

M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure



06-25 to 28-2011, Grayson Highlands/Mount Rogers Car Camping and Day Hikes: Every year for the past three years we've been coming here over Janet's birthday weekend (Prime time for the Catawba Rhododendron bloom) and conducting forays into the Mount Rogers N.R.A. and Grayson Highlands SP. Initially we explored the quintessential aspects of the area: Pine Mountain, Wilburn Ridge, the wild ponies, rock formations and the Mount Rogers Summit itself (highest point in the Old Dominion). Last year we toured Iron Mountain using both the new and old AT as backbones for the loops and developed three new circuits. This year we returned to more or less fill in the gaps; probing the Little Wilson Creek Wilderness, a miniature Grayson Highlands, and adding a missing link to our previous Iron Mountain adventures.

This year we had a smallish group but they were a more than able bunch of hikers nonetheless. The Mad Hatter, as always, beat us there grabbing a fine electric site so he could toast his morning bagel. (I hear it has become a near sacramental ritual.) Gadget Gyrl, Alan and Brendan drifted in later. We had a huge shaded site with a pitch perfect tent pad and picnic table. We had to move the latter just a tad to make our "system" work. Being next to the showers/bathrooms was a plus. After everyone had checked in Janet and I took the dogs up to

the Visitor Center to check out a handicapped access panoramic view. It was pretty awesome but the dogs didn't seem to care for the deck. That evening, as the group sat around the campfire, we were serenaded by a family reunion next door that sang mostly hymns accompanied by a quite guitar and mandolin. As quite time approached the sound of a banjo became apparent and the night's performance reached a crescendo with some good ol' fashioned pickin' and grinnin' music concluded with a robust instrumental version of the theme from "The Beverly Hillbillies". It was a good way to end the day after a long seven hour drive.

The next day's hike started from the beginning of the main campground loop. We descended on the Wilson Tr and soon turned right on Upchurch Road, an equestrian trail. This in turn switchbacked deep into the Wilson Creek drainage. An un-official spur trail soon connected us to Big Wilson Creek Trail which lead us into the heart of the Little Wilson Creek Wilderness area. The trail followed the creek for a while as it passed through Rhododendron tunnels and Hemlock trees and eventually crossed the creek. We took a breather as Precious checked out the refreshing pool. The trail continued to follow the stream a little longer before turning away from it and climbing to its junction with the Kabel Tr. There were some other unsigned old roads that intersected the main trail earlier but Mr. Garmin helped us to decide which was the correct course to follow. While the Big Wilson Trail had been considerably chewed up by horses this one was nearly pristine with a good hard surface and moss growing along the edges. After a brief climb the trail flattened out and followed nearly the same contour line to its end at the First Peak Trail. About halfway through this section the winds picked up and the rain fell. Of course this lasted only until Gadget put her rain jacket on, then it stopped and the temperature dropped almost 10 degrees. The rest of the day would be some of the most glorious hiking this guy has done. We took an abbreviated lunch at the previously noted trail junction before continuing.

I should mention something here, a fact that even my hiking mates noticed and deserves an explanation. Once upon a time the entire Grayson Highlands/Mt. Rogers N.R.A. was one big open pasture land. Little Wilson Creek Wilderness was no different. There were very few trees to be found on the hillsides because of the constantly grazing livestock. When the area became part of a national forest and state park two separate herds of wild ponies were introduced to maintain the open balds we see today in the most popular areas. Well, apparently Little Wilson Creek didn't get its herd of ponies. The result

is an odd kind of forest, mostly hardwood in nature with some pine and spruce at higher elevations and Hemlocks and Rhodos in the hollows. That in itself describes a typical Appalachian forest. What is odd is the GRASS understory of the dense forest we observed in several places, clear evidence that, at one time, this area was also open pasture land.

Returning to the hike, the First Peak Trail traverses four knobs. As expected the first is named First Peak. It was fully engulfed in forest, as expected. Treading on a large flat rock in the trail surrounded by short scrubby trees served as the only proof that you were crossing it. This peak naming format continued for the next two peaks. Unlike their big brother, however, these were miniature open balds with thickets of Flaming Azaleas instead of Catawba Rhodos. Views of the region began to develop more and more as we hiked with a significantly different perspective of the area than one gets on one of the more popular hikes and we had it to ourselves. Things seemed "turned around" because we were approaching them from a different direction. The Third Peak is outside of the Wilderness and part of the park. The trail continued westward crossing one more bald, this one much broader and offering even better views. Until this moment it has been un-named but in keeping with the cartographer's apt identification of high points in this area I bequeath upon it the name ... you guessed it ... Fourth Peak. From here we descended on a very rough horse trail with its own unique view to the Scales (An area where cattle was weighed before taking that long one way ride to the city) where we took a little break. From here we jumped onto the familiar AT which ascended Stone Mountain at a vary oblique angle. We passed through fields of Fire Weed as we reached the open crest and all of its amazing views. After a mile or so the AT descended back into the wilderness and its forest. As the trail continued to descend we caught one final mountain view that appears in many of the photos of the area. It is the Twin Pinnacles near the Visitor Center. These are a short walk from it and probably the two best view points in southern VA. We soon found ourselves on the Seed Orchard and then Wilson Roads with all of their Rhododendrons and moss covered rocks providing a cooling sensation as we sauntered, each at his/her own pace back to camp.

I have read some pretty disappointing critiques of the Little Wilson Wilderness Area. All I can say is that the author(s) must not have explored the area in depth or used the right combination of trails. If I lived closer to it I would hike it more. It has a wonderful combination

of scenery and solitude not often found in the more popular areas of the highlands.

We had another campfire that night but it was a lot more subdued having completed a 13 mile trek that day. We also had no one to serenade us. I tried humming but that didn't work. We called it an early night in anticipation of the next hike. The night air was cool and made for great sleeping.

The next day I awoke refreshed and ready to go. After a pancake breakfast I met the others and we all drove to "the scene of the crime" and I mean that literally. We parked our vehicles at the same trailhead where the truck had been broken into two years ago during an aborted backpacking trip to Mount Rogers. This time we were only doing a day hike and all valuables were back at camp. I knew this hike was going to be anti-climatic compared to what we had experienced the previous day but it would be nice just the same. It began by climbing up to the Flat Top area of Hurricane Mountain via the Flat Top Tr and a gravel service road. From there we turned east onto the yellow blazed Iron Mountain Trail (previously the AT). The forest was thick and mature with outstanding canopy. The going was slow in places as horses had done a number on eroded sections and the recent rain had worsened the situation. Trail conditions improved greatly as we crossed the highpoint of the mountain and drainage improved. We stopped for lunch at the intersection with the AT in an area locally called Chestnut Flats. We had completed most of the elevation gain by the time we reached the Iron Mountain Trail. Now we were going to descend on the AT, a horse-less trail. When hiking in this area, if you want to visit some of the less traveled areas you have to be willing to share the trail with others even if they tend to be destructive and I'm OK with that ... most of the time. Still it's nice when through the course of the day a hiker can take a few steps and not have to worry about where he is putting his feet. After topping a little rise the trail pretty much sidehilled in and out of coves as it gradually descended to Fairwood Valley. The trail was well graded and sloped, helping the hiker keep undo pressure off of his ankles and knee ligaments. We stopped for a long refreshing pause where the trail crosses Fox Creek on a bridge. Precious was very happy to see the deep cool pool under it. After drenching our heads with cold water we began a very slight climb on the Fairwood Valley Horse trail. Initially this was pretty muddy in spots but after crossing the creek at its confluence with Lewis Fork it became packed gravel. We were surrounded by Rhododendron until we passed through a pasture with views of Hurricane Mountain, which we had just

hiked, and Pine Mountain, home of Mount Rogers. We were back at our cars by one. Total distance about 7 miles.

Since we finished early Brendan and Gadget Gyrll decided to head home. The campfire was very brief that night as the remaining hikers had over 7 hours to drive the next day and some had to work the day after. Even though I dislike packing up wet gear the following rain showers has an effect of a lullaby much like the serenade of the first night. The hatter was gone way before we woke up and Alan was off to Pittsburg as I was taking down the tent. We got on the road pretty ealy mainly because we simply stuffed the wet gear in their bags with no attempt at organization. On the way out we decided to have breakfast at the Log House, a family style restaurant and general store at the intersection of Rt 58 and Rt 16. The food was good and cheap and the service was friendly and fast. They did not disappoint.