

Description: The George Washington National Forest and Jefferson National Forest were administratively combined in 1995 to form the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests. The two National Forests contain nearly 1.8 million acres of public land, representing one of the largest blocks of public land in the eastern United States. Their entire eastern border is traversed by two of the most popular transportation routes in the entire Old Dominion: The Appalachian Trail and the Blue Ridge Parkway (BRP). Unlike its northern extension known as Skyline Drive the AT and BRP wander away from each other from time to time giving the hiker a better sense of wilderness solitude. Up north the AT hiker is seldom out of earshot of the scenic road. Still the BRP and the trail intersect frequently, making this an ideal venue for setting up backpacking shuttle hikes.

Described here is a pretty challenging 29.3 mile hike beginning at the Sunset Field/Apple Orchard Trailhead and ending just north of the Punch Bowl Shelter where the AT crosses the BRP at Mile Post 51.7 with the north/south boundaries of the two forests right in the middle of it all, along the banks of the beautiful James River. Its overall difficulty rating is "strenuous". You will gain over 6000 feet in elevation and lose an equivalent amount along the entire length of the hike. If you do it as described the daily breakdown will be: 9.89 miles/2400 ft E.G. on day 1; 10.04 miles/800 ft. E.G. on day 2 and 9.39 miles/3100 ft. E.G. on day 3. Feel free to explore other potential camping areas other than those discussed here but note that once you leave Johns Hollow Shelter, heading north bound, you will find no reliable water source until you are 0.5 miles from your final destination.

This hike features several outstanding views, scenic streams, the James River and constantly changing terrain. Spring flowers and blooming trees include Blood Root, White Trillium, Wild Geranium, Columbine, Fire Pink, Wild Pink, Star Chickweed, Bleeding Heart, purple and yellow Violets, Red Bud, Shad Bush, Dogwood and a host of flowering heath bushes. May features the blossoms of the beautiful pink Catawba Rhododendron and Mountain Laurel. In the fall the views are filled with the orange, red and yellow of the change in seasons. The hike was laid out in such a manner that the hiker encounters the amazing James River Foot Bridge right near the halfway point of the trek.

Trail Notes: The AT is blazed white. Some side trails might be blazed blue but these are sporadic. All trail junctions, save one, are signed.

Day 1 (Moderately difficult to difficult): From the Sunset Field parking area descend 1000 feet on the Apple Orchard Falls Tr. Turn right onto the AT, cross a service road and climb to the top of Apple Orchard Mt. Arrive at the summit and the retired FAA/U.S.A.F. Radar tower in 0.43 miles from the service road you crossed. Descend along the north slope on the mountain and pass under the guillotine.

At 0.85 miles from the last summit cross the BRP. In another 0.23 miles pass the Thunder Hill Shelter w/water and privy on the left. (This shelter used to be located at Marble Springs, your camping spot for the night, but was moved to its new location via helicopter.) In 0.93 miles cross the BRP

again. Arrive at the Thunder Ridge Overlook in another 0.40 miles. (Yes, you can drive there!) Besides the grand view of the valley you can see the Devil's Marbleyard and Gunter Ridge to the right. Climb up and over Thunder Ridge with views in another 1.31 miles and then an additional 0.66 miles.

Descend another 1.42 miles to Petites Gap, cross the road at the kiosk. You will leave the Thunder Ridge Wilderness Area and enter the James River Face Wilderness Area. Summit Highcock Knob in 1.22 miles and descend 0.67 miles to the only unsigned trail junction in 29.3 miles. To the left is an unsigned jeep trail. To the right, as of this posting (04/08), some trail vandals have tried to scrap off the white blazes. Turn right here and in a few steps again see unadulterated blazes. Arrive at your camp at Marble Spring in another 0.44 miles. You can easily fit about 10 tents in this area. The spring is about 300 feet downhill from a signpost. It's a small stream but the trail overseer for that section told me he has never seen it completely dry. (Those are his words.)

Day 2 (pretty easy): Continue northbound on the AT. In 0.47 miles cross the intersection of the Sulphur Spring Trail (left and right) and the Piney Ridge Tr (right). Along the next segment you will catch nice views of places you hiked yesterday, namely Highcock Knob, Thunder Ridge and, in the distance, Apple orchard Mt. At 0.84 miles from the last trail junction look for a recently constructed short trail that climbs up to a connection with the Sulphur Spring Tr. This area is known as the Helicopter Landing Pad and was used during the relocation of the Marble Spring Shelter to Thunder Hill and, I believe, to fight a forest fire not too long ago. (You'll pass through the burned area later.) From here you will have a nearly 360 degree view.

In 1.14 miles from the Helicopter Landing Pad reach the junction with the Belfast Trail. Turn hard right here and hike 0.49 miles to yet another junction with the Sulphur Spring Tr (right) and Balcony Tr (left). Cross here and descend on the AT through a recently burned area. (Look for the skeletal remains of trees to your left.) In 2.79 miles arrive at Matts Creek Shelter. This is a good lunch spot about 1/2 way through your day.

Continue descending toward the James River. Pass Matts Creek Tr (the old AT prior to the foot bridge construction) on the right in 0.19 miles. In 0.71 more miles the trail bears to the right and follows the river downstream. The cliffs and rock formations along this stretch are pretty impressive. In 1.11 miles the AT makes a sharp left turn onto a RR grade and arrives at the James River Foot Bridge. (625 feet long. The old RR bridge piers cost \$1.00. The rest of the project cost 1.5 million dollars.)

After crossing the foot bridge the AT turns right, goes under a RR bridge and follows a footpath out to VA Rt 501. Cross the road and begin walking up a Rt 812/36. Almost immediately turn right onto a footpath through some rocks. Cross Rocky Row Run twice on well-constructed bridges. After 1.04 miles of walking on relatively flat logging grades the trail makes a sharp left onto a footpath and climbs a bit to cross Rt 812/36 again. Cross it and in 0.75 miles of a gradual climb arrive at Johns Hollow Shelter, your home for the night. The tenting area behind the shelter is quite large and has its own

fire ring. The privy is recently constructed and features modern ventilation, handicapped handrails (???) and a skylight roof.

Day 3 (strenuous - the most challenging day): From this point onward there are no reliable water sources until 0.5 miles before the end of the hike.

Rejoin the northbound AT. Immediately begin climbing, gradually at first. As you approach the top of Little Rocky Row the trail will begin switchbacking up the face of the mountain and will obviously become more rocky. In 2.14 miles reach the junction of Rocky Row Tr to the left. Just prior to this turn around for a good view of the James River valley. There are more views down Rocky Row Tr but remember you have to climb back up should you decide to check them out. Turning right at this junction (staying on the AT) soon brings you to another great view point at Fuller Rocks.

After a brief respite from climbing approach the base of Big Rocky Row. A view westward of the town of Glasgow will be had in 0.83 miles. In another 0.40 miles, on the other side of the summit, will be another south/east vista on the right. This would make a good dry campsite. The trail from here to Salt Log Gap is either downhill or flat and, for the most part, is over a very smooth surface. In 1.38 miles pass the junction of the Saddle Gap Tr and in another 1.14 miles the junction of the abandoned Log Gap Tr (also on the right). There is a dry campsite a few yards down the old trail.

In 1.48 miles reach the summit of Bluff Mountain and the Memorial to Little Ottie. (Read his story here.) Over the next 1.49 miles the trail will be either downhill or flat with one slight rise just before the Punch Bowl Shelter spur trail on the left. In another 0.45 miles arrive at Mile Post 51.7 of the BRP and the end of your hike.