

Middle Prong Wilderness Area Hike, March 20, 2005

By Ed Kelley ©2005

I felt like I should have had crampons on my boots. The trail was so slick I would take a step or two forward, then slide back one. Last fall's leaves were still covering the trail, a sign to me that it didn't get traveled often. The leaves were dry, but slippery and it was mid-March. It was the vernal equinox and I couldn't be in a more fitting place on such an occasion, and with perfect weather.

My dog Tildy and I had started out at the bridge at the Sunburst campground off Hwy. 215 in the Pisgah National Forest. I had used some mapping software to plan out the trip and figured it to be an oblong loop almost 9 miles in length. Now, nine miles may not sound like much, but in the mountains of North Carolina, that could just as well be 12 miles anywhere else. I had been on these trails once before with friends, on backpacking trips and long ridge hikes, or following Middle Prong downstream. But I think I've been on many more trips in the Wilderness Area by pouring over topo maps, or my computer software or my raised relief map. Not to mention books and websites.

Some folks think that my wilderness travels, particularly when I do it alone, are risky and just another symptom of whatever mental illness I possess. I proclaim it is like unto the best church service you've ever been to. The journey I was about to take in one afternoon required a mindset and determination and confidence and faith. I was relying on my abilities, both physical and mental to climb almost 3500 feet and back down in less than 9 miles. So it is with caution that I would advise anyone not experienced in traveling WNC mountain backcountry to attempt this. I must admit, there were a couple times during my trip I was beginning to think it a foolhardy venture.

The trails in the Middle Prong Wilderness are unmarked and at times difficult to follow. The Fork Ridge trail climbs to about 5880 feet above sea level at Green Knob, from an elevation of about 3200 feet. When you scramble up the side of the first "hill" at what seems like a 45-degree angle, remember, this is only a small taste of what is yet to come. Ridge top trails in WNC are almost always a really nice treat. It's usually quiet, the scenery and vegetation changes often; animals hang out there, not to mention the views. As I climbed, I remembered a rock outcropping overlooking Fork Mountain and the West Fork of the Pigeon River somewhere up ahead. Time flies, and I am still amazed that it has been almost 20 years since I last hiked this trail.

Tildy and I both had packs. She was carrying water for herself and a small plastic bowl. I had everything else. Tildy (short for Matilda) is an Australian mix that loves to hike and knew exactly what the pack was for the first time I put it on her. I'm always careful not to load her too much, and if she empties the contents, I carry her pack. Dogs are excellent hiking companions if they know how to behave on the trail. This ridgetop hike would be dry with no water at all. I had 2 liters in my pack and its weight wasn't helping me climb upwards on those slick leaves!

With as steep a climb as this, it doesn't take very long to get up to where you begin to see what's around you: the mountain ridges that you sometimes rely on to navigate the wilderness. There's a satisfaction in seeing them in person and recognizing them, not just on maps or in photos. Even through the trees I could see Lickstone Ridge on my right, leading up to the highest point on the Blue Ridge Parkway near Richland Balsam. That was another ridge I had traveled in times past. I finally reached the rock ledge I remembered, but the view was much more impressive than I recalled. Fork Mountain was spread out before me, a long side ridge off the Shining Rock Ledge. Fork Mountain is the name for the ridge running parallel to the ridge I was hiking, Fork Ridge. I've always been confounded as to why they named two adjacent major ridges almost the same name, as it can be confusing. This overlook would be a good destination in itself, the scenery is that good. Should anyone decide to turn around here, they will have a quick trip back down the trail on a steep sliding board of leaves!

This exposed rock ledge leads to more rock outcroppings, and in places the trail traverses the rocky knife-edge spine of the ridge. Often the trail just climbs right over these rocky vertebrae where the top of the ridge is only a yard wide, with steep slopes falling off quickly on either side. The laurels form a safety cage around them, so the danger is minimal. There were a few vertical spots where I had to give Tildy a leg up over the rocks. I can't decide if it's more difficult to climb or descend these steep ridges. Sharp-top ridges like this are always very dry with little chance of finding water. Oak, laurel, pine, and hemlock seem to favor these places.

There are lots of hemlocks of various ages along this ridge, notably some elder ones, at least 100 years old. The adelgid doesn't seem to have struck here, but I'm sure it won't be long, as I saw them on hemlocks down near the creek. When you approach 5000 feet in these mountains you begin to see red spruce. Here they are mixed in with hemlock, but you can always tell spruce by their prickly needles. A few hundred feet higher and it's all red spruce, as far as evergreens go. Closer to 6000' is a mix of Fraser fir and spruce, and finally all fir trees in the highest elevations. You can usually guess your elevation within a couple hundred feet based on vegetation.

I began to see quite a few piles of scat at frequent intervals on the path. Some large piles were obviously from a bear, but there was a quantity of dog-poop-sized pellets full of gray hair and small bone chips. It could have been fox, or bobcat; I'm suspicious that it may be coyote. This area used to be full of deer, but I only saw a little deer sign in the fields near the top of the main ridge. A turkey had left J-shaped droppings on several large logs where the trail crossed. I envisioned a young jake standing up there strutting his stuff and gobbling—it was a good vantage point to look for hens or dominant gobblers headed his way. Otherwise, the bird world was quiet and I saw only a few juncos and heard a couple of kinglets high in the red spruce near the top.

At the 5000 foot elevation, the trail levels out or climbs more gradually and is really enjoyable walking. Beech, birch, spruce and lots of grassy areas, with occasional views through the trees make this a nice walk in any season. I could see evergreen-covered Green Knob in the distance a little higher than where I was, which was encouraging. I

was almost an hour behind what I had calculated, but the climb was grueling and I did the best I could to pace myself so neither Tildy nor I would fade out before we reached the highest point. I did pick up my pace a bit on this more level ground to gain some time, but in my map reading, I had overlooked the fact the Green Knob has a false top. You think you are there, but have what seems like half a mile to go. As you ascend to this little sub-peak, the trail becomes difficult to follow because of blown down limbs and in the grassy areas it often fans out, but appears again just before entering the woods. I'll bet this trail gets more animal traffic than human! Staying near the top of the ridge helped me to stay on course. I reached the little peak and realized I still had to travel bit farther to reach the Knob. There are several nice views on this trail between the peaks and I found a rock outcropping, perfect for lunch, and overlooking upper portion of the MPWA. Matilda got to lick the peanut butter and honey off the bottom of the bread bag and ate some dates. I got to survey the territory that I would be traveling on my way down. It was a lot of wild country, the vista was spectacular, but my mind was busy thinking about the upcoming task of finding the trail back down!

I finally reached the true summit of Green Knob, the north side covered with Fraser fir and red spruce, in some places forming a tunnel for the trail through the trees. This opens into magnificent meadow with a truly excellent view of Sam Knob, Little Sam, Devil's Courthouse, and the whole Shining Rock Ledge to the East. Looking southward on the ridge ahead I could see Mt. Hardy, at 6110 feet and several of the smaller knobs in the couple of miles between Hardy and my location on Green Knob. I did not get my fill of that view, because I felt persuaded to move on due to time constraints. Even in the wilderness there are time constraints--a fact of life that will exist as long as the sun goes down and comes back up. I moved on around the mountaintop through thickets of blueberry bushes, thick clumps of dried grasses and burgundy blackberry stems to another panorama. Looking westerly from Hardy, I could see Haywood Gap and Rough Butt Bald and the headwaters of the Middle Prong. These open fields would be a fantastic place to watch the sunset and the night sky.

I saw some charred evidence that fires may have had something to do with the presence of these bald areas, as they have in the Shining Rock area. For several years there has been a "no campfire" rule in the Wilderness Areas. It has really made a difference, as I only saw one small fire pit, and practically no trash. My next destination was an old railroad grade that ran along the west side of Fork Ridge from the Parkway at Haywood Gap to the gap below Green Knob. I began to look for a sign of a trail cutting off to the right, for I felt sure there would be a connector trail near the gap. I'm sure there is a cutoff somewhere, but I didn't find it before I found myself climbing again, toward the next small peak. No more climbing for me, so I had a decision to make. Going cross-country by oneself, late in the day, is a formula for getting lost and having to make use of your survival skills while the emergency personnel are out looking for you and the folks at home are scared to death. While this could lead to a life-threatening experience, the most problematic issue for me was not my safety, but the embarrassment of reading my name in the newspaper article about the rescue of a lost hiker, and echoes of, "I told you so!" This section of the Pisgah National Forest has been the stage for many such search and rescue operations over the years.

Nevertheless, I weighed my options and trusted my sense of direction and the map I had memorized and headed off down the side of the mountain. To increase my chances of joining up with the old grade, I angled left toward the southwest as I walked through grassy groves with blueberries, mountain maple, fire cherry, and scattered fir and spruce trees thick enough to keep me from seeing more than 30 yards. I was committed and sure that I could find the trail, and was relieved when it appeared within 20 minutes of leaving the top. I turned north to look for the Grassy Ridge trail that would take me back down the mountain. I only had to go a few hundred yards to find a campsite and a faint trail leading off to the left. At this point I was certain that a one-dog night was not in store for me, even if darkness fell. I carry artificial light, and the map in my head would guide on me on. Tildy was glad to be descending as well and she seemed to know we were on our way back.

Almost 30 years ago was the last time I had followed this particular path. It was after a meal of pancakes and fresh picked blueberries on the high ridge near Green Knob. The thing I remember from that backpacking trip with a couple of good friends was the lush grass that covers the top of this broad, gently sloping ridge. The concrete foundation of a narrow building and some inch-thick rusty steel cable are reminders of the logging operations that were supplying Champion International with chestnut for their tannin and pulp production almost 100 years ago. There must have been some demand for the spruce and fir, too, because there seems to have been much logging activity in the highest areas here. Sometimes I long to have seen these mountains cloaked in their virgin spruce-fir forests. On the other hand, these mountains have felt the impact of man and have recovered with a unique rugged beauty all their own, a testament to the resilience of nature. I was getting spoiled to the ease of travel when the trail suddenly took a dive off to the right, steeply down the side of the ridge. I could see Green Knob above me now, and felt like I was descending pretty fast. The trail crossed the top of a small series of waterfalls that you can view only after you cross and look back. The creek plunges down a deep gorge as the trail follows a more gradual contour out of the cove. I like the way the trail is cut into the side of the mountain here, very steep on either side, but well-graded and must have taken some good planning and surveying.

I finally reached the valley floor of Middle Prong. Here again is the old railroad grade from the logging days. You can always tell a railroad bed because it is much wider than a regular footpath, but also because of its mild and even grade. A regular road or trail can twist and climb and descend with the lay of the land, but the narrow gauge railway had to be fairly straight with an easy grade. I cannot imagine the hard labor it took to build these old rail paths, lay the track, drive the spikes, and then log the hillsides. In some places you can still see where the railroad ties were, the timbers have rotted out, leaving uniform horizontal troughs in the trail. Sometimes an old spike can be spotted and it doesn't take much to visualize a Shay locomotive steaming along on its mission. The huge fires of the 1930's were probably the result of the logging operations leaving dry slash everywhere. The fires were pretty much the culmination of any serious logging in this section of the Pisgah National Forest.

Finally the Middle Prong of the West Fork of the Pigeon River came into view. There are also Left and Right Prongs of the West Fork. I will never forget the two consecutive hurricanes that dumped a couple of feet of water onto parts of Western North Carolina in September of 2004. The waters that flooded Canton and Clyde came from Middle Prong and its sisters, plus the Big East Fork of the Pigeon. The huge rocks along the creek were now white and scoured clean from last fall's inundation. And how could any trout have survived without being carried on downstream? The water is clear and green, but I saw no fish. There are several waterfalls on this stream that have isolated the native brook trout population from introduced trout species. I hear the speckled trout recover their numbers quickly and hopefully this will be the case here.

At last we reached the stream crossing, just below two waterfalls, where Little Beartrap Branch meets Middle Prong. While Tildy was dipping her belly in the cold water, I was taking photos of the falls. I knew that from here we would be following an easier trail, but I forgot how much farther I had to go. I continued on the old railroad grade for another mile or so, passing some narrow but tall waterfalls. This grade connects to a newer Forest Service road that leads another couple of miles back to Hwy. 215. It's pleasant, but not dramatic walking, and after having already been to the top, it was a little anti-climatic for me, and by now my feet and knees were feeling the miles. I'm sure Tildy's feet were just as tender, but she never let on and pushed onward with determination. We finally reached the concrete ford of Right Hand Prong, shallow enough to walk right through, and a sign that we only had a quarter mile left to go. On the trip back, I finally got a cell signal and called my wife. The words, "What's for supper?" let her know that I was out of the woods safely after a most memorable day in the wilderness.