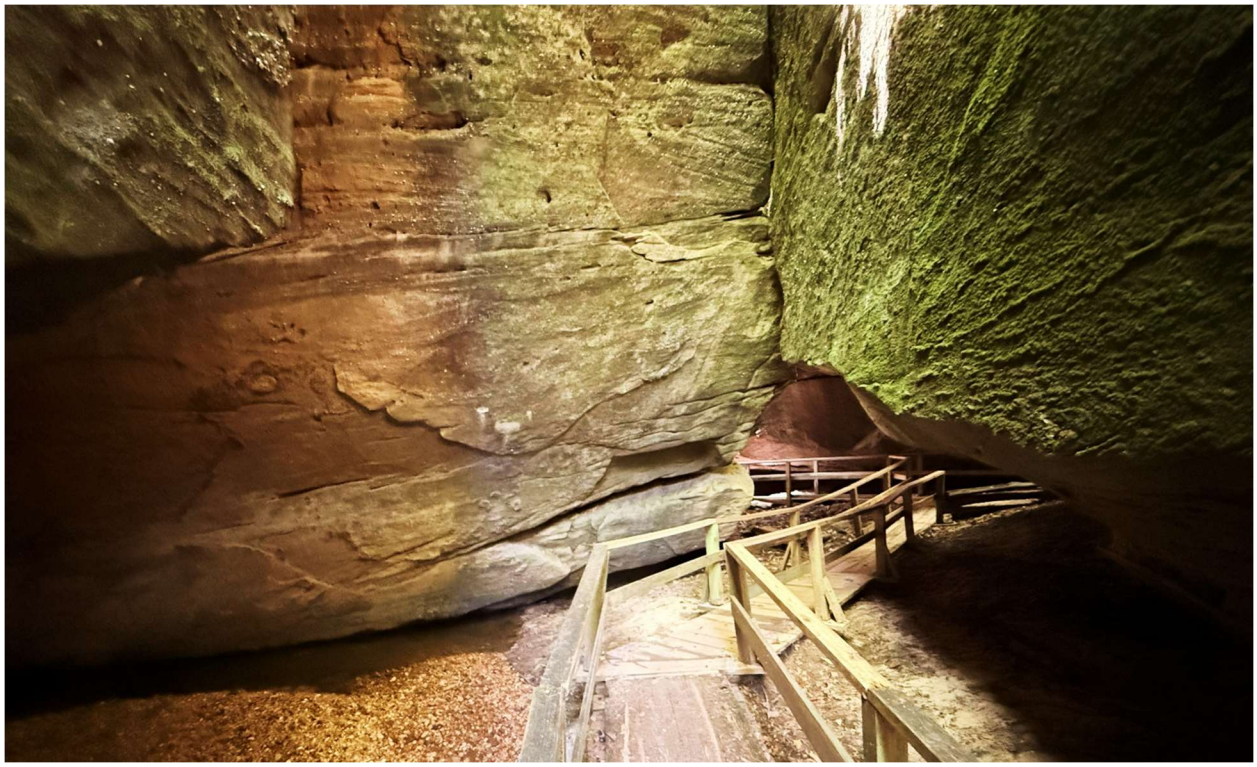
The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America

RICK'S ROADS

Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What

BLOG POST: 2026.05.14

Dismals Canyon, Hayleyville, Alabama





After three straight man-made attractions, it was finally time for some nature. (OK, OK, there was nature on display at Mote SEA, but it was nature contained within man-made walls and windows, so not quite the same.)

I thank Google for letting me know about Dismals Canyon. Faced with the prospect of driving northeast from New Orleans, I scouted ahead to find interesting sites in that direction, and this popped up with rave reviews. I made it a Must See.

Dismals is about as middle-of-nowhere as you'll get in the southeast US. I was lucky to find a Harvest Host that was within an hour of the Canyon. (Shout out to Detail Depot in Red Bay AL! Thanks!)





Dismals Canyon is an 85 acre Nature Conservatory privately owned and operated. It is not a State Park or National Park. However, it was designated a "National Natural Landmark" in 1975 by the National Natural Landmarks Program, which seems like a fine group to do such designating. NNLs are administered by the National Park Service.

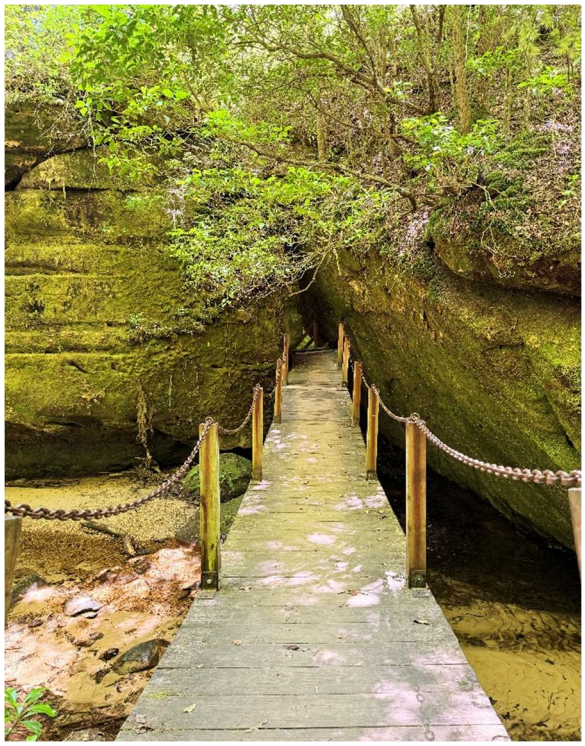
Their website beckons, “Take a couple of hours to hike the canyon floor and experience this beautiful sunken forest. Explore the strange and beautiful labyrinth of caverns and grottos. A 1.5 mile hiking trail on the canyon floor follows Dismals Branch through sky-reaching boulders, past thundering waterfalls, into a secret world of mossy-green and pearl-gray filled with ferns and giant trees.”

That’s actually a pretty accurate description, although I don’t know if I agree with the word “thundering” for the modest falls that I saw. I was given a map in the Gift Shop on my way in – the only way into or out of the canyon is through the Gift Shop & Café, how clever (nice open air lounge though (photo, above) – and I referenced it a lot.



Rainbow Falls is one of the first sights that you see on the Gorge Trail.





The swaying bridge comes right after, though you are urged to hike the loop counter-clockwise and save the bridge for the end.

The canyon's name comes from a somewhat outdated definition of the word "dismal". That word used to mean "dark, shadowy, lonely or mysterious" rather than the connotation of "depressing" that we tend to use now.

Between the high steep cliffs and the ample tree canopy, it is a very shady and shadowy place. The twisting and winding nature of the trail adds to mystery, as it is easy to get turned around among the huge sandstone boulders.

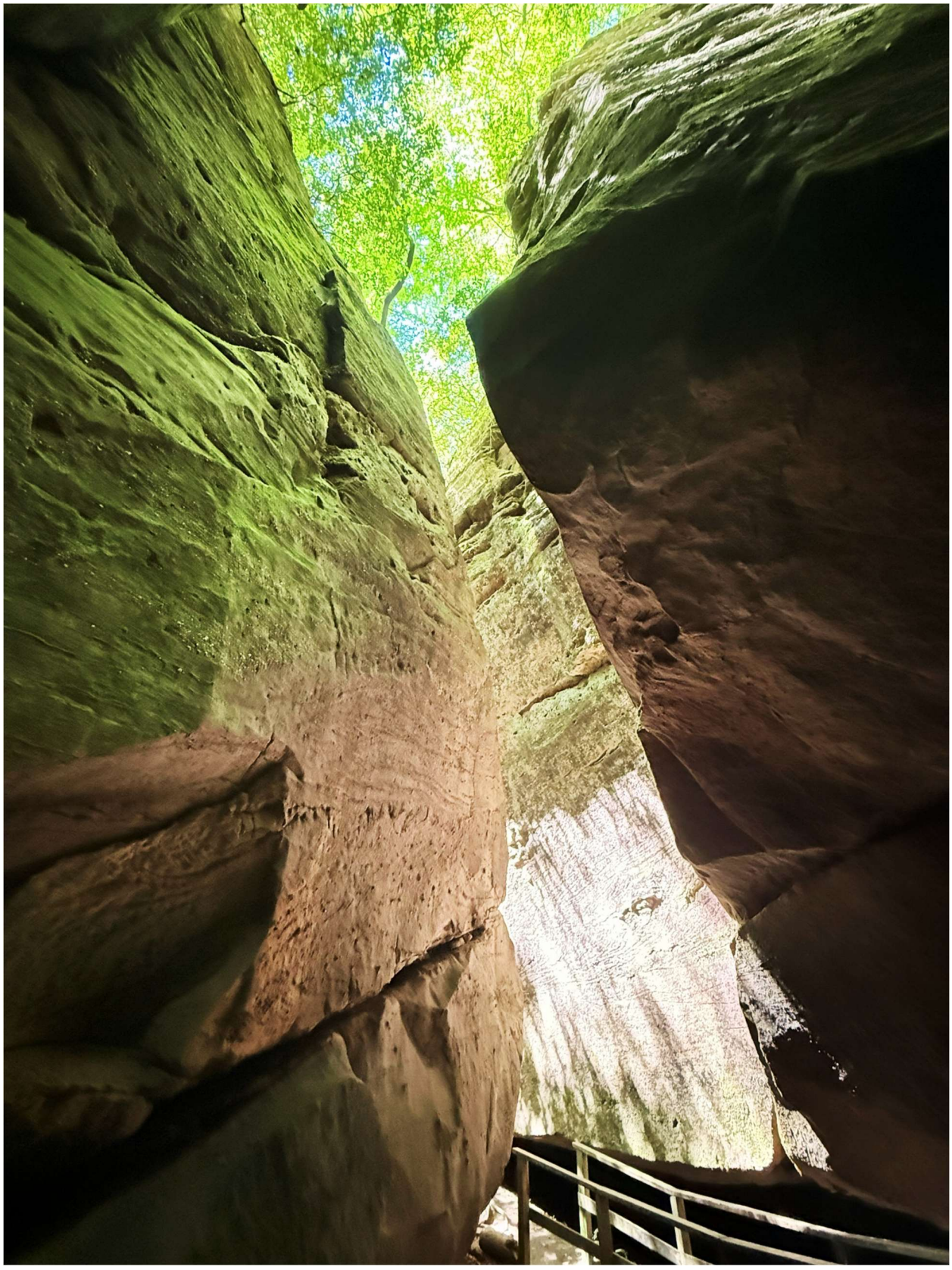
It's amazing how green most of the boulders are. The sandtone acts like a giant sponge, aborbing the moisture that the moss thrives on.

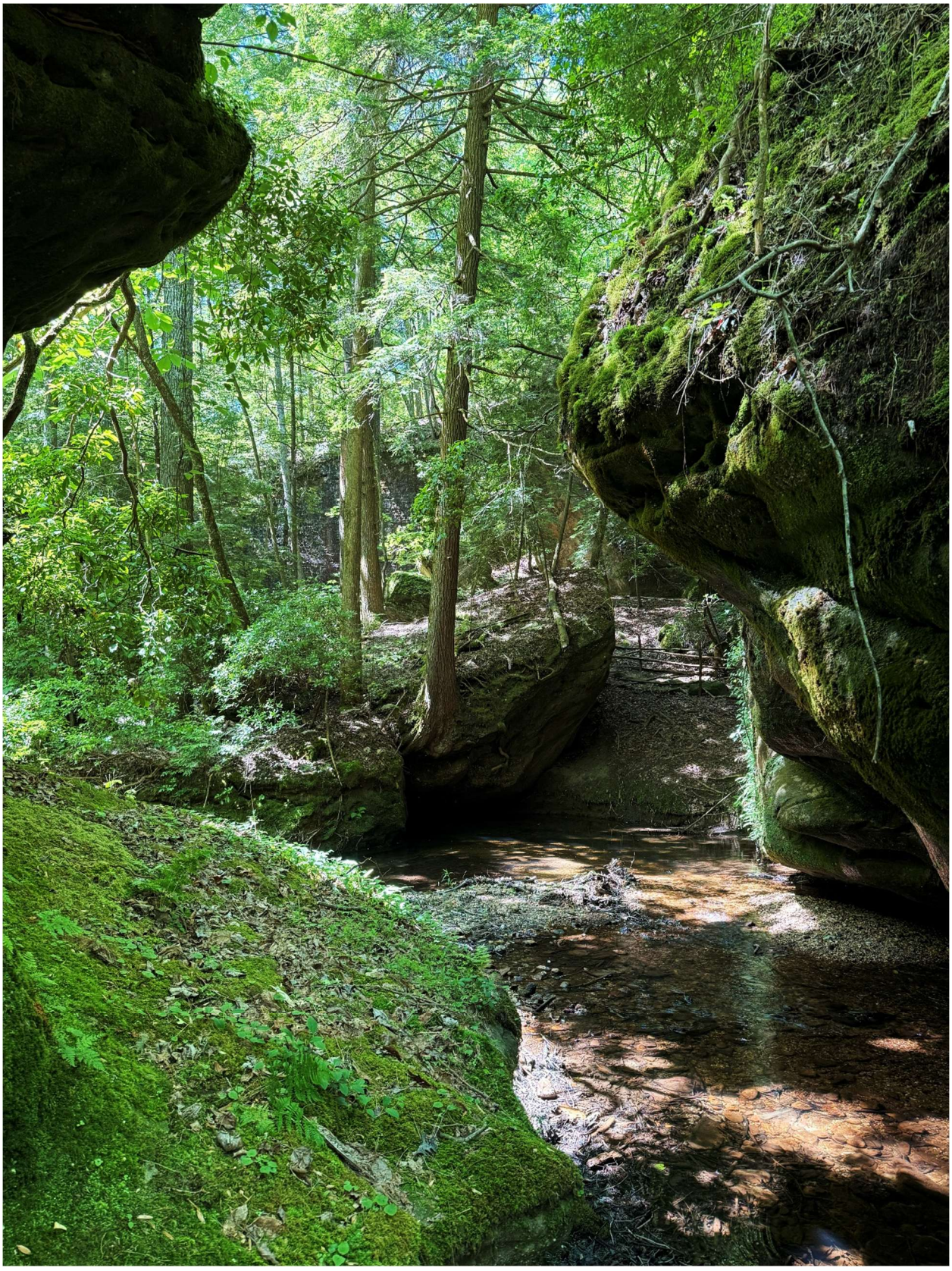


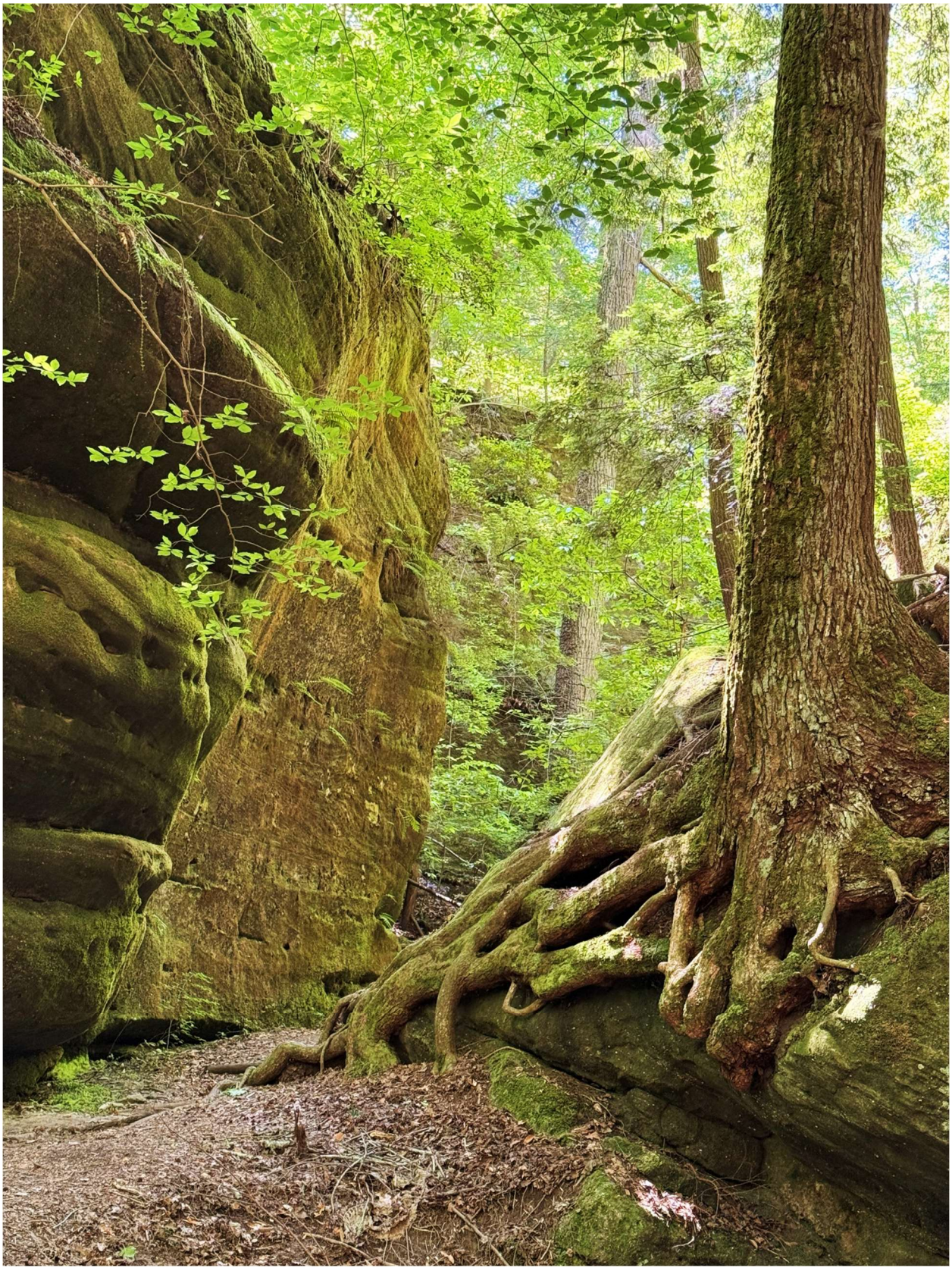
The trial often leads under overhanging rock, or through narrow spaces between enormous boulders. Some of trees are quite clever.



There are a few boardwalks, but it is mostly uneven dirt, rocks, and roots.









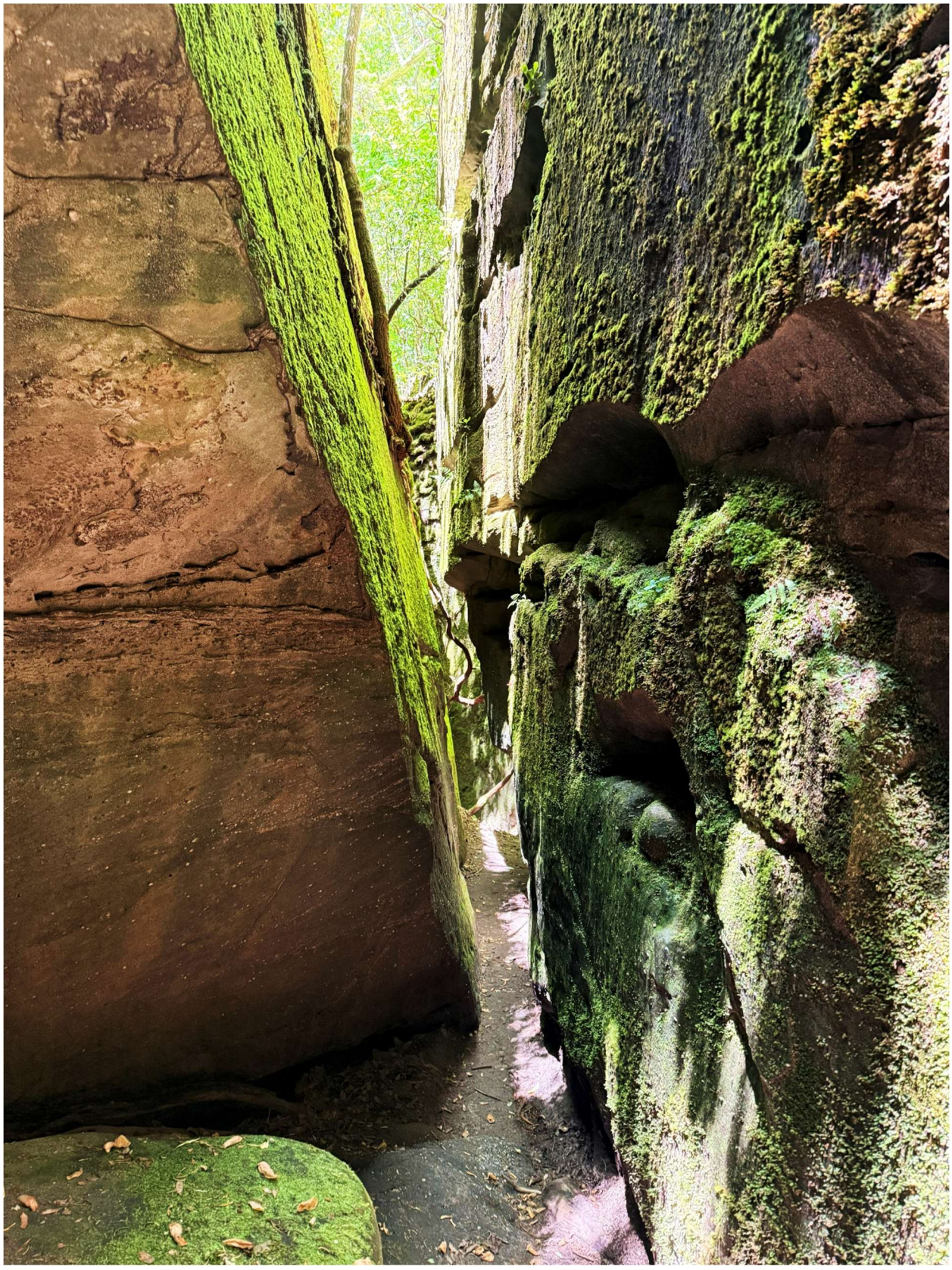
This wall was oozing moisture, which shimmered as it crawled through the moss.



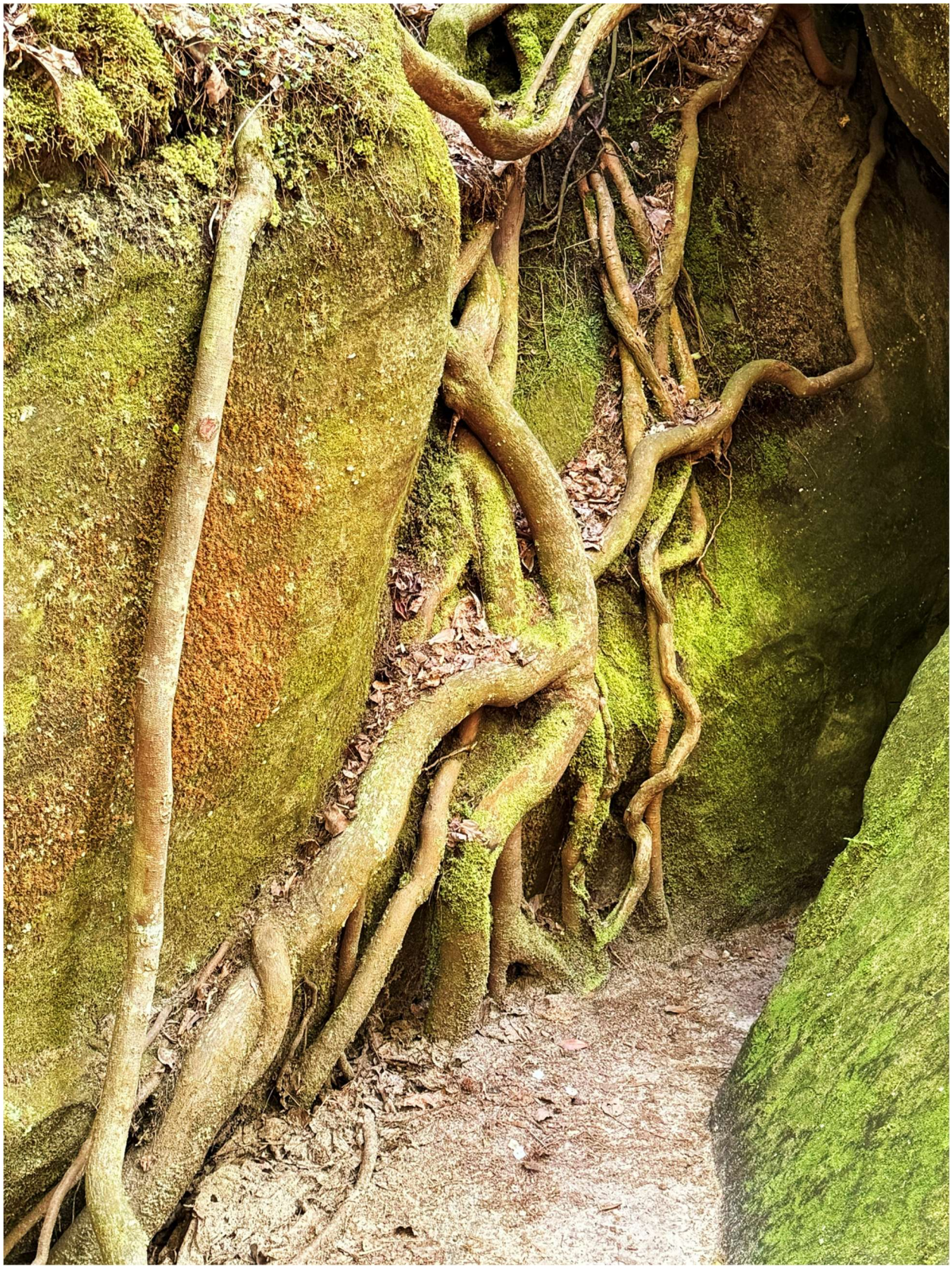
A good spot to take a restful break in the cool shade.



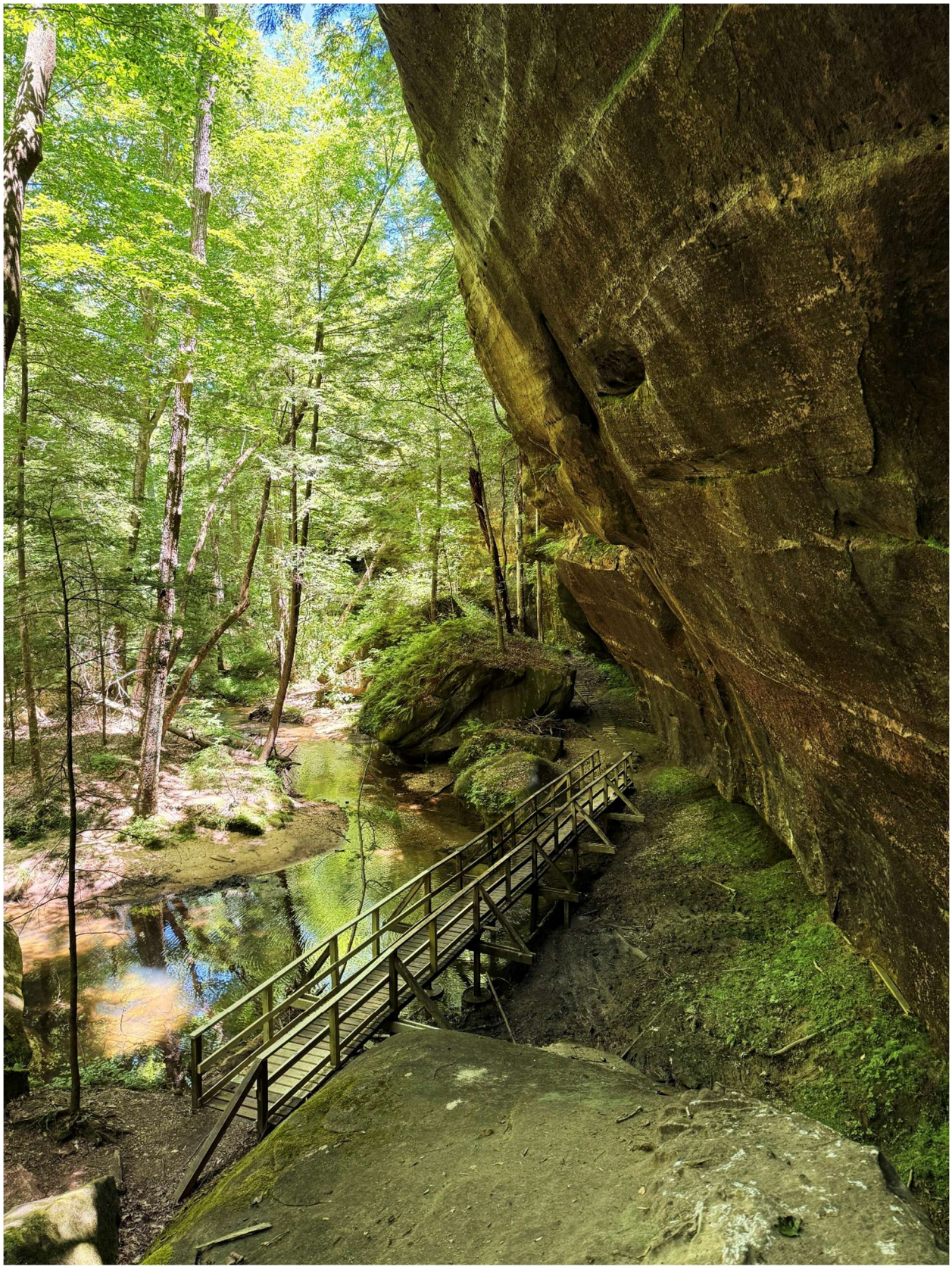
In some spots, the trail get pretty narrow.



And in other spots, it is a downright squeeze.



The interaction of trees and rocks was amazing.



All in all, this was a terrific hike in the woods, worth the $26 entrance fee.

I spent a good two hours on the trail, including a 20-minute sit-and-dig-it break lying on a large sloping rock under a huge, leaning cliff.

Happily, there were very few people around. I got there shortly after the Gift Shop opened at 9:00. I wanted to beat whatever crowd there might be. Early on, there was one group of three up-in-years women that seemed intent on spoiling my solitude. I took side trails to lose them, but they seemed to be in *follow-him-he-knows-where-to-go* mode and showed up whenever I paused for a photo break or to explore some crazy crevice.

Finally, after passing them on a double-back, I put on a surge and left them on their own and saw nobody for the rest of the hike. Maybe they're still out there somewhere.

With peace and quiet, Dismals Canyon was excellent. I hear the place gets crowded on weekends, and that they even allow field trips. To me, a busload of school kids scampering and squealing around in here would totally ruin it.

Glad I came when I did.

