

M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure



01/01/11, St. Anthony's Wilderness/ Rausch Gap Loop: I was joined by Sixteen Penny, Sparky, The Oscillator, Heidi, Stella and the Mad Hatter. It turned out to be a pretty nice day compared to past New Years Day hikes. The temperature was in the upper 40s as we started the hike and would top out in the 50s. We hiked up Gold Mine Road for a short distance before bearing off onto an old work road. Immediately we began a long gradual climb towards a gap in Sharp Mountain. At about 0.82 miles we passed the old eastern terminus of the Schuylkill and Susquehanna Railroad (S&SRR) on the left and a higher road supported by extensive rock cribbing on the right. This area must have been a hub of industrial activity back in the day. We passed a couple of trenches with coal tailings piled above the deepest end as well as some bony (waste acidic soil extracted from coal mines) piles, looking like ill-placed hills dispersed around otherwise flat terrain. The crossing of acid polluted Goldmine Run was uneventful. Once through the gap the trail curved to the left and took us through a huge pine plantation. During this stretch three obviously disgruntled hunters discharged their weapons in rapid succession in obvious protest to our presence. I calmed the group down and we continued on. I counted 5 hunters in close proximity to each other as we passed. (I thought hunters usually spread out? Apparently the other two were not as p-o-ed as their mates and waved to us.) We turned left onto the Old Stagecoach Road and followed it to a gas pipeline right-of-way. Thwaites directions have the hiker going up the hill about 30 yards to avoid piles of blowdowns but it appears that trail maintainers have since cleared the trail straight ahead and added some red blazes to show the way. Here we seemed to be following the same grade but young Hemlocks have begun to encroach on the road giving it more of a "wilderness" feel than what we've hiked so far. The trail slowly descended into Rausch Gap. The forest here is predominantly Hemlock. We crossed the East Branch of Rausch Creek and a pretty extensive boulder field obviously created by past flooding before fording the main branch of Rausch Creek. Here the

trail turned left to follow the west bank before joining the AT.

After taking a break at the shelter we returned to the AT and noticed an orange blazed trail paralleling the creek. It was signed Horseshoe trail (not to be confused with the yellow blazed long distance Horse-Shoe Trail). It was much more scenic than the AT so we followed it for about a quarter of a mile. We noticed that several of the blazes were painted over with gray paint and we were losing sight of the close by AT. I assumed that a trail maintainer was trying to tell us that there was some potential difficulty ahead so we backtracked to the AT and followed it down to the railroad grade. We could see orange blazes in the general area of the creek as we went along until finally the Horseshoe trail turned into a crushed coal grade similar to what we were walking on and merged with the AT just before the S&SRR. Here the orange trail was intentionally blocked with dead wood. If anyone could fill us in on the status of that trail I'd appreciate it. It would be a welcome addition to this loop. We turned left onto the grade and checked out the Liming Station and old bridge over the creek before visiting the graveyard. The remainder of the hike was a 3.6 mile power walk back to the vehicles. The tread was wide, smooth, straight and after a while, despite the Hemlock tunnels, a bit boring. It was also a little hard on the feet. I wish I would have brought my walking shoes to replace my "Waffle Stompers" with. Regardless, we dialed up the pace, found our respective "zones" and found ourselves back at the vehicles by 2:30. Checking the stats on my GPS we covered almost 11 miles at a rate of 3.0 mph, not counting breaks. I'm sure much of the increased speed was due to the Old Stagecoach Trail and the railroad grade.

The invasion of Saint Anthony's Wilderness has begun!