

## **Cranberry Wilderness Backpack**

**Description:** This was my first trip to the Cranberry Wilderness and it won't be my last. This page describes a 24 to 27 mile moderate loop through some of the most beautiful forest I've yet to visit. The trails used mostly follow old forest roads or railroad grades as they wind their way up very scenic river valleys and stream hollows. The loop descends along the North Fork of the Cranberry on the first leg. On the second leg it follows the main branch of the Cranberry using FR76 and then ascends along Birch Log Trail to the ridge top and the North/South Trail. You then descend along the Laurelly Branch Trail to what I consider the focal point of the trip, the Middle Fork of the Williams River. This is where you have the choice of making this a 24 or 27 mile trip. If you prefer the latter, turn left and follow the railroad grade down to the confluence of Big Beechy Run and the trail of the same name for some fantastic camping. If you prefer the former turn right and hike 0.5 miles to campsites in the "Hell For Certain Branch" area. There are campsites on both sides of the Middle Fork and even more further up-stream. The next day follow the Middle Fork back to the North Fork Trail and return to your vehicles filled with the memories of a wonderful trip.

### **Directions from the Cranberry Wilderness Visitor Center at the junction of Rt39 and the Highland Scenic Highway 150:**

Simply proceed north on the Scenic Highway for about 8.4 miles. The North/South trailhead is on the left. Extra parking is on the right side of the highway.

**Trail Notes:** Follow the North/South trail in from the parking area. At first there are several footpaths which seem to go in all directions. Bear to the left and pass a kiosk. In 0.4 miles arrive at the junction with the North Fork Trail. Turn left here.

In about 1.5 miles the trail will split. Bear right and descend a short distance before making a sharp switchback to the right. It is marked with cairns. The trail is easy to follow except in two areas where it temporarily leaves the old woods road/railroad grade to avoid blowouts of the bank. These are marked by cairns and some sort of signage.

In about 6.5 miles from leaving the North/South Tr pass the signed forks trail on the left. Shortly after that there is an isolated campsite on the right. It's easy to walk by. This is a good place to camp for the night.

As you near the confluence of the main fork of the Cranberry you'll pass a liming station on the right which is used to neutralize the acidity in the river. Turn right onto FR76 (Black on the map). Follow it for approximately 1.7 miles to the junction of Tumbling Rock Tr. You will pass a shelter and some nice campsites.

Soon pass Tumbling Rock Shelter. In another 0.5 miles arrive at the junction of Birch Log Tr. Turn right here. As you ascend Birch Log Tr ( blazed with

**blue diamonds) pass a campsite on the right. Climb steadily for 2.1 miles. You'll gain about 1400 feet in elevation. This is the steepest part of the trip.**

**Arrive at the junction of the North/South Tr. As of this writing there is no sign but the trail is obvious. Turn right and in about a mile turn left onto the Laurelly Tr. Laurelly Tr starts as a footpath but shortly after passing a small campsite on the right and crossing the run connects with a railroad grade. Descend on the grade as it switchbacks to the valley below and arrive at a ford and the junction of Middle Fork Tr at 3.23 miles from the last trail junction.**

**There are 3 options here. There is a nice campsite to the left just after the ford. Camp there or turn left and hike 1.5 miles downstream to the junction of Big Beechy for some great camping or turn right (upstream) and hike 0.5 miles to good camping at the confluence of Hell For Certain Branch. There are sites on both sides of the river here. If you opt not to hike down to Big Beechy your trip will be 24 miles long.**

**Regardless of where you camp, to complete the trip follow the Middle Fork Trail for approximately 4 miles to the junction of the North Branch Tr. (This trail may be defunct but the sign is still there.) Continue straight on the Middle Fork Tr for another 2.3 miles. You'll pass a small campsite on the right before turning north, away from the stream, and finally reaching the North Fork Tr.**

**Turn right onto the North Fork Tr and follow it back to the original junction with the North/South Tr (1.14 miles). Turn left onto the North/South Tr and follow it back to your car.**