

# Vermilion River Ramble

– Dan Styer

I have gone backpacking at least once each year since 1969 when, at age fourteen years, I took a three-day hike on Pennsylvania’s Horse-Shoe Trail. I do this for the usual reasons: adventure, exercise, scenery, and immersion in nature. But at one point this “immersion in nature” facet began to seem shallow: Here I was driving, or flying, or motorboating in some high-tech way in order to immerse myself in nature. The backpacking opened me up to nature, but what about the travel to and from? I dreamed of a trip that was 100% hiking: I would walk starting from and ending at my front door, with no cars or planes or motorboats to confuse the issue. The year 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic raged and motorized travel was discouraged, seemed a perfect time to realize this dream.

Ohio’s Vermilion River runs just fifty yards from my home. My plan was to follow the river downstream about eight miles to a special place I know, a box canyon with the improbable name “Dellefield’s Ditch”, to spend the night there, and then to walk back home. I chose two days when the weather would be dry, the temperature fine, and the water low. For the first time in fifty-two years of backpacking, I carried a mask.

In the morning of Tuesday, 18 August 2020, I set out walking from my front door. In fifty yards I removed my shoes and socks and then forded the Vermilion River – easy to do in the low water. I dried my feet, reshod, and turned left to walk downstream. Soon I passed under the Dean Road Bridge. (I could have taken the bridge rather than forded the river, but that seemed to violate the spirit of a hiking-only excursion.) Within a few yards the riverside cliff forced me to walk in the river anyway, so my attempts to keep my feet dry were for naught. Then the cliff pulled back from the river and I walked through Crooked Creek Flat, which I had visited from my home many times. At the far edge of the flat, as I entered an area I’d never visited, I turned and looked back into familiar territory. In the sky, a Bald Eagle flew circles.

I walked on: sometimes in the woods by the river, sometimes hugging the cliff or slope at the far edge of the flat, sometimes in the river itself, but usually on the wide rocky riverbank. Mostly I was on the right bank, but sometimes I forded to the left.



*Oxeye, Vermilion River, and cliff in Swift Hollow*

I saw: Sandpipers, a Green Heron, a Merganser, and Great Blue Herons. Tiny fish and frogs in the beautiful clear water. Many deer – two fawns let me approach within thirty yards. Abundant Jumpseed, Ostrich Fern, Oxeye, and Wood Nettle; occasional Kalm's Lobelia, Glade Fern, Goldie's Fern, and Fragile Fern. Two waterfalls tumbling down the riverside cliffs.



*Cardinal Flower, Monkey Flower, and Water Plantain*

My first encounter with people came in the afternoon, at Mill Hollow Park. I put on my mask and followed river-edge paths. Memories flooded back when I passed a riverbank of smooth flat stones where my sons and I had spent hours skipping stones two decades ago. Soon after that a man with children aged five and six years told me “I’ve just taught ’em how to skip stones.” Later I saw a couple in their seventies or eighties, the man skipping stones and the woman filming him, both with great delight. The man said to me “You’ve gotta skip!”

Past Mill Hollow Park I took off my mask, forded to the left bank, and walked in the woods for about three miles. I was nearing Dellefield’s Ditch when I heard “whomp, whomp, whomp” coming from the sky – fifty yards away a Bald Eagle flew off downstream.

At the mouth of Dellefield’s creek I washed in the river and then ate dinner on the riverbank: two Kingfishers flew upstream and one Great Blue Heron flew downstream while I ate. Then I walked up the creek into the fern-bedecked box canyon and set up camp.



*Home in Dellefield's Ditch*

As I was going to sleep two bats circled above my bed. I heard but couldn't see a flock of Canada Geese. I watched stars move, and then fireflies way up in the woods at the canyon rim.

The next morning I walked back out through the box canyon. The morning sunlight delicately lit mist rising from the Vermilion River. I turned upstream and walked to an abandoned roadbed, which ascended to the canyon rim. From there, I walked south on Gore Orphanage Road for several miles back into Swift Hollow where I latched onto the Vermilion River again, following it upstream on the right bank. The river water level was so low that I kept my feet dry even at cliffs. I stopped at the foot of a magnificent Sugar Maple.



Just as I stopped a deer snorted and ran away. Then I photographed the tree and wrote notes. As I sat still, the curious deer crept back.

The magnificent Sugar Maple was in Crooked Creek Flat – I was almost home. I saw a doe and fawn on the opposite bank, got my feet wet at the same cliff where I had stepped into the water while heading downstream, and then walked under Dean Road Bridge.

To get home I had to ford the river one last time. From the riverbank I saw a Red-headed Woodpecker, and a Sandpiper bobbing both head and tail. I crossed the river and walked up the box canyon of Wolf Run to a place I call “the amphitheater”. The shelf fungus Ling Chih, which grows also in China where it is called “mushroom of immortality”, grew on beech log there. I decided that Dellefield’s Ditch is more spectacular, larger, grander, but the box canyon of Wolf Run is more beautiful, humane, musical.

With that, I turned back and walked to my own front door.