

# Laurel Fork Area, VA Backpacking Trip

As the weekend approached, the weather deteriorated. Sleet was forecast for Friday; snow for Saturday and Sunday. Sue and I arrived at the Locust Springs Picnic Area at noon Saturday, October 7, 2000. A brisk wind whipped Rob's poncho and stole Mike's breath as he spoke.



*At left, the Picnic Area Entrance Sign.*

I wondered aloud if I had brought enough warm layers. Sue and I introduced ourselves and after adding a layer of pile, the four of us headed into the Laurel Fork Special Management Area. This 10,000-acre section of the George Washington National Forest contains biological features not commonly found in Virginia. According to Forest Service literature, it is Virginia's only example of the Alleghany Plateau Ecoregion and the only location in Virginia for 25 plant and animal species.

From the picnic area (4000 feet above sea level), we started walking the 3-mile Locust Springs Run Trail and descending 900 feet to the Laurel Fork. Because most trails in this area follow wide, gently sloping railroad grades, we didn't spend much time searching for tree blazes. We just enjoyed each others company and marveled at the oak, birch, beech, maple, and cherry leaves that fell like rain blanketing the trail and the mountain laurel on the ridge. After several stops to remove layers of clothing, tiptoe across the creek on rocks and sample the tart apples growing trailside, we arrived at the Laurel Fork. Evidence of the area's railroad history can especially be seen here. Even though the Norfolk and Western Railroad logged the area at the turn of the last century, we found pieces of coal, old narrow gauge rails, and impressions of wooden ties in the trail.

After we set up our camp near the confluence of Buck Run and Laurel Fork, we set out to explore the eastern side of the valley. By now it was about 4:00 pm and only 50 degrees F. To get to the eastern side of the Laurel Fork valley, we had to cross the Laurel Fork. On previous trips to the area I just skipped across well-placed rocks. This year, however, the water level was at least 4 inches higher. We epitomized a functioning group dynamics. We evaluated almost a dozen different ways to cross the creek; we tried to build steps by adding rocks, considered wading across and subsequently having wet boots for 2 days, and even tried to build our



*At left, some nice fall foliage.*

own bridge by moving logs. Finally we scouted along the shore and found a place where several trees had fallen to form a natural bridge with a handrail. Given the lateness of the hour, we returned to our rhododendron-sheltered camp for hot food and a warm campfire. After dinner, Mike showed us his simple bear-proofing technique (denial), and then Rob and Sue built a suspension system to hang our food.

We awoke Sunday morning to a crisp blue sky. Ron informed us that the temperature dropped to about 35 degrees during the night. He knew because he had checked the temperature several times when his new, ultra-lightweight sleeping system hadn't been quite warm enough. It had not snowed during the night; within minutes, the stoves were singing. All was well in our little piece of the woods.

After breakfast, we quickly found the log bridge, crossed Laurel Fork and started up Christian Run Trail. This trail follows another railroad grade from Laurel Fork to the ridge of Middle Mountain. Along the way, we heard the calls of a wild turkey and saw several whitetail deer bounding across the meadow. In the meadows near Middle Mountain Trail, we again snacked on apples, which were very sweet and juicy. The old apple trees, a few bits of lumber and wire, and an earthen water tank are all that remains of a homestead. We didn't explore very long. Neither the meadow nor the trees along the ridge protected us from the wind, as had the creek valleys. Rob and Mike set a brisk pace. Sue and I followed slowly, enjoying the variety of leaf pattern and color, the plentiful crop of oak acorns, and the brief glimpses of valleys to the East. We soon regrouped and started back to Laurel Fork. This time we followed the Cold Spring Run Trail. At the confluence, we sat, and snacked, discussed warm clothes and marveled at the incredible display. The life of the forest progressed all around us, 'without human intervention', marveled Ron. The leaves changed colors and fell to the forest floor. Squirrels hurried around collecting food. Repairs to a nearby beaver dam could be seen. Even trout were visible in quiet pools.



*At left, group picture before the hike.*

Because this 4-mile loop had taken just a few hours the

group decided to pack up camp and head back to the trailhead. Once we broke camp, we hiked the 3-mile Buck Run Trail to the Locust Spring Picnic Area. By this time we were so used to traveling the wide rail grades that we stopped looking for blazes and found ourselves off route. Reluctantly, we returned to watching for blue blazes and the narrow depression of a foot trail. Near the picnic area, we were pleased to see that beavers have returned and fully repaired dams damaged by the storms in 1996. Even ferns along the edge of the pond had grown back.

This is my third trip to the area. Each trip has been in a different season. On each trip, the forest has displayed different sides of its character. I cannot improve the forest, but I can help the Forest Service care for it. Several places along the trails have poorly visible blazes, recent blow downs blocking the route, and unreadable trail signs due to bear damage. I'll be contacting the Forest Service volunteer coordinator to set up a weekend late next spring to do trail maintenance. It will be another opportunity for the Rag Tag Rangers to hike and help out in this area.

FYI: Hunters had fowled the water in the beaver pond. I never recommend drinking untreated water in the backcountry, and I strongly discourage it here.

Dawn R

[^ Back](#) to top

**The Rag Tag Rangers | Updated: 12/31/2024 16:52:36**