

# Volunteers on the Red Leaves Trail

*Text and Photo by Randy Hedgepath*

Walking trails have never before had so many users and supporters. Today, we recognize the benefits of walking a trail thru the forest. Walking and hiking on trails can relieve stress and improve your physical and mental health. Some people believe that hiking trails provide the best way to connect with nature.

In the late 1960s, a group of trail enthusiasts sought to provide Tennesseans with a number of major long distance trails. Unfortunately, a number of obstacles kept most of the trails as just proposals. Funding that was secured for the projects was not being used. To adapt to the situation, shorter trails were planned on existing state lands to make use of the funds. One of those projects is the Red Leaves Trail on the Natchez Trace State Park and State Forest in Wildersville in West Tennessee.



The Red Leaves Trail was built in 1977. The total trail length is 42.5 miles thru 48,000 acres of state land. It consists of a north and a south loop and a long connecting trail between them. The four lakes within the Natchez Trace Forest are all along the route. Campers on the trail can feast on freshly caught fish while enjoying the panoramic views across the lakes. The terrain is sand hills and wet bottomlands. This is a lush garden of wild plants with outstanding groves of hardwood trees, colorful wildflowers, and abundant ferns. Groves of Loblolly Pine were planted to slow soil erosion and today have reached an impressive size. Numerous clear streams run in steep sided gullies thru the soft sands.

Walking the trail is generally an easy and rewarding experience. Things to beware of include holes in the tread formed by underground erosion, wet muddy areas, and the summer time slate of insects and snakes. If you become familiar with the hazards and how to deal with them, they will be less of a problem. The trail's 42.5 miles is enough to give you a real wilderness experience or a wide variety of possible short walks. The Red Leaves Trail is a valuable and convenient nature resource for west Tennessee.

The north loop is near my childhood home. Having the trail and the great forest there was a matter of pride. Except for use by a few people like me, the trail has received little use thru the years and remains largely unknown. It often has been regarded as a maintenance burden for the park and forest employees. Staff time is hard to justify on an unused facility.

By 2006, the north loop of the trail had essentially disappeared and the rest of the Red Leaves Trail needed extensive renovation and maintenance. Then in the summer of 2007, the reopening of the trail became a project of the Tennessee Youth Conservation Corps. Months of hard work by the dedicated young members of the TYCC brought the trail back from obscurity. The lucky hikers who had experienced the trail before rejoiced because finally they could walk it again.

The economic downturn of 2008 caused the end of many worthwhile programs including the TYCC. The spring of 2008 was also the time when a high wind, possibly a tornado, destroyed four sections of the north loop. Less than a year after its reopening, the trail again needed a lot of work but had no youth program to take on the task. My mother, Shelby, saw the damage going to church and told me the bad news. I resolved to get involved when I saw the destruction because I knew it was going to be a big job and the staff at Natchez Trace was already short on time and manpower.

Park Manager Walter Pope pledged that his staff would work on the damaged section as much as they could. Trails Administrator Gary Patterson toured the damage and offered many worthwhile suggestions. The Tennessee Trails Association, Jackson Chapter, pledged their help with the effort. Dick McKeen, from TTA, became a regular volunteer. I spent many days working on the trail and took every opportunity to tell folks about the trail and the problems. The volunteer effort had begun and soon our trail would be open again.

The Tennessee Division of Forestry managed a salvage logging operation in the damaged sections which reduced the bulk of the clearing that had to be done on the trail corridor in the summer of 2008. This work set the stage for the rest of us to get busy. The two interior damaged sections became my personal project. They were cleared by the summer of 2009. That summer, Pope, with Rangers Chris Hill, Greg Taylor, and Alicia Weber, marked a reroute of the worst area which happened to be the north loop junction near the end of Cavia Road. A lucky result of the economic situation was that a summer crew became available to work on the reroute. They had it cleared by the end of the summer. With that done, the north loop was open again.

Trails need maintenance, especially trails that don't get a lot of hikers like the Red Leaves Trail. Dick McKeen saw the need to renew the blazes on the entire Red Leaves corridor and has been working on that. Near Sulphur Fork Creek there was a very confusing area where hikers were losing the trail. I volunteered to help Ranger Chris Hill and the Natchez Trace 2009 Seasonal Interpretive Rangers Cody Gilliam and Tyson Weller to reroute this section. Walking a trail is good exercise and working on a trail is even better. The Red Leaves Trail has a continuing need for our help and we can benefit from the healthy activity too. Even if you do not want to do maintenance you can help by going for a walk. Lightly used trails benefit from more traffic that better defines the tread and hikers reporting trail problems help planning trail work.

A reason some folks give for not trying the Red Leaves Trail is that it is an overnight trail. With the length of the entire trail an overnight trip is possible. Three backcountry campsites are provided for that more in depth experience. Day hikers can enjoy the trail, too. Numerous road crossings make many shorter walks easy to do. The north loop can be accessed from the Pecan Tree Picnic Area. The south loop can be accessed from the Cub Lake Road, several paved and gravel roads, and from the Cub Lake Trail. In and out walks are great fun too so a walk of any distance can be planned with or without being a loop.

Get out and enjoy a trail walk today. There are trails in most parks and most would benefit from your walk, not to mention how much you will benefit. And with that reward from nature you may grow to love certain trails and get a desire to help keep them in good shape for yourself and others.

To volunteer, contact the park management at 731-968-3742 or visit the Web site [www.tnstateparks.com](http://www.tnstateparks.com) and look for the park site, and for Web pages for Tennessee State Parks friends groups and volunteer opportunities. Check out the Web site for the Tennessee Trails Association at [www.tta.org](http://www.tta.org) or other trail clubs or organizations and tell them about your favorite trail and ask to help. See you on the trail.

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