

Tuscarora Trail from US340 to Mathews Arm CG, SNP Backpacking Trip

This trip took place over the weekend of September 5 & 6, 1998. I wanted to attempt a solo backpacking trip, just to see how I would do. So I chose an up and back route over the Tuscarora Trail between Bentonville, VA and Mathew's Arm Campground in Shenandoah National Park, VA. The length was 7.1 miles each way. The elevation changes were about 2,200 feet.

I parked my car at the lone available parking space where VA 613 intersects US Route 340. As I was parking my car, a bus containing the Wanderbirds Hiking Club pulled up and let off about 30 day hikers. I walked with them for about a mile. However, as soon as we started ascending the western ridges of SNP, I fell behind since I had a 40 pound backpack and they all had light day packs on. From US 340



*At right, a panoramic view of Overall Run Canyon.
By Mike Calabrese*

I traveled a driveway, a trail, an old road, and then started along some beautiful trail. I then came to an intersection with Thompson Hollow Trail and turned right. I walked along it for about a half a mile and then turned left to ascend the Tuscarora-Overall Run Trail. This trail paralleled Overall Run, which I would be walking along for the next 5 miles as I ascended the mountain. Water was very scarce along this creek. I would only see water where occasional springs fed into it.

I was enjoying the scenery when I came around a corner and, within about 50 feet and on the trail, was what appeared to be a yearling black bear. I stopped dead in my tracks and put my hand on my pepper spray canister. The bear just seemed to be sauntering about and sniffing on the trail. Then, I'm not sure if he sensed my presence or just got bored, but he wandered about 25 feet off of the trail to the right. What do I do now? I thought. I slowly started walking past the bear, who was now within 20-25 feet of me to the right of the trail as I passed. I did not make eye contact, but would sneak quick glances at him/her to make sure that I was not being charged. The bear then turned and started wandering up the mountain and away from me. My heart was still pounding for the next mile or so until I spotted a lone day hiker coming towards me. I told him that I was very glad to see him and to watch out for the bear ahead. We talked for awhile and parted ways. He told me that there was a steep ascent ahead and that I was probably 2 to 2.5 hours away from Mathews Arm Campground.

It was hot out and my water reserves were getting low. The bad thing was that the creek was dry and I would not see any water again until I hit the campground. The ascent was rough, however, I kept passing day hikers so I knew that I wasn't far. One couple even gave me some of their water when mine appeared almost gone.

The climb continued. I left the Tuscarora Trail and turned right onto the Mathews Arm Trail, which had a sign that said the campground was 1.3 miles. I knew that I was close to

the campground, but my water had just run out. So I sat down and just rested for about a half hour. It was getting close to 5:00 so I decided to push on. Finally, when I felt like I was becoming dehydrated, I came across a gate and a sign designating the camp ground.

That was good. However, I had come in the back entrance, and the campground office was at the front, which was another half mile. I got some water at one of the camp bathrooms, then trudged to the front of the campground and the office. At first, they told me to go pick out a spot at the back of the campground, then come back and pay for it. Hey, I had just hiked up the mountain from Bentonville, I explained, and I just wanted to get a site, put up my tent and sleep. I did not want to walk an additional mile. So the rangers figured out which walkin site was vacant, and I paid for it and trudged back to the back of the campground.

I finally got to my spot, set up my tent and started boiling water and making a fire. There was a very nice family at the next site that was from MD. The kids came up first and asked me where my car was. I explained that I had walked in and my car was about 7 miles away down in Bentonville, VA. They were amazed by that. Their parents then came over and we all introduced ourselves. They



At left, I pose with 2 youngsters from MD while descending the Tuscarora-Overall Run Trail. By Mike Calabrese

were Norwegian and ran a "hothouse" in Maryland for a large Norwegian plant company. They said that business was good and that they enjoyed the outdoors. We had some good conversations until it started to get dark. I then excused myself as I wanted to get to bed early. Today wore me out.

The night was fairly warm and uneventful. On Sunday morning I ate, packed up and was ready to hit the trail by 8am. I gave my site pass to my neighbor to turn in for me so that I could avoid that half mile up and half mile back to the camp ground office. I started off and caught up to the lady and her sons taking a morning walk. We talked and walked together until we hit the switchbacks going downhill. The mother took a picture of me standing with her 2 sons. We said goodbye and I started back down the mountain. The weather was good. I did not see another person between that point and when I got back to my car. I was concerned about the bears again on the way down. So I made a point of banging my walking stick against rocks as I was walking. This seemed to do the trick as I didn't see any bears on the way down.

What amazed me was that it took 7 hours to hike the 7.1 miles up the mountain and only 4 hours to walk down it. I got to my car around 12 noon. I headed to Front Royal, VA for some fast food and then went home. This was a tough hike. The switchbacks at one point while going up the mountain were brutal. I wouldn't mind doing the downhill part again. The only way that will probably happen is if I have a car shuttle. Anyway, the Tuscarora Trail is a great place to hike for the experienced backpacker that wants solitude and a

challenge.

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