

M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure



09/17-20-2011, Watoga S.P. Car Camping and Hiking: At over 10,000 acres Watoga in the largest state park in West Virginia. It offers everything: a swimming pool, lake, two modern campgrounds and one primitive one, standard and modern cabins, a restaurant (in season) and over 33 miles of maintained trails including 5.5 miles of the long distance Allegheny Trail. The real draw for this hiker, though, was the recently (2009) designated Spice Run Wilderness (SRW) which is approximately 1.5 miles south of the southern park boundary on SR 21.

We set up camp on what has to be the largest, flattest site in Riverside Campground. The only downside was that it wasn't along the very scenic Greenbrier River. We took a drive in search of an old road that lead to the river close to where I would have to ford it to enter SRW. We found it with no problem but, as our luck would have it, it was gated and heavily posted. So much for plan A. Plan B was also out because it included six miles of hiking the Greenbrier River Trail, a scenic rails to trails route popular with bikers. Although easy it would make for a very long day. That left me with plan C, besides the 12.5

wilderness loop I had planned it would include a four mile out-and-back on the heavily rutted SR 21 mentioned earlier. The next morning I packed extra water, snacks, fleece and head lamp just in case I would get stuck in the woods after dark. P-Hyker and I parked the truck out the far end on the Laurel Run primitive campground and began our trek. Immediately we were plunged into the darkness of a Hemlock grove and two easy fords of the run. The road then passed through a large meadow with a wonderful view of Pyle Mountain. It then re-entered the woods, fording the run one last time. Initially the road made for a nice hike through Calvin Price State Forest with a few ruts and mud puddles to negotiate. The last 0.3 miles were quite the opposite. It appeared that local ATVers had brought in a piece of heavy equipment and created huge "tank traps" - giant, scooped out mud puddles, reinforced with clay and log dams on the downhill sides to prevent drainage. It seemed more like an obstacle course like you would see on TV than a State Road. I was OK with all of this destruction because in mere minutes I would be back in my element ... the wilderness, or at least so I thought. We arrived at a clearing with a giant pine tree in the middle and a sign post (with the map removed) next to what was once upon a time an old jeep road used by hunters that traversed Spice Ridge. It was my plan to use this old road to deposit us at the confluence of Greenbrier River and Spice Run. From there we would hike up the run returning to SR 21. Keep in mind that this road has existed for something like 30 to 50 years, serving as the boundary between the Monongahela N.F. and Calvin Price S.F. Although it might be considered a scar in a wilderness area it had ample time to heal and was at least partially naturalized with an assortment of several species of wildflowers, ferns, mosses, lichens and herbaceous shrubs reclaiming their spot in the forest. Words cannot express my dismay to find that the Forest Service had bulldozed all six miles of it as part of a mandate for "Wilderness Reclamation", roughly grading it to match the contour of the ridge it followed. We hiked up it for about 0.5 miles hoping that it was merely a brief effort to keep mechanized vehicles out of the wilderness but, indeed, the devastation was complete. This short part of the hike was like walking uphill, on a beach with combat boots on, in the middle of a heavily shelled war zone. It was difficult and plain ol' U.G.L.Y. It would take another 30-50 years for this new scar to heal and it will probably not return to the hardwood forest it was once before but will most likely be replaced with unwanted species such as Striped Maple and Sassafras, both miniature trees that grow in dense thickets preventing desirable species from ever taking hold.

We began a hasty retreat to the truck. I tried to purge my mind of what we had just experienced but it was very difficult. I probably won't get another chance to visit Spice Run again and I was still in need of a wilderness fix. As we approached the large meadow we had walked through earlier I remembered an old boundary road on the U.S.G.S. maps in my software that roughly followed Laurel Run as it separated Calvin Price S.F. and Watoga S.P. We found it after we forded the run. I didn't have that particular map with me but "What the heck!" We followed it downstream past a majestic old maple tree. The meadow constricted here but soon opened up again and then "Bingo!" we were standing on a wide rocky road. We followed the road through more meadows, beautiful stands of Pine and Hemlock and a couple of stream crossings and scenic streamside views for about 1.5 miles. I suddenly realized that I was breaking one of the tenets of safe hiking that I constantly preach to novice hikers: "Tell a loved one where you will be hiking and do not deviate from your plans in case rescue is needed." So here I was, 1.5 miles off of my designated route and on a trail that nobody working in any of the involved government agencies knows about. I had been recording the route on my trusty GPS so ended this little side bar adventure and returned to camp confident that come tomorrow I would experience my wilderness fix after all, leaving thoughts of the more civilized Watoga hike on maintained trails for another time.

The next day we drove to the Ann Bailey Trailhead (Ann was a British born lady who became a scout during the Indian wars after her husband was killed.) and proceeded down the double track woods road. The road climbed gently for 1.25 miles as it passed through mature hardwood forest to the junction with the Burnside Ridge trail (also an old road) which we followed for another mile. Here we turned left onto the South Burnside Ridge Trail until we reached the crest of the ridge. The adventure began as we left the road to the right, descending into an un-named drainage. We stayed a bit up on the hillside for a while, avoiding several serious blowdowns. As the valley opened up we began to follow the dry stream bed, at times walking in it and at other times walking on narrow deltas created by past flooding. Following the topography was pretty easy albeit different from much of what I had hiked in the past. I felt sort of like AegisIII and Jmitch ... hiking where no man has hiked before. In 1.1 miles the streambed steepened as it deposited us, as if on a sliding board, into the middle of mostly dry Laurel Run. "On yeah, this is just the ticket!" I gleefully thought. As we looked upstream we had our left feet in the park and our right feet in Calvin Price S.F. Also to our right was a flood plain. I thought perhaps we would find an old grade there to hike on but the entire thing was

covered in impenetrable Rhododendron thickets. We returned to the stream and proceeded to follow it toward the GPS track we had created yesterday. We were only about 0.5 miles away. During the spring this portion of the hike would probably be what I call a "Waterwhack" but the gentle grade of the stream and the flatness of the rocks would make it an easy one. (BTW, we saw several such rocks turned on their sides ... an obvious result of bear looking for their favorite crustacean ... crawfish.) We explored a few more deltas but the time and energy spent was not worth the effort. I committed myself to the stream which actually proved to be an excellent decision as we passed bouquets of violet Asters, vivid specimens of intense scarlet Cardinal Flower, assorted goldenrod species, Sneezeweed and Wingstem. As we approached yesterday's track on the GPS I zoomed in as much as the unit would allow. "Dang it!" I missed the end of the old road by about 30 feet. I knew the road crossed the stream at the next bend in the stream but, being the perfectionist that I am, hastily backtracked through a deep pool, doing my best P-Hyker imitation as water finally poured into my boots, marked the stream exiting point with a cairn and in about five steps stood once again on the familiar moss covered road. With the next two miles being a "No Brainer" and yesterday's trek through the tall goldenrod still evident, I could spend more time focusing on our surroundings. The "Leader of the Pack" in the open meadows was obviously the Sharp-leaved Goldenrod, chest high most of the time, but the towering Giant Ironweed and the much more diminutive Monkshood proved to be rewarding accents. Once we spotted that old magnificent Maple from yesterday we made a bee line to the primitive campground and temporarily borrowed a picnic table for some nourishment and rehydration.

The Kennison Run Trail, the final leg of our adventure, is described as an old railroad grade that crosses the run many times. Although blazed with faded yellow circles it was difficult to follow. It obviously gets much less use than the other park trails and that is exactly what I was hoping for. Initially we had to work around some huge fallen trees and then mistakenly turned right up a steep, rocky dead end ravine at a double blaze. It seems that in the park a double blaze might not necessarily signify a turn but in this case was meant merely to point out a stream crossing. Only after crawling under a large trail obstruction I finally realized my error. Precious gave me that look of "non-confidence" that only a canine can give as we crawled back under it. We corrected our mistake but still had trouble staying on trail. As we continued to criss-cross the trail while trying to follow the stream my hiker instincts started to kick in. Railroad grades in stream valleys are all pretty much the same wherever you go. While a waterway is

able to follow the path of least resistance on its serpentine track down the valley a railroad grade generally has to follow the more gentle contours of the valley. By nature it cannot make the sharp turns that the stream makes. Once we spotted the next yellow blaze I began to follow my nose, the occasional blaze and some very old log cuts from long ago trail maintenance. While I was figuring all of this out we were walking through a near continuous stand of pine and Hemlocks. The trail was still overgrown in places but eventually gave way to an understory of low growing ferns or plain leaf mulch where Rhododendron tunnels precluded any form of vegetative growth. At 3 miles the trail made an abrupt left hand turn and climbed more steeply to the T.M. Cheek or South Entrance Road. Here we turned left onto it and in another 150 yards turned left again onto the Ann Bailey Trailhead Road. We were back at the truck by 3:30 full with that sense of accomplishment one gets after a true wilderness exploration.

We returned to camp for one last sumptuous meal and an early bedtime. A light rain fell throughout the night, ending the orchestral cadences of Katydid and crickets while punctuating the end of another great adventure.