

M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure



05/08-09/2010, Ramsey's Draft-East Backpack: I was initially joined by Dr. Mike, Short Stack, The Oscillator, Heidi and Bubbles. We waited an additional 30 minutes at the trailhead for .Com and Gadget Gyrl but there was no sign of them. Reluctantly we donned our packs and headed up the Draft. It's been about five years since I was here to hike the western loop. Things have really changed. Before, most of the mammoth Hemlocks were dead. Now all but a handful are surviving the attack of the Woolly Adelgid. There are young trees all over the place but a quick examination of the underside of their needles revealed that they would also succumb to this parasite. I remember having to climb over a few of these giants that had fallen to the ground but the number has increased dramatically. In places there were blowdowns on top of blowdowns. We didn't mind it too much as we hiked along the sections that were once an old CCC road. The trail here was wide, smooth and nearly flat. But when the trail diverted to a recently constructed sidehill path or turned into the narrow, steep and rocky climb near the end of the first day the blowdowns really sucked the strength out of a person. Still, even with these obstacles it was a good hike tough but good. To help ease the extra effort the trail was lined with plenty of wildflowers. There were the usual violets and wild geraniums but also Golden Ragwort, Painted Trillium, Canada Violets, Wood Anemone and more. We reached camp around 4:30. The wind was really picking up and the temperature was dropping. I set up my tent and hung the bear bag line and then crawled into my tent for one of my patented power naps. About 45 minutes later I heard a familiar voice laughing and talking to Short Stack. It was Gadget Gyrl! It seems that Google Maps had given her directions to someplace further south totally unrelated to the map link that I had sent her. She had wisely printed the original map and loaded in the closest town (West Augusta) into her onboard GPS and eventually found the trailhead. She slogged up the Draft by herself to join us. That's what I call really wanting to hike! (I found out upon my return home the same fate befell .Com but she couldn't find the trailhead and went home.) With the weather turning south in a hurry and no one wanting to risk a fire with the high winds we all quickly ate and rode the wind out in our tents. We climbed 2000 feet over 7.4 miles today.

The wind continued non-stop through the night and all of the next day. I grabbed my food and kitchen gear and sat on a log in the common area around the fire ring contemplating breakfast but it was just too cold for me to sit still. I decided to keep moving by busting down camp. I would snack on the hike out. We were ready to go by 8:20 so up the Hiner Spring Trail we went. Except for a couple of initial blowdowns the route was 180 degrees different from the previous day. A large part of the trek was just outside the Wilderness so was better maintained. The hiking was much easier. There were several climbs but although the cumulative gain was around 1500 feet most of them were pretty gradual. Fortunately, most of the time, there was just enough tree cover to shelter us from the brunt of the wind. There were several nice views of the mountains to the east with hardly a sign of civilization of any kind. We dipped down into a saddle between two ridges and then climbed up to Bald Ridge and the junction with the Wild Oak National Recreation Trail and turned south onto it. We found the wildlife pond easy enough but we had to walk around for a few minutes before Doc found the turn off onto the Bald Knob Trail. (I think that's what it is called. There is no sign for it and the USFS map doesn't give it a name.) This ridge walk was also surrounded by flowers but besides what we had seen yesterday there was also Pussy Toes, Golden Alexander, Yellow Pimpernel, Turkey Beard, Fly Poison (Just starting to bud), Beards Tongue Fly Pink, Small Flower Phacelia and Gay Wings. We took a break about four miles into the hike and then another at about six miles in. At one point the trail left the ridge and followed a nasty little sidehill until the ridge came back down to join it. From this sidehill to the end the route was outside of the wilderness. Yellow diamond blazes and signs would mark the rest of the way to the end. We turned right onto the Bridge Hollow Trail and followed it down to the Draft. At the end of the trail we found a set of stone steps that were apparently built back in the '30s by the CCC. Building the cribbing that held them up must have been a very labor intensive task ... all done by hand. After one last ford we soon found ourselves back at our vehicles. We quickly freshened up and headed to T-Bone Tooter's for an early dinner. Today we hiked 9.5 miles and climbed 1200 feet.