

M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure



08/13/2011, Stone Tower Loop, SGL211: This was one of those impromptu "man and his dog" hikes. I had tried to do this hike with a group twice before. The first time there was too much crusty snow and on the second attempt Clark Creek was over its banks causing us to abort the hike and do an out and back on the AT.

The Sand Spring Trailhead is very hard to spot from Rt325. The double blue blazes are more easily seen if driving south than approaching from the opposite direction. After realizing I had missed it I used my GPS to zero in on it. This time the water was lower and the rock bridge across the creek was mostly intact. We turned right onto a pink blazed but un-named connector trail and enjoyed a pleasant walk through dense Hemlock and moss covered boulders, that is except for the distant sounds of heavy machine guns and 40 mm rapid firing guns from Indiantown Gap Military Reservation. And we would be hiking towards the sounds for the first half of the hike. In about 0.9 miles we joined the red blazed Stone Tower Trail which also starts on the road. Unlike Sandstone this requires crossing the creek on a single log

bridge with a cable. These kinds of crossings give this hiker the hebees and I avoid them at all costs, sometimes electing to get my boots wet instead. The trail continued on a slight uphill grade until its junction straight ahead with a pale yellow blazed trail. It is not on the SATC map and caused a bit of head scratching for about five minutes. Perhaps some of the local hikers can shed some light on its course. Here the Stone Tower trail makes a ninety degree turn uphill and ceases to be a trail. All that you can see before you is a continuous talus slope with occasional red blazes, often times on rocks. We slowly climbed through it, constantly watching for the blazes which did little in the way of changing direction. For 0.3 miles and 300 feet E.G. it did nothing but climb. Just as my left knee started to scream that it had endured enough pain "this trail" made an abrupt right hand turn joining a much more manageable tram grade. The climbing continued but, except for one more steep but brief ascent, at an almost unperceivable pitch until reaching the junction with the Yellow Springs Trail on the right and a blue connector on the left. We took the blue trail and soon found the namesake of the hike. It is actually a chimney and not a tower at all. It seems to be built upon a coal mine and probably served to ventilate it. We continued on this easy trail until we reached the AT and the ruins of the town of Yellow Springs, now a grassy area with a few piles of rocks where buildings used to be. We took a brief break on one such pile as I wondered if I was sitting in what once was some ones kitchen. The next two miles on the AT were nearly flat and as straight as a ruler with just enough rocks and exposed roots to keep one's attention on the trail. I thought we would be putting some distance between us and the war exercises but then the big cannons started booming. Near the midway point we stopped to chat with a trio of backpackers who were hiking through the wilderness but P-hyker's whimpering soon had us going again. She really is not big on breaks. Thwaite's description of this hike had me a bit concerned, implying that it might be easy to walk by the junction with the Sandy Spring Trail. It is not only obvious but signed and blazed. We crossed what I thought was Sand Spring (later to realize that it is the upper reaches of Rausch Creek) and turned left on the un-signed but obvious spur to visit that famous industrial relic, the General. This is why I came here in the first place. In about 0.3 miles we arrived at the site as the old steam shovel sat in all of its rusting glory, permanently trapped by trees that probably were not even seeds when it was abandoned. As we walked around it a young coiled rattle snake got my attention. It seemed oblivious to our presence and Precious was not yet aware of it. I quickly took its photo and that of the backside of the General, both a bit out of focus, before quickly putting some distance between us and our reptilian friend. As we

approached the main trail I heard running water to our right and found a spring contaminated with metal oxide deposits from a coal mine. It was pretty unsightly. Almost immediately the trail began a steep rocky ascent and I began to realize that we were probably going to experience some of our earlier anguish but going down instead of up. I searched diligently for a yellow blazed trail that leads to a vista but could not find it. It was probably a good thing because we found ourselves in a race against the rain, wanting to get off of the steepest, rockiest slope before the skies opened up. It is bad enough trying to navigate such a trail in dry conditions. Add some wet rocks and the dangers become compounded. About halfway down the pitch of the trail lessened as we joined some kind of grade or skid road. I'm thinking it was the later as there were few rocks, mostly a nice carpet of Hemlock needles and, in places, had high banks as if logs had carved out the path. As we re-crossed Clark Creek I let Precious take one last dip. She deserved it. As we made our way back to the truck the first of a series of strong showers hit. Once again our timing was impeccable.