

M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure



Chuck Keiper Trail – West, 10/10 to 12/2009: I've been trying to get this hike under my belt for three years now. The first time I had to abort because of health reasons. Last year I cancelled without even trying as I new I wasn't in good enough physical condition to get beyond the first day. This year would be my last attempt at it. I was joined by Ted E. Bear, Sparky, Single Malt, Cognac Jack and Hank (a new guy to the group). The weather was supposed to be in the 50s during the day and in the 30s at night, perfect backpacking weather!

We arrived at the [Fish Dam View](#) on Rt144 around 10:30. To our surprise the colors were in their prime. Since it was bow season we donned our orange vests before setting off. We crossed the road and began walking up Swamp Branch Road. After about a quarter mile I realized we walked past the turn off for the trail. We backtracked to the kiosk and picked up a weedy footpath that climbed a short distance to an old overgrown haul road. We turned right onto it and after a few steps found a short spur on the left that led to a [sweeping vista](#). After this short photo op we continued on, descending, once again, to Rt144 and caught yet [another view](#) (of our first climb) on the way down. We stopped at a [forestry memorial](#) before starting our first climb. It was pretty easy compared to the side-hill trail that led us down to Fish Dam Run drainage after it. It seems that large sections of side-hill trails in this venue slope downhill. This makes it difficult to maintain your footing plus puts a lot of stress on the ankles and the tendons on the sides of the knees that a hiker might not be used to. We re-grouped where the trail made a hard left to climb out of the drainage and took a break. One by one we all climbed the 800 feet in a little over 1.2 miles across rocky terrain. This is where I had to abort my first attempt. After reaching the top this time I scoffed it and continued on. We got a short reprieve from climbing as we used a forest road and then a grassy haul road for a short distant before starting another steep descent only to have to climb 950 feet more over 1.4 miles, this one a little rockier and tougher than the last one. Still we all made it to the top in good order and I gave this torturous twin an equal scoffing before continuing on. I've finally beaten them both!

We crossed a wide plateau on the Plantation Trail, turned right at a hunter's cabin

and began another side-hill descent. By this time everyone's knees were wobbly from all of the climbing and merciless side-hills. We rolled into camp at [Yost Run](#) around 6:00 and 11.4 miles from our start with just enough time to set up and eat. There were folks there already but the delta is large enough to hold several groups while affording each some degree of privacy. The only exploration of the stream that night was to find a suitable place to pump water from.

The next morning found us opting out of the old blue-blazed trail and taking the re-route up the east wall of the valley. This was, once again, all side-hill work. We put up with it for about three miles and were rewarded with several [nice views](#) of the stream. (I read somewhere that this re-route took away from the beauty of the valley. All six of us can confirm this statement.) Before turning away from the run we were greeted with views of beautiful waterfalls. One was at the confluence of [Kyler Run](#) and the other was on [Yost itself](#). From there we joined a hunter's cabin road and completed the long climb out of the drainage. It was 11:30. We took a long break to try to get our legs back under us, hoping that we would have no more side-hill trails to endure. And our hopes came true. From here on out we would be walking along well groomed foot paths, haul roads and railroad grades. We found [Eddy Run](#) particularly beautiful with its gradually cascading water, sandy bottom and Hemlock and Birch forest. We made quick work of our second day (10.4 miles) and arrived at the best campsite on the entire CKT on West Branch just below its confluence with Panther Branch. We thought about continuing up Panther Branch to knock off some more mileage but decided, rightfully so, not to pass up a sure thing. We had a nice fire ring and what seemed to be two large bedrooms separated by a wall of Hemlocks, enough dead wood on the ground for a roaring fire and the gentle gurgling of the run as it cascaded over moss covered rocks. This was one of those beer commercial places.

The next morning the decision was made to "not hike" the cross connector. I had hiked it once before and am at that stage in my life where I don't care for repetition if it's not needed. Instead we would make a hard left onto Swamp Branch Road when we got there and follow it back to our cars, knocking about 3 miles off of the trip and giving us an early start for a long drive home. No sooner had we broke camp than we stumbled into the path of a porcupine. He was as startled as we were as he waddled his fastest waddle up a steep hill to get away from us. Soon after our first wildlife encounter of the trip we spooked a couple of deer. "Run deer, run! It's bow season!!!" In about 1.8 miles from camp we reached the previously discussed camping area. It was a large grassy area in the woods next to the tiny Panther Branch. While it would have worked for us it was not even close to being as nice as the West Branch site. We congratulated each other for our decision as we crossed Hicks Road to join the Weaver Trail. Here I think we enjoyed [the best display of colors](#) as we were surrounded by the deep reds of the blueberry bushes, amber gold of the ferns with a backdrop of a distant ridge and all the reds, yellows and oranges Mother Nature had to offer. There was just enough evergreen to contrast with the rest of it. The Swamp Branch Trail was another easy walk on a grassy haul road with a wide swath cut through a young White Pine forest. At its end we crossed the branch itself on a very robust bridge and joined a dirt road. We continued east on it for a few yards before I looked at my GPS and realized we were on Swamp Branch Road but hiking away from the van. I didn't realize that the bridge was so close to the road. We reversed our direction and hiked the relatively easy 2.1 miles back to the van. It was 1:30. We freshened up and headed south on 144 for 20 miles for lunch at the [Snow Shoe Restaurant](#). It was a great trip with just the right amounts of challenge and beauty.