

M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure



04-24 to 26-2010: The three best vistas on the VA portion of the AT are considered to be, from south to north, the Dragon's Tooth, McAfee Knob and Tinker Cliffs. I foolishly attempted to do a hike summitting all three in October/2009 but some broken ribs limited me to a day hike to the Dragon's Tooth instead. Fully healed, I now returned with seven friends to complete this modest hiking life goal. Since I abhor redundancy (plus the climb up and down the Dragon's Tooth is a challenge in itself) we by-passed it but added several views of Carvin Cove Reservoir on the northern end of Tinker Mountain by extending the trek to the intersection of I-81 and U.S. 220.

Day 1: I was joined by Short Stack, Treebeard IM, Bubbles, Single Malt, Paul, Richard and Henry. We planted vehicles at the northern trailhead and then drove south to the Southern Trailhead on VA route 311. We were hiking by 12:15. The weatherman was calling for a 60% chance of thunderstorms but we were too far from camp to try to race the weather. We set off on a reasonable pace using the Scout trail to quickly connect with the AT. Almost immediately the typical Appalachian display of spring wildflowers started. The litany of names start with Gay Wings, then some Trillium followed by an assortment of violets, Bluets, Fly Pink, Spring Beauties, Pink Lady Slippers, the diminutive Pussy Toes and Red Bud and Blackhaw Viburnum as beautiful understory trees. It was too early for the Mountain Laurel but the beautiful pink Azaleas were putting on quite a show. We crossed a road and began a gradual climb via switchbacks to some picturesque pastures with Catawba Mountain, our target for the day, in the background. Several stiles had to be negotiated to navigate through them, a tough chore with a 40 pound pack. We climbed steeply up Beckner Gap. As we got closer to the gap itself the trail veered off to the left, quickly reaching the initial ridge line of Catawba Mountain. Here we began to get partial views of the valley of the same name and Great North Mountain to the northwest. We crossed Route 311. The trail was now lined with Dame's Rocket, a garden escapee with pretty pink/purple flowers and leaves resembling those of wild Garlic Mustard. There were several places where the mountainside was too steep and

rocky to hold a trail. To resolve this issue a group of Eagle Scouts had built short boardwalks on logs to get by the worst of it. We soon passed a recently constructed John's Spring Shelter (but there is no water there.). (The old one had been unwisely constructed using a living tree as one of the corner posts. Whenever the wind blew the entire shelter would creak, making for an uncomfortable if not nerve racking night for its occupants.). In another one and a half miles we reached the Catawba Mountain Shelter and its tent site and flowing spring. We set up camp as Richard erected a light weight tarp and Single Malt set up the bear bag line. A slight drizzle began to fall as we prepared our dinners. We quickly finished our meals and hung our food before retiring for the night at around 7:30. Minutes later the skies opened up. It stayed like that off and on through the wee hours. The timing could not have been more precise! Stats for the day: 9.2 miles and 1700 feet of elevation gain, lots of pleasant views.

Day 2: When we first woke up the sun was trying to come out but by the time we were ready to start hiking a dense fog had rolled in. One had the feeling that this was going to burn off. I began to suggest that we should hang around camp for another hour but the group was chaffing at the bit so off we went at 8:30. We summited McAfee Knob in 45 minutes but there was no view to be had. Some of us stayed behind to dry some wet gear while the rest of us descended through some massive rock mazes on our way to the next focal point, Tinker Cliffs. In about an hour the skies were blue with some fluffy white clouds drifting high above. The trail leveled out as we passed Campbell Shelter and its campsites and spring. For a short distance the trail joined a service road lined with the pale blue softness of Small Flower Phacelia that we had crossed earlier in the day. This provided a welcome, albeit short, respite from the rocky trail before we climbed to Tinker Cliffs and some of the most magnificent panoramas any of us have seen in the Mid-Atlantic region. Here we took a brief lunch as we took it all in. The cliffs were edged with masses of beautiful Dwarf Iris. A very brief shower caused some of the crew to rapidly don their rain coats but these were quickly removed within ten minutes of resuming our hike. We descended to Scorched Earth Gap and the junction with the yellow blazed Andy Lane Trail. (This would be the usual exit point of the trip if doing the original Triple Crown hike.) Scorched Earth Gap – The story is told that a trail maintenance crew had hiked up the Andy Lane Trail to do some work on the AT. The trail climbs nearly 3000 feet in 3.1 miles. The leader claims that the language that came out of one lady's mouth after the climb was so foul it ... scorched the earth beneath them!) The sign post here claims that the Lambert's Meadow Shelter and camp sites are 0.6 miles NOBO. I swear it felt more like a mile. Regardless of the distance we were all in camp by 3:00. The first thing that went up was clothes lines as several of us still had wet gear to dry out. Thank God for nylon and Sil-nylon. With a little bright sun light and a pleasant breeze everything was dry in about 0.5 hours. There was enough daylight after setting up camp that some of us (me) took a brief power nap before preparing dinner. The wood was pretty wet from the night before so we made it another early night hoping to get an early start on the final leg of the trip. Stats for the day: 9.1 miles, 2000 feet elevation gain and some of the best views we've ever seen.

Day 3: We only had a couple of light showers during the night so our tents were pretty dry the next morning. We once again broke camp around 8:30. Although today would be longer than originally predicted the elevation gain was not supposed to be as bad as the previous two days. It was not but buried in the elevation profile that my National Geographic software plotted were several short but steep climbs that we encountered as the AT tried its best to maintain its position on the top of

Tinker Mountain. Thankfully the rocky parts were separated by some long stretches of flat and smooth hiking. The highlight of this final segment was supposed to be Hay Rock Overlook. We were all sorely disappointed to find this massive rock outcrop almost totally covered by graffiti. At this point I was behind everybody in the group by several minutes. I said to myself "Why? What's the purpose? Why not just paint the side of some vacant building in town?" Fortunately there were several other better views of the Carvin Cove Reservoir that escaped the spray paint cans of these eco-terrorists. To enhance the experience a couple of the vistas were framed with blooming Fringe Trees (AKA Old Man's Beard). You typically smell their fragrance before you see them. After passing under a set of humming high power lines the AT quickly switchbacked down to the bottom of the mountain. Here it crossed, in quick succession, a pipeline swath, a railroad track and Tinker Creek. We turned off onto an abandoned road and soon found ourselves at the northern trailhead. Stats for the day: 9.6 miles and 900 feet of elevation gain.

We quickly loaded our gear into the awaiting vehicles and drove to the southern trailhead to retrieve the rest of our transportation. We stopped for gas mere minutes from the trailhead. As our vehicles guzzled their replenishment the skies opened up on us. And so it would be as we drove home, shower after shower. With just a minimum of error five of us found our way to the Country Cookin' Restaurant in Salem for a hearty meal before heading back to northern VA/MD. It was one of the best trips we've done in a very long time.