## By Robb Frederick

Two men stood in the woods, eying a hillside.

"It's fabulous," said one.

"It's ugly as sin," said the other.

Above them, 37 feet over the Youghiogheny River Trail, a fan-shaped hump of mossy rock dripped minerals. It — *drip* — coated leaves and twigs and — *drip* — a black snake's skin. It — *drip* — killed the violets, choking them with calcium. It — *drip* — crumbled when the men touched it, in pieces the texture of a bathroom loofah.

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

*Drip.*

It was growing.

The men brought in an expert: Jim Shaulis, a geologist with the state's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. He scratched his head.

"Honestly, I thought this was where someone's septic system came out," he said.

He called in a colleague, DCNR's Bob Smith. Smith saw the thing for what it was: an outdoor stalactite. A living, breathing rock. A tufa.

"Who ever heard of a tufa?" asked Bob McKinley, manager of the Regional Trail Corp. and one of those first two men. "My daughter is a geologist. I told her, and she said, 'What are you talking about?'"

For the record, then: A tufa is a lime deposit. It grows out of fresh water, often at the mouth of a mineral spring. The water warms, and calcium carbonate comes out. It fossilizes and then covers anything that falls on the deposit. That's how the tufa grows.

This one, dubbed the Port Royal, is particularly rare. Its proximity to the Yough trail and to Cedar Creek Park, a half-mile to the north, makes it uniquely accessible.

"A tufa on a public access ... it's priceless," Shaulis said.

No wonder some see it a little differently these days.

### THE TEACHER

"You don't really find the tufa," said Tom Jones, a Somerset County science teacher. "It finds you."

Jones had passed the Port Royal dozens of times. He teaches teachers — summer continuing ed — and uses the Yough trail to inspire lesson plans.

"We knew there was something there, but we didn't know exactly what it was," he said. "When we really started to look at it, we realized we had something of significance."

Now he runs on-site seminars, testing water acidity and temperature. He has collected a year and a half of data.

Sometimes he'll drop a twig or two on the tufa. His next time out, he'll measure how much has been covered.