

M. R. Hyker's Latest Adventure



10-23 to 25-2010, The Iron Stone loop, PA: I was joined by Shortstack, The Oscillator, Cognac Jack, Sparky, Single Malt, Indiana Moser and hank (Are you ready for some football?). First let me say that this has got to be one of the top 10 PA hikes in my book, especially with regards to vistas and challenges. Secondly I'd like to point out that the MST Guide is totally wrong. The Iron Stone Trail is well maintained (except for one spot where a sign is sorely needed – more on that later) and, for the most part, a joy to hike on.

There are two places on Rt26 where you can park to begin this hike but the parking area in the Stone Valley Recreation Area is probably the most secure and lends itself well to the few available camping options. Since we were only supposed to hike around 5 miles on the first day we got a late start. From the boat mooring area of the now dry Lake Perez we took the Lake Trail north and then crossed a marsh at the headwaters on a pretty spiffy boardwalk, weaving our way up a small hill to the Sawmill Creek Nature Center. We got directions to the Iron Stone Trail from the lady there and soon found ourselves hiking on a combination of footpaths, haul roads and RR grades. While the forest was mostly hardwoods in full color the trail also goes through dark Hemlock groves especially where it closely parallels Sawmill Creek. At one point the blue blazed trail was joined by the orange blazed Woodcock Trail and this is where the sign is needed. After about a mile of following the dual blazes there is a sign pointing to the Woodcock Trail straight ahead and a double blue blaze indicating what we thought meant a right hand turn for the Iron Stone Trail crossing the stream. Neither the official MST map nor the semi-official Purple Lizard map showed a turn here. I thought it must be a recent reroute and would soon veer back to the true course. I kept watching my GPS as we hiked some pretty easy trail at one point passing an old agricultural relic. Our track kept getting further and further away from the route I had loaded into the unit until finally the trail began doubling back on itself but in the wrong direction. I pulled out my maps and after a long study

session realized that we were on an un-named trail. Not quite sure if it was going to go all the way back to some point we had already hiked we backtracked the 1.5 miles to the Woodcock Trail sign. We turned right onto it and in about 5 steps saw the continuation of the dual blazes. From there it was a pleasant walk through Hemlocks along the stream out to Rt26. We crossed the road and paid a short visit to the Morris Iron Furnace before continuing on, first along an old RR grade paralleling the stream and then, after a brief climb, to a higher grade that followed the edge of a logged area before the Iron Stone Trail ended at its junction with the MST. We set up camp overlooking what is called the Beaver Pond. In actuality it appears to be an old mill pond complete with a concrete spill way for feeding a barely perceptible mill race. Perhaps this was the saw mill from whence the creek gets its name. Although we had hiked an extra 3 unintended miles we still had plenty of time to set up camp, eat and enjoy a nice campfire.

The next day we broke camp around 9:00 and continued on the same haul road we came in on. For about the first 2 miles the grade was barely perceivable. I kept watching my GPS as we approached the point where the trail made a 90 degree turn and headed straight up to the ridge of Tussey Mountain. The last 30 yards or so went through a talus slope on an oblique angle. We took a break at the top before continuing south-west on the Jackson Trail. The going was very tough for the next three miles as we crossed one talus slope after another. The connecting footpaths weren't much better. The rewards for our efforts were exceptional as we could see burning ridge after ridge to the east and a wide valley with farms and towns like Pine Grove Mills to the west. As we approached Rt26 there was a double vista with a campsite nestled under some Hemlocks. This must be one heck of a place to hike in and watch both the sunrise and sunset from the same spot. We took a brief break at the Jo Hays Vista with Penn State clearly in sight to the north before continuing. At first this section of the MST is on a service road for some comm. towers. For a brief moment I thought all of the rocks were behind us. After the last tower, however, the trail reverted back to its rocky old self. After a few more vistas we stopped for a break at the top of the Indian Steps. We couldn't believe what we saw as we peered over the edge of the ridge. I've never seen such a steep trail! By the time we got to the bottom our legs were like Jell-O. Tussey Mountain had been more of a challenge than I expected. We found a really nice campsite in Harry's valley and decided to stop for the day at 10.3 miles. We felt it rated somewhere between a Motel 6 and a Holiday Inn Express on the campsite scale. One thing for sure it was spacious and flat. You could throw your tent down just about anywhere.

Monday morning we all awoke early and prepared for the day under a nearly full moon. By the time we broke camp the sun was up, the woods were on fire with fall colors and the 60% chance of thunderstorms melted away under mostly blue skies. The climb out of the valley wasn't nearly as bad as it would have been if we would have continued on the afternoon before carrying a full compliment of water and uneaten food. It took us less than 15 minutes to reach the crest of Leading Ridge, We turned right onto a pretty rocky footpath which soon turned into a somewhat rocky jeep road. This in turn improved to a mossy road and then a grassy road. We passed one small campsite right on the trail and then a really nice site on the edge of a mountain top meadow with a great easterly view. Shortly after this the road turned mostly into dirt as it wound its way down the east flank of the ridge to a gravel road. We followed this for about 0.25 miles and then turned right into a boreal forest of Spruce, White Pine and American Larch. This was totally different from anything we had hiked this weekend. The soft carpet of pine straw felt good on our bruised feet. The trail then crossed the same gravel road and climbed up a hill covered with

recently planted pine before descending to the south entrance of Stone Valley Recreation Area. Instead of following the Lake Trail on the west bank of the lake (longer and requiring retracing our initial steps of the hike) I opted to cross the dam where we got a panoramic view of most of what we hiked yesterday and followed the east bank a short distance back to our trucks. As we hiked through the cabin area we noticed restrooms up on the hill. It really feels good to freshen up and change your clothes immediately after a three day outing!