

Dans Mountain – Remembering the Poor Man's Friend

Saki

Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

February 29, 2020



*Figure 1: Dan's Rock Overlook*

Standing on top of the 300-million-year-old rock at Dan's Rock Overlook in Allegheny County, Maryland, on a cold but crystal-clear winter morning, the phrase "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" came to my mind. It wasn't because of the panoramic view – few would question its attractiveness – but rather, the rock itself is a subject of fierce debate. Like High Rock (the highest point on the Appalachian Trail in Maryland at 1,900 feet), Dan's Rock (at 2,895 feet) is covered in what appears to be modern graffiti, standing in sharp contrast with the pristine natural woodlands it overlooks. But on closer examination, one might notice that defacing at this site dates back to 1867. The oldest writing is painstakingly etched into the rock, while that created after WWII is typically spray painted. During my visit, a light dusting of snow sank into some of the carvings, making for some easy and fascinating reading.



Figure 2: Historic carving at Dan's Rock reads "T.S. PRESTON | 11 1883 | HELEN | STRICKLAND"

Along with Wolf Rock (2,725 feet) and Fairview Hill (2,680 feet), Dan's Rock is part of the 16-mile-long Dans Mountain range, designated an [Important Bird Area](#) by the Audubon Society. This area contains a globally significant population of Cerulean Warbler, along with various bird species that are at risk in Maryland: Wood Thrush, Worm-eating Warbler, and Kentucky Warbler.

Dan's Rock is also the highest point on Dans Mountain and Allegany County, with the overlook managed by the latter. Its elevation makes it an ideal location for forestry and communication towers, which dot parts of the skyline. Fortunately, the 180-degree view looking southeast is unencumbered, and on a clear day, one can gaze across the North Branch of the Potomac River into West Virginia or southwest towards the 9,783-acre Dan's Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

Dan's Mountain WMA includes the largest contiguous state-owned forest in Maryland. Although hunters love it for its large turkey population, they can also pursue white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse, and gray

squirrel. Hikers and mountain bikers appreciate the variety of trails and old roads that wander through the woods.

Slightly west of Dan's Mountain WMA, the 481-acre [Dane Mountain State Park](#) is famous among locals for its heated Olympic-sized swimming pool and giant water slide. Those preferring solitude may want to explore during the colder months. Starting at the [trailhead](#) just off Recreation Area Road SW, I walked a short circuit hike on Dye School Trail, which follows the clear waters of Hill Run to the ruins of Dye School. Used by local families in the 1800's, this one room schoolhouse accommodated about 25 students in first to eighth grade. Winter is an ideal time to view the ruins, often overgrown with foliage in the warmer months, and to appreciate the old stone wall which connects with part of the trail.



Figure 3: Dye School Trailhead

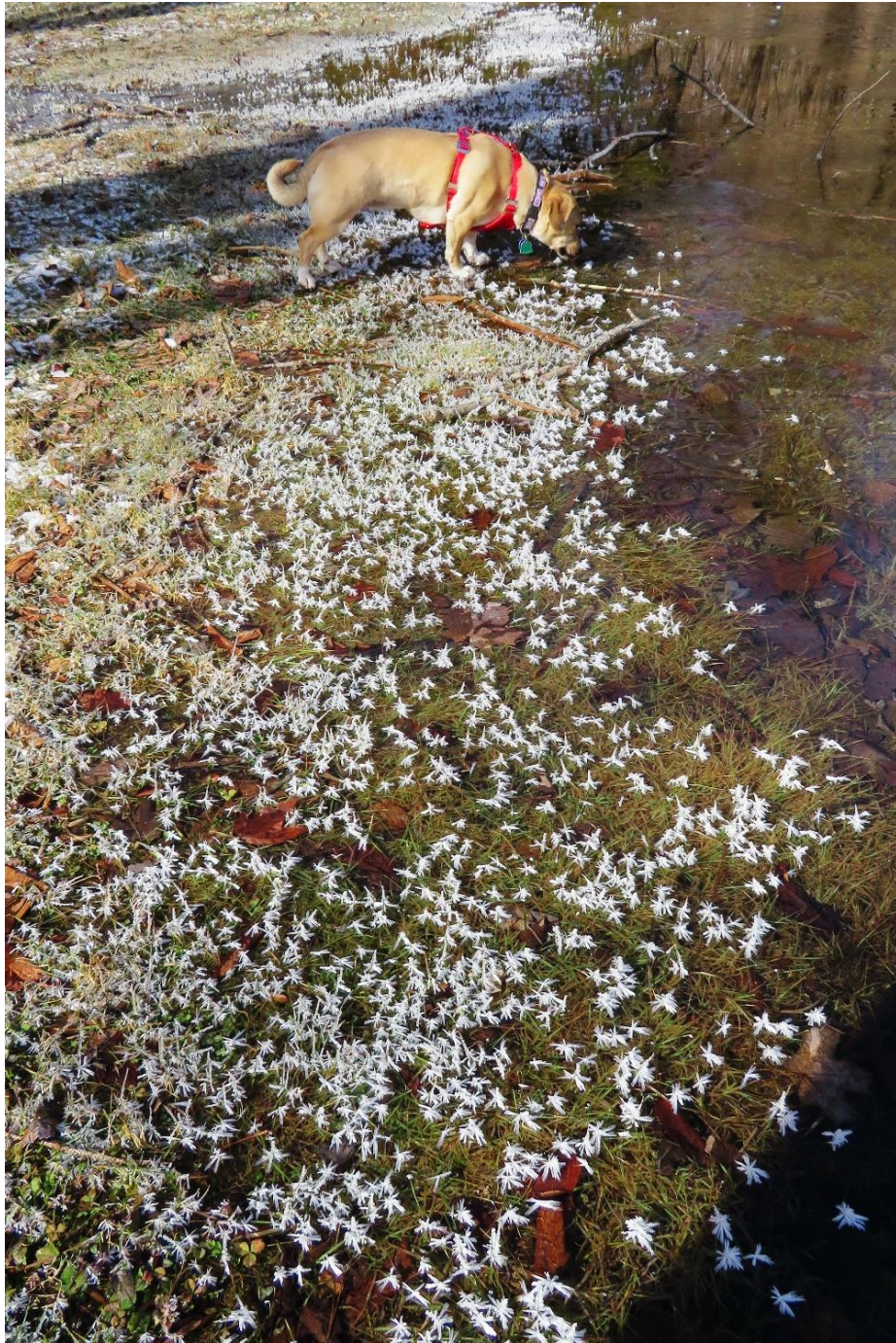


Figure 4: Dye School ruins

At the edge of a [small pond](#) in the state park, I saw what looked like white toy jacks. It turns out I stumbled across a remarkable winter phenomenon that occurs only when a variety of conditions align. The water's surface was barely frozen, and bright morning sunlight penetrated the clear layer of ice. With little wind, the water vapor, relatively warm in comparison to the air temperature of around 14 degrees Fahrenheit, created just the right environment for the growth of hundreds of frost flowers...something more commonly seen in polar regions. It was truly an amazing spectacle to witness.



*Figure 5: Frost flower on frozen pond*



*Figure 6: Daphne with frost flowers*

The only wildlife I spotted that day was a fish swimming under the ice in the pond. Perhaps it was one of the fish that is stocked there annually. The ice actually provides some insulation that helps the pond retain its heat, especially in the deeper sections. Although some fish will go dormant after burrowing in soft sediment, most, like the one I saw, simply slow their metabolism, in part so they will use less oxygen which may be in short supply due to the ice forming a barrier between the water and air.

However, I saw signs of other wildlife. Fresh, virgin snow displayed the tiny footprints of a hopping songbird. A vacant bird nest lay on one of the stone supports below the roof overhang of a pavilion for rent near the pond. Perhaps its builder will reclaim the location in a few weeks once the spring thaw arrives, though if it does, it will likely recycle the nesting material or start fresh, since most nests are seldom used more than once.

At another section of the state park, I learned about Dans Mountain's namesake, Daniel Cresap. He was born in 1728 near Havre de Grace, Maryland and became one of the first settlers in Allegany County. The nearby town of Cresaptown was also named after Daniel and his family. Though known for his service during the Revolutionary War, Daniel was perhaps best remembered as being the "poor man's friend." According to John J. Jacob's "A Biographical Sketch of the Life of the Late Captain Michael Cresap," Daniel "...was proverbially the poor man's friend, and has been known, in scarce times, to refuse to sell corn to those who had money, that he might have enough to supply those who had none." Perhaps it was Daniel's kind heart that left fond memories with the people that knew him best, inspiring them to name the land in his honor so that he would not be forgotten.

For more information, see

- [Maryland Geological Survey – Dan's Rock, Allegany County](#)
- [Maryland Historical Trust Determination of Eligibility Form – Dan's Rock](#)
- [Maryland Department of Natural Resources \(DNR\) – Dan's Mountain WMA](#)
- [Audubon – Dan's Mountain](#)
- [Maryland DNR – Dans Mountain State Park](#)
- [Damngynrfam - Dan's Mountain Hike - Dye School Trail](#)
- [Wikipedia – Frost flower \(sea ice\)](#)
- [Dickinson County Conservation Board – How Fish Survive in Frozen Lakes](#)
- [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds - Do birds reuse old nests from year to year?](#)