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Tales from Old Rocky Top, down in the Hocking Hills

Anne Z. Cooke, Tribune News Service on Aug 28, 2018

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LOGAN, Ohio -- If you paused long enough to read the trailhead signs in Ohio's Hocking Hills State Park, you'd find that the Black Hand sandstone underfoot was laid down 350,000 years ago, on an ancient seabed.

Or you could blow off the science lesson -- like I did -- and push ahead to the Old Man's Cave, past a meandering creek and down a level path. Level, it seemed, until both trail and creek abruptly vanished, swallowed up by a hole in the earth.

A moment earlier I'd been slathering sunscreen on my nose. Now shadows dimmed the sky, pinched between narrow walls, and the sun's filtered rays glanced off a cluster of half-hidden caves and a waterfall below.

For a moment I wondered if we -- my sister Mary and I -- had tumbled into Rivendell, in Middle-earth. But the shapes ahead weren't elves. They were teens on a school trip, posing for selfies and daring each other to jump in the water. "Don't be a chicken," teased one of the girls. "It's nothing special. Just a creek."

But not to us, nor the hikers behind us, astonished at their surroundings. The Old Man's Cave was as fabulous as it was unexpected. But our next day's outing, a nature walk booked in advance, which -- to my surprise -- included an introduction to rappelling -- outdid the caves by half.

"Don't we need a cliff to step off?" asked Mary, nervously scanning the landscape as eco-biologist Steve Roley, our guide, a rock climber and the owner of High Rock Adventures, gathered the group together. "Yeah, where's Old Rocky Top?" echoed the guy behind me.

But Roley, a student of native plants, was in no hurry as we strolled uphill beneath birches and hemlocks. Stopping here and there, he pointed out the edible plants that thrive beneath hemlocks, trees descended from similar hemlocks that flourished 10,000 years ago, when the climate was cooler and moister.

"These here are jack-in-the-pulpits and those are may apples," he said, moving on to a patch of greenbriar and a solitary sweet sycily.

Then Roley stopped short, next to two rocky walls. "Geeez," said somebody, gazing skyward. But before you could snap your fingers, we'd buckled up, climbed to the top, wobbled over a narrow bridge, and one-by-one, gasped, backed off into thin air and "bumped" down the wall to the ground.

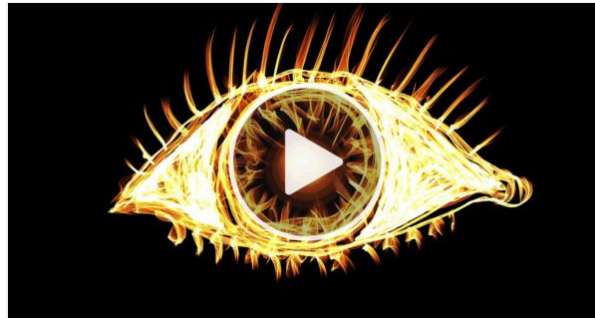
"Wow, it's easy, let's do it again!" clamored the group, thrilled -- and relieved -- that they hadn't backed out. And to think that a month earlier, I'd written off Ohio as one of the states you fly over on your way to somewhere else.

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