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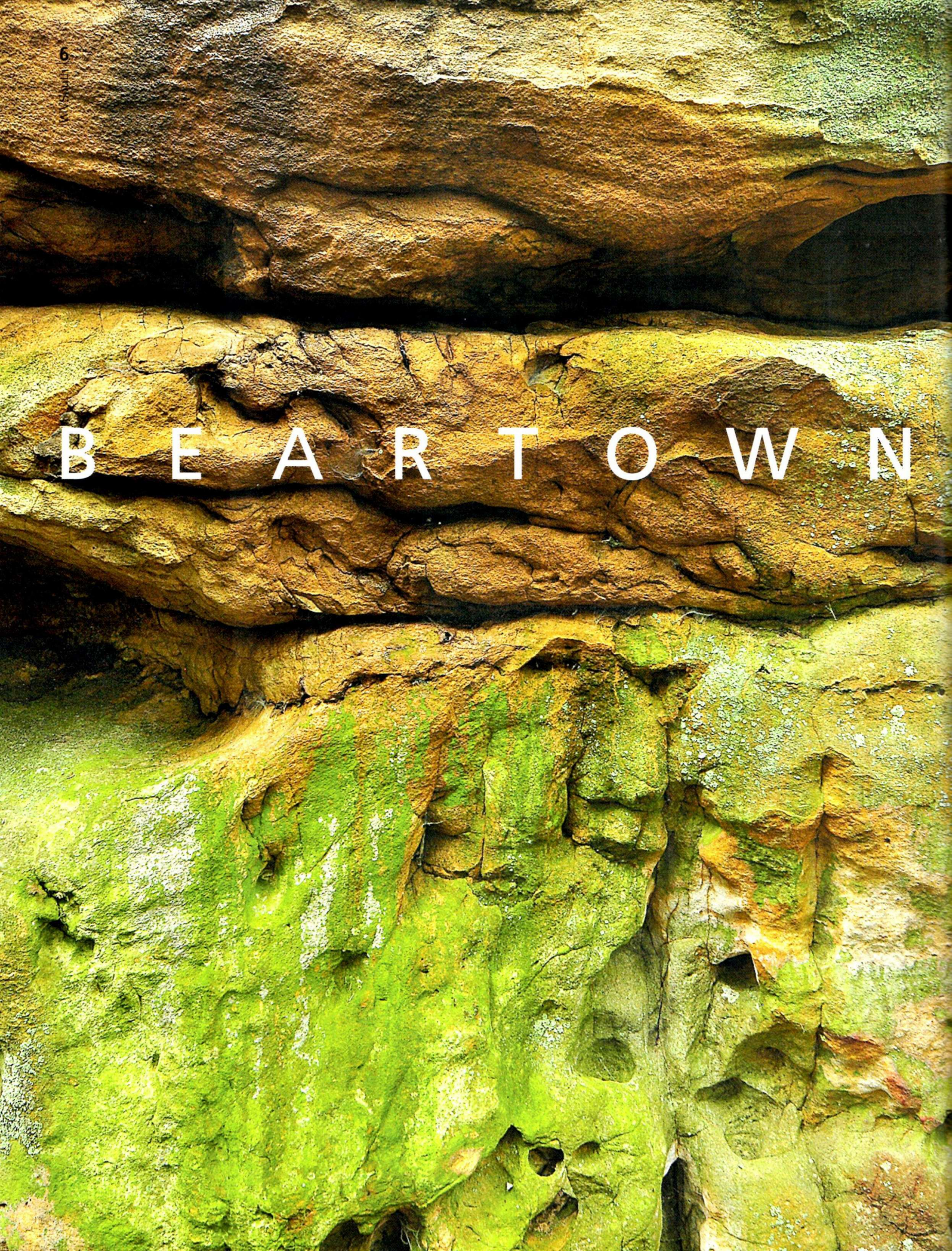


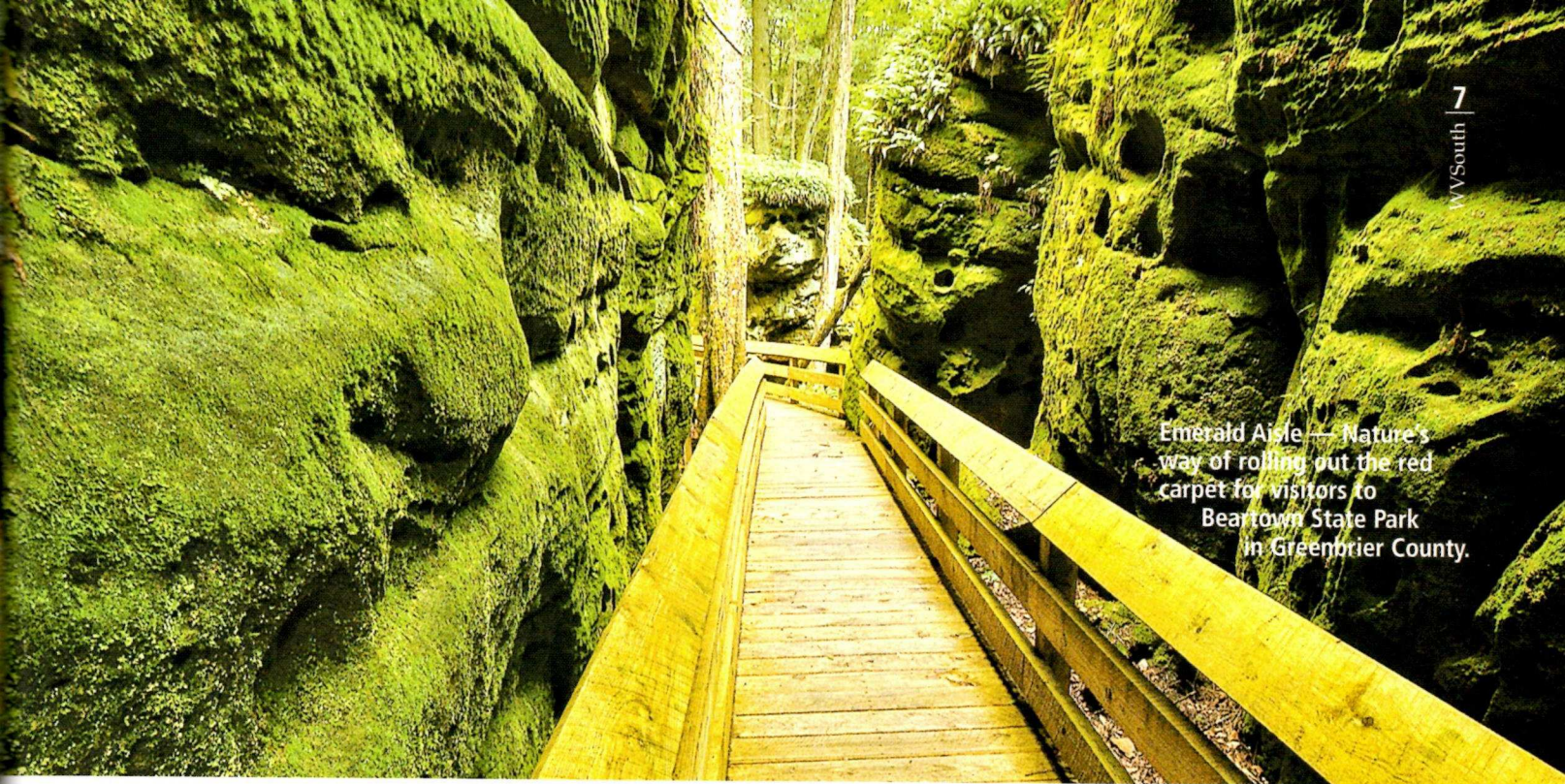
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BEARTOWN





Emerald Aisle — Nature's way of rolling out the red carpet for visitors to Beartown State Park in Greenbrier County.

R O C K S THE ARTFUL OUTDOORS IN GREENBRIER COUNTY

**Story and photos
by Ed Rehbein**

It must have been my inner-artist (if I have one) that went, “Wow,” the first time my wife, Phyllis, and I visited Beartown. I’m referring to Beartown State Park, a 107-acre natural preserve perched on the eastern slopes of Droop Mountain in Greenbrier County seven miles south of Hillsboro on U.S. 219. The park was established in 1970 with funds from the Nature Conservancy and a donation from Mrs. Edwin G. Polan in memory of her son, Ronald Keith Neal, who lost his life in the Vietnam War. Before our first visit to Beartown, Phyllis and I had just returned from visiting Barry Bryson, a fellow preacher working in Manassas, Va., who had graciously given us a grand tour of Washington, D.C., and its most popular science museums and fine art galleries. Yet as Phyllis and I strolled the boardwalks of Beartown, I thought to myself: Here is a museum of both natural history and art that rivals any that Washington has to offer.

STROLL THE BOARDWALKS

To preserve the natural beauty of Beartown and make it more accessible, 2,300 feet of boardwalk and wooden steps wind through the park. There is also a 250-foot boardwalk accessible by wheelchair as well as an accessible parking area for the boardwalk. The boardwalk and steps, which serve as your guide through this outdoor museum, begin at the top of a massive 30-foot thick sandstone rock layer and gradually descend downslope and into the clefts woven between. Along the way, well-written and informative plaques describe the natural processes at work at Beartown. As you descend the boardwalk, the crevices seem to narrow and the rock walls grow taller. At some point it seems as if you’re strolling the corridors of an elaborate art gallery, upon the halls of which nature has hung paintings and displayed sculptures.

BEARTOWN ROCKS!

Rocks, remarkably shaped and deeply colored, are the main attractions at Beartown. The geologic name for the rock at Beartown is the Droop Mountain sandstone (or Pottsville

sandstone), which was formed by the sands of an ancient sea some 300 million years ago. The rock is composed primarily of coarse grains of sand and small amounts of clay minerals — both visible to the naked eye. The sand and clay is cemented together by a hard silica matrix, which makes it resistant to decomposition.

Carved by time and the elements, these rocks have been wrought into angular boulders, rounded stones, and narrow crevices. The crevices crisscross the area dividing the bedrock into large stone islands as shown on the park map. The intersecting crevices resemble streets, and the stone islands look like city blocks. Couple this with a natural habitat for bears in the clefts and caves, and you have the name Beartown. To make matters interesting, the Droop Mountain sandstone sits on a soft layer of shale composed primarily of clay minerals. Thus the heavy sandstone blocks at Beartown are prone to sinking and sliding on this soft underlayer.

The display of stone is awesome and diverse. Some of the blocks are

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Look — no hands (or bears)! Ancient minerals have stained the high climbing rock formations to rival contemporary artwork, in a setting the author attests is safe from carnivorous encounters, in spite of its name.



Spiky, stunning ferns and a facelike rock prove that even bad hair days can be beautiful at Beartown.



The author's wife, Phyllis, takes a quick break between views along Beartown's 2,300 feet of boardwalks.

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angular while others are softly rounded. Slabs of stone rest upon one another at uneasy angles. Vertical rock walls give way to gravity-defying overhangs. The diverse shapes suggest a sculptor's hand at work. Indeed, the erosive processes of nature are the sculptors at Beartown, and her sculptures abound. Irregularities in the cementation of the sandstone have been accentuated by the elements. Water and ice have slowly but surely worn away the stone to varying degrees. The softer zones of the rock have been hollowed out leaving a dazzling array of vertical and horizontal flutes and narrow ridges. In other places, rounded depressions, shallow holes, and deep pits have been hollowed out of the exposed vertical walls of the Droop Mountain sandstone. The shapes formed by the erosion of the sandstone are exquisite in their diversity and will delight the eye of any passerby.

WALL PAINTINGS

Not only has nature sculptured the sandstone corridors of Beartown, she has painted them as well. Red, ochre, and brown stains due to the weathering of iron-bearing minerals paint the rock walls as well as any human artist could. If this wasn't enough to captivate the eye, moss covers many of the rock walls coating the finely sculptured surfaces in Kelly green. One such narrow corridor is so lavishly draped in moss that I have dubbed it, "The Emerald Aisle." Another such moss-covered crevice, somewhat narrower but equally coated in green, is located at the end of the wheelchair accessible walkway. The boardwalks do not pass through this crevice, but instead stop at the beginning of the cleft and enable you to peer down into it.

In addition to moss, the forest surrounding Beartown is lush with ferns. Lush green ferns cap many of the monoliths. Called "Cap Ferns," these ferns grow on the nutrient-poor, humus-rich soil topping the sandstone blocks. One such group of ferns grows on a block of rock seemingly carved to resemble a human head complete with eye sockets, a protruding nose, distinct chin, and a tuft of unkempt "hair." I have nicknamed this rough-hewn statue "Bad Hair Day." Very light gray-green lichen mottle the rock and moss surfaces, too, adding texture and splashes of color.

PRESERVING THE PARK

In May of 2012 the park was reopened after being closed in the fall of 2011 for necessary maintenance. One serious problem facing the park is the spread of the hemlock woolly adelgid, an aphid-like insect from Japan. The adelgid feeds on sap from hemlock needles, causing defoliation, and eventually the decline and death of the tree. Due to the adelgid infestation, about 50 hemlocks had to be removed due to the threat they posed to users of the boardwalk. In addition Mike Smith, park superintendent, reports on the park website "that we have completed restoration of approximately 350 feet of boardwalk." So the park is being carefully managed to protect the trees and natural surroundings as well as those who walk the boardwalks to admire them.

Development of the park has been minimal to preserve the natural attractions of the area. However, ample parking, restrooms, picnic tables and a water pump are available. The park is open daily from April to October. During the closed winter season foot travel to the boardwalk area is welcome, with parking available at the closed

entrance gate. Visiting Beartown State Park is free.

NEARBY ATTRACTIONS

Though by itself Beartown is worth a trip, many interesting attractions are nearby as well. Droop Mountain Battlefield State Park is just six miles north on U.S. 219 and certainly merits a visit. Watoga State Park, the Greenbrier River Trail, the Pearl S. Buck Birthplace Museum, the Cranberry Glades and the Falls of Hills Creek are all within 20 miles or less of Beartown. By the way, maps and information about Beartown State Park can be found online at www.beartownstatepark.com/

And to allay any fears about visits to Beartown — I have not seen any bears, so do not let the name of the park scare you off.

Nestled in the hills of West Virginia, the rocks and plants at Beartown have combined their attributes to create an outdoor museum of artfully sculpted and colored rock. Your only regret at Beartown will be the end of the boardwalk because it will signal that your tour of nature's art museum has concluded. But if you like Beartown as much as Phyllis and I do, you'll tell your friends about it. And your first visit won't be your last.

Happy Trails.

Ed Rehbein of Beckley is a frequent contributor to West Virginia South. His photography can be viewed at "Ed Rehbein Photography" on Facebook. His work is for sale at Tamarack, in Beckley WV, and online at <https://our-wv.com>. With Randall Sanger, he co-authored an award-winning book of photography called West Virginia Waterfalls: The New River Gorge, available online, at Tamarack, and from the authors.



A distinct piece of "art" at every stop makes the hike worth the effort. Boardwalks, including those that facilitate a 250-foot section of wheelchair-accessible views, take visitors on their self-guided tour through an authentically natural and historical outdoor museum.