

M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure



“ ... and that’s why they call it Wilderness!”

07/10-12/2010, Cranberry Wilderness North Backpack: The timing for this trip couldn’t have been better. The east coast was in a draught with daytime temps in the triple digits for three consecutive days and no precip in several days. The weatherman promised Richwood, WV daytime temps for our trek in the upper 70s to low 80s with nighttime temps in the high 50s to low 60s. To add to the forecast the area recently experienced just enough rain to revitalize the streams along the Middle Branch of the Williams River.

Doc, Treebeard-IM, Shortstack, Linda, Daryl and Daryl and I started up the Middle Fork Trail at a leisurely pace. With only 2.6 miles to hike there was no rush. We took several stops to identify flowers (Agrimony, Black Cohos, Wild Basil, Bee Balm and more) and to enjoy the views along the river. We reached Big Beechy by 5:30 and quickly got camp set up. Doc, Shortstack and I took a refreshing dip in the pool below the falls. That was really invigorating!

The next two days were really going to be challenging. We started hiking early in hopes of completing the long steep climb out of the valley before the sun got too high in the sky. Since there was going to be no water at the next campsite and we wouldn’t be crossing any reliable sources we had to carry enough in reserve to get us through the night and the short hike out on the final day. We were all carrying at least six additional pounds of weight. Our progress was further impeded by eight large blowdowns, four of which required a considerable amount of extra effort to overcome. (Oh well, that’s why they call it wilderness.) Once at the junction with the District Line Trail we took an extended lunch as we sat on moss covered boulders and rehydrated.

Initially the District Line Trail was wonderful. We found ourselves hiking through dense enclaves of giant Red Spruce trees, moss covered boulders, Rhododendron and luscious ferns. The blowdowns continued and there were a couple of places

where the trail disappeared in Mountain Laurel thickets but we fought our way through it all. (Oh well, that's why they call it wilderness.) Two miles into the trail we ran into a really big problem. Both Doc and my GPS units said that we were standing right at the junction with the County Line Trail which we had to turn left on to reach camp and complete our circuit. There was a pile of sticks to the left, the kind the hikers use to warn other hikers not to go that way, but we didn't see anything that remotely looked like a trail let alone just a place where you could walk. We probed the forest to the west of the trail we were on (now the County Line Trail) about a quarter mile before and behind us with no luck. It was four o'clock, we were all pretty beat and some of us were about to tap into our water reserves. I made the command decision to make camp for the night on a wooded knoll I had noticed during our scouting and take the fastest route out of the Wilderness to FR 86 the next morning. (Oh well, that's why they call it wilderness.)

We all ate light the next morning and broke camp by 8:00. We were able to follow the County Line Trail north for about 1.5 miles before it too totally disintegrated in an area where juvenile Red Spruce were making thickets too thick to walk through. (Oh well, that's why they call it wilderness.) After getting stabbed in the leg by broken branches several times I decided to follow the path of least resistance while still keeping the river and forest road in front of us. (This was one time where our GPS units were really paying off.) More bad news, It started raining hard as we found ourselves crossing some dry streams. A quick check of the map and our units told us we were getting too far to the west and in danger of ending up at the top of some shear cliffs overlooking the road with no immediate way down. After climbing the steep bank of the last stream we made a hard right (easterly) turn to get us back on top of the narrow, descending ridgeline we were supposed to be following. Once back on top we corrected our course to due north with Treebeard's compass and within a couple of hundred yards found ourselves on a rather obvious County Line Trail. We turned north onto it and soon switchbacked down to the forest road. It had taken us four hours to hike 2.5 miles plus the bushwhack. It was still raining hard so without barely a pause we started hiking back to our vehicles. Within a mile we encountered a large group of campers huddled under a tarp at one of the many primitive campsites along FR 86. A young gentleman was nice enough to give me a ride back to the trailhead. I recovered Big Red and returned to take the rest of the crew back to their cars. It was still raining when we said good-bye to Doc so opted, for the most part, to drive to the Riverside Grille in Marlinton where we changed and ate a nice warm meal before heading home.

Even though the trip didn't go as planned I walk away from it feeling that 1) I truly tested my metal as a hike leader as well as the metal of the rest of the group and 2) reinforced the necessity to plan well for any outing but especially outings in wilderness areas where anything can and does happen. One needs to research the trip carefully, carry the right maps and navigational tools and, perhaps most importantly, know in advance what you are going to do in the event that you have to bailout. I am confident that had we tried to continue to reach the originally planned second night's camp we might still be in the woods today.

And that, my friends, is why they call it the Wilderness.