



Follow Lake County's Blue Blazes – Ohio's 1,454-mile Buckeye Trail and the Quest for National Scenic Trail Designation in 2026

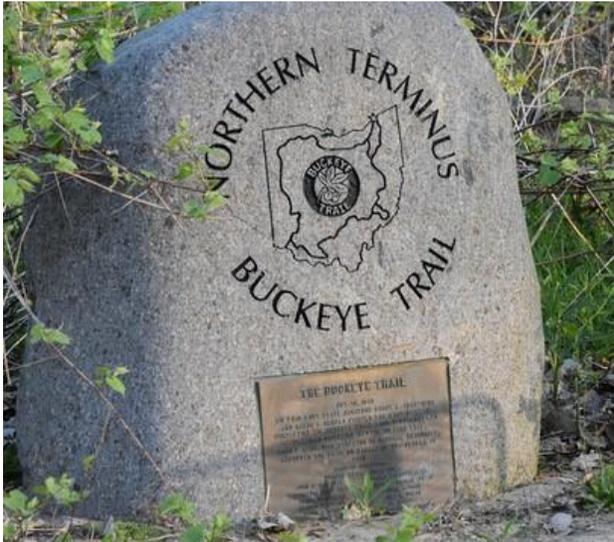
In our nation of nearly 4 million square land miles and 342 million people, there are only 11 National Scenic Trails. The 1,454-mile Buckeye Trail garlands all of Ohio's diverse landscapes, connects 47 counties, 18 State Parks and more than 100 communities. This loop of trails extends from Lake Erie to the Ohio River, through the farmland of northwest Ohio, the hills of Appalachia, the Black Hand sandstone cliffs of the Hocking Hills region, and the bluegrass region of southwest Ohio. Established in 1959-1980, the Buckeye Trail Association is a non-profit organization that manages the trail and provides unique opportunities for hiking, biking and experiencing breathtaking landscapes. Since 2022 when Congress approved funding for a trail feasibility study, this project which concludes sometime in 2026 could make Ohio the 12th National Scenic Trail and the first and only one to date whose entirety is within a single state. This informational analysis would allow Congress to choose action on this request. Regardless of the final recommendations, what is known is the importance of Lake County to this trail system.



The Trail That Connects Ohio - A Brief History

The 1400+ mile hiking path of which 60% is off road, forms a continuous loop around Ohio. Conceived in 1958 by Merrill Gilfillan as a means to connect Cincinnati and Lake Erie, his Columbus Dispatch article spurred a nature / hiking movement. On the backs of a volunteer workforce known as the Buckeye Trail Association (founded 1959), the first 20 miles were dedicated in Hocking County on September 19, 1959. Emma 'Grandma' Gatewood and Congressman Ralph Regula were early champions along with Gilfillan. Two by six inch blue blazes marked the new path. 1967 saw the state designation 'Ohio State Trail' added to its evolving accolades. Created to encourage walking, slow hiking and an appreciation of nature, the trail hit 500 miles by 1970. Some necessary reconfiguration and additions followed and in 1980 a full loop with the current mileage was achieved.

The Buckeye Trail is the longest loop hiking trail in the nation and utilizes historic canal towpaths (Wabash & Erie Canal , Erie Canal & Miami), small towns as well as abandoned railroad lines. The northern terminus begins at Headlands State Park near the Fairport



Westbreakwater Lighthouse on Lake Erie. Two connectors, one heading south, follows the eastern edge of the state. Another path heads west towards Toledo. Both paths connect SW in Milford to complete the loop. As mentioned earlier, volunteers maintain the trail and local chapters have been formed to unite hiking enthusiasts. Lake County belongs to the Crooked River Chapter and has three local Trail Towns - Mentor (2018), Chardon (2019) and Mantua (2018). One can visit over 26 points of interest. They include Headlands State Park, Rider's Inn, Lake Metroparks Greenway, Girdled Road Reservation, Big Creek Park, Burton Square and Hiram Rapids.



What Does The Future Hold For The 'Blue Blazes'? -

Feasibility studies started in 2022 are now submitted to Congress based on nine criteria (NTSA Act, 1968). Findings will be presented to the Secretary of the Interior and a recommendation to Congress would follow. If The Buckeye Trail is then approved for National Scenic Trail Status sometime in 2026, Ohio would become the 12th designee and the only one located in a single state. Ohio would join the National Park Service Network. If designated, the Buckeye Trail would receive:

- Access to NPS infrastructure, support, mapping, signage and way finding tools
- Nationwide visibility
- Promotion through federal channels for tourism and nature awareness
- Expanding opportunities and greater engagement for local communities, nature organizations and outdoor enthusiasts.
- Federally funded staffed office with dedicated support in place for future initiatives.

The last NPS - Congress designation was granted in 2009. While there is no formal timeline for legislative action or inclusion into the national trail system, 2026 looks promising. Lake County residents can help in two ways. One is to explore more than 8 miles of Blue Blazes locally anytime. Second, contact your elected officials local and state to encourage their support of this Congressional designation.

For more information - info@buckeyetrail.org

Sources - Tim Murphy , Bedford Section, Burton@buckeyetrail.org, Andrew Mizesak, America250 Geauga County, www.NPS.gov, BuckeyeTrail.org

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Local Lore by Max, 2010-2016 - The News-Herald, Community Media Lab

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