



Winter's revelations at Vernon-Douglas SNP

By Joyce Bender
Kentucky State Nature Preserves Commission

Vernon-Douglas State Nature Preserve (SNP) hides its power under a leafy cover. Walking the trail in the summer months is quite different than hiking the same path in the winter. The grandeur of the spreading crowns towering so high above and the substantial trunks that command your attention are subdued by the shorter distance that your eyes can see when they are distracted by leaf-filled branches and shrubby mid-story growth. To really get to know a preserve, you must hike it in the winter.

Walking the trail at Vernon-Douglas in Janu-

ary reveals the forest and the topography in a stark, immediate manner. The architecture of the landscape is exposed in the strength of trunks and grace of arching boughs. The ridgeline and steep slopes stand out in graphic relief above the meandering creek, more so if lightly dusted with snow. The landscape has the power to awe us with its austere beauty and humble us with its scale.

This Hardin County treasure protects 730 acres of rugged knobs and hollows and is one of the finest examples of an acid mesophytic forest (dominated by sugar maple, beech and tulip poplar) known

in Kentucky. The hills that rise around Hall Hollow protect and sustain some of the most mature forest in the Knobs region.

Thanks to the vision of the former owners, siblings Eleanor and Ollie Douglas, much of this area has been left virtually untouched for the last 120 years. Preservation of this land was the goal of the Douglas family, who had owned the land since the early 1900s. They intended

that the forest in Hall Hollow would never be logged. They desired to restore the farmed valley in Burns Hollow to forest. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Ollie Douglas applied a number of conservation practices on the land including erosion control (with kudzu!) and pine plantings in the old agricultural fields. In 1972, the Douglas family donated their land to The National Audubon Society. It maintained the area

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BACKGROUND: *Sunlight filtering through the tree canopy in Hall Hollow.* Photo by Preserve Monitor Joel Thomas
INSET: *Vernon-Douglas field trip.* D. Payne photo

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as a nature sanctuary before donating it to the Kentucky State Nature Preserves Commission, which dedicated it as a state nature preserve in 1992.

The 3.75-mile hiking trail starts near the mouth of Burns Hollow. This broad hollow had large infestations of kudzu, which the commission spent nearly 20 years eradicating. The formerly farmed valley is now filling in with young forest. The trail winds its way upward to the ridge, passing impressive-sized oaks and hickories. The trail diverges at the ridge—one side of the loop descends a side slope and passes through the bottom of the rich, north-facing Hall Hollow. The other side continues along the ridge above and around Hall Hollow. Long, dramatic views of the curving ridge and the steep slopes to the valley below accompany the winter ridgetop hiker. The ridgetop trees are those typical of well-drained drier forest soils, including chestnut oak, black oak and pignut hickory. Before the ridge top trail descends, a short

spur leads hikers to a narrow point known as “the Pinnacle.” When the leaves are off, it provides a bird’s eye view of the Younger Creek valley across the Bluegrass Parkway.

Hikers may find reasons to linger in Hall Hollow in every season. The forest’s undisturbed floor provides the best spring wildflower display on the nature preserve, especially along the creek sides. A quiet hiker may glimpse deer or turkey foraging for beech nuts and acorns. The large trees can leave one contemplative in the winter or grateful for the cool shade in summer.

The preserve is open daily for passive recreation from sunrise to sunset. Hiking, nature study and photography are encouraged, but please stay on the trail and leave all living and nonliving materials as you find them. Horses, pets, bicycles, hunting, fishing, camp fires and motorized vehicles are not permitted on the preserve. Help protect Kentucky’s natural heritage by packing out all trash and traveling only by foot.