Wayne National Forest - Vesuvius Backpack Trail

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Wayne National Forest – Vesuvius Backpack Trail

County: Lawrence

Nearest town: Ironton

Total distance: 16.2 miles; using the 8-mile Lakeshore Trail, alternate trips of varying distance can be created

Hiking time: 2 days

Trail conditions: Well established

Blazes: Backpack Trail: white diamond with yellow dot, Lakeshore Trail: white diamond with blue dot

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

Highlights: Scenic lakeshore walking, interesting rock formations, diverse flora

Maps: USGS 7.5′: Pedro, Sherritts, Ironton & Kitts Hill; Wayne National Forest Hiking and Backpacking Trails 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: Overnight parking is only permitted at the boat dock, which is adjacent to the trailhead. From State Route 93 and US Route 52 in Ironton, take SR 93 north for 6.25 miles and make a right turn onto County Road 29. After 0.8 mile on CR 29, turn left onto Forest Road 1955 and follow it for nearly 0.5 mile to the boat dock parking area on the right. A large sign at the intersection of CR 29 and FR 1955 will direct you. Day hikers have the option of parking below the Lake Vesuvius dam, a short distance past the boat dock turnoff on CR 29.

Trailhead coordinates: 38.6098°N, 82.6344°W (WGS84); UTM 17 357675E 4274539N (NAD27); UTM 17 357683E 4274764N (NAD83)

Background

Lake Vesuvius is located in far southern Ohio in the Ironton Management Unit of Wayne National Forest, about 7 miles north of the Ohio River. The narrows of Storms Creek provide the site for this long, winding lake, which was created in 1939. The lake, with its developed beach and boat dock, along with nearby developed campgrounds, picnic areas and trails are part of the Vesuvius Recreation Complex, WNF’s premier developed site. Rugged hills and rock cliffs create a scenic backdrop for this historical and scenic area.

Like the Zaleski area, The Vesuvius Region was also part of the historic six-county Hanging Rock Iron Region. The massive stone stack of the Vesuvius Furnace—named for the Italian volcano—sits quietly near the base of the dam and is one of only a few remaining tangible reminders of the days when southern Ohio was at the forefront of the nation’s iron industry. In its glory days, which began in 1833, the furnace employed 100 men and produced 8 to 12 tons of iron daily. The furnace’s appetite for charcoal was satisfied by cutting 350 acres of timber annually. In fact, all 46 iron furnaces in the Hanging Rock Region consumed trees at nearly the same rate.

In time, the Hanging Rock iron seams became depleted and new iron discoveries were developed around Lake Superior. The last charcoal furnace closed in 1916—Vesuvius Furnace in 1906—and as laborers drifted west, the regions abused and scarred lands were largely abandoned. In the 1930s, a large Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) camp was established near the now silent furnace. The manpower provided by the CCC crews constructed the lake and surrounding recreational complex.

The forests of Vesuvius consist of typical Ohio mixed hardwoods, dominated by oaks. Hemlocks are present in cooler, rocky ravines. The hills in this part of WNF attain an average relief of 250 to 300 feet. The Kimble Lookout Tower used to stand on a highpoint, some 400 feet in elevation above the lake, at the far eastern end of the backpack trail, but has since been dismantled.

A visit to the Lake Vesuvius area of Wayne National Forest is a must-do for any Ohio outdoor enthusiast. The scenic beauty and historical significance of the region combine to create a wonderful getaway. Whether you spend most of your time in the backcountry or utilize some of the overnight and day-use improvements around the
lake, you will find the facilities in a well maintained condition. In an era of shrinking federal budgets, forest service staff assigned to Vesuvius should be commended for their ongoing efforts to provide Ohioans with a quality outdoor experience.

The Trail

The 16.2-mile Vesuvius Backpack Trail is an easy to follow trail with two distinct halves: upper and lower. The halves almost create loops because the trail nearly comes together in the middle, just north of the lake in the valley of Storms Creek. In fact, the trail is separated from itself by only 300 feet at the narrowest point. Using horse trails crisscrossing the valley just north of the lake as a connector, a loop hike can be easily created. Other trip variations can be created using the Lakeshore Trail, which also connects with the backpack trail just north of the lake. These options are discussed below.

The lower half of the backpack trail loops around the lake, mainly staying above the lake at or near ridgetop level; the only exception being some lakeside walking at the beginning and end of the trail. This half of the backpack trail is characterized by mostly easy walking on wide trails. An occasional glimpse of the lake can be captured in non-foliage seasons from a few vantage points away from the lakeshore north of the lake. In several stretches, the trail follows a consistent contour in order to swing around and over the heads of many rocky ravines. At other locations, the trail travels below modest cliffs.

The upper half of the backpack trail is characterized by slightly more tedious hiking. The trail’s climbs and falls are larger and occur more often. The trail does not follow as many old roads and is more narrow. The farther you head east towards the site of the old Kimble Lookout Tower, expect trail conditions to be their worst, passable but overgrown. Not all is bad along the upper section, though. There are nice sections of ridge walking with open vistas in winter, along with several wonderful pine plantations near Aldridge Hollow, in Kanady Hollow and in the valley near the Paddle Creek Horse Trailhead.

The backpack trail is mostly well marked by plastic white diamonds with a yellow dot. You may see older painted yellow diamond blazes as well. The trail is better marked for a clockwise direction of travel, although counterclockwise hikers should have no problems staying on the trail. There are few places to stray from the trail, making it one of the easiest in Ohio to follow. The trail had been marked with plastic white diamond mile markers in the past, but few of these remain as of this writing. Trail managers at Wayne National Forest have revealed future plans to re-mark the trail in both directions with new mile markers. The benefit here is not so much for backpackers as much as it is for day hikers. The hope is that the number of search and rescue missions for ill-prepared day hikers caught by nightfall or exhaustion will be reduced if hikers can track their progress.

Since this is Wayne National Forest, camping is permitted just about anywhere. An exception to the camping rule here exists within the Vesuvius Recreation Area boundary, which encompasses a wide area around the southern two-thirds of the lake, and includes part of the backpack trail. This area is indicated on the enclosed map. Within the recreation area boundary, camping is only permitted at designated sites in the Oak Hill and Iron Ridge campgrounds. On the trail, you will not find too many established campsites. There are a small number of sites in the valley of Storms Creek where the trail bottlenecks. This part of Storms Creek is also easily accessed from Township Road 245, so non-backpacking campers sometimes use these sites, especially on weekends. Because of this, and past settlement in the valley, you may notice litter scattered in this area.

The Paddle Creek Horse Trailhead, located at the end of Township Road 245 and just a short jump off the backpack trail, offers an excellent and scenic place to camp. This area is open to primitive camping, whether it’s the drive-in, ride-in or walk-in kind. Don’t be fooled by the sign near the road that reads “Horse Camp”. If you are able to get away for a midweek trip, then you will most likely have Paddle Creek to yourself. On summer weekends, expect to have camping neighbors.

Paddle Creek is a large area located at the junction of two hollows in a remote section of forest. The forest here is very alive at night. In the hollow closest to the trail stands a nice pine grove that makes an excellent place to pitch camp. A picnic table and rock fire ring is located here as well. A pit latrine sits closer to the road. Hiking clockwise, Paddle Creek is located at the 10.5-mile mark. Because of its easy access during and before your hike, Paddle Creek makes a great spot to cache water or gear before heading out. To reach Paddle Creek by car, travel 2.4 miles past the dam on County Road 29 and turn left onto Township Road 245. Follow TR 245 to the end, a distance of approximately 2.3 miles. If a little more privacy is needed, there is a nice campsite situated in pines located on the backpack trail 100 yards before Paddle Creek.

Unlike some state forest overnight trails, you won’t find any potable water along the trail here. Water has to be carried, cached or treated. Caching water at the aforementioned Paddle Creek site is one possibility. Water can be collected prior to hitting the trail at the campgrounds in the recreation area near the lake; however, water is usually
shutoff from November through April. Water can also be treated or filtered from any of the streams along the trail. In drier months, expect many of these to run dry. Storms Creek, which is the main feeder stream for the lake, is probably the most reliable water source in drier times. Treating water from the lake is not recommended as the water is dirty and will most certainly clog a mechanical filter. It is best to treat water from the lake’s feeder streams when possible.

The backpack trail, as well as the Lakeshore Trail, begins at the lake end of the boat dock parking area. The trailhead is well marked with signs. The first 0.9 mile of trail is shared trail, so you’ll also see white diamonds with blue dots marking the Lakeshore Trail. Just uphill from the trailhead, the trail will fork, with the left fork heading up to the Oak Hill Campground. Along the first few tenths of the trail, a boardwalk, dam and a large sandstone rock face will be visible across the lake. This first section of trail along the lake is very scenic.

At the 0.9-mile mark, the two trails will split. The backpack trail will fork left and head uphill. You have the option of staying on the Lakeshore Trail until it intersects with the backpack trail at the north end of the lake, a distance of 2.25 miles. If you choose the backpack trail, it will take nearly 5.0 miles of walking to reach the same point. Staying on the backpack trail, the trail will climb immediately after leaving the Lakeshore Trail to a level contour about two-thirds up an adjacent ridge and follow the contour for 0.8 mile before making a final push to the top of the ridge and crossing the first of only two active roads intersecting the trail. The trail goes straight across Forest Road 1955 and stays nearly 300 feet above the lake for the next 1.0 mile before dropping 150 feet in elevation and passing briefly near the road serving the beach area. A scenic overlook is located across the road from where the trail drops down off the ridge. The next 2.0 miles of trail are mostly level and pleasant as the trail follows a mid-level contour up one side and out the other of an unnamed hollow before re-approaching the lake near the 4.75-mile mark. At 5.1 miles, the first, albeit small, user-established campsite is passed. An unofficial trail forks right and downhill toward the lake near this campsite.

At the 5.75-mile mark, a horse trail intersects with the backpack trail. This intersection is important if you wish to cut off the trail’s upper half or take a shorter route to Paddle Creek. To cut off the upper half, take a right on the horse trail. Follow it a short distance until it forks. Take a right at the fork and arrive shortly at the return leg of the upper backpack trail section. From here, you can go left on the backpack trail and arrive at Paddle Creek in 2.2 miles, or right, which will take you to a junction with the Lakeshore Trail.

As the backpack trail continues northeasterly past the 5.75-mile horse trail intersection, its characteristics change a bit. You are now entering a more remote part of the forest away from the lake. At the 6.0-mile mark, the trail encounters the first of three long uphill climbs along its upper half. This first one will climb nearly 300 feet, stay on a ridge for 0.6 mile and then drop into a side hollow of Aldridge Hollow. From there, it’s over 1.0 mile of hollow walking toward Aldridge Hollow and up Kanady Hollow before heading uphill toward the site of the old Kimble Lookout Tower, crossing a few horse trails en route. The side hollow to Aldridge Hollow and Kanady Hollow are home to some rather majestic pines. Be sure to take some time to immerse yourself in the solitude of Kanady Hollow. You are pretty far off the beaten path there. There is enough flat ground in these hollows to provide for a secluded campsite or two.

Once you arrive at the site of the old Kimble Lookout Tower, you will have traveled approximately 9.9 miles. From there, it’s downhill and 0.6 mile to Paddle Creek. At 10.5 miles, the backpack trail will intersect with yet another horse trail. If camping, make a left and walk a short distance into the Paddle Creek Horse Trailhead and camp area. Optionally, a campsite situated in a pine plantation is located approximately 100 yards on the backpack trail before the horse trail junction leading to Paddle Creek.

After Paddle Creek, the trail heads uphill again; this time gaining 250 feet in elevation. A ridge walk of approximately 0.75 mile culminates in a steep descent into the valley of Storms Creek near Township Road 245, which will come into view on your left. The trail will follow old roads along the north bank of Storms Creek for 0.75 mile and then arrive at a junction with the Lakeshore Trail. Very near this junction, the trail intersects with the horse trail cutoff described at the 5.75-mile mark. In 2010, a flood washed out a footbridge over Storms Creek so now a slight reroute has you fording Storms Creek via the horse trail. On the opposite side of Storms Creek, the backpack trail and the Lakeshore Trail split from the horse trail and travel a coincident path for 0.3 mile through spotty hemlocks and low rock ledges. Soon, you’ll encounter signage marking the location of where the two trails again split. The backpack trail will soon head uphill and arrive back at the trailhead in 3.0 miles. Taking the Lakeshore Trail will offer a slightly longer trek, but the scenery is better, with many nice lake views and a chance to explore the large rock promontory seen across the lake at the start of the hike. Either choice for the return trip will take you across the dam and along a boardwalk for a nice ending to a great hike.

Vesuvius Backpack Trail Notes and Mileage

0.0 Start at the trailhead at the lake end of the boat dock parking area, just past the nature center/boathouse structure. Facing the lake, the trail begins to your left at the tree line. The trailhead is well marked with signs. The first 0.9 mile is a shared trail between the backpack Trail and the Lakeshore Trail. Just down the trail from the trailhead you will arrive at a fork. Stay right. The left fork heads uphill to the Oak Hill Campground.

0.4 Cross a long wooden footbridge at the head of a small inlet.
0.9 Arrive at a fork in the trail. The backpack trail forks left and heads immediately uphill. The Lakeshore Trail continues straight. This split is well marked with signs.
1.7 Cross Forest Road 1955. The trail continues straight across the road and travels along an old road.
2.25 The trail reaches a poorly marked fork. Take the right fork. You may notice blue blazes on nearby trees marking the boundary of the Vesuvius Recreation Area.
3.0 At the apex of a horseshoe curve in the road serving the public beach, the trail begins following an old roadbed to the northeast and soon passes just above a portion of the hill washed away in a 2010 landslide.
4.75 Look for the lake to come into view on the right in non-foliage seasons.
5.1 Pass a small campsite on the right. An unofficial trail forks right, heading downhill toward the lake.
5.2 Cross a stream in a rocky ravine at the head of a six-foot wet weather waterfall. In wetter months, water can be filtered here.
5.7 Arrive at what looks like a four-way trail intersection. The small trails going left and right lead to campsites. The left camp was littered with trash as of this writing.
5.75 Arrive at an intersection with a horse trail. To create a loop hike, go right on the horse trail and follow it for a short distance until it forks. Take the right fork and arrive shortly at the return leg of the upper backpack trail section.
6.75 Arrive at a fork in the trail. Take the right fork and shortly begin a descent into a side hollow of Aldridge Hollow. Note the majestic pines in the hollow.
7.0 Pass a lightly used but noticeable campsite to the left of the trail.
7.5 Navigate around a collapsed, long wooden footbridge.
7.6 Cross a horse trail in Aldridge Hollow, then shortly cross a stream.
8.0 Pass a potential campsite on a floodplain on the opposite side of a stream in secluded Kanady Hollow.
8.6 Cross a horse trail.
9.4 Cross a horse trail.
9.9 Arrive at the site of the old Kimble Lookout Tower. The only remains of the tower are concrete footings. This open area is overgrown in summer.
10.5 Pass a campsite in the pines on your right. Just ahead, the trail will intersect with another horse trail. Take a left on the horse trail to arrive shortly at the Paddle Creek Horse Trailhead and primitive camping area.
12.1 The trail emerges onto an old road very near Township Road 245 and goes right, in 100 yards it will fork left. Keenly watch for trail markers in this area as there are several unofficial intersecting trails that could lead you astray.
12.25 Pass a side trail leading to a nice campsite in the pines on the opposite side of Storms Creek. Note the footpath on the opposite stream bank.
12.4 Pass a campsite on your right.
12.75 Arrive at the intersection with the horse trail cutoff discussed at the 5.75-mile mark above. Also arrive at a junction with the Lakeshore Trail. Ford Storms Creek via the horse trail and watch for the trail to split to the right from the horse trail on the opposite side of the creek. A campsite sits a few yards off the trail to the left at this split. The backpack trail and the Lakeshore Trail are coincident for the next 0.3 mile, passing by hemlocks and low rock ledges.
13.1 Arrive at a trail fork. The backpack trail travels the left fork up a hollow for 200 yards before crossing a streambed and ascending the next ridge. The Lakeshore Trail goes right. This junction is well marked.
14.3 Cross a paved road serving the Iron Ridge Campground.
15.8 Pass an old, large concrete water tank. This tank was part of an old gravity fed water system used prior to the installation of county supplied water.
15.7 Pass two old chimney stacks. These chimneys were once used to warm a CCC built picnic shelter prior to the shelters dismantling by the forest service. Descend the ridge and approach the dam shortly after passing the chimneys.
15.8 Walk a metal footbridge over the dam’s spillway.
15.9 Start the final stretch of the hike on a metal boardwalk. Be sure to appreciate the beautiful views of the lake.
16.2 Arrive back at the boat dock parking area.

Day Hikes

Day hiking the lower half of the backpack trail using the horse trail cutoff north of the lake discussed above would create a loop hike of 9.25 miles. You can create your own variations of a lower loop hike by using the scenic Lakeshore Trail as one of the legs of the loop, or just simply hike the Lakeshore Trail at distance of nearly 8.0 miles. Two shorter trails of interest near the lake include the Rock House Trail and the Whiskey Run Trail. The Rock House Trail is accessed at the north end of the boat dock parking area and visits an impressive overhang cave feature. The trail, paved and handicapped accessible, is a quick out-and-back trip of 0.8 mile. The Whiskey Run Trail is a 0.5-mile loop running between the Iron Ridge Campground and the Lakeshore Trail. This trail passes abandoned charcoal pits and an overhang cave where moonshine was reported to have been made.

Rock House