

Observation Walk: Things to Find While Exploring the Falls of the Ohio State Park



By Kenny Karem, Former Falls of the Ohio Foundation Board Member,
author of *Probing the Wonders of the Falls* guidebook

As you walk around the park, use all of your senses in exploring the varied habitats while answering the following questions. The more you interact with the environment, the more you will notice and appreciate it. So, get ready to touch and feel and explore! **Remember you cannot remove anything from the park, particularly living creatures, plants and fossils.**

1. Find something you see that you think few others would notice. Name and describe it.

2. Find something with an appealing touch. Name and describe it.

3. Find something with a nice smell. Name and describe it.

4. Find an eroded piece of coal, smoothed by the action of the river water. Pieces of coal spill into the river from the barges transporting it and settle into cracks and potholes. Describe its size. -----
5. Find an eroded piece of glass, smoothed by the river water and deposited along the shoreline in the rocks or sandy areas. Unfortunately, lots of trash winds up in the river. What color is your smooth piece of glass? -----
6. Some of the largest corals here are varieties of horn coral and colonial coral (corals that live in a group, cluster or community). For the largest horn coral you find, estimate or measure its length from tip to tip and write it here.

7. Then, for your largest colonial coral sighted, estimate its diameter. Note: most specimens will be only partially visible. If not entirely visible, look for its center, then measure how to the edge, then double the number. -----
8. One of the more unusual, fascinating and mysterious formations in the limestone layers are long straight white lines in the rock filled with chert or flint (calcite rock). These “stress cracks” run north–south and were formed over 200 million years ago. Some geologists connect this formation to when the Appalachian Mountains were formed and uplifted. These are visible in many places on the wide flat fossil reef visible in dry season below the visitor center. Estimate or measure the length of the longest one you find. Some can be many feet long.

9. Also, in these cracks and on the fossil beds, you can easily find the shells of the very common Asiatic clam, a non-native invasive species from China that began showing up at the Falls in the 1970s. Find a shell and describe its shape, size and colors.

10. When you have finished your walk, decide what was the most fascinating or surprising thing you saw or learned. Write that here.

Fossil Search

From the limestone rock layers and cliff areas by the river below the river observation deck you'll start your fossil search. In the park, there are over 600 species of fossils mainly from the Devonian Era and some from the Silurian era over 400 million years ago. But you won't see them all! In your search area, your challenge is to find some of the following common fossils, most of which are easy to spot with a little patience and getting down on your knees. Most of them are contained in the gray limestone rock and mixed in with other rocks and fossils which makes them sometimes difficult to identify. Most of them you will only be able to see partially—a segment, cross section, tip etc. which makes it even more challenging to identify them. Some can be very tiny (crinoid stems) and some can be very large (horn coral). Some can even be upside down. Don't worry because you don't have to identify a particular a specific species or figure out the Latin name. Check the ones you find.

11. _____ crinoid, stem or segment (“Cheerios” bead)
12. _____ horn coral
13. _____ bryozoan (“lacey-like or looks like snakeskin)
14. _____ brachiopod (“clam-like” or a bi-valve)
15. _____ gastropod (“snail”)
16. _____ knee cap coral
17. _____ hexagonal coral
18. _____ wasp nest coral
19. _____ honeycomb coral
20. _____ trilobite (very rare)

Birds at the Falls

Birding enthusiasts “flock” to the Falls to spot the 270 species that frequent or nest in this area. What attracts most birders are the fascinating migratory shore birds such as herons, sandpipers, seagulls, eagles, cormorants which are attracted to the rapids, shallow streams, marshes and wading pools. To see and identify many of these birds requires good binoculars or a birding scope, a guidebook, patience and good luck. However, you may be lucky to spot without binoculars some of the most fascinating visitors around the river.

21. _____ Great Blue Heron. One of the most spectacular visitors here, this majestic bird has about a 5 foot-wide wing span, long slender neck and legs, blue-grayish feathers can be seen darting for fish in the shallow pools. It is the official bird symbol on the park logo.
22. _____ Ring-Billed Gull. A common winter fishing bird which feeds in the rolling rapids by the hundreds, it is easily identifiable by its complete black ring around its yellow bill, white feathers underneath and gray wings with dark tips.
23. _____ Osprey. One of the visual thrills in the park is to see this “sea eagle” dive from the sky into the water to snare a fish with its talons. In flight, you can spot its nearly 5 foot-wide wing span of white feathers with black bands, bent wings and dark brown on top.

24. _____ Double-breasted Cormorant. It's fun to watch this common bird dive suddenly from a floating position and disappear by diving into the river channel to capture a fish in its beak and suddenly emerge again. Its brown body, yellow-orange throat pouch and long neck are distinctive features.
25. _____ Killdeer. You will hear the loud shrill cry of this noisy bird as it sounds the alarm to other birds of your presence. Its white plumage with dark brown markings and neck rings are distinctive features while it fast trots over the fossil beds.

Tree Search

Near the water, you can find trees and plants that can live in very wet conditions. 3 common attractive trees are the black willow, cottonwood and sycamore. The black willow has narrow lance-like leaves and has rubbery green branches. The sycamore has camouflage bark—white, brown and gray. The cottonwood has deeply furrowed or grooved gray bark and heart-shaped leaves. The familiar “cotton-like” fluffy seeds float through the air in the spring. Check the ones you find.

26. _____ Black Willow
27. _____ Cottonwood
28. _____ Sycamore