

**Welcome** to the Parker Tract of the Blacklick Valley Natural Area (BVNA). Natural areas are set aside to protect both typical and unique plant and animal communities and to protect outstanding examples of natural interest and beauty. The BVNA and the nearby Buttermilk Falls Natural Area are the first formally established natural areas in the county park system. These areas are in direct support of the mission of the county park system that includes "preserving, protecting, and enhancing county lands to improve the health of our people and the environmental health of the county."

The natural area has three tracts. The Parker Tract, located on the south side of Blacklick Creek, is comprised of 260 acres. The Caldwell and Clarke Run Tracts form a contiguous 413-acre parcel, and lie north of Blacklick Creek. The Caldwell and Parker Tracts are named after former owners of these properties, while the Clarke Run tract is named after the stream within this area of the BVNA.



leveled to provide a surface upon which to produce charcoal. In her book *Delano's Domain*, Denise Dusza Weber describes how charcoal was produced:

Local woodsmen split hardwoods, especially oak, into three or four foot lengths and stacked them in a circle, leaving an open space for the fire. The wood was piled in a cylindrical shape ten to twelve feet high with a vent on top. The sides of the pile were sealed with layers of leaves and dirt. Once lit, the fire inside the pile was controlled by the woodsmen who kept several small openings in the pile to observe the burning process. After the pile had burned down and cooled, the charcoal was sent to the furnace . . . .

Although nearly 150 years have passed since charcoal was last produced in the Blacklick Valley, the charcoal flats remain relatively free of vegetation and often may be clearly distinguished from the surrounding woods. Several charcoal flats are visible along this portion of the trail. Careful observation will reveal small pieces of charcoal scattered on and around the charcoal flats.

The charcoal was most likely destined for one of several hot-blast iron furnaces in the area. The Eliza Furnace in nearby Vintondale is a well-preserved example of one of these furnaces.

The men who tended the charcoal mounds were called colliers, from the German *Kuhler*, meaning coaler. The charcoaling season lasted from early April through October, during which the colliers lived in simple huts constructed of wood, earth, and rocks. Since a clean

collier was said to be an inexperienced collier, the men rarely bathed, and their huts would become filthy with charcoal dust, insects, and vermin. At the end of the season, the huts were burned to the ground.



#### Point 10: Vista

This view looks north and west across the Blacklick Valley. Blacklick Creek may be seen immediately behind the active Christmas tree planting. Much of the forested hillside on the other side of the creek is part of the Caldwell and Clarke Run Tracts of the BVNA.



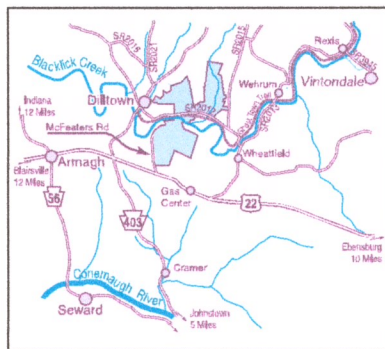
#### Natural History

The Parker Tract is located entirely within the Blacklick Creek watershed. The creek drains westward into the Conemaugh River, and is within the Ohio River Basin.

The name of the township in which the Parker tract is located, East Wheatfield, provides a clue as to the original vegetation of the area. In the 1877 Geological Survey of Pennsylvania: Indiana County, W.G. Platt states:

Among the farmers in the region it has become a by-word that 'good white oak land is good wheat land,' which expresses in a manner the nature of the soil and the country which this wood naturally seeks.

While some white oak still remains, the original forest was removed in the 1800's as settlers found their way to the Blacklick Valley. Today, the majority of the Parker Tract is covered with second- and third-growth forest, with smaller plots of abandoned Christmas tree production. Common trees in the Parker Tract include black cherry, red maple, beech, and red oak. Over forty different trees and shrubs have been identified in the Parker Tract. A great variety of wildflowers and other terrestrial plants may be found in the tract, with over one hundred species identified. Green dragon, a rare member of the Arum family, is found on the property.



The Blacklick Valley Natural Area is located 15 miles south of Indiana and 9 miles north of Johnstown. The Parker Tract is located on McFeaters Road, off Route 22.

#### Natural Area Regulations

- Motorized vehicles and bicycles are prohibited.
- Alcohol is prohibited.
- Camping and campfires are prohibited.
- Hunting is prohibited.
- Pets must be leashed.
- Littering is prohibited. Pack out what is packed in.
- Damaging, defacing, or removing any plant, animal, sign, structure, or other material is prohibited.
- Use of natural area is from sunrise to sunset only.

Artwork by Penny Russell



Indiana County Parks & Trails

1128 Blue Spruce Rd.

Indiana, PA 15701

(724) 463-8636

email: [indparks@earthlink.net](mailto:indparks@earthlink.net)

website: [www.indianacountyparks.org](http://www.indianacountyparks.org)

#### Human History

Although no detailed written history of the Native American presence in the Blacklick Valley is available, it is likely that members of the Shawnee and Delaware tribes used the creek for fishing and transportation. Flint arrowheads have been found along Blacklick Creek in this area.

The first recorded owner of what is now known as the Parker Tract was William Bracken, who purchased 309 acres along "Black Lick Creek" from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania on February 10, 1786. At that time the land was located in Westmoreland County; Indiana County was not created until 1803 when a new county was formed from portions of Westmoreland and Lycoming Counties. William Bracken established the first grist mill in Indiana County along Blacklick Creek.

Since Bracken's purchase, the property has changed hands many times. In 1854 Hugh Parker began acquiring land in this area, and the property is known as the "Parker Tract" in recognition of his former ownership. Most recently, David and Penny Russell of Dilltown, PA owned the property. In November, 1995, the Russells donated the tract to Indiana County Parks to be preserved as part of the Blacklick Valley Natural Area.

Human activity has brought many changes to the Blacklick Valley since Bracken's original ownership. The agricultural life of Bracken's day gave way to an extraction-based industrial economy. Today, the valley is in transition to a post-industrial economy, with recreation playing a key role in the formation of a new economy for the Blacklick Creek watershed. The BVNA is a critical component of this transition.



#### Parker Tract

Indiana County Parks & Trails



## Trail System

Parker Lane Trail is .62 miles long. This lane has been used to access the property since the 1800's. The trail is not marked, but is easy to follow.

The Blacklick Trail follows the shore of the creek. This trail is level and is .89 miles in length. Trail markers are blue.

The Collier Trail is 1.2 miles long and features a challenging hike up the wooded hillside of the Parker Tract. Trail markers are orange.

The Candlestick Trail follows the perimeter of the active Christmas tree planting and is .44 miles long. The trail is not marked, but is easy to follow.

The Wetland Trail is .38 miles long. Trail markers are yellow.

The Connector Trails provide additional hiking opportunities.

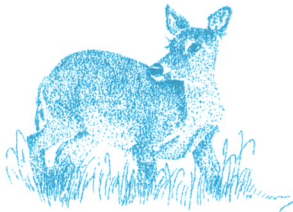
The Parker Tract contains 5 miles of maintained, marked trails. Numbered markers along the trail correspond with the points-of-interest described below.

### Point 1: Blacklick Creek/Old Ford

Previous mining activity has left Blacklick Creek severely polluted. The orange tint of the creek and its shoreline is characteristic of a waterway that is degraded by acid mine drainage (AMD). Chemical reactions take place when water comes in contact with pyrite in coal and the rock surrounding it, turning the water orange-red, yellow, or sometimes white. When this water is discharged from a mine, it reacts with oxygen in the air or in a waterway and deposits iron, manganese, and aluminum in the stream bed. Through this process, the water also gains acidity. Because of high concentrations of AMD, Blacklick Creek is unsuitable for aquatic life.

The creek is receiving renewed attention because of interest created from the establishment of the Ghost Town Trail. Several efforts are currently underway to improve mine acid discharges in the northern portion of the stream in the Nanty Glo, Colver, and Red Mill areas.

At this point in the trail, traces of a fording of Blacklick Creek are visible. A ford is a shallow spot in a river or creek that permits an easy crossing. This ford is marked on maps dating to the 1700's. The Ghost Town Trail is also visible on the other side of the creek.



### Point 2: Oxbow

The course of a river, creek, or stream is always changing. The forces of sedimentation and erosion are continuously at work, altering the flow of a waterway. At this point on the trail, evidence of these forces is visible. This wetland area was once a sharp bend, or "oxbow," in the creek. Over time, erosion allowed the creek to bypass this bend, creating a more direct path for the flow of water. Since much less water was flowing through the bend, wetland plants were able to become established. Eventually this wetland, like all wetlands, will fill with sediment and become part of the forest.

### Point 3: Active Christmas Tree Planting

This active Christmas tree planting is part of a cooperative lease agreement between Indiana County Parks and a local Christmas tree grower.

The Christmas tree industry is a relatively new addition to Indiana County's economy. The first crops of trees are believed to have been planted in the years following 1918 when several farmers planted a variety of pines and spruces. It was not until the 1930's and 40's, however, that the industry expanded. As family farming declined in the area, thousands of acres of cleared land became available for Christmas tree crops. Though much of this land was poorly suited for conventional crop farming, it has proven ideal for evergreen trees. William Stephens, former owner of the Parker Tract, was one of the earlier growers of Christmas trees in the county.

By 1960, more than 200 Indiana County Christmas tree growers were marketing one million trees annually. Although most of Indiana County's trees are shipped throughout the Northeast, many are shipped nationwide.

The Candlestick Trail in this area derives its name from the new growth at the top of an evergreen. This growth often resembles a candlestick and holder.



### Point 4: Swank Foundation

This old stone "Swank" foundation is the most prominent historic feature of the Parker Tract. Luke Swank, a well-known Pittsburgh photographer, owned the property briefly in the early 1900's. The foundation, however, predates his ownership and was most likely built during the Parker tenure in the 1800's.

### Point 5: Wildlife

The Parker Tract provides outstanding wildlife habitat and helps maintain biodiversity. Many animal species require large areas of intact habitat to thrive. Small and isolated tracts of undeveloped land usually support fewer native species and smaller populations of these species than contiguous tracts of undeveloped land. The 675-acre BVNA and Ghost Town Trail greenway allow wildlife to flourish.

Nearly one hundred species of birds have been sighted on the Parker Tract, many of which breed in the area. The Parker Tract is an outstanding location for bird-watching, particularly during the spring and fall migrations.

Black bear, white-tail deer, raccoons, opossum, and red fox are a few of the mammals which inhabit the Parker Tract. A variety of reptiles and amphibians may be found here, particularly in the wetland areas.

From this point in the trail, wetlands, mature woodlands, and an abandoned Christmas tree planting are visible. Each of these habitats supports a unique combination of species.

### Point 6: Abandoned Christmas Tree Planting

This area was once very similar in appearance to the active Christmas planting at Point 3. Since this area is no longer in Christmas tree production, the field is becoming forested once again. This transition from a cleared area to a forested area is known as succession. If left to the course of nature, this field will one day contain a mature hardwood forest. In Indiana



County, this "climax" forest is comprised primarily of American beech and sugar maple, and is the final stage of succession. The eastern portion of the Collier Trail passes through a beech/sugar maple climax forest.

The field surrounding the Swank foundation is another abandoned Christmas tree planting that is in the earlier stages of succession.

Several areas among the abandoned Christmas tree plantings in the Parker tract are mowed annually to maintain a variety of wildlife habitat.

### Point 7: Wetlands

This portion of the Parker Tract contains several acres of wetlands. Wetlands serve several critical functions. During times of flood, a wetland can soak up enormous amounts of excess water. Studies have shown that watersheds with the greatest amount of their original wetlands intact have significantly lower flood peaks than watersheds in which the wetlands have been filled or drained. Water retained in wetlands will slowly percolate into the ground, helping to recharge groundwater reserves. As water percolates through wetlands, it is naturally filtered, creating cleaner groundwater. Wetland plants also contribute to the filtration process, consuming the nutrient load carried by run-off.

Through this filtration process, wetlands also help remedy the problems caused by acid mine drainage. Part of the effort to reduce the impact of acid mine drainage includes the construction of artificial wetlands. Wetlands in the BVNA and along the Ghost Town Trail are "working" to improve water quality in the Blacklick Valley.

### Point 8: Vegetation

The Parker Tract contains a wide variety of vegetation. Here in the forested upland area, sugar maple, black cherry, American beech, black birch, hickory, tulip tree, and red oak are the most common mature trees. Spicebush, witch-hazel, hawthorn, black cherry saplings and wild grape appear frequently in the undergrowth. Groundcover is primarily Christmas fern, wood fern, mayapple, lady's thumb, black raspberry, Virginia creeper, and jumpseed.

### Point 9: Charcoal Flat

Several charcoal flats are located along the old roads on the wooded hillside of the Parker Tract. Iron-making was the Blacklick Valley's first industry, and charcoal was a critical component in the iron-making process. Charcoal flats are small areas of the hillside that were