

Mount Rogers, VA, 5,729 ft. – October 6, 2019, HP #29: Wild Ponies

After crossing White Top Road and going through a gate I came to a fork in the trail. One sign indicated the Appalachian Trail while another pointed to a horse trail. I took the Appalachian Trail heading northeast. Initially it led me up a barren hill sprinkled with white blazed fence posts. Soon after, it entered the forest. Two miles further along the trail forked once again. This time one branch led toward a spring whereas the other remained the Appalachian Trail. Once again, I stuck with the Appalachian Trail. A few times I passed by campers. Now and then I encountered hikers coming down presumably from my destination of Mount Rogers VA. However, I seemed to be alone going up.

About three miles into the hike, I encountered an open meadow to my right. The west side of the meadow at the edge of the trees where I stood was fenced. Across the fence I noticed evidence of ponies but through the thick fog I could not see any. Literally, over one hundred ponies roam free on the slopes of The Old Dominion States tallest mountain, and I was hoping to see a few of them. Around mile four, to reach the summit of Mount Rogers the route left the Appalachian Trail and headed west following a blue blazed trail.

In thick fog the evening before, I arrived at the Elk Garden trailhead along White Top Road. Heavy rain was falling, and the air was cold. The parking lot was full. I had driven at this spot in Virginia from the Tennessee side of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Along the way I had visited Black Mountain, the highest point in Kentucky.

From Chilhowie VA, the Elk Garden trailhead is located 17 miles south of I-81. Reaching it from I-81 offered views of the picturesque countryside, provided the fog was not blocking them. Luckily as I briefly chatted with a man retrieving something from the trunk of his car a parking spot opened up, and I hurried to it. Due to the rain, I remained inside the car as I organized my pack for the next day's hike. My plan had been to camp in the trees south of the parking lot, but due to the weather I opted to sleep in the car.

Mount Rogers is contained within the 183 square miles of the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area part of the Jefferson National Forest. The mountains of this area are known as the Iron Mountains and are a subset of the Appalachian Mountains. Grayson Highlands State Park neighbors Mount Rogers National Recreation Area. The mountain is named after William Rogers, Virginia's first Commonwealth Geologist and the founder of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

October 6, I was hiking by 7:15 a.m. following a quick breakfast. In spite of all the cars, no one else was about as I left the parking lot. It was still foggy and wet, but the rain had stopped.



Gaining the westbound blue blazed trail from the Appalachian Trail the landscape was initially somewhat open, but soon entered a thick spruce-fir forest. The trees of this subalpine forest were all moss covered, which added a nice ambiance to the final half mile of the four-and-a-half-mile hike.

I made it up to the 5,729-foot top of Virginia in under two hours, having gained 1,295 feet. A friendly young man was the only other person there. He informed he had come up via Massie Gap from Grayson Highlands State Park. He also told me he was from Oregon and worked for

Benchmark maps. I informed him of my fondness of maps letting him know I own three Benchmark map books. I spent about 30 minutes on the summit. Due to the denseness of the forest no view was available from the peak. Two large rocks were the only open places besides the trail itself.

On the return trip, by the time I reached the high meadow the fog had lifted and this time the wild ponies were in sight. I watched as some fellow hikers approached them. Soon after I followed suit allowing me to get some closer photographs.

Prompted by a sign pointing to the Highlands Horse Trail, I decided to use that trail to add some variety to my hike. I assumed it to be the same horse trail I had noticed after passing through the gate at White Top Road. Moving down I soon overtook a family ahead of me. Not long after, two guys packing up a tent confirmed the trail lead back to Elk Garden.

From Mount Rogers I traveled to Mount Mitchell NC, where I had reserved a camp spot. The following morning, October 7, I was up before the sun eager to reach the 6,684-foot summit of Mount Mitchell and complete the Southern Six Pack which I had begun four days prior. The hike to the top of North Carolina from the campground was only six tenths of a mile. I arrive before the sun was fully risen. This was my second visit to Mount Mitchell having been there more than seven years earlier, which began my US State highpointing journey.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/gDNjdNi7Y6LymKgJ8>