

Hazel Creek Backpack – April 11 to April 13

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Writing a new guidebook has delayed me from working on my Smokies Challenge, the Smokies 900. But last weekend, I managed to schedule a mega backpack with six others, most of whom were as obsessed as I am on getting new Smokies miles – Don Gardner, Sharon and Jim McCarthy, Bob Hysko, and Elliot Fletcher. We knew we were obsessed because the forecast had been awful for a week. They were predicting rain, thunderstorms, and freezing weather. But no one else seemed concerned, so I decided not to be either. I had called the Marina and asked if they still took people across the lake in a thunderstorm and they said “yes” and I didn’t question it.

We had two birthdays on this weekend. Sharon was celebrating her 50th and was starting a gigantic hiking project. She is going to hike all the trails in the Smokies in her 51st year. She’s also fundraising for the Girl Scouts, an organization she’s been involved in for many years. Read all about her adventure at <http://smokyscout.blogspot.com/>. It was also Lenny’s birthday, almost a generation older than Sharon.

On Friday, we met at the Fontana Marina, near Fontana Village. This is the heart of North Shore Road country. We took a ferry across Fontana Lake at noon, stopped for one photo and walked through the historic town of Proctor. In the early 1900s, Ritter Lumber Company established a lumber mill here and immediately upgraded the small settlement to a swinging town with electricity, telephones, and a movie theater. You can see the old kiln, railroad paraphernalia and cemetery.

Our walk to campsite #82 was easy since we were on an old road. I even took a couple of luxuries for a backpack, cooked chicken and rice since the walk was only nine miles without much ascent. It rained that evening after we put up our tents and that turned out to be the most rain we had the whole weekend. The next day was the day of reckoning – 18 miles on a loop consisting of Cold Spring Trail, Welch Ridge and the descent down Hazel Creek. Sharon counted 23 water crossings. Sunday, it turned cold and it was tough to get out of the tent. We had to step on it to make the ferry by noon.

Everyone felt good, really good about our hiking accomplishment as they traveled home. I had to check out a gravesite on the Cherohala Skyway and I found it with no problems and I was thrilled.