

# 'Walls of Jericho' Trail Makes Reader's Digest Top 20

By David Rainer, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

When an iconic publication like *Reader's Digest* recognizes the natural beauty and recreational opportunities in Alabama's great outdoors, it provides confirmation of what we Alabamians have been saying for a long, long time. *Reader's Digest* named the trails at the Walls of Jericho ([www.rd.com/culture/best-hikes-in-america](http://www.rd.com/culture/best-hikes-in-america)) as one of the top 20 hikes in the nation.

The Forever Wild Land Trust's 'Walls of Jericho' in Jackson County consists of eight parcels that total 25,194 acres of widely diverse terrain, from rocky bluffs to upland hardwood forests and the headwaters of Paint Rock River, an ecologically sensitive waterway that holds rare species of mollusks, amphibians, and fish.

The area with the Walls of Jericho was once owned by the Carter family, whose patriarch was Texas oil man Harry Lee Carter. Before the Carters owned it, famous Tennessee frontiersman Davy Crockett was said to have hunted in the area.

The Walls of Jericho tracts form additions to the Skyline Wildlife Management Area

and link Skyline and Crow Creek Wildlife Management Areas along Coon Creek. The area is home to numerous species of wild creatures of greatest conservation need (GCN) in the state.

In 2003, The Nature Conservancy purchased 12,500 acres in Alabama that included the Walls of Jericho, and the land was later acquired by Forever Wild. According to The Nature Conservancy, the Paint Rock River is home to 100 species of fish and about 45 mussel species. Two of the mussel species, the pale lilliput and Alabama lampshell, are found nowhere else in the world. The sawfin shiner, blotchside logperch, and snail darter – a three globally imperiled fish species – occur in the Paint Rock River. One fish species, the palezone shiner, is found only in the Paint Rock River and one other stream in Kentucky.



"The area is in the longest hardwood forest plateau, the Cumberland, that extends into Alabama from the Appalachian Plateau," said Doug Deaton, State Lands Manager with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' State Lands Division. "The Paint Rock River is home to several endangered and imperiled

species. The Walls of Jericho tracts play an important role in protecting the headwaters of those sensitive areas. It's one of the last free-flowing rivers in the Southeast. The area is definitely a biological hotspot."

For those who are looking for the recreational aspects of the Walls of Jericho, the main trail into the canyon is 6-plus miles, while the Bear Den Loop adds an additional 4.7 miles of trails. For those who prefer to travel by horseback, 12 miles of riding trails are available.

Brandon Hunnicutt, Land Stewardship Officer with the State Lands Division in north Alabama, has made numerous treks into the heavily eroded limestone canyon at the Walls of Jericho. "A few of the creeks (Turkey and Hurricane) have come together and gone underground and carved out the limestone rock into interesting formations," Hunnicutt said. "It has sheer rock walls, just straight up and down. Hence, the name of the place. There are a few caves, some so small that a person can't enter. What happens is the water goes underground and comes out of some of the holes in the side of the mountain. During certain times of the year, we have some nice waterfalls. It also has a swimming hole when there is enough rainfall."

Probably the most interesting feature of the Walls of Jericho for Hunnicutt is a natural amphitheater carved into the limestone bluffs. "There's a big overhang where evidently, thousands of years ago, water pooled and created what looks to be an amphitheater," he said. "Apparently, it was a circular area where the water ponded, and it carved out this almost perfect semi-circle in the side of the mountain. A lot of people like to see that.

"It does look like you've walked into something that would be more like the Smokies. It's definitely different. Most people are really excited about seeing it. When they get there, they don't expect this in Alabama. We have a lot of people come from out of state. They're really blown away by it. Everything I've heard has been positive."

However, Hunnicutt cautions that those who want to make the hike into the canyon need to be prepared for a workout. The hike, which descends 1,000 feet to the canyon floor, is rated moderate-to-strenuous into and out of the gorge. "It's a tough hike," he said. "It's almost 7 miles round-trip. Some folks are

overwhelmed, the folks who are not prepared for it. The ones who take their time and do their homework and pay attention to the signage and maps, they get a lot out of it."

Deaton adds, "The hike in is easy because it's essentially all downhill. But the hike out is what takes the time. The trail has several switchbacks, and you'll have to take several breaks coming back out."



*The Walls of Jericho hiking trail treats hikers to a variety of terrain features, including sheer cliff walls, overhangs and caves. (Photos courtesy of State Lands Division)*

Hunnicutt said the Walls of Jericho is a popular spot for weekend outings by Boy Scout troops and hiking clubs. "The Boy Scouts pretty much cover up the campgrounds on the weekends," he said. "Overall, we have several thousand people who will hike the trail into the canyon every year."

Deaton said the *Reader's Digest* designation gives national exposure to one treasured aspect of Alabama's diverse geographical features. "The Walls of Jericho is a beautiful place, and it's an honor to be recognized by *Reader's Digest*," Deaton said. "It's a storied and widely distributed publication. I remember finding *Reader's Digests* as a kid at my grandmother's house. It has been in circulation for a long time. It's a trusted source of information that people depend on."

Visit [www.alabamaforeverwild.com/walls-jericho](http://www.alabamaforeverwild.com/walls-jericho) for more information about the Walls of Jericho.📍

Among its many honors, the Walls of Jericho carries the designation as a National Recreation Trail (NRT) under the National Trails System Act of 1968 that established recreation trails and scenic trails. In 1978, National Historic Trails were added to the program that is administered by The National Park Service and National Forest Service.

The NRT designation is an honor shared by numerous Alabama trails that traverse the entire state, from the Cumberland Plateau all the way to the Mobile-Tensaw Delta. Other Forever Wild trails that share the NRT designation include Coon Creek in Tallapoosa County, Shoal Creek in Lauderdale County, Coldwater Mountain in Calhoun County, Wehle in Bullock County, and Freedom Hills in Colbert County. Visit [www.alabamaforeverwild.com](http://www.alabamaforeverwild.com) to explore the wide variety of recreational activities available on Forever Wild property.