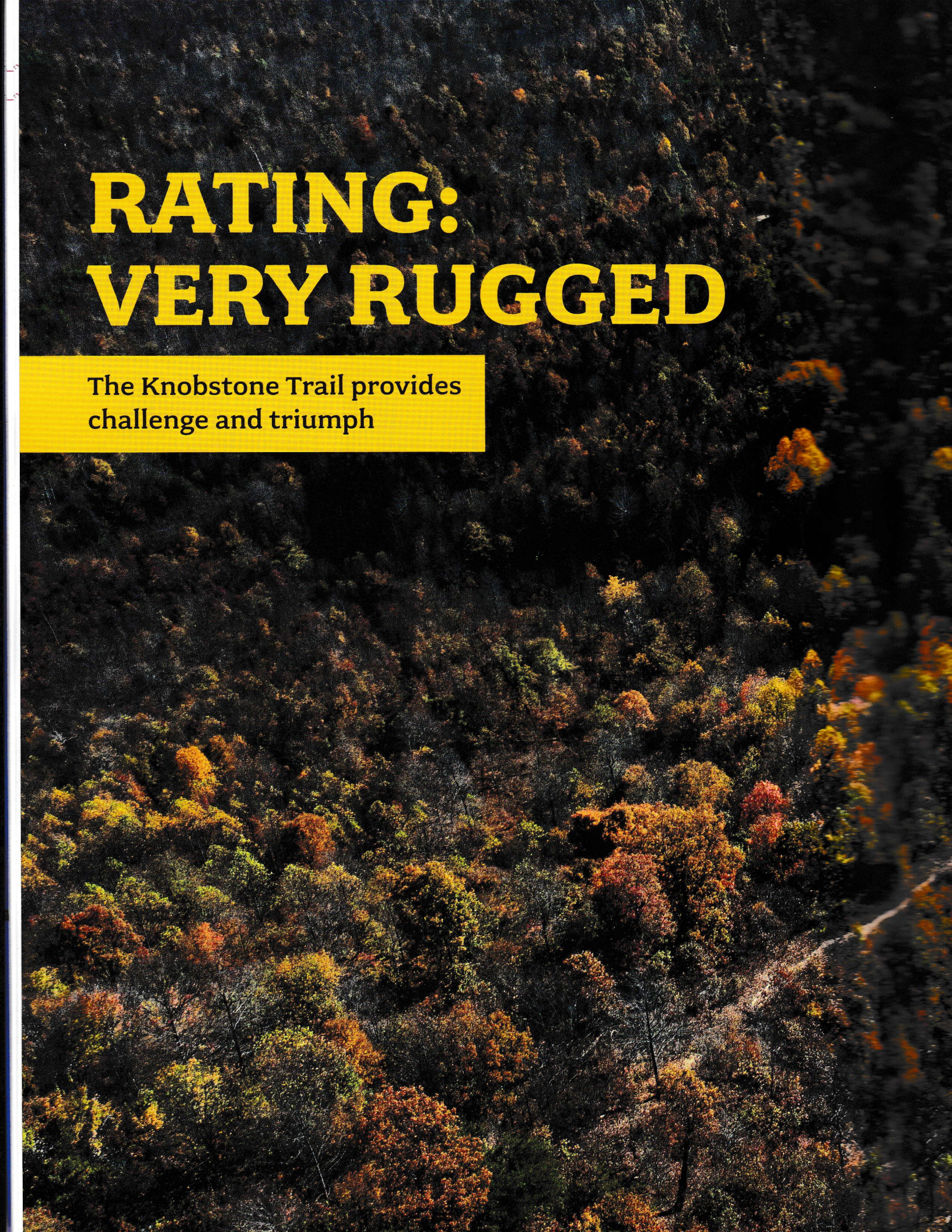
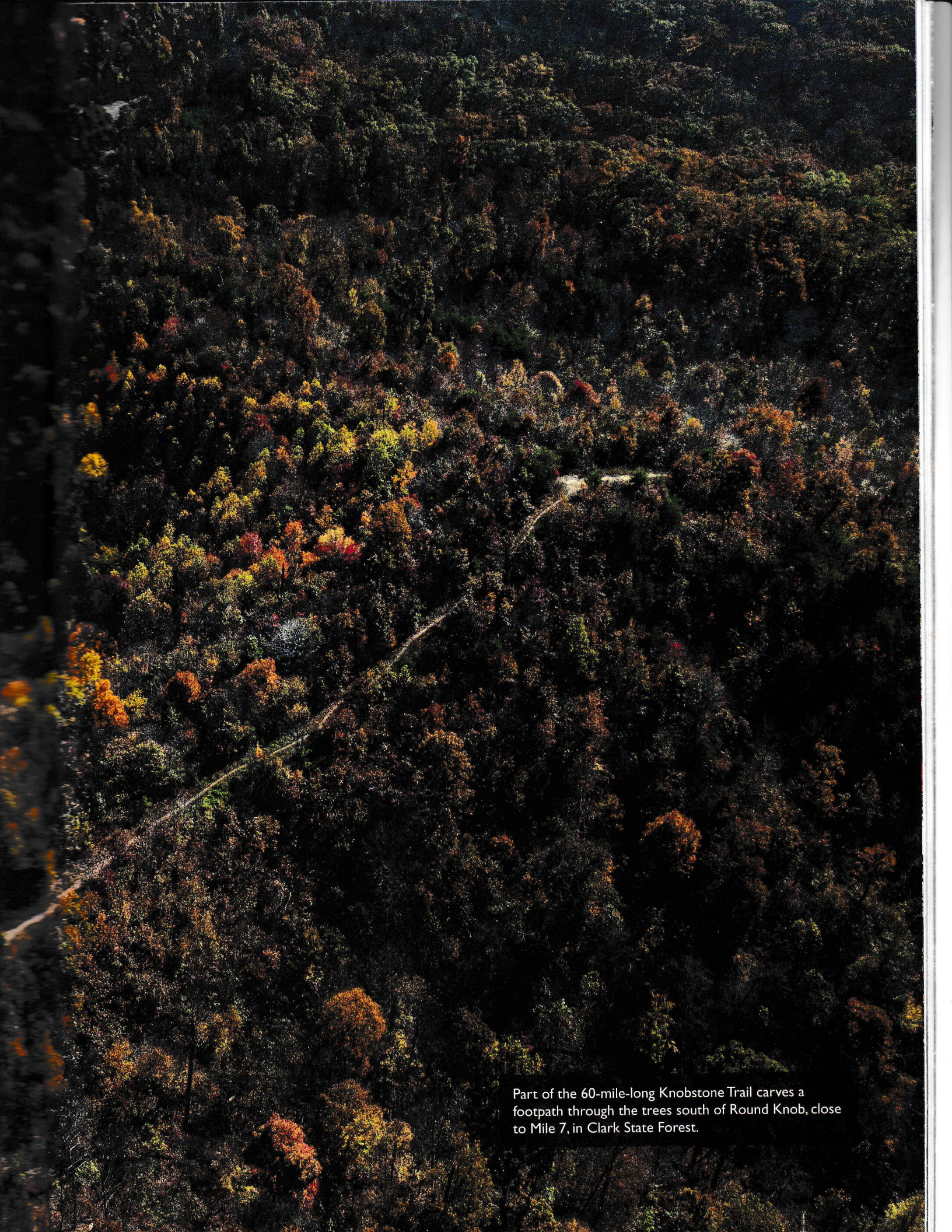


RATING: VERY RUGGED

The Knobstone Trail provides
challenge and triumph





Part of the 60-mile-long Knobstone Trail carves a footpath through the trees south of Round Knob, close to Mile 7, in Clark State Forest.

By Scott Roberts, OI staff
Photography by Brent Drinkut, OI staff

Hoosier hikers find many reasons for tackling the Knobstone Trail, a 60-mile route through beech-maple and oak-hickory forest along the rocky escarpment in southern Indiana for which it's named.

Jordan Lacy of Plainfield likes the views. He routinely hikes the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee and North Carolina, as well as the Red River Gorge in Kentucky. The Knobstone is one of the only places in Indiana he can achieve similar elevation. He's hiked it 15 to 20 times because of the challenge and the scenery at its peak.

His favorite spot on the trail, which has become one of its best-known features, is a hill called Round Knob. It's about 7 miles north of the Deam Lake State Recreation Area starting location. On a clear day, hikers can see the Ohio River and catch a glimpse of the Louisville skyline.

"When you get to a knob that has wide open views of a valley below, it just gives you a good sense of accomplishment," Lacy said.

For Jesse Vest of Jeffersonville, the trail's isolation provided a reset. During his hike, he didn't take his cellphone, enabling him to better enjoy the connection between himself and his thoughts.

"By the third day of my hike, I was feeling good," he said. "I was burning clean mentally, by which I mean my thoughts weren't all jumbled and crazy, but streamlined and focused."

The experience encouraged him to spend less time on his phone when he got back from his trip and focus more on being present in day-to-day interactions.

For Michelle Mauck of Borden, the draw is the challenge of the rugged terrain as well as socialization. She started hiking the Knobstone during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and fell in love with it. In late 2023, she launched the Tri-State Hiking Events Group on Facebook. As a direct result of its growth, this year a group of 15–20 women have hiked the trail a little at a time, beginning in January. They've met every month since to enjoy hiking a few Knobstone miles and each other's company.

"Some ladies like to hike straight through, others stop and take pictures of the scenery and take in everything, and the group allows everyone to hike it at their own pace and share their journey," Mauck said.

Called the KT for short, the Knobstone has provided similar experiences and more to hikers since the completion of its first 32-mile section in 1980. Its current length was finished 10 years later. Now the trail stretches from Deam Lake SRA to Delaney Creek Park in Washington County. About 1,300 people hike it each year, according to DNR's Division of Forestry, which manages and maintains it. That figure includes people who use it to access hunting areas or lakes.

The trail took shape thanks to the location of DNR state forests as well as the courage and vision of some DNR employees.

GETTING THE LAND

In 1972 Jerry Pagac moved from his native Wisconsin to work with the Indiana DNR. In 1974 he was promoted to

streams and trails specialist, a position in which his job was to work with citizen groups and nonprofits to acquire and develop local trail projects. During that time, he also developed a love for backpacking and hiking by exploring several sections of Hoosier National Forest.

Pagac found himself wanting longer trails. He began looking at maps to see where a several-miles-long route could be built. He noticed the Knobstone Escarpment on the map and that Clark and Jackson-Washington state forests nearly border each other, and began to get excited. The only obstacle was a small gap in between that was owned by McCormick Lumber Company.

"I discovered that if you look on the map even today, everything is linear, perfect for a long-distance trail," Pagac said. "It was pretty obvious on a topographical map how that would work."

The Knobstone Escarpment is the most significant geological feature in Indiana. Formed 200 to 400 million years ago when rock strata pushed up through the Indiana plains, it consists of sandstone, limestone and shale, and stretches 110 miles from just north of the Ohio River to a few miles south of Martinsville. It rises more than 300 feet in some areas and is named for its rocky hills. Because there are few level places on it, the escarpment has mostly remained unsettled.

Despite the gap, Pagac and Joe Payne, a new employee who was hired to assist him, began plotting the route of the future KT using topographical maps and various other tools.

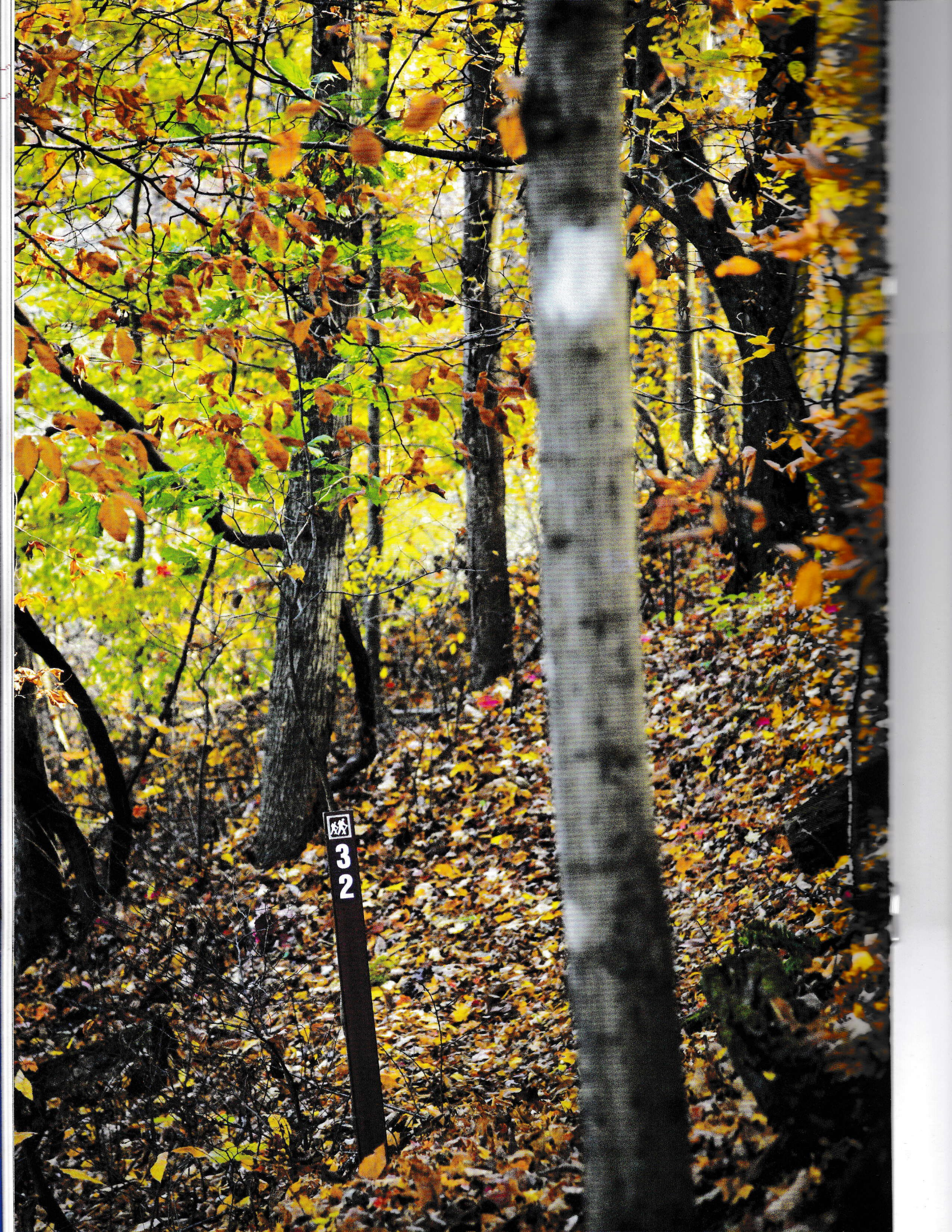
By 1979, Pagac and Payne were both promoted. Pagac had become director of the then Division of Outdoor Recreation, and Payne took Pagac's prior position. Pagac got great news when Dennis Wolkoff, director of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) at the time, whom Pagac had spoken to about the KT, called him one day.

"He said, 'You're never going to believe this, but that



(Above) Avid hiker Michelle Mauck at the Pixley Knob Road trailhead. (Opposite) The views surrounding Round Knob, close to the Jackson Road Trailhead, are a highlight of the KT hike.





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lumber company is going out of business and needs to sell," Pagac said. "That's when Dennis and I created what we call the plot."

At the time the DNR didn't have money in the budget to buy McCormick's land, so the TNC purchased it with the agreement that the DNR would buy it from them for the same price. After getting assurances from the Indiana General Assembly the money for the purchase would be in the budget the next year, the deal was set.

On March 31, 1979, the TNC bought the 1,047 gap acres, and four months later the land was transferred to DNR.

BLAZING A TRAIL

While Pagac focused on acquiring the land, Payne worked with the Indiana Water Resources Research Center at Purdue University to design a trail that would cause the least erosion. The route was laid out using data gathered from aerial surveys and topographical maps, staying on public land.

Constructing the trail along the escarpment meant there would be rugged sections that would force hikers to climb, though Payne tried to avoid areas that would be too demanding. But sometimes the only option was also the toughest because portions of the trail were linked by narrow strips of public land, leaving no other way around obstacles.

Most of the KT was designed without many switchbacks, which are curves in a trail that help guide hikers up a steep cliff a little at a time, because such features weren't a staple of trail design 40 years ago the way they are now.

Payne and a staff of DNR workers began work on clearing the KT in 1977 at Deam Lake SRA to connect to Jackson-Washington. The first parts of the trail were made from existing dirt paths that were created from illegal dirt bike activity.

Once the trail was mostly plotted, it was up to Payne and his staff to follow it. Because cellphones with GPS didn't exist yet, they had to follow the planned route guided by maps, a range finder, a compass, and an altimeter. Workers also had a two-way radio, but it only worked sporadically.

"Sometimes after everything we had to have a best guess of where the trail was supposed to be," Payne said.

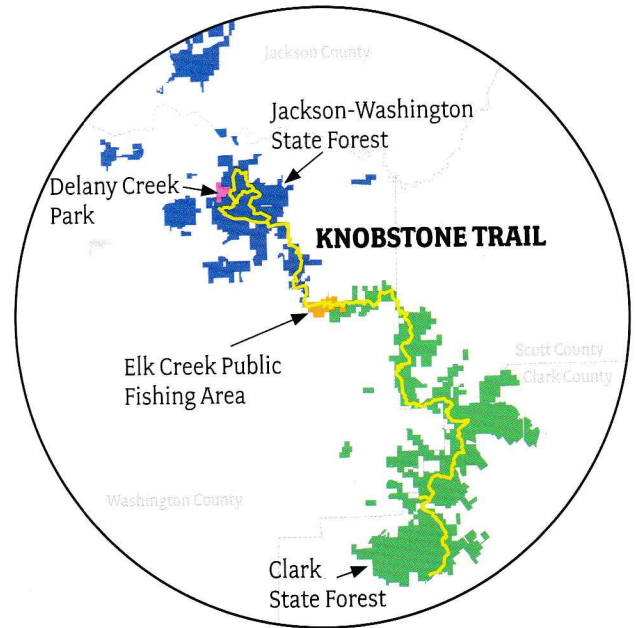
The actual work was hard and physical. Trails were cleared using axes, rakes, saws, and lopping shears that laborers had to carry in from the beginning of the trail. Workers would spend most of daylight building trail, sleep at the Clark State Forest office, or occasionally camp on the trail before resuming the next day.

"I had hiked in the Rockies for a couple of years before that, and then in the Smokies, so I was somewhat used to the grind, but even with that, some of those humid days were terrible," Payne said. "They really beat me up."

Despite the rough conditions, he said most of the crew members were positive and loved the work. They liked being out in nature creating something new. Work continued from April to October each year.

By 1980, the first 32 miles were completed, with help from the Young Adult Conservation Corps, a federal program that provided jobs and training to unemployed and out-of-school

(Opposite) White blazes on trees mark the KT, and numbers on brown posts show hikers their mile-marker location on a corresponding map.



young people between ages 16 and 23. The Indianapolis Hiking Club and Youth Conservation Board of Washington County contributed volunteer hours.

Soon, the KT crossed into McCormick's former land and then into Jackson-Washington State Forest. The trail then made its way through Elk Creek Public Fishing Area. From there the plan was to take the trail through the rest of Jackson-Washington and into Delaney Creek Park. Delaney Creek officials liked the idea and allowed DNR to store equipment in the area for building that portion of the trail, but Payne had to negotiate with some private landowners along the creek to get the trail through their parcels to connect the Knobstone and the park.

Payne befriended some of landowners in the area and spent a lot of time interacting with neighbors and local property managers on public and timber company property. Through his and other DNR workers' negotiations, the path started to become a reality.

"A lot of it was interpersonal, establishing faith and trust," Payne said. "Not everyone wanted to cooperate, but we could work something out with most people. It just took a little psychology and being up front with people."

Delaney Creek Park's existing trails became part of a loop in the area, and on April 20, 1990, a celebration and brief ceremony was held at the park to commemorate the KT's completion.

Payne still considers his work on the trail as one of the highlights of his career.

"I've always been an outdoor guy, and that was a whole lot of fun," he said. "It was pretty impressive getting to that stage."

TODAY'S MAINTENANCE

When Mark Percival retired from his job as a communications technician maintaining and repairing phone lines for AT&T in 2009, he wanted to continue getting outside as much as he could, and he'd hiked sections of the KT several times.

"I always thought, man, that would be a fun job, being out on the trail every day, staying outdoors, I'd love it," Percival said.





Hidden by Elk Creek Public Fishing Area's trees, the KT hugs the picturesque shore close to mile 33.



SONG OF THE KNOBSTONE

He worked various odd jobs until 2016, when DNR hired him to maintain the KT, clearing obstructions and keeping signs updated. Since then he's been out on the trail four days a week. He's seen every part of the KT multiple times. Although he's never walked it all straight through, he guesses he covers its equivalent distance two to three times a year.

Percival said he considered himself in decent shape before starting his DNR job, but soon realized that wasn't enough for continuous work on the KT.

"I thought 'What have I done to myself,'" he said. "I started walking up and down these hills, and it's like, 'Oh my gosh, I am not used to this.' There's a reason it's considered the most rugged trail in Indiana."

On a typical day, Percival checks in at the Jackson-Washington office and reviews his assignments. He keeps a spreadsheet with portions of the trail he's worked on and projects he still needs to do. Then he heads off to the part of the trail he's working on. Sometimes he spends a third of his day or more traveling to his work site.

Percival's typical duties include updating the trail's blazes, which are 2-inch by 6-inch white rectangles on trees that designate where the trail is, and making sure the mileposts and signs are upright and visible. He also clears the trail of debris.

Sometimes bigger projects arise. Shortly after Percival started, the entrance to the trail at Deam Lake SRA was moved a half mile, so he had to move every mile marker accordingly. That took a couple of weeks. During that time other projects stacked up, making for a busy first few months.

On many days, Percival needs tools like weed whackers, loppers, manual saws, chainsaws, and spray paint for blazes. Sometimes the trail is wide enough for a small vehicle to get in, but in most cases any tools he needs must be carried in and out.

"Most of the time I have a partner, and we each put on a pack. One person carries a pack with a saw, another person carries a pack with fuel and safety gear like goggles and gloves, and we'll just hike in," Percival said.

Occasionally he forgets a tool and either has to make the long trek back to get it, or just go without. It's a mistake he's made only a few times.

He finds areas of the trail that need work through his own observation as well as through conversations with hikers he meets and input left in the comment boxes at trailheads.

Percival said he's physically on the trail for most of his job, but occasionally it rains or snows too much for it to be safe. During those times he works on maintaining his equipment and planning future work.

"There's always something to do," he said. "I'm definitely never bored."

HIKING THE TRAIL

Due to the way the trail was constructed as well as its topography, the KT is unlike any other trail in Indiana. Because of the nature of the escarpment, there are many climbs. Hikers have used the Knobstone as training for the 2,190-mile Appalachian Trail (AT), the longest hiking trail in the country, because of its similar isolation and terrain.

(Opposite) Mark Percival clears a fallen pine tree from the Knobstone Trail in Jackson-Washington State Forest.

Elisabeth Ohly-Davis of Yorktown was so awestruck with her time on the Knobstone Trail she decided to commission a song about it. Its rocks, terrain, and views were so out of character with what she'd seen in the rest of Indiana, she thought a song could give the trail more notoriety.

"I thought Indiana doesn't get enough credit for what it has, and people need to know about this," Davis said.

Davis was orchestra director at Carmel High School at the time, and she thought her group could play the finished piece at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic in Chicago in December 2019. She met composer Stephen Lias, who had composed music for the centennial celebration of the National Park Service in 2016, and they agreed to meet to hike the trail later that year.

"I was delighted to find such a lush and challenging hike in this part of the country," Lias said. "It felt similar to some of the densely wooded trails in the mountains of Arkansas to me, but with plant life I was less familiar with."

Their time on the trail was cut short when Lias found out his father had suffered a stroke, but he still had experienced enough of the KT to write the song. Lias and Davis thought the theme for the piece should be overcoming adversity because the trail was so challenging.

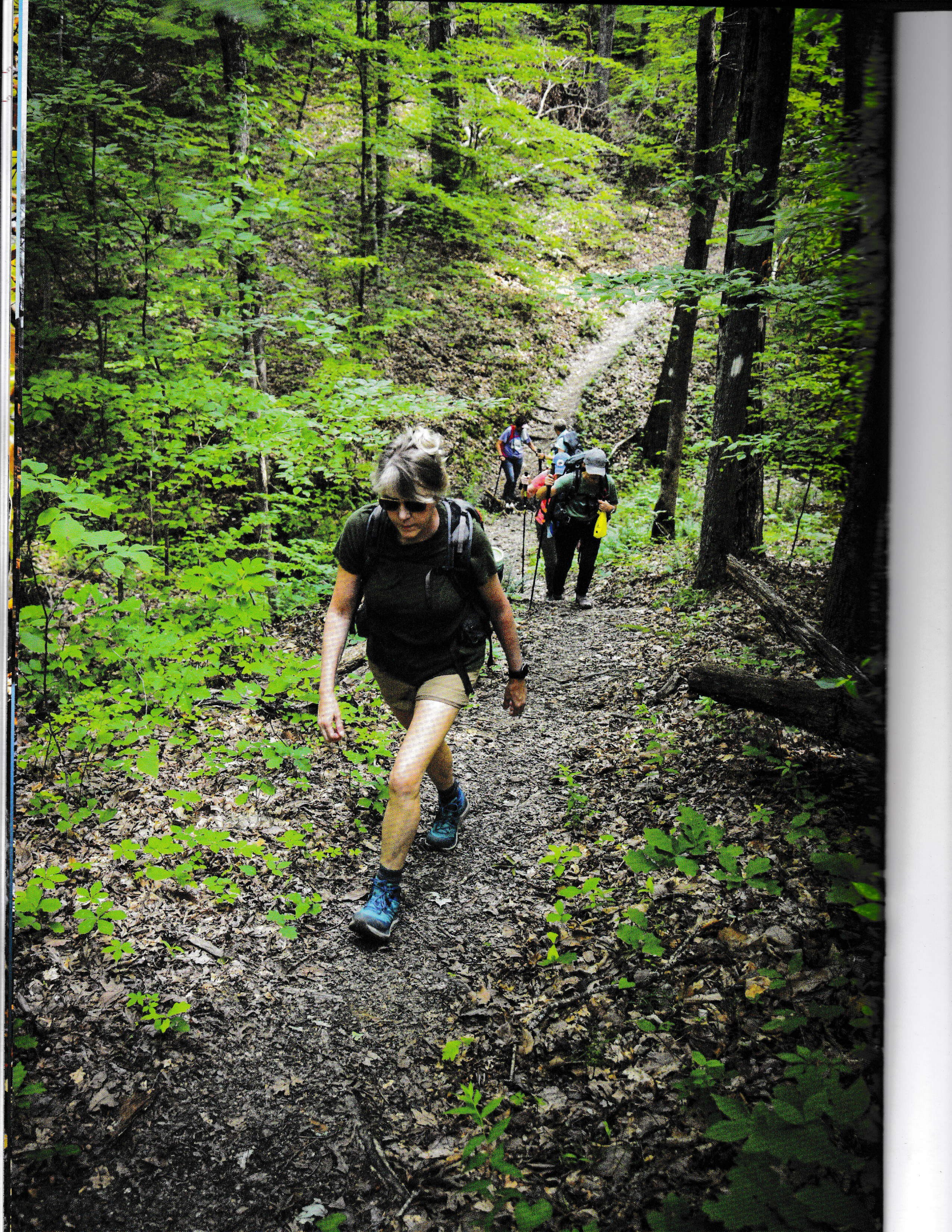
After a few tweaks to make the song playable for a high school band, Lias finished the piece, and it was debuted at the clinic. You can find it on YouTube by searching for "Knobstone Trail Live."

"When writing the piece, I tried to exclusively focus on the thematic ideas surrounding the Knobstone Trail, the rhythm of hiking, forward momentum, drama, beauty, and accomplishment," Lias said. "As I listen to it now, I'm struck by the range of moods and colors it portrays."

"It twists and turns the way the trail does and has sudden revelations at times."

The theme of overcoming adversity took on new meaning for Lias after his father passed away six weeks after his hike, while he was still working on the piece. He said his father always supported his music and would be happy he finished it. He hopes more orchestras will play it and make more people aware of Indiana's longest hiking trail.





"The Knobstone is pretty brutal with all of the ups and downs because it uses different muscles all the time," Lacy said. "I just get used to using one group of muscles going up, and I'm already back down again."

Percival said he's heard hikers say that because of its hilly nature, in some ways they think the KT is harder than the AT because the AT's hills are farther apart.

Before starting the KT, hikers should *check on.IN.gov/knobstonetrail* for trail conditions and potential reroutes. Physical maps can be purchased for \$10 by ordering through the DNR customer service center at 317-232-4200 or at the property office at Clark or Jackson-Washington state forests, Deam Lake or Starve Hollow state recreation areas, or Delaney Creek Park.

Because the KT is isolated for miles, hikers need to bring all they will need for their journey. The only modern facilities are at the end points, Deam Lake SRA at the south and Delaney Creek Park at the north.

Hikers don't need to tackle the entire stretch at one time. The Knobstone has nine trailheads that are 7 to 12 miles apart. Each has a small gravel parking lot and borders a road, so hikers can park along the route and exit and enter, or if they are in a group, park cars at two different trailheads, then hike from one to the other.

Hiking from trailhead to trailhead without completing the KT is called section hiking. Mauck said she and her group wouldn't be able to hike the KT if they didn't section hike it. Her group and many other hikers choose to complete one or two sections at a time at their own pace.

It's not clear if hiking north to south or south to north is easier, but many hikers agree that the trail looks different when hiking in the opposite direction of the way they've hiked before. Lacy prefers going north to south because the mile markers decrease in that direction.

Hiking the KT also differs depending on the season. Robin Cummings of Seymour and her husband Jim started hiking the trail as an empty-nester hobby last winter. She liked the clear views she got of the landscape and that she was able to keep cool.

In late April, she tried the Knobstone again, but the plants had leafed out, and she found it a lot harder to find the trail. She also did not get the views she liked and needed to drink a lot more water to cool down.

"I think what it came down to is I'm a winter hiker," Cummings said.

Whether section hiking or doing the full trail, hikers need to remember to carry enough food and water. Only two trailheads have creeks near them, Elk Creek and Spurgeon Hollow, and their water must be filtered before drinking. The creeks also can run dry during dry parts of the year.

Those who plan on hiking the entire trail at once will sometimes leave containers of water at the different trailheads before their hike so that they can make sure they have enough for the journey without having to carry it. This is called caching, and it's what Lacy and Vest do before their hikes. Lacy takes a gallon of water and finds a spot that's away from the trailhead's parking lot but still easy to get to, writes his name and the date he intends to pick it up on it, and then leaves it sealed.

After completing his hike, Vest said he wished he brought more food. Instead, he tried to make his backpack as light as possible. He quickly realized he was burning more calories



(Opposite) Rachel Williams climbs during a day hike from Pixley Knob with the Tri-State Hiking Events group. (Above) Maidenhair fern grows in the understory along the Knobstone.

than he had packed, leaving him extremely hungry but still able to continue.

Hikers needing to relieve themselves should do so discreetly by finding a secluded location and making sure to dispose of waste in a hole 6 to 8 inches deep, 4 to 6 inches wide, and at least 200 feet away from campsites and water sources.

Because the KT is so long, many will take more than one day to hike it if they want to complete its full length. Camping is allowed, but DNR regulations require camps to be on public lands at least .25 miles away from all roads, recreation areas, and trailheads while staying out of sight of the trail and all lakes. DNR encourages campers to call DNR Law Enforcement Central Dispatch, 812-837-9536, to inform them about overnight stays on the trail.

In the book "A Guide to the Knobstone Trail," Nathan Strange writes that flat KT campsites are few and far between and provides a few other campsite guidelines. Hikers should avoid using existing camps along the trail to maintain the route's solitude. Instead, they should choose the most open and remote areas to do the least damage to the ground and plant life as possible. He said dry creek beds can work well.

Vest said the trail area is different at night. He didn't see a lot of wildlife during the day, a few woodpeckers and cardinals and one wild turkey. He could hear a lot more at night, coyotes, foxes, and frogs, as well as small animals rustling in the leaves.

Shuttle services, none of which are affiliated with DNR, can be a big help to Knobstone hikers no matter how far they are going. For a fee of about \$10 to \$40 depending on the service, drivers provide a ride to hikers who want one. Hired drivers can also bring water, food, and sometimes medical supplies to hikers who have run out and help others cache water before their trip. A Google search will turn up a few shuttle services, most of which work only part time.

The KT can be experienced in many ways. Choose yours, grab ample water, food, sturdy shoes and a backpack, and start hiking. □

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