<u>**SNP-Hazel Mt Loop**</u>

<u>**Description**</u>**: This is a strenuous 10.4 mile loop through the heart of what is known as Hazel Mountain Country. It was the last heavily settled area before it became part of the Shenandoah Nation Park. Contrary to what I've read, I find the trails to be enjoyable with nice views (probably best in the winter and early spring) along Sam's Ridge and White Rocks Trails, scenic Hazel River and a waterfall and cave to visit as a focal point of the trip.**

This all comes at some costs. There is a total elevation gain of over 2100 feet for the entire circuit. At one point you'll climb over 500 feet in less than 0.5 miles only to find three more false summits before you. There are 5 crossings of Hazel River not counting the one at the headwaters. These are negotiable but can be quite tricky when the water is high. Check your personal gas tank before you make the rapid 0.2 mile descent to visit the falls and cave. Remember you have to climb back up.

Finally, if one can find ample parking on Rt600 at the southeastern end of the hike, where Sam's Ridge Tr and the Hazel River Trail come together you can knock 3.2 miles off of the loop. I would still do the loop in a counter-clockwise fashion. The climb up Sam's Ridge is quite steep from that end.

<u>**Directions from the central gate of SNP at Rt211:**</u>

1. **Turn south onto Skyline Drive.**
2. **Drive through the tunnel.**
3. **Pass Hazel Mt Overlook and mile marker 33.**
4. **Turn left into a small lot for the Buck Hollow and Meadow Spring Trails.**

<u>**Trail Notes:**</u> **All trails are blazed yellow or blue. Every trail junction is clearly marked with a SNP concrete post. The Hazel Mountain Road trailhead is in the southeast corner of the parking lot.**

Descend from the lot and immediately pass the junction of blue blazed Buck Hollow Trail on the left. Hazel Mt Road is blazed yellow. Pass blue blazed Buck Ridge Tr on the left at 0.4 miles, yellow blazed White Rocks Tr (your return route) at another 1.05 miles also on your left and in another 0.55 miles the Catlett Mt Spur Trail on the right. Here you will cross two forks of the headwaters of the Hazel River. Continue on Hazel Mt Rd/Tr.

For about 0.69 miles you will climb steadily and pass yellow blazed Hazel River Trail on the left. In another 0.18 miles Hazel Mt Rd/Tr bears right (The red trail laid in by National Geographic is incorrectly located). Bear left onto blue blazed Sam's Ridge Trail here. Along this portion of the hike you should get some nice views north and east.

At 1.97 miles from leaving Hazel Mt Rd/Tr you'll descend steeply to the yellow blazed Hazel River Trail. This junction is almost exactly at the mid-point of this trek and makes a great lunch spot.

After lunch, head upstream along the Hazel River Trail for 1.31 miles. You will cross it five times. Immediately after the fourth crossing the Hazel River Trail will bear left at a concrete post and climb a hill. Stay straight, now on yellow blazed White rocks trail and cross a small tributary and the main river for the fifth and final time.

From here climb steeply for about 0.5 miles gaining 500 feet in elevation. The trail will make a hard left turn and climb over a series of false summits. Keep an eye out for a faint, unmarked spur trail to the left at the top of one of these summits. This supposedly takes you to White Rocks and a view of the Hazel River Valley. I saw the trail but didn't investigate it so cannot comment on the quality of the view. All along White Rocks Trail you'll get views north looking at Buck Hollow/Ridge and points beyond.

At 1.29 miles from leaving the river arrive at a concrete post marking the spur trail to the falls and cave on the left. It's 0.2 miles to the falls and cave, most of which is straight down. At the bottom make a sharp right and follow the rock outcrops back to the cave and falls.

Return to the ridge and turn left to continue on White Rocks Trail. In about a mile reach the original junction with Hazel Mountain Rd/Tr. Turn right here and retrace the first 1.6 miles of the trek back to the parking lot.