

Cranberry Wilderness Expansion (Proposed)

Size: approx. 11,796 acres

Location: Webster, Pocahontas Counties

Watershed: Gauley

USGS Topographic Maps: Webster Springs SE, Webster Spring SW

Elevation Range (approx.): 2,300 – 3,927

Dominant Vegetation: Sugar Maple/Beech/ Yellow Birch/Red Spruce; Mixed Hardwoods



Photo © Jonathan Jessup

With this proposed wilderness acreage, the existing Cranberry Wilderness would be expanded on the west by nearly 12,000 acres of deep cove hardwood forest between the Williams River on the north and the Cranberry River on the south and west. The proposed expansion is contiguous to the existing wilderness, which borders it to the east. From atop the ridge between the two rivers, steep hollows drop from almost 4,000 feet to 2,300 feet at the Williams River and 2,500 feet along the Cranberry. These include Little Fork and Lick Branch (of the Williams) to the north, and Rough Run, Lick Branch (of the Cranberry) and the Twin Branches to the south, plus numerous small runs. The landscape is predominantly a lush moist forest.

Red Spruce is native to, and reclaiming, the high elevations, with the rest of the area supporting a wide mixture of Eastern Hemlock and hardwoods, including oak, maple, Black Cherry, Yellow Birch, American Beech and Yellow Poplar. Thickets of rhododendron flank the many streams, and a wide variety of moss and ferns carpet the forest floor. The entire area, as well as a large portion of the existing wilderness, is underlain with hard, Pottsville sandstone formed during the Paleozoic Era.

The Cranberry Expansion area provides habitat for the federally endangered WV Northern Flying Squirrel, and a few Northern Goshawk nests have been sited. Other inhabitants leaving signs of their frequent presence include Black Bear, White-Tailed Deer, and Beaver. The streams are acidic, but both the Williams and Cranberry Rivers are home to trout. The Cranberry is treated for acidity at two liming stations near the Cranberry Wilderness. In addition to the Cranberry and Williams Rivers, Lick Branch (of the Cranberry), Lick Branch (of the Williams), and Birchlog Run are classified as Tier 2.5 streams, those that will support trout populations.

The experience that awaits numerous hikers and backpackers is one of a vast silent forest primeval. The North South Trail leaves the Cranberry Campground on the western boundary and follows the top of the ridge, continuing through the Cranberry Wilderness for a total of 22 miles. Several other trails connect from the North South Trail down to the closed, gated FS road 102 popular with anglers and bikers along the Cranberry River, or down to the Three Forks of the Williams. The North South Trail and the Cranberry River road are also popular with horseback riders, and the entire area is highly esteemed by hunters. Overall, this proposed expansion would provide excellent connectivity to the existing trail system in the current wilderness area, increasing the recreational opportunities and wilderness values therein.