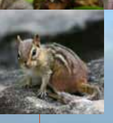


A Pennsylvania Recreational Guide for

Cowans Gap

Cowans Gap State Park



Pennsylvania
Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

Pennsylvania State Parks Mission

The primary purpose of Pennsylvania state parks is to provide opportunities for enjoying healthful outdoor recreation and serve as outdoor classrooms for environmental education. In meeting these purposes, the conservation of the natural, scenic, aesthetic, and historical values of parks should be given first consideration. Stewardship responsibilities should be carried out in a way that protects the natural outdoor experience for the enjoyment of current and future generations.

PAStateParks

2025



Top 10 Activities

1. Paddleboard or kayak around to view the park from the water.
2. Take a family-friendly hike on Lakeside Trail to view wildlife around the lake.
3. Enjoy a peaceful picnic beside the lake.
4. Cast a line into the stocked Cowans Gap Lake or fish for native species in South Branch Little Aughwick Creek.
5. Relax on the beach cool off by swimming in the lake.
6. Hike in autumn and view the colorful fall foliage.
7. Attend a park program to learn about local history.
8. View the beautiful valley from two vistas on Standing Stone Trail.
9. Watch for bats catching insects at dusk from a campsite in one of the two campgrounds.
10. Stay the night in a historic CCC cabin.



Cowans Gap State Park

Cowans Gap State Park is a 1,085-acre park in the beautiful Allens Valley of Fulton County. A 42-acre lake, two campgrounds, rustic Civilian Conservation Corps cabins, and many trails are prime attractions. State forest land surrounds the park, providing additional options for recreation and natural beauty in all seasons.

Reservations

Make online reservations at www.pa.gov/state-parks or call toll-free 888-PA-PARKS (888-727-2757), 7:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday to Saturday.

Directions

GPS DD: Lat. 39.99478 Long. -77.9249

The park is north of US 30 and Fort Loudon.

From I-76 West: Take Exit 180, Fort Littleton, turn right onto US 522 north to Burnt Cabins, and follow signs to the park.

From I-76 East: Take Exit 189, Willow Hill, then PA 75 south to Richmond Furnace, and follow signs to the park.

From US 30: At Fort Loudon, take PA 75 north to Richmond Furnace, and follow signs to the park.

Learn, Experience, Connect

Cowans Gap State Park offers a wide variety of programs April through November. Programs focus on the natural and historic resources of the park and surrounding landscape, with popular topics including kayaking, bats, bears, and local history.

Curriculum-based environmental education programs are available to schools and organized groups. Call the park office to schedule a group program. A variety of professional development workshops are also offered for teachers.

Contact the park office or explore the online calendar of events, https://events.dcnr.pa.gov, for more information on programs and other learning experiences.



Wildlife Watching



Cowans Gap State Park is situated in a highland valley between two mountains, making the park an interesting place to see wildlife in all seasons. During the spring and fall, watch for migrating raptors using the updrafts of the mountainsides to conserve energy on their long journeys. In early summer, enjoy grand displays of mountain laurel. Summer evenings bring out bats to feed on night-flying insects. Winter's rugged beauty features rock-strewn slopes and the green of eastern hemlocks and rhododendrons. Year-round songbirds like chickadees and woodpeckers forage for food among the branches.

History

Natural History

Cowans Gap is an east-west pass in the north-south oriented Tuscarora Mountain. Millions of years ago, the area likely had two small streams. One flowed through the park area, then turned east and flowed out through Cowans Gap. A second stream drained north toward Burnt Cabins. Due to differing rates of erosion, the South Branch Little Aughwick Creek eventually breached the stream that flowed through Cowans Gap, rerouting it north into its own bed. This created one long stream and valley, leaving behind the wind gap called Cowans Gap.

Famous Roads

The French and Indian War began in 1754 as the French and British fought for the Ohio River Valley. Key to the control of the area was the Forks of the Ohio (Pittsburgh), which was held by the French. In 1755, British Major General Edward Braddock carved a new road from Cumberland, Maryland toward the Forks.

Meanwhile, Colonel James Burd began a road west from Shippensburg, passing through an unnamed gap in Tuscarora Mountain that was eventually named Cowans Gap. Braddock's army was defeated, and Burd's Road was never completed. In 1758, General John Forbes carved a new road (Forbes Road) that followed Burd's Road then headed due west to the Forks of the Ohio. General Forbes drove the French out of Pennsylvania.

Names

In 1775, Loyalist John Samuel Cowan met Patriot Mary Mueller in Boston. The couple eloped several years later and headed for Kentucky. The family story describes how their wagon broke down while crossing the Conococheague Creek near Fort Loudon. John traded their horses and wagon to a Tuscarora chief for the land that is now known as Cowans Gap.

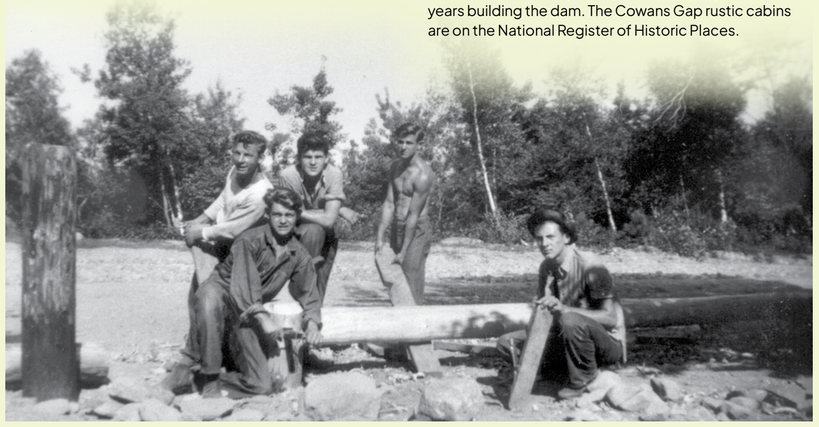
Industrial Times

Nearby, Mount Pleasant Iron Furnace operated from 1783 to 1835. Richmond Iron Furnace operated from 1865 to 1885. The furnaces mined iron ore along the face of Tuscarora Mountain and in the gap. The demand for charcoal led to clearcutting portions of the forests in the gap and the valley every 20 to 25 years.

In 1893, Harrison Kalbach, of Lebanon, Pennsylvania, began intensive logging operations around Cowans Gap. The final cut was completed in 1907, leaving a landscape of overcut forests and erosion.

Recovery

In 1933, President Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). That same year Richmond Furnace Camp S-54 was built at Cowans Gap. The CCC Boys built roads, trails, and recreational facilities, fought fires, planted trees, and completed many other conservation activities. In Cowans Gap State Park, they built ten cabins, four picnic pavilions, and spent three years building the dam. The Cowans Gap rustic cabins are on the National Register of Historic Places.



Recreational Opportunities

Spend the Day



PICNICKING: Picnic areas along the eastern side of Cowans Gap Lake are mostly shaded with several CCC-era stone fireplaces and charcoal grills scattered throughout. Picnic tables are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Some picnic tables are ADA accessible. Visitors can enjoy the nearby playground, sand volleyball court, and horseshoe pits.

Four picnic pavilions may be reserved up to 11 months in advance for a fee. Unreserved picnic pavilions are free on a first-come, first-served basis. Pavilions 2 and 4 have electricity. Pavilions 2, 3, and 4 are stone and have a fireplace. Pavilion 1 is ADA accessible.

SWIMMING: The 500-foot sand beach is open from late May through September, 8:00 AM to sunset. Please read and follow posted rules for swimming. Swim at your own risk.

FOOD AND REFRESHMENT CONCESSION: The concession in the day use area serves many snacks and hot foods. It also has ice, charcoal, firewood, and other camping supplies. The concession is open Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day.

HORSEBACK RIDING: 3 miles
Lot 5 on the west side of the lake has parking for horse trailers. Horse Trail connects there and leads to Knobsville Road Trail, which joins additional trails in Buchanan State Forest.

MOUNTAIN BIKING: 2 miles
North and South Logging Road trails are the primary mountain biking trails in the park. Knobsville Road Trail provides access to many more miles of mountain biking trails in Buchanan State Forest.

Stay the Night

BACKPACKING: Backpacking is permitted on Standing Stone and Tuscarora trails, but not within the boundaries of the park. To stay within the park, backpackers must pay for a designated campsite within the campground. Overnight parking is permitted for hikers, but they must check in at the park office prior to departure.

CABINS: Ten rustic cabins are open mid-April through mid-December. The three-room cabins have a four-person overnight capacity and contain a refrigerator, stove, microwave, fireplace, ceiling fan, and two sets of single bunkbeds. Up to two dogs are permitted in designated cabins for an additional fee.

Rustic cabins have no indoor plumbing. A water faucet is outside. A central shower house with flush toilets and warm showers is nearby. The cabins were built by the CCC in the 1930s and are on the National Register of Historic Places.



Rustic cabin



CAMPING: flush toilets, warm showers
Cowans Gap has about 200 campsites in two areas. Both camping areas have modern shower houses with flush toilets and warm showers. A sanitary dump station is in Camping Area A.

Each camping area can accommodate small tents to large motor homes. Seven walk-to tent sites are adjacent to Camping Area B. Pets are permitted on designated campsites for a fee. An overnight courtesy boat mooring area is available for registered campers during their stay at the park. The camping area is open from early April until mid-December.

ORGANIZED GROUP TENTING: This camping area accommodates organized groups of up to forty people. The restroom has flush toilets but no showers and is open from early April until mid-October.

BOATING: electric motors only; slow no wake
There are two boat launches with reservable mooring areas on Cowans Gap Lake. A concession in the day use area is open daily in the summer and rents rowboats, canoes, kayaks, paddleboards, and paddle boats.

Motorboats must display a boat registration from any state. Non-powered boats must display one of the following: boat registration from any state; launch permit or mooring permit from Pennsylvania State Parks, available at most state park offices; launch use permit from the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission.

BIKING: 1.5 miles
Lakeside Trail is flat and excellent for casual bikers.



FISHING: Cowans Gap Lake offers excellent fishing for species such as trout, bass, perch, catfish, and panfish. There are two ADA-accessible fishing piers. South Branch Little Aughwick Creek offers good trout fishing. The stream and lake are stocked periodically throughout the year. Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission regulations and laws apply.

HUNTING AND FIREARMS: About 630 acres are open to hunting, trapping, and the training of dogs during established seasons. Common game species are deer, turkey, and squirrel. The park borders Buchanan State Forest, which provides further opportunities for hunting, trapping, and dog training.

Hunting woodchucks, also known as groundhogs, is prohibited. Dog training is only permitted from the day following Labor Day through March 31 in designated hunting areas. The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Pennsylvania Game Commission rules and regulations apply. Contact the park office for ADA accessible hunting information.

Use extreme caution with firearms at all times. Other visitors use the park during hunting seasons. Firearms and archery equipment used for hunting may be uncased and ready for use only in authorized hunting areas during hunting seasons. In areas not open to hunting or during non-hunting seasons, firearms and archery equipment shall be kept in the owner's vehicle or enclosed trailer. Exceptions include: law enforcement officers and individuals with a valid *Pennsylvania License to Carry Firearms* are authorized to carry a firearm concealed on their person while they are within a state park.



Enjoy the Winter

For ice and snow conditions, visit www.pa.gov/state-parks.

CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING: Seasonally closed park roads and some hiking trails are suitable for cross-country skiing.

ICE SAFETY: For your safety, make sure ice is at least 4" thick for a single user and 7" thick for a small group. Always carry safety equipment.

ICE FISHING: The 42-acre Cowans Gap Lake is open for ice fishing except within the ice skating area. Ice thickness is not monitored.

ICE SKATING: A section of the lake by the beach is available exclusively for ice skating. Ice thickness is monitored only in the ice skating area.



Information and Reservations

Cowans Gap State Park
6235 Aughwick Road
Fort Loudon, PA 17224
717-485-3948
CowansGapSP@pa.gov

An Equal Opportunity Employer
www.pa.gov/state-parks

Make online reservations at www.pa.gov/state-parks or call toll-free 888-PA-PARKS (888-727-2757), 7:00 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday to Saturday.

@CowansGapSP

Electric Vehicle Charging Station

A 2-plug, first-come, first-served, electric vehicle charging station is available for public use near the park office. There is a 4-hour maximum time limit. Overnight charging is prohibited. Please move to another parking space once your vehicle has been charged or the maximum time-limit has been reached.

Access for People with Disabilities

A special vehicle permit is issued at the park office to give access to areas of the park not typically open to vehicles.

This symbol indicates facilities and activities that are Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible for people with disabilities. This publication text is available in alternative formats.

If you need an accommodation to participate in park activities due to a disability, please contact the park you plan to visit.

In an Emergency

Call 911 and contact a park employee to summon medical, fire, or safety professionals.

Call or text 988 to contact a crisis center counselor during a mental health or substance abuse crisis.

Directions to the nearest hospital are posted on bulletin boards and at the park office. An emergency phone is near the park office and near the north end of Lot 3.

NEAREST HOSPITAL
Fulton County Medical Center
214 Peach Orchard Road
McConnellsburg, PA 17233



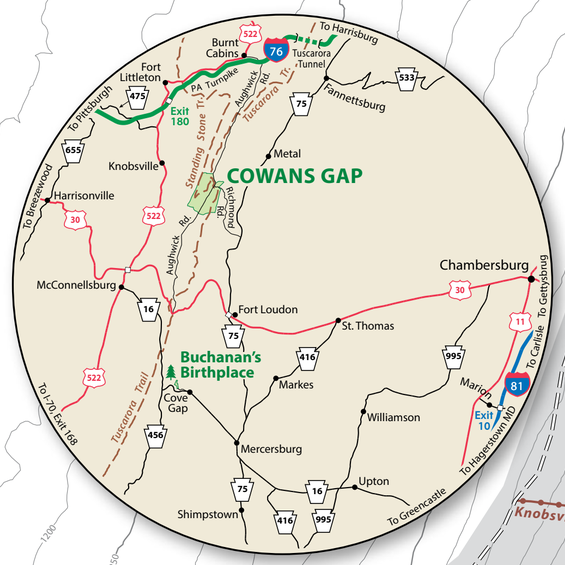
Nearby Attractions

Information on nearby attractions is available from the Fulton County Chamber of Commerce and Tourism. www.FultonCountyPA.com

Buchanan's Birthplace State Park is in the foothills of Tuscarora Mountain on the western side of Cumberland Valley, seven miles north of US 30. The park commemorates James Buchanan, 15th President of the United States. 717-485-3948

The 75,000-acre **Buchanan State Forest** is adjacent to Cowans Gap and has hiking, fishing, hunting, and other recreation. 717-485-3148

COWANS GAP STATE PARK



TRAIL INFORMATION

- Trail - Hiking
- Trail - Multi-use: Hiking, mountain biking, and as designated
- Trail - Paved
- Trail - Hiking, Long distance
- Trail - Multi-use, Long distance
- Trail - Drivable
- Horseback Riding
- Cross-country Skiing Recommended
- 00 Trail Intersection Number

- Park Office
- Blue Symbols Mean ADA Accessible
- Emergency Phone
- Nature Center
- Wayside Exhibit
- Restrooms - Modern
- Shower House/Restrooms
- Amphitheater
- Food Concession
- Picnicking
- Picnic Pavilion
- Scenic View
- Camping
- Sanitary Dump Station
- Cabin - Rustic
- Organized Group Tenting
- Swimming Beach
- Playground
- Ice Skating
- Fishing Pier
- Boat Rental
- Boat Launch & Mooring
- Boat Launch - Hand Carry
- Boat Mooring
- Road - Unpaved
- Road - Paved
- Gate
- Parking - ADA-accessible
- Parking - Paved
- Parking - Unpaved
- Parking - Horse Trailers
- Electric Vehicle Charging Station
- State Park - No Hunting
- State Park - Hunting
- State Park - Boundary

Hiking: 13 miles

All trails allow hiking. Where noted, trails also permit mountain biking and horseback riding.

Cameron Trail: 0.5 mile
More difficult hiking | Out-and-back trail | Yellow blazes
Built by the CCC, this very steep, boundary trail is on the south end of the park. It climbs to the top of Cove Mountain allowing access to the ridgetop.

Doe Trail: 0.2 mile
Easiest hiking | Out-and-back | Yellow blazes
This short trail connects Lot 5 with Logging Road Trail above Camping Area B.

Geyer Trail: 0.6 mile
Most difficult hiking | Connector trail | White blazes
This steep park boundary trail climbs 700 feet up Tuscarora Mountain from Aughwick Road to the Tuscarora Trail, passing through areas of mountain laurel.

Horse Trail: 0.2 mile
Easiest hiking | Connector trail | Yellow blazes
Recreations permitted: hiking, mountain biking, equestrian
This short trail connects Lot 5 with Standing Stone Trail/ Knobsville Road Trail.

Horseshoe Trail: 0.8 mile
Most difficult hiking | Connector trail | White blazes
This steep and rugged trail passes over loose stones on slopes. It is accessed from Tuscarora Trail. From there, hikers climb up Cove Mountain to Standing Stone Trail.

Knobsville Road Trail: 1.6 miles
More difficult hiking | Connector trail | Yellow blazes
Recreations permitted: hiking, mountain biking, equestrian
Accessed off Lakeside Trail or Lot 4, This trail passes by a historic CCC site on the way to a stunning overlook near the top of the mountain.

Lakeside Trail: 1.5 miles
Easiest hiking | Loop trail | Yellow blazes
Recreations permitted: hiking, biking, cross-country skiing recommended
Trailhead amenities: modern restrooms, picnic tables
This scenic, nearly-level trail can be accessed from multiple areas in the park and takes visitors along Cowans Gap Lake's shoreline. The popular, gravel or paved trail provides scenic views of the lake and wildlife viewing opportunities.

North Logging Road Trail: 0.9 mile
Easiest hiking | Connector trail | Yellow blazes
Recreations permitted: hiking, mountain biking, equestrian
Connecting with other trails on the Cove Mountain side of the park, this trail follows an old logging road and serves as a great connector trail for making a loop hike when traversing other trails.

One Mile Trail: 0.7 mile
Easiest hiking | Out-and-back trail | Yellow blazes
Accessed along Aughwick Road near the park office, this mountain laurel shaded trail winds along the bottom of Tuscarora Mountain to join Three Mile Trail.

Plessinger Trail: 1.1 miles
More difficult hiking | Connector trail | Yellow blazes
Connecting Lakeside and Cameron trails, rocky path meanders along Aughwick Creek providing access for anglers and wildlife watchers.

South Logging Road Trail: 0.7 mile
Easiest hiking | Connector trail | Yellow blazes
Recreations permitted: hiking, mountain biking, equestrian
This trail connects with other trails on the Cove Mountain side of the park and continues into Buchanan State Forest.

Standing Stone Trail: 2.5 miles in the park, 80 miles total
More difficult hiking | Point-to-point trail | Orange blazes
A portion of this long-distance trail passes through the park and by vistas and a historical CCC incinerator. The trail continues north to Greenwood Furnace State Park.

Three Mile Trail: 1.6 miles
More difficult hiking | Out-and-back trail | Yellow blazes
Trailhead amenities: modern restrooms
Traveling from Lot 3 to Plessinger Trail, this trail wanders through mountain laurel on the side of Tuscarora Mountain. Be aware, there is a short, 200-foot section of very steep trail.

Tuscarora Trail: 2.4 miles in the park, 250 miles total
More difficult hiking | Point-to-point trail | Blue blazes
Recreations permitted: hiking, backpacking
Trailhead amenities: modern restrooms, potable water, picnic tables
In the park, the trail goes through the day use area around Cowans Gap Lake. It then climbs Tuscarora Mountain which offers scenic views.

