

Description: This is the third hike I describe in a series utilizing the Wild Oak National Recreation Trail (W.O.N.R.T.). (See the W.O.N.R.T.- North River Gorge Loop, W.O.N.R.T. – North Shuttle and the W.O.N.R.T. – Grooms Ridge Loop for other hiking opportunities using this trail.) Almost all of the 1472 feet of elevation gain happens over the first 2.5 miles. The rest of the hike is either flat or a gradual downhill stroll. Don't let the fact that five miles of the hike are on a part-time hunter's road. In the spring and summer months it is lined with a wide assortment of wildflowers ranging from common varieties like ox-eye daisy, daisy fleabane, yellow sweet clover, and crown vetch (a civil engineer's experiment in erosion control gone awry) to less common ones such as Goats Rue, Oyster Plant, deptford pink and, bladder campion.

This is a shuttle hike, requiring two cars, unless you happen to be camping at the rustic yet beautiful North River campground then you can simply park your car at the Braley Pond Road crossing of the trail and hike back to camp. You will still need to get a ride to retrieve your vehicle after the hike.

Trail Notes: From the Braley Pond parking area cross the road and begin the long climb to the Hankey Mountain ridge line following the white blazed W.O.N.R.T. Pass a junction with the yellow blazed Dowells Draft Trail in 1.3 miles. The grade steepens over the next 0.4 miles as the trail makes a final lunge to reach the crest. Here the trail makes a 90 degree turn as another spur of the Dowells Draft Trail comes in from the right. In another 0.2 miles keep an eye out for an unsigned trail on the right that leads to a rock ledge offering a fantastic view of Great North Mountain and a prominent high point – Elliot's Knob.

Continue on as the trail takes on the characteristics of an abandoned jeep road with a single track down the middle and wide grassy shoulders on the side. Pass a small, crystal clear pond, partially hidden in the brush, on the right in 0.8 miles. (If you are backpacking this might be your last water source for quite some time. Be sure to use a filter or chemical treatment before using.) In another 0.3 miles pass the yellow blazed White Oak Draft Trail on the right. Although the initial blaze is obvious the trail is not. It has the appearance of no longer being used or maintained. Regardless continue on the W.O.N.R.T. Walk around a forest gate in 0.1 miles. Here is where the part-time hunter's road begins as it passes through a large clearing. Keep an eye out for the different wild flowers as you pass several other clearings in 0.3, 0.4, 0.3, 0.3, 0.3, 0.3 and 0.7 mile intervals.

The seed heads of the oyster plants (their edible tuberous roots taste like the shellfish.) are particularly beautiful, reminding one of something made by an expert glass blower at an art fair. Keep an eye out for a window sized view of Lookout Mountain (the high point of the ridge you are walking) at a slight bend in the road. Arrive at an unmistakable triangle road junction in 0.6 miles from the last clearing. Bearing right continues to follow the W.O.N.R.T. If doing the shuttle hike as described here turn left onto unsigned Hankey Mountain Road (425) and follow it as it descends for 2.0 miles to FR95B/Staunton Dam Road where you will find your car. The campground is just a few steps up the road after turning right onto it.