

Troop 316 Tackles the Creeper Trail

Scouts and leaders from Boy Scout Troop 316, in Apex, ventured out on a beautiful May Saturday morning to take on the Virginia Creeper Trail, a rail-to-trail in Southwestern Virginia. This was the troop's third trip to the trail. The trail runs through Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area in the Jefferson National Forest and is widely referred to as one of the most beautiful rail-trails on the continent.

After spending a cool Friday night camping in at Raven Knob Scout camp just north of Pilot's Mountain, the scouts packed their mountain bikes and gear, ventured the winding mountainous roads and headed to the town of Damascus, Virginia. Unfortunately, several scouts succumbed to the hair pin turns in the vans and saw their breakfast again! After a short stop to clean up and clear their heads, the Troop pressed on toward their destination.

The trail occupies the bed of what was once a rugged mountain railroad between Abingdon and the Virginia-North Carolina border. At the trail's lowest point, it is 2,000 feet above sea level, but by the time it reaches its high point it has ascended 1,600 feet, some of it at nearly 7 percent grade.

While a crew of three, the weak at heart, set up a base camp in the town, the remainder of the scouts and leaders hopped on a shuttle with their bikes to the top of Whitetop Mountain, for the fast paced 17 mile trip down the mountain. "I was a little scared at the beginning" said one scout, "but once I got used to the speed, it was awesome!"

The Creeper trail, which began as a Native American footpath, was later used by early explorers including Daniel Boone. In the early 1900s, the trail was converted into a railroad, built to haul many of the areas natural resources and supplies to the towns below. After regional economic conditions caused the Virginia Creeper Railroad to fail, it was shut down in the late 1970s and the bike trail was planned and developed about ten years later.

In a matter of hours and a handful of snack & rest stops along the way, the scouts successfully conquered the trail and with only a few scraped knees and one flat tire. One scout, who had a little mishap along the way, described his first time descent down the trail as "the worst best trip I've ever been on" The troop regrouped once again at the base camp in the Town of Damascus, for lunch and a recap of the trip trading tales.

Also known as *Trail Town, U.S.A.*, Damascus is surrounded by national forest and has numerous other area hiking or biking trails that run through or nearby the town. It is one of a few notable towns along the Appalachian Trail and is the most mentioned location among trail hikers talk about towns on the trail. In Damascus, hikers can purchase or trade for needed trail supplies, hikers can also arrange to have supplies sent from home by shipping them to one of the many outfitters, which cater to the hikers and bikers.

One of the added benefits of this weekend adventure was it coincided with the annual Trail Days festival held in Damascus. This festival is the largest single gathering of hikers anywhere. This year, an estimated 25,000 people showed up for the celebration in a town with a population of around 1,100.

The scouts got to experience the peak of the festival which is a parade down the town's main street, including a 20 foot high hot-rod shopping cart & multiple water-gun & water-balloon fights along the parade's route (some involving Troop 316's scouts!). The parade is a backpacker's Mardi Gras with an alumni reunion for anyone who has ever hiked the 2,159-mile Appalachian Trail. In its 21st year, the festival began as a celebration of the Appalachian Trail's 50th anniversary.

After a day of biking and festival fun the scouts headed back to Raven Knob scout camp and enjoyed the remainder of the weekend in the beautiful foothills of the Appalachians Mountains before heading home to Apex. Scoutmaster Rick Bunnell believes an adventure like this brings out the best skills in our scouts, "Being prepared is the scout motto and a trip like this one gives our troop a chance to show once again that we really live by that motto." He goes on to say, "this is one of the most popular outings the troop does annually."

Troop 316 is sponsored by St. Andrew Mens' Society and meets at St. Andrew's at 7:00 PM every Tuesday. Anyone interested in joining Troop 316 should contact Rick Bunnell, Scoutmaster, at 303-3672 or Lloyd Allen, Committee Chairman, at 380-1254. Please visit the troop's website for additional information.
<http://home.earthlink.net/~troop316/id22.html>