

M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure



June 27-30-2010: Car camping and day hiking in Mount Rogers N.R.A., VA: MrsHyker, the dogs and I completed our six hour drive to Grindstone Campground by 3:30 on Saturday. There we met the Mad Hatter, Ted E. Bear, Macro man and his son Marc (AKA Mini-Macro).

The camping: The sites were all flat, large, well maintained and shaded by mature Hemlocks and hardwoods. The temperatures were cooler than expected (mid to high 70s during the day and mid-60s at night). The days were sunny but we had a lot of rain on Tuesday night. The restrooms were meticulously kept. Unlike our previous trip to PA we had no invasive varmint issues (Raccoons). No one had a single complaint.

Hike 1: AT-Iron Mountain Loop. Last year we had backpacked and day hiked the ever popular Mount Rogers/Grayson Highlands area, covering most of the major trails there. This year, in a search of hikes with more solitude, we decided to do hikes in the less popular Iron Mountain/Hurricane Mountain area. I set up the three hikes we were to do by order of difficulty doing the longest/hardest one first and the shortest/easiest one last. Today we convened at a trailhead in the Beartree Lake Recreation Area to complete a 14.0 mile circuit with 2720 feet of elevation gain utilizing the Beartree Gap, Appalachian, Feathercamp Branch and Iron Mountain trails. The hike started with us crossing the dam of Beartree Lake before turning south and climbing to reach the AT. We had views of Mount Rogers, White Top and Chestnut mountains along the way. Initially the AT was on a relatively flat RR grade but soon gave way to a series of well graded switchbacks that took us up to a ridge line with very little effort. The next 2 miles provided relatively flat walking through luscious green hardwoods, Rhododendron and Eastern Hemlocks. One could see where there were once great open views of the ridges in northern North Carolina and Tennessee but they are now, at least during the summer, partially obstructed. We took a break at the Saunders shelter where we met two large groups of college aged backpackers. (It's nice to see young adults partaking in these outdoor activities.) The descent down to White Top Laurel Creek was through a seemingly endless stretch of

switchbacks but stopped short of reaching the pretty stream. For the most part we would only get partial glimpses of it as we hiked high above it towards Rt 58. We left the AT shortly after taking a lunch break at Straight Branch, turning right onto the blue blazed Feathercamp Branch trail. In the first 0.5 miles we crossed this beautiful gurgling stream rapped in Rhododendron thickets 8 times before climbing up above it. We gained about 1500 feet over 2 miles before joining the Iron Mountain trail and taking a break at the Sandy Flats shelter. This used to be part of the AT before it was rerouted to the section we hiked earlier in the day. We met yet another group of young backpackers here. The stretch of trail to Shaw's Gap was a pretty easy piece of ridge walking with the mountain falling away pretty steeply on either side of the trail. From there we descended gradually on the Beartree Gap trail, at this point an old haul road. The further we dropped in elevation the more we became encapsulated in a jungle of Rhododendron and Hemlock, passing a nice wildlife pond as the trail flattened out. We completed the hike a little after 5:00 and headed back to camp for showers, dinner and fireside chat.

Hike 2: Rowlands Creek Falls-Jerry's Run Loop: Macro Man and Mini-Macro had to head back to Pittsburg so that left the Hatter, Ted, PHYker and myself to hike this 12 mile circuit while climbing 2500+ feet. Although the distance between camp and the trailhead was only about thirteen miles the route was very circuitous. It took us 30 minutes to reach the trailhead. We climbed along the Roland Creek trail for about two miles, navigating one nasty blowdown along the way that had obliterated the location of the trail on the other side. The views of the chutes and mini-falls were very nice but we were high above them. This created a sense of separation from what we were viewing, almost as if we were watching TV. There was a trail down to the base of the focal point of the hike, a one hundred foot set of cascades, but the footing looked tricky and I wasn't about to try it with a 80 pound dog pulling me. We took a brief break at the end of the trail before joining the Old FR84 Trail. About 20 yards in I saw my first black bear in over two years. It was PHYker's first. Thankfully she didn't know how to react and made a feeble lunge at it as it quickly ran away from us. I'm glad she was on lead. Initially this trail was narrow and engulfed in Rhododendron (like so many of the trails up here) but soon turned into a wide old forest road as the name would imply. It was pretty easy walking with only gradual increases in elevation but after a while it developed this feeling of ... sameness. About six miles into the hike and 4 miles into what was almost becoming a boring road walk we took a lunch break. I took a power nap while PHYker rolled around in the leaves and the Hatter and Ted ate. For some reason I had no appetite. About a mile after lunch we happily turned off onto the Jerry's Run trail. This was another one of those wonderful Rhodo tunnels that follow an invisible yet very audible stream. We followed it for about two miles until the trail finally turned and crossed the run. We took a break here to let PHYker soak in a refreshing pool before continuing on. The last three miles of the trail became another old forest road. It climbed a bit before leveling off and turning sharply to the right before drawing a bee line back to the forest road we were parked on. Sadly, towards the end, I noticed that the once magnificent Hemlock forest was infested with its archrival, the Woolly Adegid. Many of the largest ones are now mere grey skeletons.

Hike 3: Comers Creek Falls/Iron Mountain Loop. The Mad Hatter decided to do a driving tour of White Top and Damascus rather than hike so that left Ted, PHYker and myself to do this shortest/easiest hike of the trip at 8.9 miles and 1870 feet of E.G. It also turned out to be the best. It was the coolest day of the three and pretty bug-free. The climb up the Dickey Gap Trail and then the AT was very gradual. We could hear the creek hundreds of feet below us but could not see it. It was running

very strong. Soon the AT dropped us down to the foot of the namesake waterfall. The trail crossed the creek here on a sturdy bridge but we rested here for a while, enjoying the sights and sounds, and then backtracked a bit to take the Comers Creek trail to its junction with the Iron Mountain trail. Here we found one of the nicest campsites bracketed above and below by small waterfalls. We finished our climb up the Iron Mountain trail and passed through a style to find a Cold Mountain-esque view in front of us. It was very easy to ascertain that we would be hiking through active pastures as we zig-zagged through numerous cow pies, stopping occasionally to take in the views of the ridge to the south of us. As we neared the end of the pasture land we spotted a lone Black Angus steer in the forest ... then another ... then 2 more ... OH MAN!!! We were suddenly in the middle of a herd of 40 head of cattle, calves and all. I had learned what to do if confronted by a black bear in the woods but what does one do in this situation? PHyker, still on lead, began to yelp at the calves, figuring they were small enough for her to play with, and all but yanked my left arm out of its socket. The calves immediately began running through the woods as the cows bleated for them to come back. We hiked as fast as we could until I got P on the other side of the last style, the entire time listening to the cows giving us a piece of their minds. From there the trail followed an old forest road (Oh no! Not another one?) but only for about 0.5 miles. Along the way we found an open field that offered a great panorama of a distant ridge with a pastoral setting in the foreground, something I wasn't expecting. Shortly after this the trail turned off onto a footpath returning us to a feeling of being in the wilderness. The trail got pretty sloppy but only for a short distance as a horse trail joined the route. As we took a break at the junction with the AT in an area called Chestnut Flats we met one of the young backpacker groups we saw on Sunday. They were all in good spirits and in the middle of the third day out of five on the trail. We followed the AT as it descended along another one of those streams that preferred to play hide and seek except at a couple of exceptional campsites we passed. PHyker took another dip in the stream as Ted checked out the recently constructed Hurricane Shelter. The trail curved away from the stream and then exited the old haul road we had been following onto a nice piece of side-hill trail. For two miles we cruised along stopping occasionally to take in our surroundings (and yes, to allow one more cool down break for P as we crossed the same stream we had been following earlier.) From there it was a short and sweet descent on the Dickey Gap trail back to Ted's van.

We had hiked a total of 35 miles in three days and climbed over 7000 Feet by the time it was all said and done. We drove back to camp for a simple but filling meal and another nice campfire. MrsHyker packed up a lot of our gear that last night so we were able to break camp pretty quickly the next morning and headed straight for Jerry's Country Kitchen for a quick breakfast before our long drive home.