

## ***M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure***



02/19/2011, State Game Lands 211, AT/Old Horse-Shoe Trail Loop:  
Last week I tried to lead a group on the Stone Tower Loop but after a mile we gave up. There was still about 6 inches of snow on the ground with a 1 inch crust that had to be broken through. I rescheduled it for March 12th and decided to take PHyker on the one we were supposed to do then this weekend. Most of the snow was gone but the trails at the higher elevation had a good bit of ice and/or packed snow. Still it was better than last week. Besides the ice we were also confronted with near constant high winds, a variable that severely limited the lengths of our breaks. The hike started on the AT, crossing Clark Creek on a frozen bridge. At this point the creek meanders through a beautiful swath of Rhododendrons and Hemlocks. The trail turned left onto an old haul road but soon left it in the general vicinity of the Henry Knauber Trail. The AT passes through a seemingly endless scree field for almost a mile. The going was not as bad as one would think as the trail builders had taken great pains to construct stone steps and bridges through the worst of it. We re-joined the haul road and began to encounter a lot of ice. A close eye could see the overgrown remnants of other grades on either side. At one point we passed an out of place flat area with possibly the only legal campsite in the area. It is not in the State Game Lands or private property.

For the next 1.5 miles we could get broken views of De Hart Reservoir. We ran into a trio of hikers that informed me that we were getting close to the northern terminus of the Horse-Shoe Trail, the high point of our hike. From there we descended on it into a gap in Sharp Mountain on an almost snowless trail (South slopes get the sun more than the north they say!), crossing a hidden Devil's Race Course near the end. We had a bit of a quandary here. We arrived at the expected haul road. The 2004 edition of the AT map (the one I was using) told me we should turn right to stay on the Horse-Shoe Trail but fresh yellow blazes and an arrow told us to go left. We walked down it a few yards until we found the Kabob (They pronounced it KAY-bob back then.) Hiking Club Memorial. I knew this was going to take us down to the main RR grade. That would add more distance and a short but tough climb to an already challenging hike. We reversed directions, confusing the heck out of PHYker for a while and began a gradual climb back to the ridge. The previous hikers' boot tracks and what appeared to be snowmobile tracks ensured us that we were going the right way. The latter had compressed the snow making it somewhat easier to walk on, at least for a while. We passed an old rusty water tank and the southern terminus of the Henry Knauber Trail that we passed near the beginning of the trek before reaching a wide open field. I don't know if this area was planted with grass for game or if it was a result of logging, fire or strip mining. I'm hoping a local historian will come forward and clue me in. At this point the batteries in my GPS were about zapped, giving me an incorrect distance reading and some whacko pre-loaded waypoints. I changed them out for fresh ones, gave P some water and continued to the junction of the Stony Mountain Fire Tower Road. I don't know why but I decided since we were up here we might as well walk out to it to see if there was a view without climbing the tower. (I don't climb anything that moves around in the wind, legal or otherwise.) There was none so we retraced our steps and began searching for the blue blazed Water Tank Trail. We soon came upon a hiker and his dog. I asked him if I was getting close to it and he informed me that we had just walked by it. We found a 2 rock cairn and some blue ribbon marking it and then a blue blaze. That hiker could not have timed it better. Precious and I would still be up there walking that service road! We followed it a short distance to a red trail which we followed down to a service road (the continuation of the Water Tank Trail). The top half mile was very icy, rocky and steep. Once we dropped below a certain elevation the ice went away and the last mile of the hike served as a pleasant stroll back to the truck with occasional views of Peters Mountain. All in all it was a pretty nice hike although the ice and gale force wind increased the degree of difficulty a little. I would definitely recommend it to others.