writer and educator. During his 77 years, Stuart wrote 500 short stories, 703 sonnets and 60 books. Stuart was a man who stopped plowing to write a sonnet. He often would use a poplar leaf if the mood struck and no paper was handy. He proclaimed in one of his writings that he was “a farmer singing at the plow,” drawing great inspiration from his surroundings and his real life.

Early in life Stuart became an educator, school principal and even a Kentucky poet laureate. He produced popular books such as, “The Thread That Runs So True” and “A

Stuart was born in southern Appalachia in 1907 and traveled the world as both



TOP LEFT OPPOSITE PAGE: A sign welcomes you to the nature preserve.

ABOVE: A path trails off into the wilderness. This trail is one of many found at the nature preserve.

INSET: Jesse Stuart. Photo courtesy of the Jesse Stuart Foundation