



# Ice Mountain

## A Cool Place in West Virginia

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**  
Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

Anyone desiring a walk on the cold side will enjoy a visit to Ice Mountain Preserve, a unique work of nature located in Hampshire County, West Virginia. The cold temperatures found on the mountain have been part of the historical record for more than 200 years because Native Americans, pioneers, and early settlers found it to be useful in daily living. In more recent years naturalists and tourists explored the preserve for research purposes and adventure.

The mysteries of Ice Mountain involve a layer of ice found beneath the earth's surface. Specifically, the ice is found beneath a slope of Oriskany sandstone that was created by the collapse of hanging rock. The sloping mass of boulders accumulated at the foot of the mountain is referred to as a talus.

The most frequently asked question about Ice Mountain concerns where the ice forms and how it remains present into the warmer months. The primary explanation offered by scientists focuses on how the talus insulates ice formed during the winter. The refrigeration effect inside the mass of boulders is intensified when the dense cold air sinks deeper into the rocks. The heavier cold air is later diffused during warm weather when it flows continuously from natural "vents" located near the bottom of the slope. Researchers have identified approximately 150 small vents at the base of the talus.

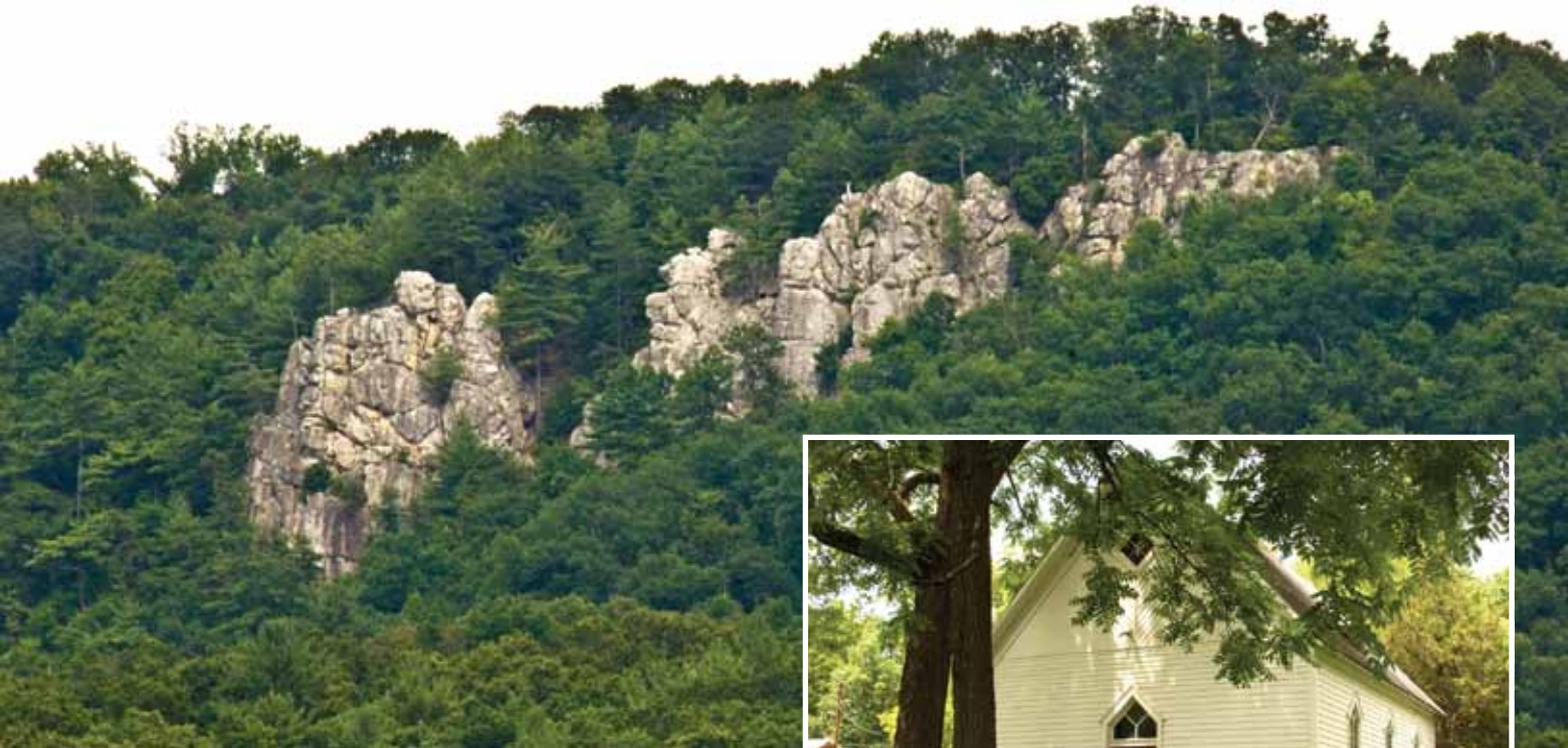
Today visitors can enjoy the chill of Ice Mountain through the auspices of The Nature

Conservancy, an international nonprofit environmental group that acquired 149 acres on the site. The Conservancy seeks to safeguard the property by controlling invasive plant species while protecting the rare ones. Botanists have identified a number of plants that are unique to Ice Mountain because they are normally found farther north and above 4,000 feet. The Bristly Rose, Twinflower, Bunchberry, Appalachian Wood Fern, Purple Clematis, and Northern Bedstraw are considered rare plants that may be observed near the vent openings.

Arranging for a walk on Ice Mountain is easy, just complete the online Nature Conservancy Request Form that will be directed to North River Mills residents Steve and Terry Lynn Bailes. The volunteers, docents, and North River advocates work with individuals and small groups to make the trip rewarding.

The hike begins at the Miller House near the center of North River Mills. Melissa Blank, educator and docent at Ice Mountain, made the necessary arrangements when I made the trip on a 95 degree day in July. I was hoping that Ice Mountain would live up to its name!

The ascent begins through a stretch of private property that has been secured for Conservancy purposes. Hiking the initial phase is relatively easy and can be accomplished in about 15 minutes. A wooden sign notifies visitors when entering the Conservancy property and to proceed in single file along a



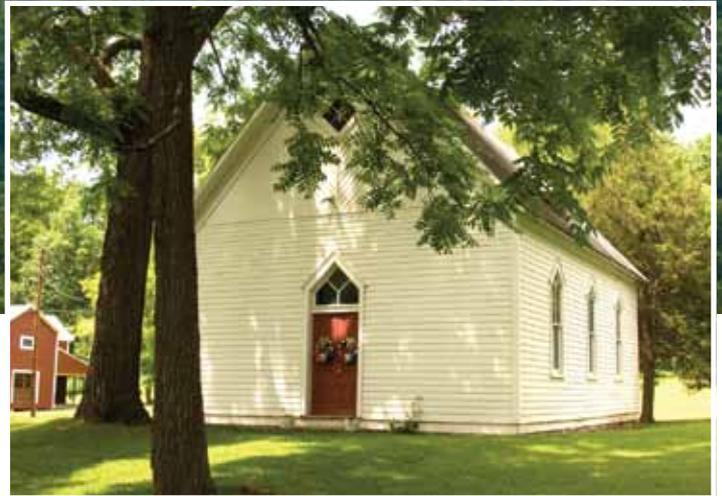
pathway to the left if they wish to experience the talus and vents. A second sign directs visitors to the right and uphill to Raven Rocks, a 200 foot cliff towering above the talus.

We chose the path to the left which wound its way between the North River and mountain base. The walk was not difficult. When entering the refrigerated area, I could immediately feel a flow of cold air.

Some of the vents could not be easily seen but their existence was confirmed by the presence of rare plants. Melissa's son and daughter, John and Jessica, acted as data collectors and inserted a thermometer into the largest and most noteworthy vent along the trail; the lowest reading was 52 degrees.

Melissa identified the rare species of plants and provided additional information on invasive species of plants that have infiltrated the river valley at an alarming rate.

The return trip along the path took us back to the intersection of Raven Rocks Trail. Unlike the lower path, the ascent to Raven Rocks is steep, rough, and not to be attempted by anyone who may not be physically prepared for a rigorous adventure. The difference in elevation between the Miller House and the top of Raven Rocks is only 400 feet but it seems greater when climbing.



**Top: A view of Raven Rocks on Ice Mountain.**

**Inset: The Methodist Church at North River Mills.**

**Above: Steve and Terry Bailes inside the Methodist Church at North River Mills. The church, built in 1893, is still in use today.**

Once at the summit of Raven Rocks a spectacular view of the North River Valley unfolds and an interpretative sign identifies the mountain ranges in view. American Bald Eagles and other birds including ravens are often observed by visitors.



Exploration of both trails, including casual observations of flora and fauna took approximately two hours and covered 2.26 miles. If visitors have particular interests, more time should be allowed.

Ice Mountain continues to draw national attention because it is only one of two such locations in the United States. In 2012, Ice Mountain was designated a National Natural Landmark by the United States Park Service.

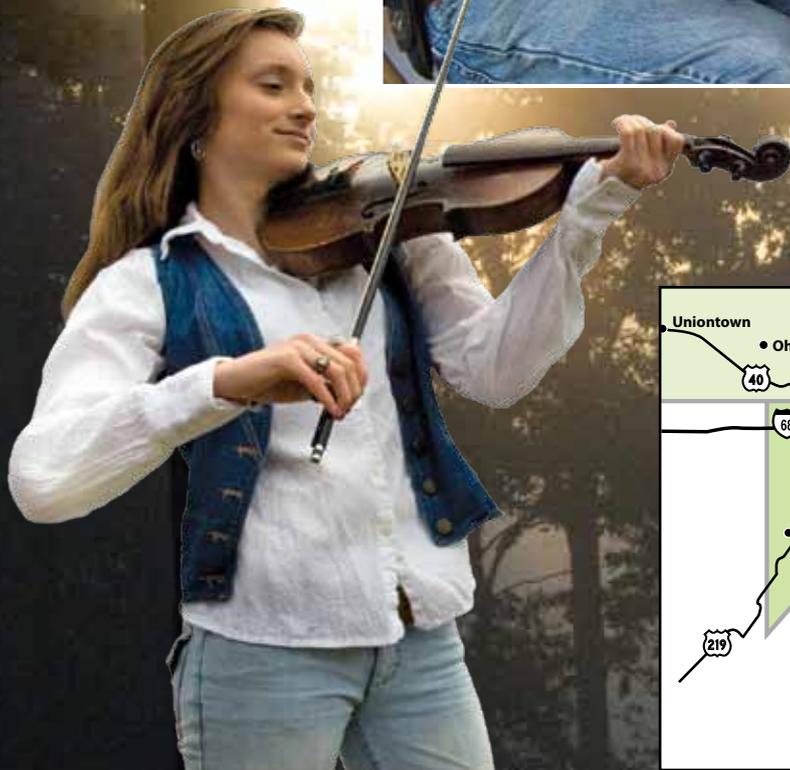
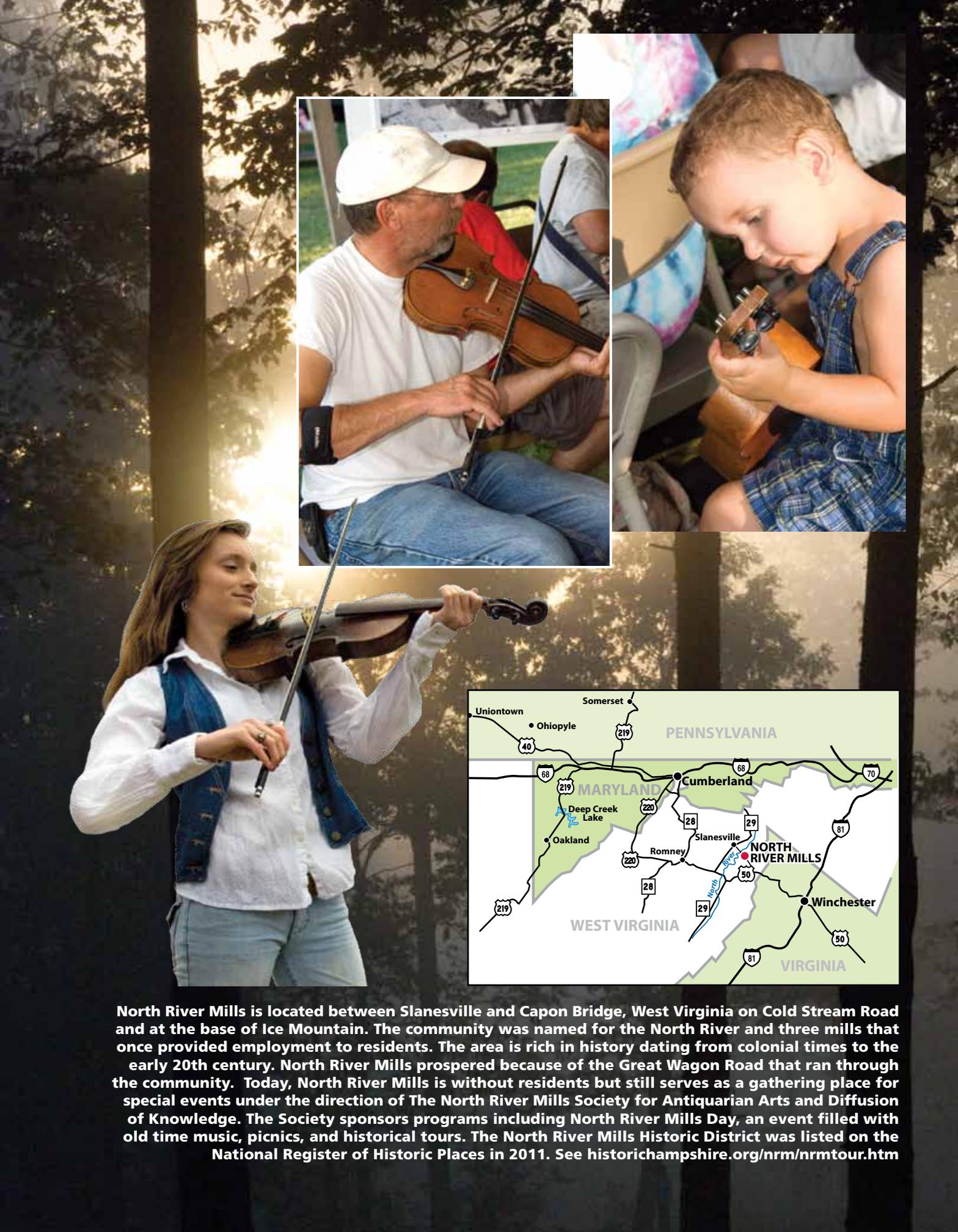
Contact Information:  
 Steve and Terry Lynn Bailes  
 HC 71 Box 103C  
 Capon Bridge, WV 26711-9505  
 304-496-7359  
[www.stevebailes.org/icemountain/visit.htm](http://www.stevebailes.org/icemountain/visit.htm)

*The author would like to express appreciation to Steve and Terry Lynn Bailes for their help and assistance for showing us Ice Mountain and North River Mills and for story information and to Melissa Blank for the site visit. Also to Maria Rose for suggesting this story.*

**It is said that on a dark and rainy night, a drummer, or traveling salesman, was staying at the Miller Inn, above. He came down from his room with a sack, saying he didn't feel well and he wanted to get some air. He returned later without the sack, went upstairs and promptly died.**

**Lake Miller Henderson, who was raised in the inn, felt the drummer's room was haunted. There is a dark stain on the floor where he died — blood or water stain? It is believed the sack was full of gold or some kind of valuables and the drummer buried it somewhere outside and is still around looking for it.**

**Above: The Miller Inn today with the Bailes; Terry is dressed in period clothing of that day. Some say they can still see the ghost of the traveling salesman.**



**North River Mills is located between Slanesville and Capon Bridge, West Virginia on Cold Stream Road and at the base of Ice Mountain. The community was named for the North River and three mills that once provided employment to residents. The area is rich in history dating from colonial times to the early 20th century. North River Mills prospered because of the Great Wagon Road that ran through the community. Today, North River Mills is without residents but still serves as a gathering place for special events under the direction of The North River Mills Society for Antiquarian Arts and Diffusion of Knowledge. The Society sponsors programs including North River Mills Day, an event filled with old time music, picnics, and historical tours. The North River Mills Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2011. See [historichampshire.org/nrm/nrmtour.htm](http://historichampshire.org/nrm/nrmtour.htm)**