



Hike in Comfort

Day 1— Portions of the Trail in Shenandoah are flat, smooth, and wide enough to walk hand-in-hand.

PHOTO BY LAURIE POTTEIGER

Night 1— Many rooms at Big Meadows Lodge contain views of the twinkling lights from towns in the Shenandoah Valley.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK

BY LAURIE POTTEIGER

Picture a three-day hike on the Appalachian Trail.

Your mental snapshot will probably include breathtaking views, white blazes, and well-maintained Trail over the tallest mountains the landscape has to offer. Zoom in on the details of this hike and you'll probably visualize a sweaty backpack, rustic shelters, and a sleeping pad about a half-inch thick. For some, the reverie ends there.

No matter how great the allure of an extended hike on the Appalachian Trail, for some the idea of hiking without a hot shower and a private bed at the end of the day is unthinkable. But, "primitive" is the operative word in describing the A.T. experience. By design, the Trail eschews towns

and civilization to keep it as wild as possible. Typically, motels or inns close to the Trail are at least 20, but often 50 or more miles apart. There is one notable exception: the high mountain lodges of Shenandoah National Park.

Along the famed Skyline Drive in Virginia, two historic lodges offer an unparalleled opportunity to enjoy the A.T. for three days and two nights without giving up the comforts of home. Starting at Lewis Mountain and ending at Thornton Gap, you can hike eight to ten miles a day, spending your nights and enjoying meals at the Big Meadows Lodge and Skyland Resort in Shenandoah National Park's central section.

The rooms in the lodges are not fancy, but rustic and comfortable. What's special about these places is the setting: while decidedly civilized, you never forget you are high in the Appalachians. Weather-beaten trees surround you, swirling fog frequently adds to the sense of isolation from the rest of the world, and wildlife is abundant. Best of all, the A.T. is only yards away.

Terrain Thru-hikers will sometimes tell you the A.T. in Shenandoah is flat. Don't believe them. What they mean is that Shenandoah is flat in comparison to many other parts of the Trail. They will also say hiking in Shenandoah is "easy." Remember, if a thru-hiker tells you this, their impression was formed when they had just hiked about a thousand miles. Even without a pack, this section is not easy, unless you regularly hike in hilly terrain, run, or work out at a gym. While it is true that portions of this hike are flat, smooth, and wide enough to walk hand-in-hand, other portions consist of steady climbs and descents of several hundred feet. Nowhere is the terrain in this section truly "steep," (admittedly a subjective term), but periodically the terrain is rocky enough to require full attention to the placement of your feet. You'll want sturdy soles on your shoes.

Three Days in Shenandoah National Park

Day 1—Lewis Mountain to Big Meadows, 8.3 miles

Day 2—Big Meadows to Skyland, 8.1 miles

Day 3—Skyland to Thornton Gap, 9.5 miles.

The most dramatic scenery on the A.T. is often found at the top of big mountains that require a big effort to climb: the Smokies, the Roan Highlands, the White Mountains of New Hampshire and almost all of Maine's peaks. Shenandoah is a fortunate exception. There are many outstanding views, and the payoff for the amount of exertion is high. The reason is that on this hike in Shenandoah, you start at a fairly high elevation (about 3,400 feet), and stay between three- and four-thousand feet, except at the end where you drop 1,200 feet in two miles.

Shenandoah's Stony Man gets top billing as the mountain on or near the A.T. most resembling a human face (now that the White Mountains' Old Man in the Mountain has crumbled). Another notable view on this hike is Mary's Rock. There are numerous of other views along the way, and even more if you



Day 2—Looking out from Hawksbill Summit.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK

Rocky terrain on Talus slope.

PHOTO BY LAURIE POTTEIGER



are willing to depart from the white blazes. The highest peak in the park, Hawksbill, is accessible via a blue-blazed loop, as is Bearfence Mountain, one of the best short rock-scrambles anywhere along the A.T. Both have terrific views. If you look down instead of up, you'll see the human face of Shenandoah's past in the many retaining walls in this section, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s and 1940s. These rock walls enable a wide, smooth trail even on the steepest slopes. Today's heroes are the volunteers of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, who keep Shenandoah's A.T. and side trails cleared of summer growth, remove downed trees, and continually fight erosion with a variety of water diversion devices.

Pace Although most hikers will be able to walk at a pace of two miles an hour or more, allow plenty of time to linger at the views and listen to a grouse drumming or barred owl call. Check out some of the views that are on blue-blazed side trails. On this hike you'll have the time to use, and can afford

the weight of a wildflower book or other field guide.

Lodging Although Big Meadows does have an old-fashioned lodge with rooms, most of the accommodations there and at Skyland are in small, motel-like buildings. There are also suites available, and more rustic cabins. Many rooms have views. The scenery of the valley and distant ridges is beautiful during the day, but the twinkling lights from towns in the Shenandoah Valley can be equally charming. Most rooms do not have TV, but that would be a waste of time in this beautiful, restful place. There are also no phones in the rooms, but pay phones are available.

Meals Dining rooms at both Big Meadows and Skyland offer breakfast, lunch, and dinner, as well as boxed lunches that can be ordered in advance for pick-up in



Night 2—Dinner fare at Skyland Resort ranges from fried chicken to gourmet.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK

the morning. Dinner fare ranges from fried chicken to gourmet, sustainably-grown offerings. Prices may be somewhat higher a typical Virginia Trail town, but you're paying for finer fare, the view, and relative remoteness of the location. Those looking for lower-budget options can dine on bar food or sandwiches at the taprooms available at both locations. Skyland's gift shop also sells trail mix and candy bars.

Logistics It is best to call ahead to check room availability. Shenandoah National Park and Skyline Drive are less than 1½ hours from the Washington-area Dulles airport in northern Virginia. Somewhat like the A.T., Shenandoah is a long linear park, and there are different access points depending on where you are coming from. Keep in mind the speed limit on the Drive is 35 miles-per-hour and the road is windy, so progress is slow, especially if you stop to enjoy the many overlooks. Charlottesville, Virginia, is only about 20 miles from the southern entrance of the Park, but if

Essentials to carry

- Large daypack or small backpack
- Water
- Snacks or lunch for your first day
- Compass and map (Potomac A.T. Club map 10, Shenandoah central section)
- Sunscreen, insect repellent
- Trowel, toilet paper, and hand sanitizer
- Flashlight

Rain jacket and hat

- Clothing changes for three days
- Toiletries
- Small first aid/blister kit

Nice to have

- Guidebook
- Pen and paper
- Camera
- Binoculars
- Field guides
- Hand lens
- Hiking stick/poles



Day 3—View from Shenandoah’s Stony Man.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL WARREN

you enter there, it will take you two or three hours to wend your way to the northern end of the hike at Thornton Gap. Cars can be left at Thornton Gap (there’s a \$20 entrance fee to the park). There are no shuttles within the park.

For an unhurried start the first day of hiking, you might want to arrange the shuttle the day before and spend the night at Lewis Mountain Cabins. The cabins have the same amenities as the lodges, but there are no meals available at Lewis Mountain.

When to go Late spring and early fall are the best times to go. Although Shenandoah can be hot and humid during the day in the summer, it is easily 10 or even 20 degrees cooler (especially with wind chill) than the surrounding areas. May offers a spectacular wildflower display; late April has winter-only views as well as early spring ephemeral wildflowers. Big Meadows and Sky-



Peregrine falcon takes flight from Stony Man.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK

land are usually open from early April through late November. During the edges of the season it can be cold enough for snow flurries or even ice storms. The peak of

color in the park overall is usually the second and third week of October. Avoid the crowds and go the last week of September or the first weeks or two of October, when the colors start to turn on the ridgetops. If you go during the week, you’ll have a lot fewer people, lower prices, and less road noise where the A.T. passes close to Skyline Drive.

Flora and Fauna Chances are you’ll see deer, and lots of them. They are wild animals so resist the temptation to feed them and have your camera ready instead. Black bear abound in the park. If you look closely, you’ll see lots of signs of them



Deer in the park are unbelievably tame.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL WARREN

along the Trail, but you’re more likely to see them on Skyline Drive than on the A.T. Grouse and turkey are common too, and if you’re lucky and have sharp eyes, you may see a peregrine falcon from Stony Man. This stretch also has a wonderful diversity of plants and trees. Shenandoah’s high elevations create a climate friendly to many species absent from the lower elevations of the A.T. in the mid-Atlantic but common further north. These include balsam fir, red spruce, and gray birch. For all its showy flowers, Shenandoah probably owes the humble hayscented fern the most for giving the park its famous lush appearance. Vast colonies of this aromatic fern carpet the forest floor. In fall the fronds turn a pale green, then gold, and finally the color of a lightly browned pie crust.

There was much controversy surrounding the park’s creation and the building of Skyline Drive, and tensions over these issues helped create a rift that permanently divided the A.T.’s founding fathers, Benton MacKaye and Myron Avery. Both in spite of and because of Skyline Drive, Shenandoah remains one of the

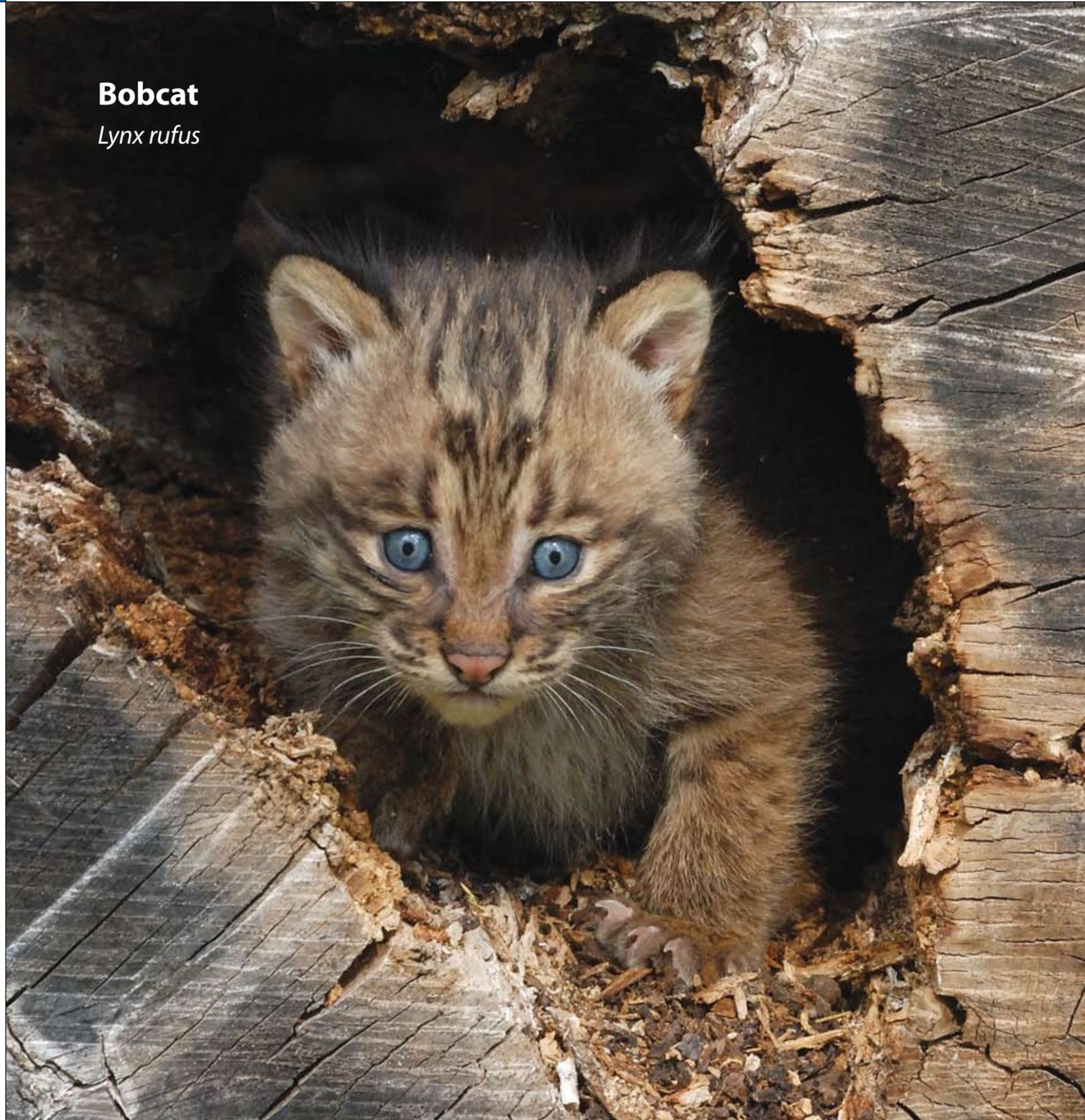
wildest, most beautiful places in the country, easily accessible to millions.

If you like this hike, you may find yourself seeking out something similar elsewhere on the A.T. The *A.T. Thru-Hikers’ Companion* lists all lodging found on or close to the Trail. Your best bets for something close to it are northern Virginia and Massachusetts. If you like the rock scramble up Bearfence Mountain and want to ratchet up the physical challenge, try the hut system in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. If you’re contemplating the plunge to a real backpacking trip, consider just how much weight a tent, sleeping bag, food, and a couple dozen other items would add to your pack. If this is not appealing, make no apologies. After all, Benton MacKaye said the purpose of the Trail is “to walk, to see, and to see what you see.”

For more information and to plan ahead visit: Shenandoah National Park’s Web site: www.nps.gov/shen or ATC at: www.appalachiantrail.org

Bobcat

Lynx rufus



BY KURT RINEHART

If you are lucky enough to see a bobcat in the woods, the experience can be as disorienting as it is exhilarating. An alert bobcat freezes in mid-stride and stares intently at you, sizing you up, judging the risk you represent. It can stand so motionless and its spotted coat camouflages it so well that it seems to disappear in front of your eyes. One minute it's there and the next, you're not so sure, until it quickly lopes out of sight. If the cat sees you first, you haven't a chance of discovering it.

Bobcats have never been extremely abundant, but their current densities may be diminished due to the eastward expansion of the coyote. In the Northeast, where deer meat, either fresh-killed or carrion, forms a significant portion of bobcat winter diet, the addition of coyotes to the predator guild may leave room for fewer bobcats. Most people wouldn't guess it, but bobcats can and do kill deer on occasion. It is not unheard of to find tracks in the snow of a bobcat stalk and rush showing a leap that intersects the tracks of a panicked deer.

Rebounding fisher (or fisher cat) populations could also mean competition for snowshoe hares. When prey is plentiful, there is likely little conflict. If times are tough, competition could reduce access to adequate nutrition for this socially subordinate species. Coyotes have been seen to dominate bobcats in some studies and fisher may as well. Lowered nutrition means lowered reproduction and survival, the natural mechanisms for balancing predator populations.

The bobcat is a generalist predator, readily finding and consuming a range of different animal species. By and large the most common prey throughout its range is rabbits or hares. They also feed on deer, squirrels or small mammals like mice, voles, and birds. A bobcat's tracks often show where it sat and watched for prey. From the sit, the tracks will show a stalk: a slow, deliberate walk to within striking distance. A few vigorous bounds will cover the remaining distance.

Unknown population densities and possible competitive interactions are of interest to wildlife managers, but the most pressing conservation concern currently centers on the effects of roads and determination of critical habitat needs. Outside of legal

trapping, traffic collisions are the leading cause of bobcat mortality. Even if the cats are not dying directly on the road, high traffic levels can deter road crossing, making roads barriers to dispersal and movement. On a wildlife road-crossing study managed by the Audubon Society of New Hampshire in 2005 and 2006, I trailed a bobcat that approached and retreated from U.S. Highway 2 six times before it finally crossed, indicating a high level of anxiety and caution. In that study, we recorded thousands of crossings by moose, red fox, and coyotes (respectively) and hundreds by deer and fisher. Less than 40 bobcat crossings were recorded.

While roads may deter bobcat movement or cause deaths, cliff and ledge habitat appears to draw them in, providing refuge from deep snows in winter as well as human and other activity. Cliffy areas are good places to find signs of bobcats, but the functional role of these areas in bobcat ecology is unknown. Deep, soft, snow is a prime enemy of the bobcat. The bobcat has four times more weight-load per foot as does its more northern cousin, the lynx. This higher foot-load means moving in soft snow costs more energy, which can tip the balance of survival in a tough winter. Snow is the limiting factor that differentiates the bobcat's expansive range from the more northerly, mountainous range of the lynx.

The stealthy and secretive nature of the bobcat makes understanding their ecology and working for their conservation difficult. Your best chance of knowing that there is a bobcat around is when you might cross one's tracks in winter. A few hours spent threading through deep thickets, up wooded slopes, and across frozen marshes will work knowledge of bobcats into your bones and you will have earned your stripes, or in this case, spots.

Kurt Rinehart (M.S.) is a wildlife biologist specializing in carnivores and landscape ecology and the author of *The Naturalist's Guide to Observing Nature* (Stackpole Books), an ecological primer for amateur naturalists. He is currently working on a guide to North American mammal behavior.

PHOTO BY MARK ELBROCH