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Wayne National Forest - Symmes Creek & Morgan Sisters Trails

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Wayne National Forest – Symmes Creek & Morgan Sisters Trails

County: Gallia

Nearest town: Rio Grande

Total distance: 12.5 miles for a continuous hike of both trails; multiple options exist for shorter hikes

Hiking time: 1.5 hours to 2 days

Trail conditions: Overgrown in summer, rutted along sections used by illegal ATV riding

Blazes: Symmes Creek Trail: white diamond with orange dot, Morgan Sisters Trail: white diamond with yellow dot, connector trails: white diamond with red dot

Water: None provided along trail. Water must be carried, cached or treated.

Highlights: Large timber in a remote section of Wayne National Forest, large rock outcroppings along Symmes Creek, abundant wildlife

Maps: USGS 7.5': Patriot; Wayne National Forest Hiking and Backpacking Trails map; enclosed map; BackpackOhio.com eTrailsOhio

Contact info: Wayne National Forest – Ironton Ranger District, phone: 740-534-6500

Internet: www.fs.fed.us/r9/wayne/

Getting there: There are three designated parking areas providing access to the two trails. To access the trail system via the Symmes Creek Trail, travel south on State Route 325 from US 35 for 4.6 miles to Wolf Run Road and turn right. Follow Wolf Run Road for 2.5 miles to where it makes a T with Symmes Creek Road. Turn right, and follow the road for 0.5 mile to a short gravel drive on the right, which leads to a parking area large enough for several vehicles. A second smaller parking area is located 1.5 miles ahead (west) on the same road. There is room for only two vehicles at that location.

To begin a hike via the Morgan Sisters Trail, travel south on State Route 325 from US 35 for 7 miles to State Route 141. Turn right onto SR 141 and travel 3 miles to State Route 233, which takes off to the right. Travel approximately 3.2 miles on SR 233 and make a right turn onto Pumpkintown Road. In 0.9 mile, turn right onto Forest Road 615 and follow it until it ends at Kenton Lake, a distance of 0.3 mile. FR 615 is fairly steep and can be very muddy and rutted in wet weather.

Trailhead coordinates: Symmes Creek Road eastern trailhead - 38.8158°N, 82.4454°W (WGS84); UTM 17 374497E 4297113N (NAD27); UTM 17 374511E 4297329N (NAD83)

Background

The two connected loop trails creating the Symmes Creek & Morgan Sisters trail system straddle Symmes Creek on the north and south in a remote corner of Wayne National Forest in far southeastern Ohio. Over the millennia, Symmes Creek has made some impressive cuts into the sandstone bedrock in the vicinity of the Symmes Creek Trail. Walking the trail along the creek's floodplain will take you past many of the natural monoliths created by water and time. South of the creek, along the Morgan Sisters Trail, the focus turns to the native hardwood forests, some thought to be virgin, but most likely just second- or old-growth. About half of the Morgan Sisters Trail traverses this old forest, which has garnered status as a WNF Special Area. As you may have guessed, the Morgan Sisters Trail is named for a pair of sisters named Morgan, who lived for years nearby.

The landscape in this part of southeastern Ohio is very rural. Along these trails you can still identify the fading remains of old homesteads and fields, and even an old schoolhouse, reminders of past uses of the land. A sparse human population in these moderate hills adds to the remote feeling of the region. Abundant are populations of deer and turkey. The hammering sounds of the pileated woodpecker are commonly heard, as are the calls of the great horned owl. The regions lightly traveled roads--and unfortunately the foot trails--are popular with ATV riders in warmer months. Mushroom hunters also frequent these woods in the spring. Symmes Creek is area's largest

drainage feature and also its lowest point at 640 above sea level. Above the creek's narrows, hilltops struggle to reach the 900-foot contour. One highpoint along the Morgan Sisters Trail manages to reach 960 feet.

The Trails

The Symmes Creek & Morgan Sisters Trails are two of Wayne National Forest's newest trails. These trails are separate loops lying on both sides of Symmes Creek and linked by a short connector trail. The Morgan Sisters Trail actually contains three connected loops of its own: Schoolhouse Loop, Ridge Loop & Coal Branch Loop, allowing for many trip options of varying distance. For purposes of this trail report, both trails are treated as one continuous hike, traveling first the short Symmes Creek Trail and then the outer perimeter of all three loops making up the Morgan Sisters Trail. Mileage stated in this report is continuous from start to finish and not broken down by trail or loop. Starting from the easternmost parking area for the Symmes Creek Trail on Symmes Creek Road, the total distance for an overnight trip following our route is 12.5 miles.



Easternmost trailhead

Although both trails are described in one continuous fashion for benefit of the overnight hiker, they are not uniformly marked in the field. The forest service chose to mark these trails differently. The Symmes Creek Trail is marked by white diamonds with an orange dot, even though a few dots appear red. The Morgan Sisters Trail, with its three loops, is marked by a white diamond with a yellow dot; however, you will see an unexplainable section of blue dots around the 4.0-mile mark. Connector trails, of which there are two, are marked with a white diamond and a red dot. Essentially, if you follow the trail marked by white diamonds you will be safe; there are no other marked trails in the area. All trails are adequately marked (with only a couple exceptions) and intersections are posted with signs, aiding in your navigation through the many loops of this trail system.

This particular trail system was largely developed utilizing abandoned roads. Many of these old roads still appear on USGS maps and even Internet and GPS base maps. Although this makes for wide pathways for walking, it also makes for inviting (albeit illegal) use by ATV riders. Aside from the three forest service identified parking areas, there are two other access points from dead-end township roads. Easy access, the remote location and modest efforts by the forest service to curtail illegal use of the trails means ATV riders are frequent trail users. Their impact on the trails is easily noticed in many places. Always keeping an eye forward to the next trail marker is important here as it is easy to unknowingly slip past a fork in the official trail as you become relaxed and focused on a better worn unofficial ATV trail. Weekends will see the most illegal ATV use; you may want to consider saving this hike for the midweek. Timing is key to enjoying this hike.

Since this is Wayne National Forest, camping is permitted anywhere along the trail system. There are limited backpacker-established campsites to be found along either trail. The only established campsites are found at the parking areas, Kenton Lake (a.k.a. Pumpkintown Lake), a couple along Symmes Creek on the Symmes Creek Trail and one hillside site on the connector trail just above the bridge on Symmes Creek Road. Most of these sites are clearly the destination for weekend revelers and not solitude seeking backpackers, and probably should be avoided on weekends; however, you should be fine during a midweek off-season outing. Other campsites marked on the enclosed map are areas noted for their potential in providing a suitable camping location. Only a little ground grooming would be required to create an adequate spot to pitch camp. Users with good topographic map reading skills may be able to identify other potential off-trail camping areas. On weekends, consider camping in Coal Branch Hollow. ATV riders have not penetrated this area and there are many flat areas for camping. In summer, however, most of this area will become overgrown. The middle section of Coal Branch Hollow remains a little more open in summer as do some areas in the floodplain on the opposite side of the creek along the Ridge Loop. Be prepared for drastic microclimates in the cool dry air of spring and fall.



Small campsite at Kenton Lake

No water is provided along the two trails. You will have to carry it, cache it or treat it from a natural source. Symmes Creek and Kenton Lake are too turbid for treating with a mechanical filter. There are small streams in Coal Branch Hollow and at the start of the Schoolhouse Loop of the Morgan Sisters Trail, but in dry weather these will become unreliable sources. Kenton Lake provides an excellent place to cache water due to its proximity near the halfway point of the hike. Another location could be the unofficial trail access point at the end of Morgan Sisters Road off of State Route 233. Additionally, even stashing water pre-hike adjacent to the connector trail along Symmes Creek Road would save you some weight while you complete the Symmes Creek Trail leg of the hike. This would provide a much closer cache than driving to Kenton Lake first.

A trip begins from the easternmost parking area of the Symmes Creek Trail on a 0.25-mile two-way section of trail that will also be used to return you to the trailhead at the end of the hike. Within the first 0.5 mile, the trail will take you up about 250' in elevation to an approximate 1.7-mile ridgetop walk on an old road rutted in spots by ATV riders. Many nice vistas across Symmes Creek Valley on the south side of the trail are opened up when trees are not in foliage. Several pine plantations are visited by the trail. As the trail starts to descend from the ridge, a short trail

coming uphill from the small western parking area on Symmes Creek Road will intersect with the main trail at just past the 2.0-mile mark. After this intersection, the characteristics of the trail change.

As the trail approaches the 2.2-mile point, it has taken you to the floodplain of Symmes Creek. For the next 0.5 mile the trail passes by the base of many interesting rock cliffs and overhangs. The first overhang cave passed is an obvious spot for weekend parties. Graffiti and often trash are present here. Conditions farther down the trail become more pristine. A large campsite can be found in the floodplain very near the creek at the base of the cliffs. If time permits, this is a fun area to explore. Scrambling to the top of any of the tall rock walls will provide an excellent view and wonderful spot for your first water break.



Rocks by Symmes Creek

After passing the rock formations, the trail will head uphill and intersect the connector trail joining the two main trails. You will have hiked 3.0 miles at this point. The last section of the Symmes Creek Trail will be completed at the end of the hike. The connector trail will fork right and head downhill through a pine plantation, passing a small established campsite on the way, before arriving onto Symmes Creek Road for a short section of road walk. The connector trail will cross an iron bridge and then leave the road just past the bridge. In 0.25 mile, you'll arrive at a junction with the Schoolhouse Loop of the Morgan Sisters Trail. The connector trail ends here.

An uphill climb, with one very steep but short section, awaits you in 0.3 mile after your arrival on the Morgan Sisters Trail. Once on top, the trail will stay at or near the ridgetop until it intersects the Ridge Loop. Some flatter areas on this ridge are suitable for camping. Be very careful not to miss a sudden right turn in the trail at the 4.25-mile point. Missing this will have you walking straight on an unofficial ATV trail.

The short northern half of the Ridge Loop offers nice walking through some big timber before dropping into Coal Branch Hollow. The Ridge Loop is located in the middle of a forest service Special Area because of the old growth forest located here. After dropping down off the ridge, the trail soon arrives at a junction with a short connector trail leading you to the Coal Branch Loop. You'll hike this short connector trail circling back from Kenton Lake as well. The trail map published by Wayne National Forest does not show this configuration as it actually occurs in the field. The WNF map shows a shared section of trail between the Ridge Loop and the Coal Branch Loop. This short connector trail is marked by a white diamond with red dot. Coal Branch Hollow is secluded and safely out of reach of ATV riders. Consider carving out a spot for the night here either at this point of the hike or on the return trip from Kenton Lake.

Once your Coal Branch Loop section of the hike begins, you'll pass some rock outcroppings before heading uphill for a short section of ridge walking, past a potential open meadow campsite, and then descend to Kenton Lake on an old topo map indicated jeep trail. Your arrival at Kenton Lake will mean you have put to rest 6.3 miles of trail. Kenton Lake could be used as a camping destination; however, it does receive activity on weekends and warm weeknights from fishermen. During off-season midweek outings you will most likely have the lake to yourself. Avoid this area during deer hunting season. There is a large campsite away from the lake at the end of Forest Road 615 near a pine plantation used by car/RV campers or hunters and a small site right on the lake. Use the small site on the lake. The Coal Branch Loop trail continues past the lake, following Forest Road 615 for 200 yards before forking left into a nice pine plantation.



Trail intersection signage

After leaving the picturesque pines, the trail will arrive back in Coal Branch Hollow in just under 1.0 mile. The trail will double back on the short connector trail between the Coal Branch and Ridge loops. At the connector trail's junction with the Ridge Loop, you will want to go straight to begin your return trip using the southern leg of the Ridge and Schoolhouse loops. About half of the distance of the southern leg of the Ridge loop is comprised of a steady uphill climb on the spine of a narrow ridge. On this ridge, the trail will fork unnoticeably to the left around the 8.2-mile mark. It is easy to continue following a more noticeable ATV trail here and walk right past this fork. If you pass a deer stand and small pond on your left near this location, then you have missed the trail fork and should backtrack about 0.1 mile to resume hiking the official trail.

As the trail arrives at the 8.6-mile mark, it reaches a junction with the Schoolhouse Loop. Make a right to begin the last leg of the Morgan Sisters Trail. In approximately 100 yards, the trail will emerge onto the very end of a dead-end gravel road named Morgan Sisters Road. A meadow adjacent to the road could be used as a campsite in a pinch. Making this a destination camp is probably not a good idea due to the ease of access for ATV riders. The trail will continue on an abandoned road (once named Bethel Road) where the current gravel road ends. Despite a "Foot Traffic Only" sign and a guardrail gate, this upcoming section of trail receives much ATV use. After 0.7 mile, the trail will fork from the abandoned road.



Schoolhouse Loop by creek

The final stretch of the Schoolhouse Loop, starting around the 9.7 mile mark of the hike, follows a wide, fairly level path about 50 to 75 feet in elevation below the ridgetops. Views into the surrounding hollows are nice and the regions ghost (sycamore) trees stand out in non-foliage seasons. At 10.3 miles, the trail

arrives at a powerline right-of-way and then 0.1 mile ahead some building remains, perhaps the old schoolhouse that gave this loop its name. From here, it's downhill to the floor of Symmes Creek Valley. After a quick brush with the creek, it's a brief climb to a short section of trail hugging the hillside straight above the flowing waters of the wide creek below. A brief section of trail just ahead will have you imitating a mountain goat. After the trail levels out, it arrives back at the junction with the connector trail over a series of 3 wooden bridges (2 really, the middle one is washed out).

To finish out the hike, double back on the connector trail to the junction with the Symmes Creek Trail. As an option, you can walk Symmes Creek Road back to the trailhead--a distance of 0.6 mile from the iron bridge. By trail, the remaining distance is 1.4 miles. At the junction with the Symmes Creek Trail, turn right. The trail between here and the two-way section of trail back to the trailhead is winding, covering a linear distance of almost 1.0 mile. The pathway is not well defined and in places you'll be choosing the path of least resistance between trail markers. At the 12.3-mile mark, you'll start the two-way section of trail back to the trailhead.

Symmes Creek and Morgan Sisters Trail Notes and Mileage

- 0.0** Begin from the easternmost trailhead of the Symmes Creek Trail on Symmes Creek Road. The trail leaves the back of the parking area and heads uphill following the bed of an old road.
- 0.25** Arrive at junction with the return leg of the Symmes Creek Trail. Continue straight.
- 0.4** The trail forks to the left while an obvious ATV route forks right.
- 0.8 - 0.9** Watch for trail markers in this stretch of trail intersected by unofficial ATV trails and old roads.
- 1.4** Pass a nice pine plantation with suitable conditions for a campsite.
- 1.5** Pass a meadow at the end of a gravel drive used for ATV access. Camping is not recommended. Walk around the guardrail gate to continue.
- 1.75** Pass a small meadow on the right several feet above trail grade with camping potential.
- 2.1** Arrive at a junction with the short trail coming up from the small western Symmes Creek Trail parking area. Take a sharp left and continue to drop into the floodplain of Symmes Creek. Cross a long wooden boardwalk ahead.
- 2.4** Enter a section of trail flanked by large rock formations on the left. A campsite in a small pine grove is just ahead and another one in the floodplain near a large slump block in 0.1 mile.
- 3.0** Arrive at a junction with the connector trail to the Morgan Sisters Trail. Go right. Going left will take you back to the trailhead. Do not follow the noticeable trail in the powerline right-of-way. Follow the connector trail downhill through pines, past a campsite, and make a right onto Symmes Creek Road. Walk over an iron bridge and exit the road to the left at the Carsonite sign and trail marker.
- 3.4** Arrive at a junction with the Schoolhouse Loop of the Morgan Sisters Trail. Take the right fork.
- 4.2** Arrive on a ridgetop with camping potential. Just ahead, the trail will make a poorly marked sharp right turn as an unofficial ATV trail continues straight.
- 4.8** Arrive at an intersection with the Ridge Loop. Go right.
- 5.3** Arrive at a junction with a short connector trail to the Coal Branch Loop. Go right.
- 5.4** Arrive at a junction with the Coal Branch Loop. Go right.
- 5.8** The trail makes a sharp left onto an old road. An open meadow with camping potential sits on the left. ATV use in this area is evident.
- 6.3** Arrive at Kenton Lake at the end of Forest Road 615. An untidy campsite is located to the right near some pines. A small site sits close to the lake on the east side near a small boat ramp, approximately 150 yards from the end of the road. The trail continues in a westerly direction along FR-615 for approximately 200 yards before forking left and heading uphill through a nice pine plantation.
- 7.0** An unofficial ATV trail forks right. Continue straight.
- 7.6** Arrive back at the junction with the connector trail to the Ridge Loop. Go right.
- 7.7** Arrive back at the junction with the Ridge Loop. Go straight.
- 8.15** The trail forks almost unnoticed to the left as a more visible unofficial ATV trail continues straight. Turn back if you pass a deer stand and small pond on your left.
- 8.6** Arrive at an intersection with the Schoolhouse Loop. Go right. In 100 yards, emerge into an open area at the end of Morgan Sisters Road. A small meadow here could be used as a last resort campsite. The trail continues straight down an old road often used by ATVs. Walk around the guardrail gate.
- 9.3** The trail forks left from an old road.
- 10.2** An ATV trail intersects uphill from the right. Go straight. In 200 yards, the trail emerges into a powerline right-of-way.
- 10.4** In an open saddle, the trail will make a left and head downhill towards Symmes Creek. ATV trails will continue straight, as well as follow the trail downhill. Old building remains are located here.
- 10.6** The trail makes a sharp left just before reaching Symmes Creek. An ATV trail goes straight, crossing the creek.
- 10.9** Arrive back at the junction with the connector trail to the Symmes Creek Trail. Go right.
- 11.3** Pass a small campsite on the right.
- 11.4** Arrive at the junction with the Symmes Creek Trail. Go right to complete the final leg of the Symmes Creek Trail, which was bypassed at the beginning of the hike. The pathway along this section of trail is not always well defined, so

always look forward to the next trail marker. In the beginning section, watch for the trail to fork right from an ATV trail you are following.

12.3 Arrive back at the intersection with the old road carrying the outgoing trail. Go right to return to the trailhead.

12.5 Arrive back at the trailhead.

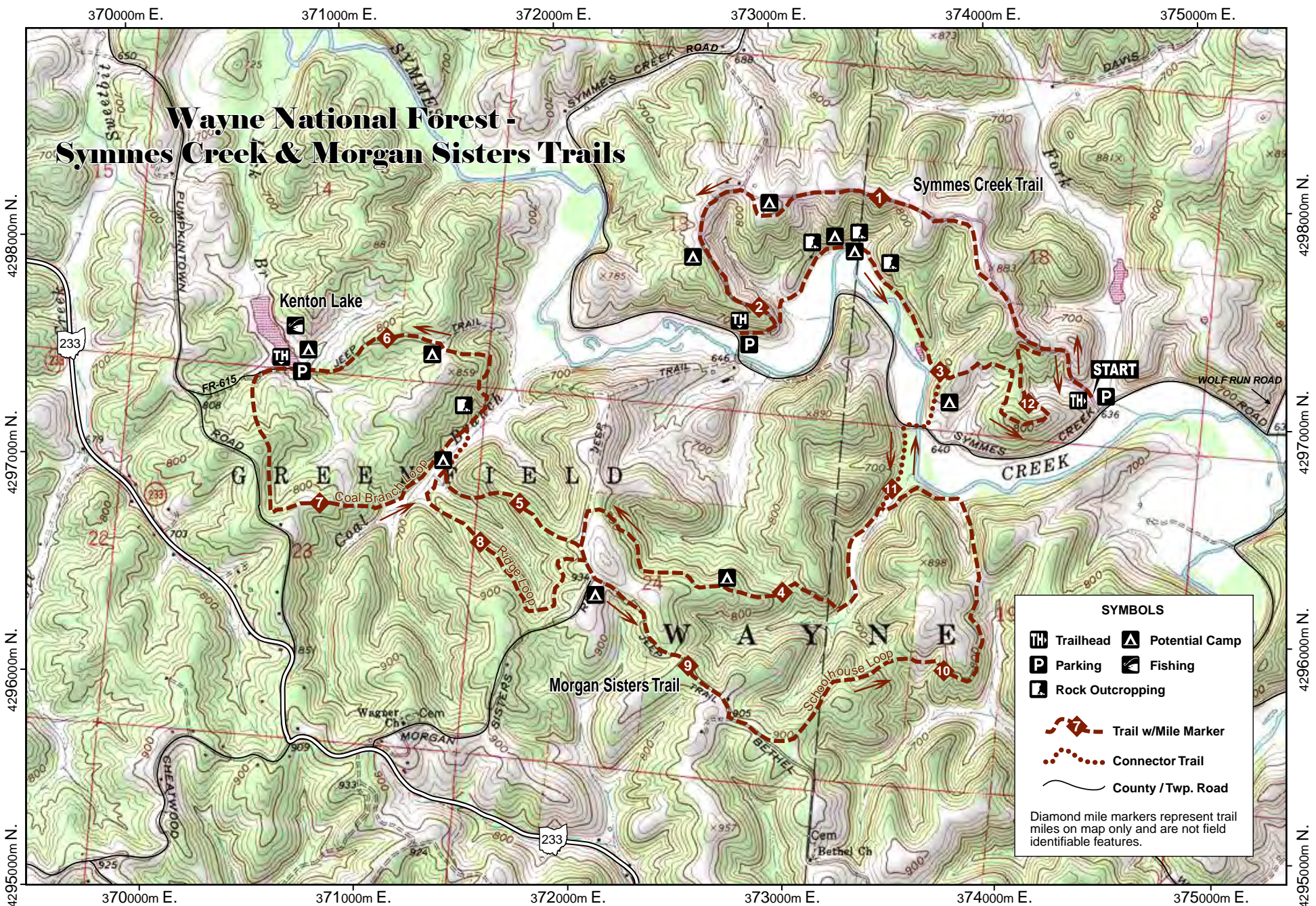
Day Hikes

Day hike options are plentiful due to the number of places to access the trail system and because of its interconnected looping layout. A hike on just the Symmes Creek Trail starting from either trailhead on Symmes Creek Road would only have you walking just over 4.0 miles. A nice hike for when time may be an issue. For a longer hike of 8.0 miles that will take you past most of the highlights, start at the westernmost trailhead for the Symmes Creek Trail on Symmes Creek Road and follow the southern leg of the Symmes Creek Trail along Symmes Creek. Allow some time to explore the interesting rock formations along the creek. Follow the connector trail to the Morgan Sisters Trail and complete the Schoolhouse and Ridge loops in either direction. Return via the connector trail and the Symmes Creek Trail back to the trailhead.



Symmes Creek Trail vista

Wayne National Forest - Symmes Creek & Morgan Sisters Trails



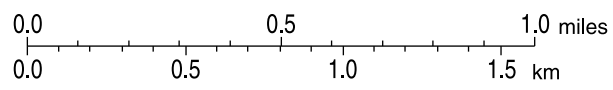
SYMBOLS

- Trailhead
- Potential Camp
- Parking
- Fishing
- Rock Outcropping
- Trail w/Mile Marker
- Connector Trail
- County / Twp. Road

Diamond mile markers represent trail miles on map only and are not field identifiable features.



Base map created with TOPO!
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1" = 2000'

1000-Meter UTM 17 Grid
NAD 27

contour interval 20'

