

M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure



03-20-2010, Jones Mountain/Staunton River circuit: Happy First Day of Spring! Temps in the 70s, clear skies, open trail, great views and a beautiful stream, who could ask for more? Despite all of this I was joined by two fellow hikers: The Mad hatter and Bubbles. Perhaps the strenuous rating or the 3 hour (one way) drive scared off others. Whatever the case, their loss was our gain. We didn't start hiking until 11:20 as we waited for two "no shows" then made the short climb toward Hazel Top on the AT. (I think it is ranked the 5th or 6th highest point in the park.) Just before reaching the high point we turned right onto the Laurel Prong Trail. The boulders were coated with Thick layers of Giant Rock Tripe (*Umbilicaria mammulata*) as Princess Pine (*Lycopodium obscurum*) grew at their base. In another mile we reached the junction of Cat knob Trail. We took a brief break prior to attacking the steep climb (over 500 feet in 0.5 miles). Although quite challenging, the effort was short lived. The next couple of miles were spent hiking along the ridge with very little elevation gain. The trail was hard to follow at times as the blazes were faded and few and the forest floor had a sameness due to all of the dead leaves being packed down by the winter's snow. The key was searching for signs of trail maintenance (cut logs, erosion dams and the like). A short, steep climb rewarded us with a nice hike through alternating Mountain Laurel tunnels and rock gardens. One provided us with a view of North Fork Mountain to the north. (Our initial plans were to hike up to the FAA microwave tower there for another view but fatigue and a long drive home caused us to leave it for another day.)

We didn't stay "on top" long as a series of short, steep, rocky switchbacks brought us to an unmarked but obvious spur trail that lead us to Bear Church Rocks. We took lunch here and took in the view. I'm pretty sure you can see the top of Old Rag from here. We completed our descent to

Staunton River, by-passing the side trip to Jones Mountain Cabin. The river was full due to the heavy snow melt and rains of the past couple of months but the two crossings weren't all that technical. We passed a slab pile left over from a long ago logging operation after the first one. The river was full of white water and initially made the climb out of the drainage quite pleasant. Then the grade increased significantly as we climbed above the last waterfall. It seemed a lot harder than when we did it last May but I have yet to shed my "winter fat" and I had obviously gotten a bit out of shape. We hiked up the Fork Mountain Forest Road to the Jones Mountain Trail. It was here that the decision was made to forgo the FAA tower. I was running out of gas fast. This portion of the hike is pretty deceptive. It is a low spot on the top of the mountain called "The Sag". The descent into it is nearly unperceivable until you have to climb up the other side. We took a brief break before the steep descent down the Cat Knob Trail. My old knees were really barking at me by now. "Slow as you go!" now became my mantra. Once back at the Laurel Prong Trail I was able to recover enough to complete the last 1.4 miles. I let my comrades go ahead of me but, true to form, they waited for me at every trail junction. We completed our trek at 6:15, an hour later than I predicted. Although we enjoyed the workout we were all pretty much done with hiking for the day. All I can say is that the grilled salmon and Pinot Grigio tasted extra good that night.