

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



10/24-27/2009 – Douthat State Park, VA car camping and day hiking: Douthat (pronounced DOW-thut) State Park is the oldest State Park in the Old Dominion, constructed by the CCC in 1936. We've driven by the exit for it on I-64 many times on our way to and from the Cranberry Wilderness, Lake Sherwood and New River National River Park. We drove through the campgrounds once just to check them out about eight years ago than thought nothing about it. Then a friend sent me a set of Leonard Adkins' "50 Hikes in ... VA" books. One contained the descriptions of two hikes within the park. The same friend explored these hikes last year and rated them highly. This year I decided it was time for us to visit them. Since we had a long way to drive and would be camping there the decision was made to circumnavigate both Middle Mountain on the western slope of the valley and I guess what is called Beard's Mountain on the eastern slope, adding about 4.4 miles and 900 feet Elevation Gain total to the combined hikes.

Janet, the dogs and myself were joined by Doc and the Mad Hatter on the first night. We reserved sites at the Lake Side loop. The night air was pretty chilly but the day time temps were in the 50s with mostly clear skies ... great hiking weather. The next day we started the Middle Mountain Circuit from my campsite. I won't enumerate the trails used here but there were several. The first 3.5 miles was an almost constant, but very gradual, 1700 foot climb on meticulously maintained trails. It hardly felt like we were putting out any major effort. The fall colors were about a week beyond prime but the yellows of the Beech and Poplar still contrasted nicely with the reds of the Maples and Oak, especially at the lower elevations. We passed a couple of "unofficial views" as we climbed upward. (One note here, almost all of the views in the park centers on the lake in the valley so you'll see it quite a bit.) A series of switchbacks brought us to the first official overlook. After a brief photo op we ascended on yet more switchbacks almost to the ridge and followed a spur trail out to an old cabin at the Tuscarora Overlook and the grandest view of the day. From there the hike was literally all downhill or flat. We would have two short climbs down in the valley as we approached our campsites. The Tobacco House Trail provided one last view of the lake. The final 0.8 miles followed the west bank of the lake, offering several nice "reflective" moments.

We returned to find that Steve and Mary had joined the group. After dinner we built a nice fire and spent some time huddled around it before retiring for the night. The next morning found the temperature dipping below freezing for a bit, making it hard for me to crawl out from under my sleeping bag. I finally got up and immediately re-kindled the fire. After a hardy breakfast we all drove down to the Visitor Center to begin the Beard's Mountain figure 8 Loop. The hike started with hiking across the lawns of some park buildings to pick up the Wilson Creek Trail at an old chimney and followed it to the Buck Hollow Trail. From there we began a prolonged climb up the hollow. About halfway up we took a side trail to our first vista of the day. After the prerequisite photo op we returned to the main trail and proceeded up the hollow again. Just as it looked like the trail was going to become steeper we turned left onto the first of several switchbacks. At the apex of the figure 8 we took a nice break before finishing our first climb. Once again we had more nice switchbacks in front of us. Surprisingly, the next view was not on the top of the ridge but significantly below its crest. The wide side-hill trail was basically flat so we were back at the apex in no time. We took lunch and then began some more switchbacking, first down and then up as we traversed Beard's Gap, passing yet another view of the park. At the top we captured our last view, this time looking into a valley to the east of the park ... no lake this time! From there we followed the Brushy Hollow Trail back down to Wilson Creek, crossing it on a swinging bridge. P-Hyker was a little apprehensive about this but she made it across while on lead. Once over we made a right turn and followed the multi-use Flat Run Trail for one mile back to our cars.

The last night was a repeat of the previous ones except dense cloud cover moved in. This helped to keep the temperature relatively high. The next day we all broke camp at our leisure and headed home. First Janet and I headed to Vic's in Clifton Forge to check out their breakfast buffet. Though the selections were somewhat limited the quality was very good and the waitress kept our coffee cups full, something you need for a 4.5 hour drive back to civilization.