McCONNELLS MILL: SLIPPERY ROCK GORGE TRAIL

IN BRIEF
Bring your camera. The gorge itself, cut in just a few thousand years by the force of the meltwater of three glacial lakes, is surrounded by large trees (some virgin), waterfalls, and at least 69 species of wildflowers. Its rugged beauty made it one of the selections of trails that make up the North Country National Scenic Trail.

DESCRIPTION
McConnells Mill State Park encompasses 2,546 acres around the Slippery Rock Creek Gorge. The 930-acre Slippery Rock Creek Gorge was designated a National Natural Landmark in 1974 and became a State Park Natural Area in 1988. Through the gorge flows the 49-mile-long Slippery Rock Creek, which begets its name from a time when a Native American trail crossed the creek across a sandstone shelf over which a natural oil seep flowed. The shelf is located below the Armstrong Bridge on the southern end of the

DIRECTIONS
From Pittsburgh, take Interstate 279 North to I-79 North. Take Exit 96, Prospect-Portersville; turn left onto US 488 and right onto US 19. If hiking from Hell's Hollow, at 2.7 miles turn left on Johnson Road, drive to mill, then follow directions below. To hike from Eckert Bridge, about 0.5 miles from US 19 turn left onto Cheese Man Road; follow about 2 miles to turn right into Eckert Bridge-Breakneck Bridge parking area. If setting up a shuttle, drive back up Cheese Man Road, turn left on Kennedy Road, and follow past mill and over covered bridge. At about 0.2 miles, turn left on Mount Hope Furnace Road; at about 0.4 miles, turn right on Eckert Bridge Road; at about 0.2 miles, turn left off Route 19 and then turn left on Stuber Road. At about 0.5 miles, turn left into parking area for Hell's Hollow.
The land is separated in sections on the hillside, caused by more landsliding; the packed earth is literally cracked in sections horizontal to the hillside. Mountain laurels and chestnut oaks can be found along this section. For almost a half mile, descend approximately 150 feet to an opening that affords a nice view of the ravine. The trail then leads through hemlocks growing so closely together and to the trail that they appear to form a tunnel. Hiking with a significant other turns this into a great spot to steal a kiss. A break in the hemlocks allows another view of the ravine before a turn in the trail at 1.4 miles leads to yet another visual treat. Stop here to take a look at the natural-rock bridge before crossing it. As you cross the bridge, take in the view of the water rushing underneath. Following is another section of hemlocks and another natural bridge where a side stream has dissolved the limestone underneath the trail. Rock outcroppings and shale are found along this section, and a waterfall on the right of the trail cascades down a steep drop in the terrain. The trail becomes more cumbersome with rocks and roots.

At approximately 2.4 miles is a short side trail on the right that you can descend for a view of Hell Run entering Slippery Rock Creek. Return to the trail and follow it carefully. You may find yourself following reroutes around blowdowns.

The trail has a lot of sun exposure in this section, even this deep in the gorge. At 2.6 miles, you’ll find a series of cross-sections of trees placed to keep your boots out of the mud. At about 3 miles emerge into an area in which the trail has been somewhat washed away by mudslide. Round a narrow curve heading left, and tread carefully over water running down a shelf of rocks. Look for the blue blazes to regain the trail. Make a sharp right, dropping down to cross over more water runoff. Slippery Rock Creek comes into better view. Initially it is wide and calm, but quickly shifts into high gear as the depth changes and the water crashes around the boulders in the creek. Once again make your way over water runoff, and then you’ll head back into the woods to be surrounded by mixed forest with a floor where moss-covered rocks and logs are frequent. The trail is flatter here and easier to navigate.

At 3.6 miles the land is separated in sections on the hillside, caused by more landsliding; the packed earth is literally cracked in sections horizontal to the hillside. Hikers are well rewarded for the navigation around cracks and fallen trees by the pure beauty to be found here. Be sure to avoid the thorny underbrush and look closely near the water’s edge for evidence of busy beavers. At 4 miles, you’ll reach Walnut Flats; there’s no sign here to indicate it, but it should be evident by the rather level