

On The Trail

No Snow, No Problem

By Gary Thornbloom

Winter with no snow is an excellent opportunity to do off-trail hiking in areas that are knee to waist high with seasonal growth during other times of the year. Spread out a topographical map and choose territory where terrain or names on the map grab you. Rock Cabin Run and Birch Lick Run are two hollows that I have been itching to explore, and on a relatively snow less day I did just that.

Off-trail hiking, or bushwhacking, is somewhat easier in winter weather with no significant snow cover. Ferns and other thick growth, in timber rattlesnake and tick country, are situations a prudent hiker will avoid. It is also easier to orient yourself with the open view through the winter woods. Off-trail hiking can, even in areas with some development, give you the feel of being in a wilderness. The challenge of finding your way, the unexpected encounters along that way, and the sense of satisfaction at arriving back where you started after a day in the woods are some of the reasons to occasionally get off the trail.

Hiking off-trail poses some risk, although by following streams and hollows you can minimize the possibility of getting lost. Let someone know where you are hiking and when you plan on returning. Start early in the day and give yourself more than enough daylight to finish hiking. Carry basic survival gear including matches, a space blanket, compass, whistle, flashlight—with lithium batteries which last longer in cold weather—and a map. Most important, if this sort of hiking is beyond your comfort level either do not attempt it or consider going with a group or someone who knows what they are doing.

The Bear Knob topographical map includes an area of Centre County that has fascinated me for decades. Wallace Run, while not a remote wilderness, is isolated by the steep drop to the stream. Down by the stream, with the sound of water over rocks, you are cut off from the man carved and cut up landscape in the distance.

Rock Cabin Run can be found just off of the Snow Shoe Road. I began by following a gated road across the top of the hollow. When the coyote tracks in the light dusting of snow along this path headed into the woods and down the southwest side of the hollow I too dropped into the hollow. I could see where the coyote examined crevasses and cover under brush and fallen tree trunks and their mass of roots now laying perpendicular to the ground.

With no trail the path of least resistance is often the best way. Following a clearing created where a large fallen tree slashes through the brush, a well worn game trail traverses steep sections of the hollow, and quite often retracing your steps is the way forward. In snaking my way along the top of, and then down into, Rock Cabin Run I would follow, depart from, and then meet up again with coyote tracks. The many trails left by mice scurrying from cover to cover were never where the coyote tracks were!

Many of these hollows have large rock outcroppings above the streams. By not dropping too quickly to the stream I spotted some rocks on the point between two branches of Rock Cabin Run. Moss and lichen covered rock formations often include

animal dens among the interesting nooks and crannies. This location included a porcupine den easily identifiable by the mound of droppings sliding away from the opening. In this instance the bristly tail the porcupine presented while retreating into the small opening provided proof certain of the den's occupant.



In winter not only are the large rock outcroppings often festooned with icicles, and frozen seepages covering their faces, but the streams can also have interesting ice formations. In colder winters Wallace Run will have frozen sections with ice caves and all manner of frozen oddities along and across it. In milder winter weather a lacework of ice curtains hangs from logs and branches across the smaller as well as larger mountain streams.

A nice bear beech is located near where Rock Cabin Run joins Wallace Run. The smooth shiny silver bark of beech trees stands out in the winter woods. Scrapes in this smooth bark leave a noticeable dark scar. Bears like to climb beech trees to get beech nuts. The claw marks they leave in the bark provide a dramatic record of the climb. Later in my day of exploration I found a beech tree halfway between Wallace Run and a rock outcropping on the southwest side of Birch Lick Run that was covered with claw marks from one foot to about thirty-five feet high. Numerous bear beech can be found along Birch Lick Run.

The narrow gauge railroad bed, dating from the logging days of the late 1800's, makes for some easy walking while paralleling Wallace Run on the downstream walk to Birch Lick Run. The first gap on the far side of Wallace Run is Grindstone Gap where

remnants of huge, five feet in diameter and ten inches thick, grindstones can be found. Ganderstep Knob is the notable feature downstream from here. Along the base of Ganderstep, stone steps lead up the mountainside. A light dusting of snow will make them stand out.



Jake Eckenrode of Gum Stump enlightened me as to the mystery of these steps. According to Jake the steps lead up to a fire trail cut by Civilian Conservation Corps workers in the 1930's. The workers put the steps in to lead to a swimming hole that over time Wallace Run has washed away all traces of.

Each day brings a different feel to every hike. My day off-trail included clear views through the woods and across the hollows. A light dusting of snow provided contrast for wildlife sightings. I saw deer moving across mountain sides near the top of the hollows. Mist lay heavy just above the treetops, which glowed white in the crystalline frost coating that is common throughout the winter on mountain top trees. Christmas ferns proclaimed "green" in the otherwise grey and white landscape.

As Birch Lick Run settled into a narrow notch I found it easier to follow a bench above the cut, although several times the terrain or brush nudged me back to stream level and at times I crossed and recrossed the stream. You will not do an off-trail hike twice on the same route!

Near the top of the hollow I once again found myself alongside the stream. The stream now flowed intermittently, above and then below ground, where I could hear it gurgling under my feet. A wide area at the top of this hollow is a good example of a

wetland area that at many times of the year would appear to be anything but a wetland to an uneducated eye. Water is seeping, and flowing underground all through here.

My map showed the stream pointing straight to where I intended to emerge along the Snow Shoe Road, so I headed a little to the west moving toward the loudest sound of running water. There the stream was, much smaller then down in the hollow, but once again running along the surface.

A small clearing was off to my right. The depression in the ground outlined by a stone foundation and a collapsed fireplace along with the din of Interstate 80 in the distance brought me out of the wilderness reverie of my day of exploring off-trail terrain.

Hikes that follow the meander of streams and hollows can let you escape into the restorative nature of the wild if only for a day. There are many nearby places for the hiker who is willing to accept the challenge of getting off the trail to get a taste of the wild.

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Maps

The Public Use Map for Moshannon State Forest, available free from the Bureau of Forestry, gives an overview of this area. The USGS Bear Knob Quadrangle is the topographical map that provides the detail needed for this off-trail hike.

If You GO

Take SR 144 north from the intersection with SR 220 (near Bald Eagle High School) for 7.3 miles and turn left onto the Snow Shoe Road. A large mailbox marks this turn. Travel on the Snow Shoe Road for 3.1 miles. After about 2.1 miles you can look carefully to see a very slight path leading into the woods on the left side of the road—this is where you will come up past the stone foundation at the top of Birch Lick Run. Drive 1 more mile and you will see a well defined pull off area with a black and yellow gate in front of the trail that leads across the top of Rock Cabin Hollow. This is about a 5 mile loop, but with the challenge of no trail, time for exploring, and the meanders imposed by terrain, brush and fallen trees allow yourself the best part of day to do this hike.