

Northern Savage River State Forest – Straddling the Sheds

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Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

February 29, 2020



Figure 1: Looking to Frostburg from St. John's Rock

At 55,155 acres, [Savage River State Forest](#) is the largest state forest in Maryland. All but about 40 acres of it resides in Garrett County, the westernmost county in Maryland. The rest crosses over into Allegany County near Frostburg and Lonaconing. The Forest straddles the Eastern Continental Divide. Those parts which lie west of the divide have waterways that eventually drain into the Youghiogheny River, the Ohio River, and finally the Mississippi River, thus making it part of the 1,245,000 square mile Mississippi watershed, the largest drainage basin in North America. Most of the forest is situated east of the divide, comprising part of the 64,000 square mile Chesapeake Bay watershed, which flows to the Savage River, the Potomac River, and eventually the Chesapeake Bay.

Savage River State Forest covers a lot of ground...more than I could reconnoiter in just a few days. So I decided to limit my exploration to three discontinuous portions in the northern half: St. John's Rock, Mt. Aetna, and Negro Mountain.

[St. John's Rock](#) is a resistant sandstone outcrop of the [Pottsville](#) geologic formation located on Big Savage Mountain. Since the late 1800's, it has been a tourist and recreational attraction, with some visitors leaving their name and date of visit etched into the rock. From its 2,904-foot overlook, one can clearly see the town of Frostburg about two miles east.

About 800 feet south of St. John's Rock is the [northern terminus](#) of the 17-mile-long Big Savage Mountain Trail, a popular and rugged backpacking trail that follows the Big Savage Mountain ridgeline southwest to the Savage River Reservoir. To the east of the Big Savage Mountain Trail lies the St. John's Rock Off-Road Vehicle (ORV) Trail, the first trail on Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) lands designed specifically for ORV enthusiasts.

About five miles west of St. John's Rock lies the 700-acre Mt. Aetna Tract, a network of hiking trails nestled between Mudlick Run and Savage River. After parking at the [trailhead](#) just north of the Mt. Aetna Road bridge, I set off on a 4.3-mile hike on the red-blazed Outer (aka Mt. Aetna) Loop, a moderately challenging hike featuring diverse and pristine terrain. The first thing I noticed were wind turbines on Fourmile Ridge, about 0.75 mile to the east. Completed in 2015, the [Fourmile Wind Energy Project](#), along with Backbone, the other Western Maryland wind farm, generates enough clean energy to power more than 30,000 homes!



Figure 2: Wind turbines on Fourmile Ridge

A moist, sunny clearing near the Savage River was home to a variety of interesting plants. The tastiest, [teaberry](#), also known as checkerberry or wintergreen, typically has shiny green leaves, but at this time of year, they are dark red. Peeking under the leaves, I found bright red fruit, which is used to flavor teas, candies, medicines, and chewing gum. Next to the teaberry lay [hair-cap moss](#), also known as pigeon wheat, which forms large mats in peat bogs, old fields, and areas with high soil acidity. Just below the hair-cap moss grew [reindeer lichen](#), which is used as food and medicine in some cultures.



*Figure 3: Teaberry, hair-cap moss, and reindeer lichen*

Hiking north, I picked up the orange-blazed Red Oak (aka Tall Oaks) Trail, which took me to the most northern section of the Mt. Aetna Tract, where I crossed over a footbridge made from what appears to be a recycled pier. Eventually, I connected again with the Outer Loop, this time along Mudlick Run, which, as the name implies, created muddy conditions. The damp ground and cold air had its advantages...they brought to life wintry sculptures comprised of dirt and [needle ice](#), including one that resembled a demon claw emerging

from the ground. Other parts of the trail were covered in needle ice and created a “crunchy” walking sensation as ice shattered under the weight of my footsteps.



*Figure 4: Demon claw ice sculpture*

Several miles west of the Mt. Aetna Tract and on the other side of the Eastern Continental Divide lies Negro Mountain. Known for having the highest point on the National Road, the first highway in the United States, in recent years, Negro Mountain’s name has been the subject of debate and controversy. Its origins are hazy, but the best documented story is that a black slave or a scout called "Nemesis" died heroically in 1756 during the French and Indian War while serving under frontiersman Colonel Thomas Cresap. While the mountain was most likely named as a testament to African American bravery, many are demanding that it be renamed. Such a bill was introduced in 2011, but rejected. Eight years later, the Maryland State Highway Administration removed road signs for Negro Mountain, citing concerns over racial sensitivity.

When I arrived at the Bowman Hill Road [trailhead](#) for Negro Mountain, the first thing I noticed was a kiosk providing information about Savage River State Forest but nothing about Negro Mountain. On my 6.3-mile hike, there were no blazes and no signs, but the wide paths, which appeared to be logging roads, were easy to follow, though not necessarily easy to walk on. Snow had thawed and refroze, creating slippery conditions. But the ice also produced plenty of pretty polar patterns.



*Figure 5: Ice pattern on Negro Mountain*

The thing I liked best about Negro Mountain was the variety of plants and lichens which brought color to what would have otherwise been a fairly drab winter environment. Some were on sunny rocks but most were in wet areas along a [powerline right of way](#), which afforded an impressive view to the west. The most interesting were the [bryophytes](#), which include mosses. These are small, herbaceous plants that grow closely packed together in mats or cushions on rocks, soil, or as [epiphytes](#) on the trunks and leaves of forest trees.



*Figure 6: Red Sphagnum Moss with a touch of teaberries at Negro Mountain*



*Figure 7: Baltimore Greenshield lichen on Negro Mountain*

It is hard to comprehend the immense size of Savage River State Forest, which makes up roughly 13% of Garrett County, Maryland, the second largest county (by area) in the state. My exploration just scratched the surface, and only from a hiker's perspective. One might claim that the place is so big that it couldn't all fit in a single watershed...so it straddles two.



For more information, see

- [Maryland DNR – Savage River State Forest](#)
- [Geography Realm – Geography Facts About the Mississippi Watershed](#)
- [Chesapeake Bay Program – Watershed](#)
- [Wikipedia – Savage River State Forest](#)
- [Maryland Historical Trust Determination of Eligibility Form – St. John Rock](#)
- [Maryland DNR – Savage River State Forest Trail Guide](#)
- [Maryland DNR – Savage River State Forest Mt. Aetna Tract](#)
- [Maryland DNR – Off-Road Vehicle Use on Maryland's Public Lands](#)
- [Wikipedia – Negro Mountain](#)