

Trail Notes For the Big Beechy – Middle Fork Loop

Description: The Cranberry Wilderness is a wonderful place to hike. Don't go there if you are seeking vistas (You will see them as you drive to it!). If, however, mature forests with towering Red Spruce, Hemlocks, moss covered boulders, wildflowers and tranquil streams teeming with falls, rapids and pools are what you are searching for this is the place. The following hike is described as an over-night backpack. The distance can be extended by adding other trails to it. We used this particular route to set up a base camp and then did a modified version of the nice, leisurely 13 mile Little Fork – Middle Fork Loop described on this site as a day hike on the second day of a 3 day trip. The "Hall of Kings" encountered early on during the hike will set the tone for the rest of the trip. Your stay at the confluence of Big Beechy Run and the Middle Fork of the Williams River with it's own waterfall and swimming hole will be equally memorable. On the final day try to develop your "sauntering" skills as you gradually climb out of this beautiful river valley visiting places with names like "Hell for Certain" and "Slick Rock" along the way. Take your time.

Trail Notes: Trails that are totally within the Wilderness boundaries are not blazed. All trail junctions are signed with two exception (the lower terminus of Laurelly Branch Trail with the Middle Fork Trail and the Big Beechy Trail at North Fork Trail). Trails that extend beyond the Wilderness are blazed. From the parking area walk down the road and around an earthen bearm. This was once FR76 which is, like many other old roads in the Wilderness, now part of the trail system. It is now designated North Fork Trail. Pass a kiosk on the right. In 0.24 miles come to an obvious footpath with a vacant sign post. This is the Big Beechy Trail. Turn right onto it and ascent about 150 feet to an old jeep road on top of the ridge. This is the beginning of "The Hall of Kings". For the next 15 minutes or so you will be surrounded by towering Red Spruce with an understory of moss covered boulders. The rest of the day's hike will be mostly flat with some gradual hills and a final rapid descent to camp. In about 1.07 miles from the last turn-off the trail leaves the jeep road with a 90 degree turn onto a footpath. There will still be many splendid examples of tall Red Spruce but now they will be mixed with Hemlocks, Black Cherry, Beech and other deciduous trees. The understory will consist of Rhodendron and ferns. Parts of the trail will be lined in wildflowers in season. Keep an eye out for Yellow Celadine and Mountain Sorrel.

In another 1.17 miles reach the junction with the District Line Trail on the right. Continue straight on the Big Beechy Trail. There will be a couple of gradual climbs as you pass over to 4000 foot knobs. After the last you will begin a fairly rapid descent to the valley as the trail clings to the side of the mountain. Arrive at the junction with the Middle Fork Trail and Big Beechy Run at 4.53 miles from the last trail junction. There is a huge camping area just on the other side of the of the stream. If you are traveling alone or as a couple there is a very secluded campsite before crossing on the other side of the Middle Fork Trail. It overlooks the waterfall and swimming hole.

Assuming you spent the night at this place, recross Big Beechy and follow the Middle Fork Trail upstream. In 1.4 miles pass the junction of Laurelly

Branch Trail on the right. There is no sign there as of this writing. Continue onward. In another 0.42 miles come to a small campsite on the right. If you look across the river you might spot the double waterfall of Hell for Certain Run. To its left, on the opposite bank of the river, is yet another great campsite.

Continue upstream. You will soon pass Slick Rock. Once you see it you'll realize the name needs no explanation. Above this oddity of nature you'll cross the river for the first time. Shortly after the crossing you'll find that a large section of the old roadbed has been washed away. There are a couple of cairns here that will help you quickly reestablish the trail. In about another mile cross the river for the second and last time. Here you will also find the roadbed severely eroded in places. In a short distance you'll find a nice rock jutting out into the river ... an ideal lunch spot.

At 5.84 miles from the Hell for Certain camp the trail will make a sharp left and leave the valley. To the right at this point is yet one more nice, but small, campsite. In 0.43 miles merge with the flat and grassy North Fork Trail. Bear left and follow it for 1.39 miles back to the car.