

Lower Laurel Fork Wilderness (Proposed)

Size: approx. 3,182

Location: Randolph County

Watershed: Cheat

USGS Topographic Map: Harman

Elevation Range (approx.): 2120 - 3240

Dominant Vegetation: Mixed
Hardwoods, River Birch



Photo © Dave Saville

Laurel Fork flows northward through Randolph County into the Dry Fork of the Cheat River. The lower 15 miles, starting about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile north of U.S. 33, would begin the proposed

Wilderness. It is already a 40 ft. wide stream at this point and the proposed wilderness would extend between the undisturbed hillsides of Rich Mountain on the east and Middle Mountain on the west. It totals about 3,132 acres, and has a somewhat irregular boundary. An old railroad grade runs through it with little noticed abutments of its single crossing about two miles below the highway. This is the only mark of man as the rail grade is only a trail today. There are no settlements in the entire watershed and it is an absolutely uncluttered stream flowing generally clear. There is a great day-long hike through or a day's fishing. There is virtually no evidence of camping or other recreational impacts.

Another notable feature of this 15 mile section is that the upstream 7 miles of Laurel Fork meanders and the lower does not. The sometimes strong meandering is not that much noticed; the banks are stable with little tree topple. The valley floor is mostly narrow, but it is not deeply incised like a gorge. The two tributaries are small and are not believed to be native Brook Trout streams. The Devonian shales have grown beautifully timbered hillsides and Laurel Fork is a moderately productive unpolluted stream.

Canoeists and kayakers put in at Highway 33 for the 15 mile float. There is a scenic 12 ft waterfall a short distance above the mouth. The stream here drops only about 1,000 ft in its 15 miles. The bed above the falls is characterized by perhaps over 50 ledge rock drops of from 1 to 2 feet in height. These are a delight to the canoeist and angler. Each forms a nice flat pool above and a plunge pool below; here may be a 4' depth and excellent cover for the many eager, lightly fished, Small Mouth Bass. These bass are small, seldom over one foot long. The entirely shaded stream may be too cool for big bass. Rainbow Trout are stocked above Highway 33 and some work their way down; there are few Brown Trout. Rainbows have been stocked from nearby Bowden Hatchery and dumped at the end of the Sponaugle Farm access at Highway 33. These have scattered well, and the fact that there is no depth over three feet for large predator bass in the first three miles aids survival and dispersal. When this is successful 2 two-foot long beautiful wild Rainbow can be produced in the same pools that normally produce only one-foot long Bass.

Laurel Fork can be accessed by car only at the highway and from its mouth near Jenningson on Dry Fork. It can be reached most anywhere fairly easily by going down the hillside off the Sully Road on Middle Mountain that parallels Laurel Fork about a mile above.