

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



10/08/11, FMF, Volkswagon Loop: I was a little lazy getting up this morning but P-Hyker and I still found ourselves at the Hamburg Road trailhead by 9:15, plenty of time to enjoy a 7 mile hike. The temperature would top out in the high 70s, humidity was low and the sky was as blue as I've seen it in a long time. We started off on the wrong trail and my mistake was soon confirmed when we spotted a familiar "No Trespassing" sign. We had hiked this trail with Sixteen Penny when we did the Four Ponds-Rock City Loop over the winter. We backtracked to the road and immediately found the blue blazed Catoctin Trail. We were going to have to make a right hand turn on a bike trail in a short distance but I had no idea if it would be obvious or not. A passing mountain biker made the turn in front of us. We followed at a distance although P wanted to run with him. The trail was flat and well maintained but the constant bends and sharp curves made the Salamander Trail seem like a ruler. P was even having troubles staying on trail. The architect of this trail was making sure it went over every flat boulder worthy of riding over or jumping off of. Talk about getting your internal gyroscope messed up! I was considering naming it the Worm Trail since Salamander was already spoken for and a snake couldn't possibly undulate this much when we came upon a lawn ornament with the plastic head of some kind of doll on it. The head seemed to be of a character out of a cartoon or animated movie ... sort of like a Kid Neptune or something or other. The undulations stopped briefly as we came upon a 4X woods road intersection. We continued straight although in about 5 minutes we realized that turning right would also have

worked, both putting us back on the continuation of the bike trail. In about a mile (about a half mile as the crow flies) we crossed Hamburg Road and joined an old haul road that followed the edge of a ridge for a while. After passing the namesake of the trail and crossing a stream on a biker bridge it began a gradual descent until we arrived at another 4X junction. Any direction would work depending on the distance you want to hike. We turned left onto the Catoctin Trail and then left onto an old skid road and followed it towards Clifford Hollow, my favorite section of the forest. The road was maintained in sections but where it made a sharp left turn a biker trail left it and then crossed it further on, ending with a steep descent to the stream. We crossed and took a jerky break on a nice flat rock. P rather enjoyed immersing herself in the cold mountain stream. Another mountain biker came by and chatted with us a bit. He was going to climb a steep biker trail and then downhill on the section of the Catoctin Trail we were going to go up. He was sure he was going to run into us again but this would be the last we saw of him. The hike along the stream was mostly on a gentle old haul road and out of its sight except where we crossed it. We could still hear it and feel its coolness as we walked past the Mountain Laurel and Rhododendron. In a handful of minutes we arrived at a junction with the Catoctin Trail ... again. We were again on familiar ground. We had hiked this next section with Dot Com while doing the Clifford Hollow Circuit. We weren't in a race nor was I trying to catch up with someone or trying to maintain my pace for fellow hikers so we just took our time, stopping twice to check the map and GPS, the whole time knowing exactly where we were. We turned left onto a shortcut trail just before cresting the hill, walked through a grassy stretch lined with dead trees and left onto the same skid road we used to descend to Clifford Hollow earlier. After a very short, gradual climb the road flattened out and alternated between walking through Mountain Laurel Tunnels and young open forest. I should mention here that throughout our hike we enjoyed some nice fall colors. They weren't that "take your breath away, I can't believe this is a real photo" kind of color display. The reds, oranges and yellow were more subtle, diluted by the still green oak forest. Somehow the mind has the ability to filter out some of the green, concentrating the colors on some internal canvas and providing a very soothing sensation. I don't think there is a camera capable of doing that. A second highlight of the hike was to be a series of three ponds. When we arrived at the breast of the first and largest we found that it had been drained. A biker whom we talked to at the parking area told me that they always dry up in the summer but, upon noticing that the drain pipe had been "spiked" several times along its length, I doubt that it will ever fill up. Perhaps this is one of the ponds that had been drained during the long ago Anthrax investigation. There was another "spiked" drain pipe at a pond along the Salamander hike. After crossing the dam we veered off to the right, joining another bike trail. This in turn connected with the Catoctin Trail and soon deposited us back at our starting point. Just before arriving there we were passed by a guy on a dirt bike. I tried to explain to him that he was committing a big no-no but then his potty mouth started up. I decided not to get too confrontational and ruin our day so I just let him go on about his way. Except for that little distraction it had been a most excellent day in the woods.