

M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure



06-12 to 16-10, Car Camping at Cook Forest State Park with assorted day hikes: We arrived at camp around 3:00. We had a large open grassy area under a cluster of some of the largest trees in the park as a site. At first we felt rather exposed but then realized that while no one could see us we could see anyone coming toward us from any direction for quite some distance. We give high marks to the rustic dog friendly sites, many of which were nestled under giant White Pines and Hemlocks and isolated from each other. The more modern sites, though well maintained, were packed in tightly with little to no sense of isolation, a real RV ghetto IMO. The weather was warm and muggy the first two days with some occasional showers. The next two days were great with mostly blue skies, lower temps and less humidity. We had a thunderstorm around 5:00 A.M. on "get away day", causing us to pack up some wet gear. Except for a couple of night time visits by a pair of raccoons (They are quite adept at opening coolers and that's all I have to say about that.) the camping was pretty good.

Hike !: On Monday we took the Ridge trail down to the Log Cabin Inn where we hooked up with the shared North Country and Baker trails (blazed blue over yellow) and followed it SOBO until it left the park. First our trek took us through the heart of the Forest Cathedral Natural Area. I have never seen such huge trees of any species in this region. Some of these White Pines and Eastern Hemlocks are over 300 years old (with a few thought to be approaching 450 years old), nearly reaching 200 feet in height and over 5 feet in diameter. We are talking BIG TREES here! The route took us across pretty Tom's Run (a stream that deserves more exploration on my part) and up the Hemlock, Deer Park and Seneca trails to the vista at Seneca Point and the old fire tower (I still can't get myself to climb one of these things!). The descent down the River trail was steep and over loose footing. This made it a bit difficult to enjoy the masses of blooming Mountain Laurel we were walking through. Once along

the beautiful Clarion River the going was much easier. As we reached the western park boundary the NCT/Baker Trail continued straight along the river through SGL 283 while the River trail (our route) turned to the right and followed an old road steeply back up to the plateau. By this point Mrshyker's bad knee and ankle had taken all of the punishment they could handle so we aborted a planned short walk on the Mohawk Ski trail and took the Fire Tower Road back to Rt 36 and the campground. We had hiked 7 miles and climbed about 1500 feet. I had planned on taking P-hyker on an additional 5-6 mile loop exploring the more northern parts of the park but the late hour and a prolonged rain shower negated that possibility. (I guess we'll just have to come back next year and do it!)

Hike 2: Initially I had planned to drive up to the Allegheny National Forest from camp and do the Minister Creek and Morrison Run hikes. I changed one venue a week before the trip when I found info on Clear Creek SP and its trail system that were a mere 20 minutes from camp. It was begging to be hiked. P-hyker and I arrived at the parking area around 9:30. We couldn't find the trailhead for the Clear Creek trail anywhere. We found a couple in the picnic area who kindly directed us to the Phyllis Run Trail. We climbed steeply crossing the Clear Creek trail in the process (I found out later that the trailhead sign was about 20 feet in the woods and not visible from the parking lot.). We reached a large flat plateau hardwood forest with a thick understory of Hay Scented Ferns, quite different from yesterday's hike. The lack of a well-worn treadway told me this was going to be a very peaceful, quite hike with little or no interaction with other humans. Although there was little in the way of real trail left there were plenty of white metal blazes along this trail and then later the Zerby trail to keep us on course. The Ridge trail was a lot easier to follow as it descended along Truby Run. The rocks in the stream were stained orange, probably from acid leaching out of an abandoned coal mine further up stream. At a point where the stream flowed through a mini-gorge we were compelled to climb a bit and pass through a rock field before reaching a gas pipeline swath and bridge that crossed the run. The park map indicated we should climb the swath for a bit and descend on a trail that roughly parallels it. We found some faded old blazes but nothing that remotely resembled a trail. We backtracked down the swath and bushwhacked about 20 feet into the woods just above the bridge and found a well worn trail with red and white disks as blazes. This soon hooked up with the Sawmill ski trail and another steep climb taking us to the Tadler Run trail (obviously groomed as a ski trail). The next mile was a pleasantly flat walk as the trail followed the same elevation in and out of the tops of small coves along the ridge. Unfortunately the two vistas shown on the park map are now overgrown. After the last one the trail descended toward the Clarion River on an old haul road that passed through Rhododendron and Hemlock tunnels as the namesake run gurgled out of sight below us in the thickets. Every time we came to a seep across the trail we found nice bouquets of Forget-Me-Nots with their light blue flowers and yellow "eyes". With the river in sight the trail turned to the right and joined another old haul road. I kept waiting for the trail to descend to the river's edge but it stayed at a near constant 100 feet above it until the trail ended at the park campground (very clean and well maintained but not dog friendly). The views of the river here were great. I topped off my water bladder at the faucet and poked around until we found the Clear Creek trail. It took us a few minutes but once found it provided us with a straight one mile shot back to the car. Initially it stayed in close proximity to the creek where one could see where some junior engineers were trying to change its course with rocks. Shortly after crossing the pipeline that bisects the park the trail climbed gradually over two phases and took us through some dense pine forests, so dense that very little light could penetrate it. About 10 minutes after passing our initial junction with

the Phyllis Run trail we were back at the truck. We had hiked over 9 miles and climbed 1700 feet by 2:30.

Hike 3: Ok, so I mentioned I swapped out the Minister Creek hike for a hike in Clear Creek SP. The day before the trip, as I was looking at the Clear Creek SP map, I noticed that there is also a Clear Creek State Forest right across the road... with more trails. Their on line general use map was impossible to read so I called them. A young lady named Wendy E-mailed me a PDF of a new map that showed all but one of the trails. (See you next year, Morrison Run!) This change in venues was another great decision. We parked at the same place as yesterday, crossed Rt 949 and immediately found ourselves walking on some of the best maintained trails in PA. First there was the Beartown Rocks trail. This section of the forest had been clear cut back in the late 1800s and then, during a destructive forest fire in 1905, was burned over as it struggled to re-create itself. In the 1930s the CCC planted the entire area with Red Pine and Spruce. It has not been harvested since. Pictures don't do this forest view justice. We soon crossed the remains of an earthen dam used to create a pond which held logs for a saw mill on the other side of Clear Creek. To add to the history of this forest, it was an active oil field from 1905 to the early 1960s. One central steam engine pumped oil from several wells. (This explains the 4 inch steel pipes I had been tripping over.) The highest out put of the original well was 30 barrels/day but most averaged a couple of barrels/day. Back in those days this was considered high out put. Shortly after this a bridge spans the creek and goes out to Corbett Road and the Clear Creek tr. We would hike this later. For now we left the Beartown Rocks trail and ascended on the Trap Run Trail. For the most part it is an old haul road that follows a hidden stream through tunnels of Rhododendron, Mountain Laurel, Hemlock and Pine, only occasionally giving way to hardwoods. We were climbing the entire time but the grade was so gradual, except for the very top, that I didn't even break a sweat. After a short walk through a hardwood forest and up a gas line access road we found ourselves at the focal point of the hike, Beartown Rocks. This is a labyrinth of huge eroded boulders that are fun to explore. One has some stone stairs and wooden steps that lead to its top and a nice view of the forest. At this point we met the only hiker we would see for the entire day.

After a break we descended on the Beartown Rocks trail to the previously mentioned bridge. The Clear Creek trail was right where it was supposed to be. The final three miles was a pleasant walk on ski trails, haul roads and footpaths as the trail followed Clear Creek and one of its tributaries up and over a plateau to Little Clear Creek where we once again encountered Rhododendron tunnels, Hemlocks, Spruce and Red Pine. Without any major elevation change we made great time getting back to Rt 949. We had hiked about 9 miles but only climbed 1000 feet, finishing about the same time as yesterday.

I've got to say that this has been one of the best PA day hiking experiences I've ever had. Never have I hiked so many miles through such beautiful forests and seen so few people in my entire life. I intentionally left some trails un-hiked so we have an excuse to comeback next year. Oh! And we will still plan to do our invasion of the ANF.

We broke camp early on Wednesday, short 2 Roast Beef and Provolone subs, one Oscar Myer Ham and Swiss sandwich, 7 fresh eggs and the contents of 3 Glucosamine capsules, and headed to the Sawmill Restaurant for some Sausage Gravy and Biscuits before heading home. Somewhere in Cook Forest State Park there are 2 very full raccoons who are no longer suffering from stiff joints.