

SHENANDOAH SAMPLER: Day Hiking Highlights

David and I lived in Falls Church, Virginia near Washington DC from 1998-2015. We moved from Utah with our 12-year-old daughter, for jobs at Forest Service headquarters.

The east side of Shenandoah National Park was a convenient day hiking area. It's only 65 miles from Falls Church on freeway and roads through pastoral Fauquier and Rappahannock counties. We would often drop our daughter off at school, do "reverse commute" to Park, hike 6 hours and be home when school got out (with another reverse commute). Michal sometimes joined us when school out—famous "Old Rag" and iconic Little Devils Stairs scrambling past waterfalls. We hiked the west side of Park on longer days. (The 2019 visit map below includes photos from these earlier trips.)

Most hikers come down from Skyline Drive. We always hiked from the bottom—topping out on Skyline or using part of the Appalachian Trail (AT) to complete a loop. Since we hiked on weekdays, we saw few people except near Skyline Drive. We probably hiked in Shenandoah Park about 25 times. Here are a few fond memories.

Tuscarora/Overall Run: Leaf Slog and Wildlife Fest, March 2014

The Tuscarora Trail was our favorite westside wilderness hike off US-340 (south of Front Royal near Bentonville). Designed as partial AT alternative, it leaves the AT from Park, drops down Overall Run, crosses Shenandoah Valley and heads north along the Virginia/West Virginia border, meeting the AT in Pennsylvania. Trailhead tricky because designed only for thru-hike road crossing. We parked northwest of highway off Rocky Hollow (628) road and hiked back to jeep road marked with blue paint past a home, through old railroad tunnel and pasture then uphill into hardwood forest and over ridges before dropping into Overall Run. Heading up the creek, we soon passed Thomas Hollow Trail—where most hikers enter from a dead-end road. Overall/Tuscarora continues up rocky, washed out floodplain (probably abandoned farmland) before ascent to waterfall views and Matthews Arm area for loop options from 13-19 miles.

With daughter now married and out of house, we opted for longest loop through Heiskell Hollow (about 19 miles and nearly 10,000-feet total elevation up and down). For an early spring morning, trail was heavily cloaked in leaves. I asked David the forester why. Answer: Oaks and unusual weather. Oaks are last tree to drop leaves and most resistant to decomposition. Fall rains generally smash leaves down and start decomposition, while light winter snowfall and intermediate melting continue decomposition into spring. But 2013-2014 offered little fall rain and heavy winter snows. Snow kept oak leaves dry and intact all winter. On the AT, spring hikers soon trampled the leaves. But no one had hiked the Tuscarora.

Trail was muddy and well-used after Thomas Hollow joined. After stumbling over rocks, switchbacks were a relief, soon offering views of Overall Run Falls—still mostly frozen.

Matthews Arm Ridge looked down on winding Shenandoah River and the valley. But we left the inviting ridge trail and climbed to AT, following it and brief section of Skyline to gated road near

Matthews Arm and Heiskell Hollow cutoff trail—an unused, weedy jeep path to the actual “trail,” an old road gently descending. (Nice option for downhill return!) We gave wide berth to a sleepy skunk in the road. Next, we startled an opossum that shinnied up a vine and watched us from the safety of the tree. We followed a creek down and turned off to cross Compton and Keyser runs, high with spring runoff. A curious deer stared until we headed away.



Trudging up Overall Run, we met evening hikers from Thomas Hollow. When we turned onto Tuscarora, crowds vanished. We met a man packing trail equipment. He was a trail steward (Potomac Appalachian Trail Club [PATC] volunteers who maintain parts of AT and other Northern Virginia trails); this was his section, and he was surprised to see us. No one hikes his section. We parted company and hiked into pink glow of sunset reflecting softly on oak piles on the Tuscarora Trail.

Virginia opossum (see Overall Run Trailhead red-camera icon on 2019 map for more photos).

Rose River: Starter Wilderness, July 2012

A friend’s farm near Syria provided launch point to visit wilderness on Park’s central east side in a loop hike of about 15 miles and 7500-foot total elevation. Our hike began on SR-648 off SR-



Meadows Cabin (see Rose River red-hiker icon on 2019 map for more photos).

670, a gated road to Meadows Cabin (rented by PATC) and confusing mix of “nature trails” to Dark Hollow Trail along strip of wilderness and adjacent state wildlife management area. We topped out on fire road (exempted from wilderness) and met a lost hiker from Skyline Drive with a useless map she’d downloaded from Internet. She followed us back towards Skyline. We reentered wilderness on trail around Stony Mountain; then onto Rose River Fire Road. We soon met dozens of hikers entering from Skyline for Rose River Loop, all in wilderness, probably unbeknownst to most since there is only

the usual “backcountry” portal sign with many rules.

Many families and teens trooped up switchbacks, more lined rocks above Rose River Falls. We looped back through lush green meadows on the river; and took side trail to an old mining cabin. The trail returned to the fire road where we headed down to finish our loop. Hardwood forest offered cover from light rain. After switchbacks the road headed downriver but we found cutoff

trail climbing steeply up the hill back to Dark Hollow Trail. Only horses appear to use this trail, quite torn up in the wet weather.

Rose Falls Loop is near Skyline Drive and heavily used. A portal sign about wilderness would introduce the concept to many visitors. Also building an upper slope connector from Rose River to Cedar Run would relieve congestion from Big Meadows top down hikers, offer another AT wilderness loop, and better connect eastside wilderness.

Beyond Old Rag: Robertson Mountain Views Without Crowds, August 2012

On a summer weekday we saw 20 cars at 9 a.m. in the Old Rag parking lot; 56 cars and a bus when we returned at 3 p.m. We took Weakley Fire Road and crossed the low-flowing Brokenback River via three bridges. As we climbed, we saw beautiful campsites on the river below but no obvious access. About 1.3 miles from the trailhead, a bridge, a sign for Corbin Hollow to the right and nice campsite on left. Robertson Mountain trailhead was 0.1 mile further.

After briefly following the river, the rocky but good trail climbed in steep switchbacks. After a viewpoint and another mile of climbing, a spur trail ended in a lovely campsite right on Robertson Mountain at 3300 feet. This 2300-foot climb from lower parking lot compared to Old



View from Robertson Mountain (see Old Rag yellow-mountain icon on 2019 map for more photos).

Rag but without the scramble. It offered great views of Hawksbill—highest point in the park—the upper ridge of Skyline Drive, and Whiteoak and Cedar Run drainages. We saw no one.

The trail descended gently to Old Rag Fire Road. After brief climb, we descended on Corbin Hollow Trail, a gentle farm road to upper end of Brokenback River at another nice campsite. Road became trail and after two miles rejoined Weakley Hollow road and multitudes returning from Old Rag. This loop could be a nice short overnight backpack trip (if you don't mind a short steep climb with a

pack!) with a camp on the mountain or base camp up Brokenback River for a couple days of wilderness exploration. Distance was about 8 miles and 4850 feet total elevation.

Little Devils Stairs: Big Devils Temptation

One hike mostly outside wilderness joins list because we did it so often: Little Devils Stairs, a steep climb up a canyon with iconic waterfalls and pools; redbud on lower canyon in May and many return options (Piney Branch, Piney Ridge or Thornton River Trails) in the Shenandoah Wilderness. Devils and easiest return on Keyser Run Fire Road (6-mile loop) are outside wilderness. It's busy on weekends but we had it to ourselves on weekdays.

From top of Little Devils at Fourway, it's 4.5 miles north to another iconic canyon, Big Devils Stairs, within wilderness to its terminus on private land. It's accessed by Bluff Trail from Gravel Springs Shelter just off the AT. From the bottom, up Little Devils Stairs and down Big Devils Stairs canyons would be a perfect loop hike. But there is no connecting trail above nor public access along the privately owned farmland and wooded Keyser Mountain that separate the two canyons.

We did a Little Devils-to-Big Devils loop of sorts in 2003: we went down Big Devils Stairs to a viewpoint, then backtracked and descended Harris Hollow Trail to Rush River Road (SR 622). We took a 0.5 jeep road up past old farm buildings over Keyser Mountain and dropped off through rolling hills and forest to main road and our vehicle—3 miles total from Harris Hollow for a 12-mile loop (7000 feet total).

In 2014 we tried to connect the two Devils. Up Little Devils and down Big Devils. Near the Big Devils intersection, a sign warned TRAIL ENDS IN 1.5 MILES. NO PUBLIC ACCESS. But we hoped for an inconspicuous route contouring across park above private land. A blue-mark trail zig zagged through pine and oak forest, crept along white rim rock with spectacular views into the deep canyon below, then zig-zagged to canyon bottom. At Park boundary, wire fence was stretched across the drainage. Red paint was splashed across the trees and several "No Trespassing" signs offered a clear message.



Little Devils steep narrow canyon (see Little Devils Stairs yellow-hiker icon on 2019 map for more photos).

Yet our contour map showed only two-thirds mile down the creek to public road for a loop back to our vehicle, parked a couple canyons over at Little Devils. We had no interest in trespassing. We just

wanted to get to Rush River Road. It was too steep to easily contour route along the Park boundary to Harris Hollow Trailhead. The creek was rough going. A direct route crossed forest and a weedy pasture. Below, cattle headed down canyon towards fences and old buildings. Maybe not that way.

Cow paths ascended a grassy ridge. GPS showed desired road just a short drop on other side. We crossed ridge fence and headed down jeep track towards public road below, which looped south at head of valley below a picturesque farmhouse, red barn and other buildings. An ATV pulled out of the farmyard and raced down the road toward us. We had seen the farm, and the farmer had seen us. The ATV left the main road and came straight uphill to us. A big white haired guy in jeans and work shirt stopped his machine and stared at us, brows knit in anger. "Don't you people have any respect for private property?" he asked.

"Sorry, sir, we were trying to get down to the public road," David answered. "We'll get off your land as soon as we can."

“You people have thousands of acres of Park land up there,” the farmer replied, indicating the ridge. “The Park Service does a good job marking the boundaries. You need to respect them.”

No use discussing public access, easements, and the need for recreational loop hiking. With the ATV leading, we followed more slowly down to a flat where fence separated us from public road. The farmer waited for us at a gate to a dirt road paralleling the paved public road but separated by fence. He held it open for us, glaring. We joined cattle moving along the fence. Finally, thankfully, we exited another gate onto public road.

Crossing Keyser Mountain, we found muddy new road, toppled trees, signs, foundations and piles of lumber indicating a new housing tract. There should be a park route linking the Devils, but looks like more private development is reducing options—and private landowners don’t seem inclined to offer easements.

The Park website lists its trails (500 miles’ worth) by district/name; not useful for trip planning. We used AT/ Park maps published PATC by North, Central, South districts (#9,#10,#11) and PATC “Circuit Guide for Hiking Shenandoah National Park” which covers much of the wilderness as day hike loops. See **Links** for more information.