Photo by John Jaeger

# the return of wilderness to Ohio Hanging Rock

## a story of industry and nature's renewal

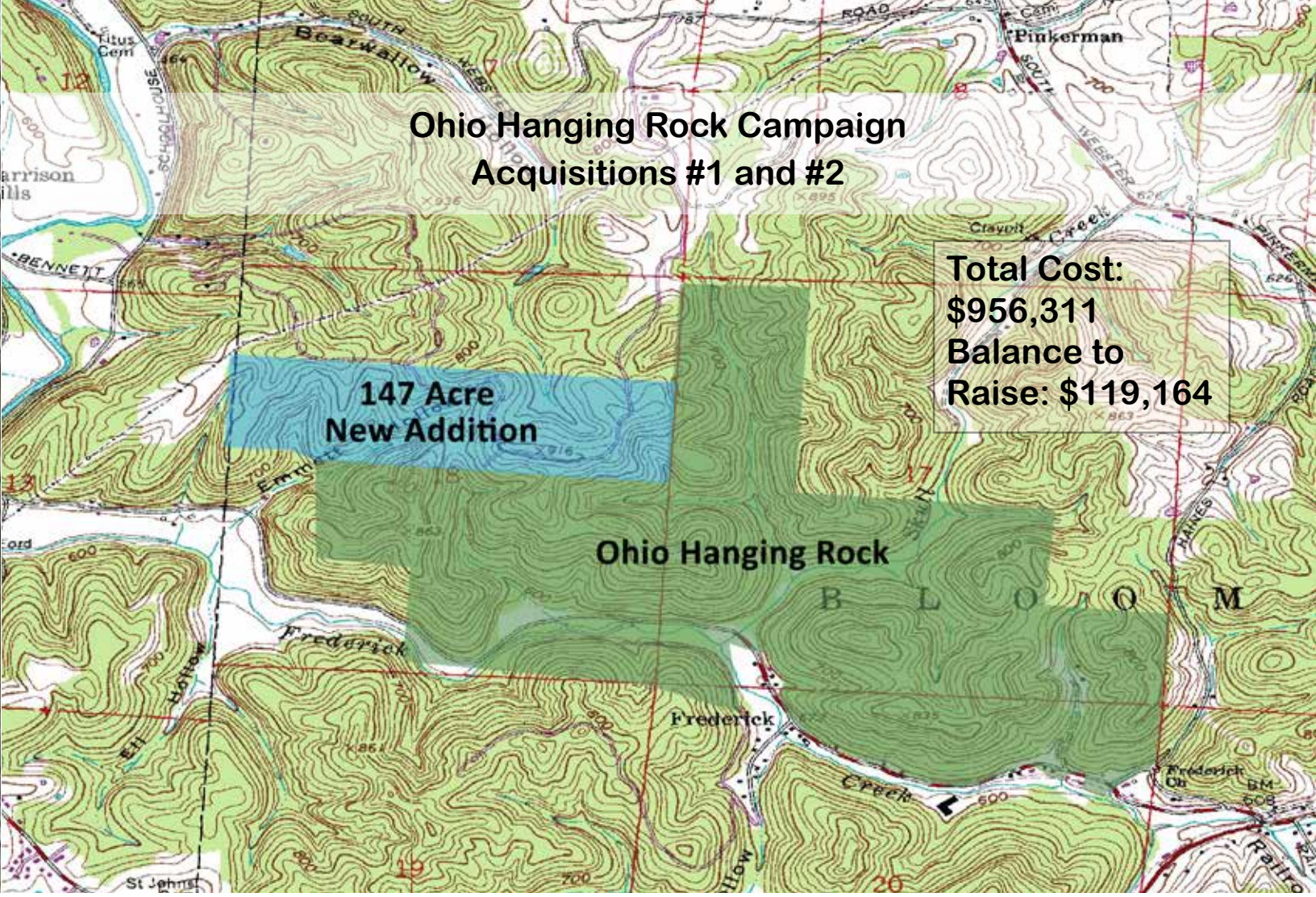
Over the past two years, we've been working to save an unbroken 600 acre forested tract in Scioto County known as Ohio Hanging Rock. It is rare to have such a large block of forest come up for sale at all, and even rarer to think we might actually be able to afford it. In the end, it was only because the Seller offered the Arc a substantial bargain sale that our purchase offer on Ohio Hanging Rock became a reality. That outcome in itself was a miracle, but when a second 147 acre tract came up for sale this year, located right next to the first 600 acres, and this owner *also* offered a bargain sale, it seemed too good to be true.

That was when John Jaeger was called in to do a rapid assessment of the property. John is a retired naturalist with Toledo Metroparks. Since 2010, has been volunteering with the Arc of Appalachia and serves as a board advisor. Many of our readers may know John from attending Arc nature hikes. He's the one who frequently demonstrates his overwhelming affinity for nature puns! Over the years, on behalf of the Arc, he has been instrumental in assessing the value of potential land acquisitions, applying his deep knowledge of Ohio's flora, fauna, and cultural history. He has spent literally hundreds of hours hiking and researching the Ohio Hanging Rock region and researching its fascinating past.

His first visit to the 600 acre tract was with Craig DeAtley, a Portsmouth-based realtor who has deep roots in the Hanging Rock region. Craig, a skilled naturalist himself, was eager to share with John his enthusiasm for the site.

"As we drove toward the preserve and passed through the relatively flat basin of Minford, Ohio, my thoughts turned to the old Teays River that had carved out this landscape before the Ohio River was even born," says John. "In stark contrast to the developed cities and farmlands of the basin, as we continued east we were suddenly immersed in steep Appalachian hill country and surrounded by forests.

John and Craig parked the car just off Frederick Road and entered the tract along an old logging trail that wound its way slowly up the steep-sided hill. When they arrived on the top of the ridge, they looked out over the steep twisting ridgelines cutting the land like knives. Looking to the northeast, Craig




*Public hiking trails winding through Ohio Hanging Rock are planned for completion sometime in 2019-2020.*

## expanding the Ohio Hanging Rock land campaign

pointed his finger to the next ridgeline over and said, "John, that's part of the tract too. And so is that one over there. And that one too." It struck John with a shock that *everything* he could see, *everything* in the entire viewshed, could actually be potentially preserved.

John made several return trips to Ohio Hanging Rock, sometimes with members of the Arc's staff and board, and once with Ohio's ODNR Chief Botanist, Rick Gardener, to assess the health and biodiversity of the forest. What they found was that the rich and diverse plant communities of Ohio Hanging Rock share characteristics of both Shawnee State Forest and Wayne National Forest,which is not surprising since geographically Ohio Hanging Rock lies between the two.

The wealth of waterways at Ohio Hanging Rock - an astonishing 10 miles in total for both tracts - combined with its highly dissected topography produces a high density of narrow ravines. These provide ideal habitat for stunning displays of wildflowers which carpet the lower elevations each spring. Especially abundant are Star Chickweed, Hepatica, Jack in the Pulpit, Dwarf Crested Iris, *Trillium grandiflorum, Trillium erectum,* Wild Oats, Foamflower, Long-spurred Violet, and Bluebells. More noteworthy, although less abundant, are mountain laurel, showy orchis, pink lady's slipper, cornel-Leaved Aster, Hartley's Club Moss, and Northern Rose Azalea. State listed species include Yellow

*John Jaeger at Ohio Hanging Rock*

*Towering rock formation by Lewis Ulman.*

Crown-beard, Small-flowered Alum-root, Feather-bells, and Southern Red Oak.

Growing along Frederick Creek's floodplain within the future preserve boundaries grow the rare White Walnut, as well as Black Walnut, Yellow Buckeye and massive Sycamores. The floodplain understory is carpeted with mounds of colorful Miami Mist and Sweet William each spring.

The trees within the forest are not particularly old, due to the fact that the most recent timber harvest occurred back in the 1970's. Although a fairly young forest, it has a remarkably balanced and diverse representation of the same species that would have grown here in pre-settlement time, including an abundance of oaks and hickories.

"It is inspiring to see the resilience of the forest here," notes John. "We've had over 100 years of commerce and only 40 years of regrowth, and look around you, the trees are well on their way to becoming mature again."

Many species of amphibians take advantage of the pristine waterways that meander throughout the preserve. Frogs, toads, and salamanders breed in abundance in the wetlands and riparian corridors. Even in the ruts of the now abandoned county roads that traverse these hills, amphibian eggs and larvae abound.

The tract is documented summer hunting grounds for a federally endangered bat, the Northern Long-eared. It also shelters dense populations of Worm-eating Warblers – a signature bird of large unbroken forests in the East.

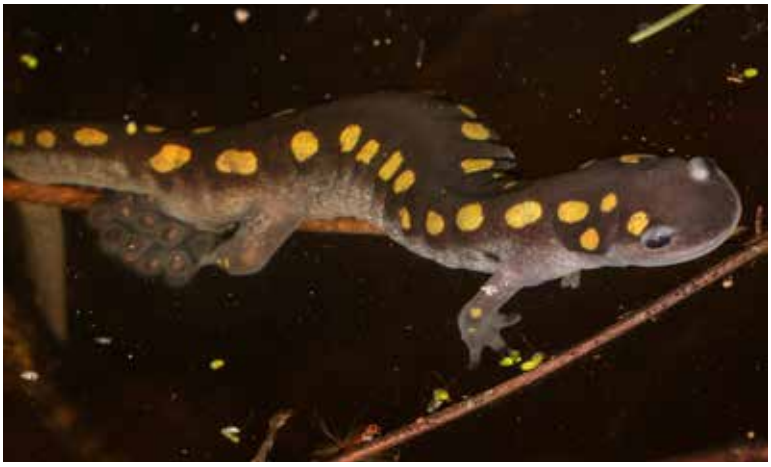
Both tracts are nearly identical in their natural attributes. They boast rich floral understories and a high density of hills and waterways. What is unique in the second tract is a small native prairie opening on the central ridgetop.

"When it comes to building effective and efficient natural areas, bigger is better," John says. "At 750 acres, this preserve encompasses well over a square mile of natural area! A block of land this big provides countless benefits for wildlife. Its size helps resist invasive plant species, and provides better protection for warblers that require large tracts of unbroken forest to successfully reproduce."

John also points out the remarkable fact that these two tracts contain slopes that face each point of the compass. This distinctive attribute of the local topography is its wide variety of micro-climates, differing dramatically from each other in light and moisture.

The Arc is working with the enthusiastic faculty at Shawnee State University to use Ohio Hanging Rock as a resource for higher learning. Biologists and geologists are on board to develop Ohio Hanging Rock as a research and learning center. Herpetological, geological and mammalian studies have already been conducted on the property by students and instructors.

Just like spring follows winter, the industrial era at Ohio Hanging Rock is well into its season of renewal. Although the hand of man is still in evidence, the region's human artifacts and memories of hard labor are being romanced by the softening dissolution of rain, the winding roots of trees, and the grace of moss and lichens. T



**Photos:**
**Top Row:** Wild Blue Phlox, *Phlox divaricata*,
**Middle left:** Spotted salamander laying eggs in early spring by Kathryn Cubert.
**Bottom left:** Larvae of wood frogs and spotted salamanders in ruts in abandoned township roads.
**Bottom right:** Foam Flower, *Tiarella cordifolia*