

Birds and Blooms in Canaan Valley

In Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge, spring presents wildflowers and birds by the hundreds.

While anyone who avidly pursues winter sports in the Mid-Atlantic is likely familiar with West Virginia's beautiful Canaan Valley and its wealth of downhill and cross-country skiing opportunities, winter isn't the only season for visiting this largest of the high-elevation valleys east of the Rockies. In spring, the landscape fills with color and song, as wildflowers carpet the woods, wetlands and meadows, and birds, both year-round residents and seasonal migrants, take up their mating rituals.

The best place to experience it all is at the 16,000-acre Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge, which is located directly adjacent to Canaan Valley State Park, south of Davis. Established in August 1995, Canaan Valley was dedicated two months later as the 500th refuge in the National Wildlife Refuge system. Host to a boreal climate more common to Canada and Maine than most of the rest of the Mid-Atlantic, the valley here supports a wide array of cold-climate flora, including northern sedge and balsam fir. The refuge is also home to a variety of high-elevation wetlands with nearly 600 species of plants and more than 200 species of birds.

Several walking and hiking trails here provide access to the blooms of late spring and early summer. One of the most leisurely is the Freeland Trail, a half-mile boardwalk loop that takes visitors past active beaver ponds and into a forest dominated by balsam fir. Among the wild blooms visitors can enjoy on this walk

are buttercups and lady's slippers.

Another relatively easy hike is the Idelman's Run Trail near the end of Forest Road 80. Passing through woodlands up the slope of Cabin Mountain, the trail provides access to squirrel corn and trout lilies. More experienced hikers should consider a half-day hike on the Bealls Trail, a four-and-a-half-mile roundtrip trek that traverses forest, fields, swamps and bog habitats, with a spur trail leading to the amber-colored Blackwater River. Here, you will see lush carpets of fern along the forest floor, and the field portions of the trail offer opportunities for viewing grassland birds such as meadowlarks, bobolinks and sparrows.

To fully appreciate what Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge has to offer, consider taking part in one of the refuge's many ranger programs or special events. Each Mother's Day weekend, the refuge is one of the hosts of the annual Wildflower Pilgrimage, and the weekend after Memorial Day, you can enjoy guided birding hikes as part of the Southern Boreal Bird Festival.

—Deborah R. Huso

IF YOU GO

Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge is open year-round, seven days a week. For more information, call 304/866-3858, or visit fws.gov/canaanvalley.

Canaan Valley is one of 551 National Wildlife Refuges in the U.S. To explore them all, visit fws.gov/refuges.