



BY JOHN ROSS PHOTOS BY WILL SHILLING

Even in beautiful woods, those pensive hours dwarfed by forests of unimaginable size and age, hiking can make you desperate for sky.

So a stretch along the sloping grass of Germantown Dam, which opens brightly from a hardwood tunnel after six miles, is most welcome. On a day like today, cool and clear, you can see for miles, the fields and forests of this Southwestern Ohio valley looking like a landscape for a toy train.

Standing 100 feet tall, the massive earthwork was built after the Flood of 1913, when rain funneled currents 10 feet deep into downtown Dayton. Today it's part of the diverse terrain along the Twin Valley Backpack Trail, a 22-mile loop set to open June 21 in the city's Five Rivers MetroParks.

The Gem City might not be known for wilderness excursions — but that's set to change.

With the Wright Brothers' cultural cache dwindling, the city has tapped Five Rivers Outdoors, the park system's adventure initiative, to exploit surrounding natural resources to attract residents and tourists. Since 2005, the group's young, knowledgeable staff has been responsible for some of the most unique wilderness projects in the state.

The MetroParks Mountain Bike Area, known as MoMBA, opened in September. Work is underway for a whitewater paddling park and a multiuse corridor along the Great Miami River. And numerous adventure gatherings — Paddle in the Park, Gear Fest and Adventure Summit — introduce the public to these extensive holdings.

Soon the hope is to bill Dayton as the adventure capital of the Midwest, says special events coordinator Tom Helbig, my guide for this two-day preview



trip on a sunny weekend in May.

"Especially around Germantown and Twin Creeks, we're trying to gobble up land near the parks," he says. "2007 saw the largest land acquisition in MetroParks history. Our main thing is access."

Twenty-five parks now hold roughly 16,000 acres, he adds proudly.

The Twin Valley trail, a series of trails running between two popular parks, is a triumph in an outdoor activity most cities haven't even tried and a remote option for those looking to use the park for more than family picnics.

Germantown's loop is spectacular. It's flatter

BACKPACKING

Where: Germantown

Distance from Columbus: 85 miles

Difficulty: Moderate. Experienced overnight hikers should tackle the course with ease. Others can choose one main loop to do overnight or shorter day hikes on ancillary trails. Especially hiking during the hotter months, all hikers should be in good shape.

What I liked: A wide, gently undulating trail through varied terrain. The fishing along Twin Creek and wildlife spotting along the trail are amazing.

What I didn't: Backtracking, backpacking's twisted sister, to access the Cedar Ridge primitive campsite. Other sites require leaving the main trail, and some of the tent spots are a little rough right now.

What you'll need: To do it all, a good backpacking setup with a tent, sleeping bag and other gadgets (see Venture on page 28). It's a remote trail, so day and overnight hikers should bring plenty of fresh water and nutritious snacks and check with park officials for trail info.

than most trails in the Hocking Hills, often a Central Ohioan's first outdoor choice, and gives Old Man's Cave a run for its money.

Except for a few sections, the path resembles an access road — wide, smooth, well marked by wooden blazes and in great condition. Most of it meanders through tall forests, along bottomland strewn with wildflowers and across shallow creeks. Occasionally, it ventures into verdant meadows and aromatic tracts of pine.

Expect to see deer, beavers, songbirds and plenty of blooms. Other surprises (good ones, not bears) are common. The Twin Creek loop, another main section reachable by a 7.5-mile connector that runs along roads and a paved bike path, is similar.

On opening day, backpackers will be able to camp at three remote sites, each with three tent pods, an outhouse and a common area. Groups can take advantage of three campgrounds that also feature a fire pit. Permits will be required.

Co-adventurer Mary Reed, author of go-to guidebook *Hiking Ohio*, points out at dinner that the Germantown loop isn't a true backwoods wilderness experience. Cars on state routes can be heard from the trail, and I get cell-phone reception in my tent.

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Then again, unlike our group, most people don't walk uphill for hours, happily sweating under the weight of a 30-pound backpack, just to poop in the woods.

For most, this is the perfect trail to try an outdoor overnight — a rare middle ground to go from the tamer world of day hiking into more advanced realms. For most, this trail is plenty wild.

"Why we're an advocate of the adventure features is because at the parks that have them, the usership is through the roof," says Helbig, putting on a headlamp to light his camping stove. "In Dayton, Ohio — who knew?"

TRAIL MAP

- ① GERMANTOWN LOOP (6.8 miles)
- ② GERMANTOWN DAM
- ③ SHARED-USE CONNECTOR (7.5 miles)
- ④ TWIN CREEK LOOP (7.9 miles)

- PRIMITIVE BACKPACKING SITES
- ⬡ GROUP CAMPING SITES
- ▲ OVERNIGHT PARKING

The Twin Valley Backpack Trail opens Saturday, June 21, in Dayton's Five Rivers MetroParks. Starting at noon, grand-opening festivities will include live music, gear demos, nature classes and shuttle service along the trail. For info and overnight camping permits, call 937-277-4374. Official trail maps will be available opening day.

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