

Sept. 13,

14 mi.

Was on the trail by 8:48am. Gary wasn't kidding when he said he'd be out before the sun came up. He was up & moving around @ 5am, out by 7 or earlier. I don't remember, as I was in & out of sleep as he got ready. 19 mi was what he mentioned that he wanted to do today. Hope he made it safely. I popped a blister on my 4<sup>th</sup> toe of the right foot, bandaged it up & it felt so much better than yesterday. Everything felt pretty good today hiking!

Coming down Brushy Mtn, the trail follows VA 615 for almost a mile before turning back into the woods. As I was walking the gravel road, who else comes driving toward me in a rental car but the firemen, Bret & Mark! They pulled over & we talked for at least 40 mins. The last day I saw them they pushed on for 23 mi into Atkins; I didn't think they'd make it. They reached Atkins @ 7:45pm, got a room @ Relax Inn & ate a rewarding meal @ McDonald's! Haha. At that time, nothing else was open. My griping about their snoring & loud morning manners were defused big time when they gave me the rest of their denatured alcohol, a bag of Cliff Bars, Hershey Bars, peanuts, Gatorade mix & a Mtn House Meal, chili mac w/ beef! I ate it tonight, it was awesome! Thanks guys, I owe ya!

There was also some more trail magic in a styrofoam cooler @ the point where the trail darts back into the woods; two Gatorades & a New Testament wrapped in a Ziplock. I packed away a grape GA for tomorrow; thank you to whomever!

When I came down to USFS 282, the trail followed another gravel road to a paved road (US 21/52). I think it was called North Scenic Parkway; it's not listed as Rte 52 until you reach the center of Bland, so I was unsure if I was headed in the right direction. Gary told me to go right, the book says 2.5 w, & I was headed for the setting sun!

Before heading toward Bland, I initially walked over the I-77 crossing & reached Kimberling Creek, before realizing I'd gone too far. I was a bit upset w/ myself. Then I hoofed to Bland in 45 mins or so from the point where the trail hits US 21/52.

In Bland, I hit Bruce's Market for a couple more days of food. Once again, not a great selection, but it'll keep me alive. I had a signal, so I plugged in my phone outside the market & called Beth.

I walked most of the way back from Bland, when a woman & her young son gave me a lift in their minivan. They drove me just a few mins up the road, but it was a welcomed & appreciative rest; thank you guys!

At Kimberling Creek, a Sobo section hiker named Daredevil (Steve) was camped, hammock hanging, & heating up some water for dinner. He said he thrued back in '99, which means he must've been just out of HS, 'cause he didn't look to be even 30. We talked a bit, he put some pages from a notebook he was carrying into the Ziplock bag his dinner was just in, & asked me to put it in the shelter for ppl to sign. Again, this shelter, like others in this stretch I've been on, doesn't have a register.

I headed up the last climb of the day @ about 6:10pm, reaching Helvey's Mill Shelter 49 mins later. Halfway up I stopped a couple times, bent over like I was about to puke, sweating the most I had all day. Maybe the Mtn Dew & Goldfish I ate @ Bland were fighting me. Taking some deep breaths & going a bit slower, I soon felt fine & pressed on. Saw 2 deer (18) today, 1 yesterday I forgot to note. Today's deer were seen on my ascent to Helvey's Mill shelter, nothing else all day.

A young couple, Kyra & Jeremy, are here tonight, tenting several yards from me. My tent is just behind the shelter. I feel so much more comfortable in my tent this year than last. It's warmer, my new sleeping pad is more comfy, & I get better sleep. Plus, I don't have to deal w/ the mice & bugs.

Kyra & Jeremy seem like really nice ppl, in the early to mid-twenties. They're out for a month of backpacking, & just recently took 2 zero days in Bland. I remember reading their 1<sup>st</sup> journal entry @ Trimpi, I think it was. They seem to be having fun. Tomorrow I'm off to Trent's Grocery, 16.3 mi away. The need to do laundry & take a shower is at an all-time high!

Sept. 14,

16.3 mi

Slept very well last night, up 8am. Kyra & Jeremy (Capri & Swotch) were out before me. It was 9:30 or so, I think, when it finally kit the trail.

It was a long & tiring day, & by its end, my feet were sore. Met Dan & Paul (Mahootch Man) going Sobo to Atkins. I'm not sure if they were hiking together or not. Paul mentioned how he'd like to head further south than Damascus, into TN perhaps. They both asked about water; this stretch has been tough for finding consistent & reliable water.

Saw 1 deer (19) & a toad. Pulled into Trent's Grocery about 6:40pm. Paid for a site, shower & laundry privileges; \$6, not bad, I thought, at least, until I saw the bathrooms & showers! Simply put, it's a hole! Two bathrooms, each w/ a shower, are inside of a cinder block building. Despite needing a severe cleaning, it worked fine & the shower was hot. My clothes are clean for another few days, & I can relax until tomorrow.

A man named Doug, 48, sort of runs the campground, or at least, sees that things run fairly smoothly. He works up the road & across during the day, then comes back here, does some chores, sleeps in a tent. There are about 10 or so campers here, but no one is currently staying.

Sometime after 9 I was headed up to the store to get a drink from the machine, & asked Doug if the machines were still on. Doug had a fire going & was cutting a tomato, preparing to make himself some sandwiches. I sat down by the fire, & we talked for a couple hours; women, work, the animals around the trail, all kinds of things. He seems like a hardworking & sincere man.

Doug's kids live 1 ½ hrs away in his house in Tassle (?sp). He stays here, close to his work, as he can't afford the cost of gas to drive back & forth. He goes home on weekends. He's a widower. By doing things around the store, campground & farm, he's allowed to stay for free. The owners also have some hens, a rooster, horses & hogs. If it wasn't for Doug, my stay here would not have been so enjoyable; thanks Doug!

I have no signal tonight, so can't call Beth. A weak signal will be around for a couple seconds, then cuts out. Beth sent a text, to which I responded, but don't know if she got it. Better luck tomorrow.

Sept. 15,

16.1 mi

It was foggy & cool this morning. I was up around 8:15am. After breakfast, I packed & stopped in the store to see what they had for food. Not much of a selection, so I grabbed a loaf of bread 2 packages of .99 baloney, an orange juice & I hit the road. I reached the trail by 10:05am. An 18-wheel trucker honked & waved as he drove past, I waved back. People around here know what you are when you're carrying a pack.

Saw 6 deer (25), a toad, heard a couple snakes in the grass, & saw my 1<sup>st</sup> bear since returning to the trail! He/she was about 30 yards off the trail, down & to my left. I looked when I heard some branches breaking. Then I saw a black mass moving down the tree so fast, it was like the bear was rappelling. He looked @ me a couple times on the way down, then hit the ground, turned down the hill & disappeared. I was glad to see him go the other way. If my camera was working, I would've had a couple good shots. I'm here alone @ Doc's Knob shelter; arrived around 6:30pm. No signal again, though I had one coming down the hill. Spoke w/ Beth a couple mins @ 6pm. She's taking Christian to a Sox game tonight for his b-day. He'll be 16 tomorrow.

In to Pearisburg tomorrow, 8.2 mi, pick up a package from Beth & get some food! Looking forward to DQ; oh yeah, ice cream! There's a hostel in town & it'll be tempting to stay, but my goal is to reach Rice Field Shelter 6.8 mi further north.

Some days I'm cranky because I miss Beth, & find myself questioning why I'm out here. I do enjoy the time alone, but I still get lonely. I wish another hiker was here tonight. Doug said he'd seen a mountain lion around Dismal Falls before. So, I was a little uncomfortable going through this are, but had no

problems.

Sept. 16,

8.2 mi

Had another decent night's sleep last night; the fire went well into the night. Up around 7:45am, on trail by 9:10.

My original plan was to hike to Rice Field Shelter today, following a brief stint in P-burg for reup. But Beth mentioned that maybe I needed a short day today, stay in town & recupe a bit. So, I did the 8.2 mi into town & now am at the Holy Family Hostel; \$10 for the night, includes a shower, or two. It's a good idea. As my left foot still bothers me a little. Gonna check it out closer in a few mins.

Weather as sunny, cool breeze while walking the ridge from the powerlines @ mi 620 to Angel's Rest/Pearis Mountain. This short stretch was pretty & serene. Here I saw 3 more bears (4), a momma & 2 cubs, I think. At first, thought it was 3 cubs; they were running off the trail to my left. When I reached that spot, I could see them down the hill, through the trees, looking up toward me. A couple hundred yards later saw a deer (26). Arrived in town after 1:30pm.

Ate @ DQ, chicken strips w/ fries, 2 Mtn Dew fountain drinks & a small Heath Bar Blizzard; good stuff! Called Beth & left message for Aboman, too. He called back on my way to the hostel; good to hear his voice again! He sounds excited to see me again, sometime in the Shenandoahs. I'll stay a day or two @ his home in Fredericksburg. He says his wife is "all signed up" for having me stay there. I'll enjoy my stay w/ him!

The package from Beth arrived @ the po; my shirt I asked for, her camera & some goodies & trail mix. She also sent some needed \$; I love her & miss her so much!

The climb up from here is a good pitch, as it is heading to the south. Other hikers staying here, thru-hiking Sobos "The Sibs," tell me water is scarce in some spots going north. The Sibs are 3 brothers & 1 sister from PA. "Wildman Bill" is also from PA, & Jeremy & Kyra are here too, tenting under the gazebo outside. The Sibs are sleeping on the porch, while Bill & I have the upstairs bunk area to ourselves. Kyra & Jeremy are planning to slackpack a few days, having a ride further north, then slackpack back here, then finish another short section south of here. When I saw their names @ the po register, I wondered how they got ahead of me; now I know.

I'll try to leave here by 8:30am tomorrow. I bought 4 + days of food @ Walmart, including some grapenut type cereal.

Aboman said he was worrying about how I was getting along, as there's not the same volume of ppl on this part of the trail @ this year's time. It's true I enjoy being alone, but there are times I miss the friendship I enjoyed on last year's hike. It was inspiring & edifying when, @ a long day's end, to see familiar faces @ a shelter or campsite. It's an innate desire of man to have fellowship & companionship w/ his fellow man. I believe one reason why so many ppl fear to be alone is how much of the self is revealed under the magnifier of solitude. Ppl don't want to see or know how frail they are, how selfish, self-centered & sinful their nature truly is. It's others who make us feel good about ourselves, others who build us up in our mind's eye.

We need time alone, real solitude; that's where a man is broken open; where each vulnerable piece is scrutinized & weighed. A man's creed is forged upon the anvil of solitude. From time to time, it needs tempering. Self-examination & evaluation cannot be attained amidst the drowning noise of society, nor the babble of ego-boosters. My weak state has brought me to tears many times in the past 13 days. Tomorrow marks 2 weeks since starting in Damascus. If I reach tomorrow's destination, it'll be just over 182 mi I'll have traveled. No amount of miles walked can rid a man of what lies beneath his exterior; but it can reveal those hidden depths & help recall to mind all truth he's learned, the lessons which truly change a man. A long walk can be an incredible tool in a changed life.