

## Trail Notes For the AT-Bluff Mountain Loop

Description: This is a 14.0 mile strenuous circuit hike (15.1 with a side trip to a vista above Big Devils Stairs) in the Shenandoah National Park, VA. The degree of difficulty is based more on the length and less on the elevation gain (2100 feet total). The climbs are steep in only a couple of places. Westward views are had on both North and South Marshall Mountains. With a keen eye you will also find a dead southerly view pretty much looking down into the Big Devils Stair drainage. The side trip down to an overlook of Big Devils Stairs is well worth the effort on a clear day. Just remember you have to climb back up! The trails are well maintained. While the going may be slow for the first 5 miles a good pace can be maintained for the last 8-9 miles. This can be done as a day trip or an over night backpack. Camping is allowed at the Gravel Spring shelter by permit only. I've not checked them out but there are supposed to be tent sites a short walk away. The PATC recommends allowing 7.5 hours for the root trip. We did the entire trip in 6 hours and 15 minutes including lunch because of the foul weather. If the skies are clear you may want to allow extra time to adsorb the views at the overlooks.

The hike begins in a parking lot on the west side of Skyline Dr between mile marker 12 and 13.

Trail Notes: Find the AT sign post in the left corner of the parking lot and proceed downhill following the yellow blazed Jenkis Gap Trail for just a few steps. Shortly come to another signpost. Yellow blazed Jenkins Gap Trail and the AT north goes right. White blazed AT south goes left. Bear left and climb. After reaching the crest of the first hill descend to and cross Skyline Drive at 1.87 miles from the start.

Begin a gradual climb up the back of North Marshall Mountain. At about 1.7 miles from crossing the drive reach the crest of the mountain and an overlook. Descend, steeply at first. In a few yards look for a tall rock outcrop to your left. There is a trail that takes you around its back and to its top. From there you can catch a view directly south into the Big Devils Stair drainage. Cross Skyline Drive for a second time (0.41 miles from the last vista).

At about 0.64 miles from the last SLD crossing reach the summit of South Marshall Mt and more views. Descend to Skyline Drive a third and final time at 0.82 miles from the last vista.

Walk across the Gravel Springs parking lot. A yellow blazed trail (Harris Hollow Tr?) is to the left. Take the AT on the right. At a fork the AT will go right and blue blazed Bluff Trail goes left. Follow Bluff trail down to a trail intersection. Gravel Spring Shelter is to the right. Turn left to continue on.

Immediately come to another fork. Bear right on now yellow blazed Bluff Trail. As you switchback down the hill for a bit pass a Horse Trail on the left. At the last left switchback yellow blazed Harris Hollow Trail goes straight. Make the left switchback following the sign that states "Big Devil's Stairs - 1.3 miles". The Bluff trail is now blazed yellow.

In 1.39 miles arrive at the junction with blue blazed Big Devil's Stairs Tr on the right. If you wish to visit Big Devil's Stairs turn right here and follow the blue blazed trail approximately 0.55 miles. The trail will continue further down through the ravine but

is blocked by private property at the park's boundary. At 0.55 miles there is a bit of an overlook on a rocky ledge that allows you to view the ravine. From this point retrace your route back to Bluff Trail and turn right.

In 2.30 miles reach yellow blazed Mount Marshall Trail. Stay straight to continue northward on Mount Marshall Trail. Cross 3 streams and begin a gradual climb. At 3.60 miles from the last trail junction arrive at Skyline Drive. Turn right, passing Jenkins Gap Overlook, and turn left into the parking lot.