

Hikes in and around Browntown

Browntown is fortunate to be surrounded on three sides by Shenandoah National Park, with four “backdoor” trails that can take residents and visitors into the park without the need to travel along Skyline Drive. Parking is available at each of the four trailheads, but it is limited to a few cars at three of them. If you choose to drive to a trailhead, please be courteous to landowners and do not block driveways.

By parking at the Browntown Community Center and walking along our country roads, a hiker can visit the three trails where parking is most limited. Additionally, the “Loop,” the route of the annual Greasy-Gooney footrace and a gently sloping walking route frequently used by many local residents, provides lovely views of the surrounding mountains, working farms, and homes. Directions below begin from the Community Center. Enjoy some or all of these hikes!

While there are water sources along all of these trails, bring water with you. Any stream or spring water should be treated (using filters or chemical treatment) before drinking. All of these trails are found on the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club’s Map # 9, which is available from local outfitters and bookstores.

Hike 1. Lands Run Fire Road and Waterfall (easy to moderate).

Distance (out and back): 3.2 miles; continuing on to Skyline Drive adds 1.2 miles.
Elevation gain: About 700 feet (to the waterfall)

Directions. Turn left onto Browntown Road. In about 0.2 mile, turn onto Smith Run Rd, the first road on the left after leaving the community center. Continue on Smith Run for one mile, before turning left onto Lands Run Rd. Continue 1.1 miles, reaching the end of the road. Limited parking is available on both sides of the road before reaching the gated Lands Run Fire Road and the boundary of SNP.

After passing the gate, there is private land to the left for about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile. Please be courteous and stay off private property. Lands Run Fire Road is a wide trail and is usually well maintained by the Park Service. You will see yellow blazes—yellow paint on trees—marking the trail and indicating that it is generally limited to foot and horse traffic, although park rangers may occasionally drive a vehicle along the trail. Hikers should yield to horses by stepping to the side of the trail, but be careful to avoid poison ivy, which runs along the sides of the trail.

This trail climbs gently uphill along Lands Run, one of the many trout streams in SNP, for the first half mile, before turning away from the stream. The trail becomes a series of short uphill stretches, followed by short level stretches. At about the one-mile point, there is a sharp bend to the left, followed by a slightly steeper climb for a short distance. Thereafter, the trail is level or gently sloping. If hiking in fall or winter, the Browntown valley can be viewed to the left. Continue approximately 0.6 mile to the falls.

As you approach the falls, you will hear the sound of falling water. The trail crosses a culvert, with the stream on both sides. If the culvert is under water, use caution in crossing.

Immediately after the culvert, an unblazed side trail is on the left to the top of the falls. To view the falls from the side, you can return the way you came, looking for two small trails to the right. These trails can be slippery, so use caution in approaching the falls.

Connecting Trails. Lands Run Fire Road continues up to Skyline Drive, 0.6 miles away. There is a parking area just off the Drive, with a trailhead for the Dickey Ridge Trail, which runs about 8 miles back to the North District (Front Royal) entrance to Skyline Drive. On the opposite side of the Drive, there are two trailheads. Hickerson Hollow Trail (on the left) will take you down into the Harmony Hollow community, close to the 4-H Training Center. The continuation of the Dickey Ridge Trail on the right after crossing the Drive, will connect to the Springhouse Hollow Trail and the Appalachian Trail (AT) near Compton's Gap. (See the directions for the Compton's Loop (**Hike 4**) below).

Hike 2. Smith Run/Jenkins Gap Trail (moderate)

Distance (from trailhead to AT): 1.3 miles

Elevation Gain: Approximately 1,100 feet

Directions. Turn left onto Browntown Road, and left again onto Smith Run Rd (about 0.1 miles from the Community Center). Continue 2.2 miles until Smith Run Rd ends. Parking is available along both sides of the road, but avoid blocking the trailhead or any of the driveways.

The first 0.2 miles is along private land. Please stay on the trail. Red paint on the trees and white boundary signs will appear on your left, just before reaching the cement post that contains trail information. The trail is yellow-blazed, indicating that it is open to foot and horse traffic. You will notice some signs of the fire that burned in this area in 2011, but most of the trees remain.

There will be several stream crossings over the next half mile. All contain stepping stones that will allow you to cross. Use caution, as the stones may be slippery or tilt unexpectedly. As you walk along the trail you will see signs of the old wagon road, both on the trail itself, and off to the sides, in the places the trail was rerouted. A wide turn to the left marks a return to the wagon road, which continues uphill. There are several long switchbacks in this part of the climb. In the fall, winter, and early spring, at several of the switchbacks you can look down into the Browntown valley and see the church steeple in the distance. When the trail widens again, and skirts the side of a hill, the steepest climbs are behind you.

When you have reached the intersection with the Appalachian Trail (the AT) in about 1.3 miles you will see a cement pillar with directions. At the trail signpost, turn around and retrace your steps.

Connecting Trails. The Appalachian Trail. At the trail signpost, turning right (south) will take you uphill across North and South Mt Marshall peaks, both visible from Browntown. Set a turn-around time if you chose to venture onto the AT, as the next trail to the south that returns to Browntown is over 5 miles away. **Hike 5** provides details for this Browntown trail.

If you chose to go north on the AT, you can hike up to Compton's Peak (a little more than a mile away), where there are two side trails of interest. This hike (**Hike 3**) is described below.

Hike 3. Compton's Peak & spur trails to viewing spots and columnar basalt formation (easy).

Distance: From the intersection of the white-blazed AT with Jenkins Gap Trail, about 1.4 miles. Each of the spur trails are 0.2 mile, making the total if both are hiked at about 0.8 miles, out and back.

Elevation change. From the intersection of the AT with Jenkins Gap Trail, about 500 ft.

Directions. From Browntown Community Center: Follow the directions for **Hike 2** to Jenkins Gap. When you reach the AT, turn north (left). The trail is mostly level or gently uphill for about half a mile, then begins to climb more steeply. In the flatter area, the trail parallels Skyline Dr. and also shows some evidence of the 2011 fire. The mountain laurel and rhododendron thickets burned, but have largely rebounded. About one mile from Jenkins Gap, you will pass over a small spring-fed stream. The trail continues to climb for a short distance, then levels out. In slightly less than half a mile from the stream, you will reach a cement pillar marking Compton's Peak. However, the actual high point is along the blue-blazed trail to the left (west). There are several large rocks providing viewing points of the valley and the Shenandoah River on this spur trail. Returning to the pillar marking the peak, take the other blue blazed trail east about 0.2 mile. There is one short, steep section on this trail where caution should be exercised, particularly in wet weather. The columnar basalt formation (evidence of a very old lava flow) is said to be the largest one in SNP, and is best viewed from underneath it. Retrace your steps to the parking area at the trailhead.

Alternate (Driving) Directions. From the SNP North Entrance Station, continue along Skyline Drive for approximately 12.2 miles. The Jenkins Gap parking area will be on your right, a large paved lot with room for about 16 cars. From the side of the lot closest to the entrance, take an unmarked trail heading downhill and turn right onto the AT (white-blazed and follow the directions to Compton's Peak.

Hike 4. Compton's Loop (Strenuous)

Distance: 9. 5 miles. Add 0.8 if both the Compton's Spur trails are hiked.

Elevation Gain: Approximately 1400 feet while on trails, not including the spur trails. This loop includes some walking on unimproved (dirt) country roads, as well as trails.

Directions. Turn left onto Browntown Road, and left again onto Smith Run Rd (about 0.1 miles from the Community Center). Continue 2.2 miles until Smith Run Rd ends. Parking is available along both sides of the road, but avoid blocking the trailhead or any of the driveways.

The first 0.2 mile is along private land. Please stay on the trail. Red paint on the trees and white boundary signs will appear on your left, just before reaching the cement post that contains trail information and marks the entrance to SNP. The trail is yellow-blazed, indicating that it is open to foot and horse traffic. You will notice some signs of the fire that burned in this area in 2011, but most of the trees remain.

There will be several small stream crossings over the next half mile. All contain stepping stones that will allow you to cross. Use caution, as the stones may be slippery or tilt unexpectedly. As you walk along the trail you will see signs of the old wagon road, both on the trail itself, and off to the sides, in the places the trail was rerouted. A wide turn to the left marks a return to the wagon road, which continues uphill. There are several long switchbacks in this part of the climb. In the fall, winter, and early spring, at several of the switchbacks you can look down into the Browntown valley and see the church steeple in the distance. When the trail widens again, and skirts the side of a hill, the steepest climbs are behind you.

When you have reached the intersection with the Appalachian Trail (the AT) in about 1.2 miles you will see a cement pillar marking the intersection. Turn left, taking the white-blazed AT north to Compton's Peak. The trail is mostly level or gently uphill for about half a mile, then begins to climb more steeply. In the flatter area, the trail parallels Skyline Dr. and also shows some evidence of the 2011 fire. The mountain laurel and rhododendron thickets burned, but have largely rebounded. In about one mile, you will pass over a small spring fed stream. The trail continues to climb for a short distance, then levels out. In slightly less than half a mile from the stream, you will reach a cement pillar marking Compton's Peak. However, the actual high point is along the blue-blazed trail to the left (west).

If you hike the spur trails, you will add 0.8 miles to this loop. At the end of the spur trail to the left (west), there are several large rocks providing viewing points of the valley and the Shenandoah River. On the spur trail to the east (also blue-blazed), there is one very steep part on just before the basalt formation. Exercise caution particularly in wet weather. The columnar basalt formation (evidence of a very old lava flow) is said to be the largest one in SNP, and is best viewed from underneath.

Continue along the AT heading north, and descend Compton's Peak. As you approach Skyline Drive after about a mile of descent, the trail becomes terraced. Cross Skyline Drive and continue down the AT for about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile, before turning left onto the Dickey Ridge Trail, which is blue-blazed, meaning it is open only to foot traffic. In 0.1 mile, you will see Fort Windham Rocks on your right, looking as though some giant dropped a huge pile of rocks alongside the trail. How it was named is a mystery, but it does resemble a crumbled fortress. In about half a mile, you will reach the intersection of Dickey Ridge and Springhouse Trail. Continue on the

Dickey Ridge Trail, reaching Skyline Drive in about 0.6 miles. Cross the drive to the Lands Run parking area, and turn left onto the Lands Run Fire Road.

Continue down the fire road 0.6 miles to the Lands Run waterfall. View from the top of the falls are just before a metal culvert across the road; view of the falls from the side are on unblazed side trails to the right shortly after crossing the culvert. Continue down Lands Run Fire Road to the park gate, about 1.6 miles. Pass to the side of the gate and continue along Lands Run Road (VA 622), a pretty country road, 1.1 miles to the intersection of Smith Run Road. This road is wider and more frequently traveled than Lands Run Road. Turn left onto Smith Run road, and return to your car in 1.2 miles.

Hike 5. Browntown Trail (moderate (trail only) (strenuous, with the addition of the walk from the Community Center)).

Distance: Trail mileage (out and back) 6.8 miles. Road mileage from the Community Center to the trailhead) adds about 3 miles.

Elevation change: About 1600 feet (from trailhead to Skyline Drive)

Directions. Whether you drive to the trailhead or walk along part of Gooney Manor Loop (known locally as “the Loop”), the directions are the same. The trailhead is not obvious, and there is parking for only one or two cars on the roadside.

From the community center, turn left. Browntown Road becomes Gooney Manor Loop in 0.2 miles. The road passes over one of the feeder streams into Gooney Creek in about 0.2 miles, with some interesting stonework along the banks of the stream. The road makes a sharp left in another 0.1 miles and then splits, with Fetchett Road going straight, and Gooney Manor Road turning right. Continue on the Loop for about 0.7 miles, until the road makes a sharp turn to the right. Two large yellow and black arrow signs mark the turn. The trail begins on the driveway between the two signs, but there is nothing to indicate that the private driveway is the trailhead. However, SNP retains a right of way along the route of the former road, and the public has a right to access the trail along the driveway and woods road that crosses the private land.

The driveway is marked with no trespassing signs and a sign indicating there is a shooting range in the area. Do not be intimidated, as the signs pertain to the adjacent land, not the road itself. When the dirt/gravel road reaches a closed gate, a small stream will be on your right. Cross the stream. The trail continues across private land, also well marked with no trespassing signs, for a total of 1.0 miles from the trailhead. When you reach the stone pillar and the gate, you have reached the beginning of the SNP land. This is a yellow-blazed (horses permitted) trail, and is not well maintained. You may encounter some overgrowth of weeds and nettles and a number of blowdowns crossing the trail. Nevertheless, it is well-blazed and the trail is easily discernable. Large oak trees provide a plentiful crop of acorns—a favorite food of bears—and bear scat is likewise plentiful along the trail.

The trail climbs steadily up graded switchbacks. The stonework reinforcing the outside of these switchbacks attests to the skill of those who created the original wagon road, which ran from Washington, VA through Browntown and into Front Royal. Browntown Trail reaches the Appalachian Trail 2.4 miles after passing the cement pillar marking the entrance into SNP. Return following the same route.

Connecting Trails. Skyline Drive is just a few yards further along the AT. Gravel Springs parking lot (MP 17.6 on Skyline Drive) is across the road. One of the SNP “huts” (three sided shelters used by long distance hikers) is 0.5 miles down the AT. Just beyond (east of) the hut, the Harris Hollow Trail (formerly a part of the same road as the Browntown Trail) continues east to the small town of Washington, VA. If you visit Gravel Springs Hut, stop to read the shelter’s trail journal and learn a bit about thru and section hikers on the AT.

Alternative hike. If two cars are available, one can be parked at the Community Center and the other at Gravel Springs parking off Skyline Drive. Browntown Trail is across Skyline Drive from the parking area. Follow the Browntown Trail hiking directions in reverse, walking back down the Browntown Trail and Gooney Manor Loop to the Community Center. This route is considerably less strenuous!

Hikes 6 - 9. Thompson Hollow Hikes. (easy to super-strenuous)

The Thompson Hollow trailhead leads to numerous trails of varying difficulty. This area is very popular because of the many swimming holes and waterfalls, and parking may be difficult. Both the Appalachian Trail and the Tuscarora Trail (a 270-mile trail stretching from the Matthews Arm area of SNP through VA, WV, and MD to the Carlisle area of PA) can be reached from this trailhead.

Directions to the trailhead: Turn left out of the Community Center, and then right onto Bentonville Road, crossing Gooney Creek. Follow Bentonville Road for 5 miles, turning left onto Thompson Hollow Road. The parking area is 1.9 miles from the turn onto Thompson Hollow Road, with parking on both shoulders, and begins after a sign indicating a change from pavement to gravel and ends just before a sign indicating that the rest of the road is closed to public traffic. This lot fills quickly on weekends and holidays, but do not be tempted into driving past the sign, as local landowners can and will tow away cars parked along the road.

To reach all of the trails below, hike along the continuation of Thompson Hollow Road beyond the parking area for about 0.2 mile, reaching a locked gate. The blue-blazed Thompson Hollow Trail begins to the right; the concrete pilar marking the park entrance is a short distance from the beginning of the trail.

Hike 6. Seven Pools (easy).

Distance: From the parking area to the pools, about 1 mile, one way.

Elevation Change: About 300 feet.

Directions: From the pilar marking the entrance into SNP, continue uphill along the Thompson Hollow Trail 0.4 mile to where it ends at the intersection with the Tuscarora Trail. Go straight ahead on the Tuscarora, for about 0.3 mile to the intersection with the Overall Run Trail. Turn right on Overall Run, and within 0.1 miles, you will see an unblazed trail to the left, leading to Overall Run. The swimming hole here contains several pools, including natural slides from one pool to another. After a refreshing swim, retrace your steps.

Hike 7. Tuscarora Trail North (moderate).

Distance: From the parking area to US 340 and return, 6.8 miles.

Elevation Change: About 900 feet

This out and back hike takes you along a portion of the Tuscarora Trail (TT) (a 247 mile trail running between the Matthews Arm area of SNP to where it rejoins the AT near Carlisle, PA). The TT was an alternative route for the AT, created when there was difficulty obtaining land or rights of way for the AT north of SNP. This section runs between Thompson Hollow and US 340, about 3 miles south of the Bentonville Post Office. *There is no parking where the trail intersects US 340.*

Directions. From the signpost marking the entrance to SNP, take the blue-blazed Thompson Hollow Trail 0.4 miles to the intersection with the blue-blazed Tuscarora. Turn right onto the Tuscarora, which begins with a short descent on an old woods road. This trail winds over several small hills, down into hollows, and in 1.8 miles from the turn onto the Tuscarora, crosses a small stream at Sandbank Hollow. In less than 0.1 mile after the stream crossing, you will reach the park boundary. For the next mile, the trail continues on private land, along old roadbeds. Exercise care in following the blazes. Just before reaching US 340, the trail passes through a stone gate and under a railroad, before reaching a gravel driveway. When you reach US 340, retrace your steps.

Hike 8. Tuscarora/Overall Run/Beecher Ridge Loop (strenuous).

Distance: 9.3 miles

Elevation Change: Approximately 2000 feet.

This loop hike takes you past the highest waterfall in SNP, Big Falls, at 93 ft. You can hike in either direction from the intersection with the Overall Run Trail. The steepest section is along Overall Run/Tuscarora Trail.

Directions. From the pilar marking the entrance into SNP, continue uphill along the Thompson Hollow Trail 0.4 mile to where it ends at the intersection with the Tuscarora Trail. Go straight ahead on the Tuscarora, for about 0.3 mile to the intersection with the Overall Run Trail. Turn right onto the Overall Run Trail. In 0.5 mile, reach the concrete signpost marking the intersection with the Overall/Beecher Ridge Connector Trail. In 0.7 mile, reach the signpost

marking the intersection with the Beecher Ridge Trail. This yellow-blazed trail climbs to a high point of 1804 feet at the top of Beecher Ridge, before climbing more steeply for the remainder of the 3.1 mile trail. At the intersection of the Matthews Arm Trail (approximately 3000 feet), turn left, traveling about 0.2 to the intersection with the blue-blazed Tuscarora/Overall Run Trail. This trail descends steeply along Overall Run in a series of waterfalls and cascades, but begins much higher than the stream. In about 0.4 miles, there will be a large rock outcropping to the left, with Big Run Falls running into the valley. Over the next 1.2 miles, there will be three crossings of Overall Run. In 0.6 mile after the last stream crossing, reach the signpost indicating the split between the Overall Run Trail and the Tuscarora. Turn right onto the Tuscarora Trail, completing the loop, and return along the Tuscarora to the Thompson Hollow Trail intersection, and return to the SNP boundary marker, and from there to the parking area.

Hike 9. Tuscarora/Overall Run/Heiskell Hollow Loop (super strenuous).

Distance: Approximately 10.2 miles

Elevation Change: Approximately 2200 feet.

Directions: From the pillar marking the entrance into SNP, continue uphill along the Thompson Hollow Trail 0.4 mile to where it ends at the intersection with the Tuscarora Trail. Go straight ahead on the Tuscarora, for about 0.3 mile to the intersection with the Overall Run Trail. Turn right onto the Overall Run Trail. In 0.5 mile, reach the concrete signpost marking the intersection with the Overall/Beecher Ridge Connector Trail. Continue along the Connector Trail for about 0.7 miles, passing the intersection with Beecher Ridge Trail. The remainder of the connector trail (about 0.6 miles) is a relatively straight trail running up to a ridge line and down the other side. When you reach the intersection of the yellow-blazed Heiskell Hollow Trail, turn left and head uphill. The 1.2 miles involves a climb of about 600-700 feet; over the next 0.6 mile, you will climb another 700 feet before reaching the intersection with the Weddlewood Trail. Turn left. This trail follows the ridgeline, but climbs about 300 more feet in about a mile. At the intersection of the Matthews Arm Trail (blue-blazed), turn left and walk about 0.5 miles, passing the intersection of the Beecher Ridge Trail on the left, before reaching the Tuscarora/Overall Run Trail.

Turn left onto this trail, which descends steeply along Overall Run in a series of waterfalls and cascades, but begins at a much higher elevation than the stream and gradually approaches it. In about 0.4 miles, there will be a large rock outcropping to the left, with Big Run Falls (at 93 feet, the highest waterfall in SNP) running into the valley. Over the next 1.2 miles, there will be three crossings of Overall Run. In 0.6 mile after the last stream crossing, reach the signpost indicating the split between the Overall Run Trail and the Tuscarora. Turn right onto the Tuscarora Trail, completing the loop, and return along the Tuscarora to the Thompson Hollow Trail intersection, and return to the SNP boundary marker, and from there to the parking area.

Hike 10. Gooney Manor Loop (moderate to strenuous).

Distance: Approximately 7 miles

Elevation Change. Approximately 500 feet.

Hiking “the Loop” involves walking along paved country roads, with a short stretch along a slightly busier paved road (Bentonville Road). Each year, this loop is used for a race, called the Greasy-Gooney 10K, which is named for the two streams (“runs”) that cross, recross, and parallel the loop. Many local residents hike all or parts of this loop throughout the day, enjoying the pastoral scenes, livestock, wildlife, ponds, streams, and the views of the mountains that form the southwest border of the Browntown Valley.

Directions. From the community center, turn left. Browntown Road becomes Gooney Manor Loop in 0.2 miles. The road makes a sharp left in about 0.5 miles, then splits, with Fetchett going straight, and Gooney Manor Road turning right. Continue on the Loop. In about one mile, the road makes a sharp turn to the right. The Browntown Trail’s trailhead is at this turn, but it is unmarked.

The road becomes bordered by woods, first on the left, then on both sides. Historic Cool Springs church, and the spring for which it is named, are both at about 0.7 miles from the Browntown Trail trailhead. In about 0.3 miles, the local chapter of the Isaac Walton League (an American environmental organization founded in 1922 that promotes natural resource protection and outdoor recreation) has its headquarters, which contains some lovely, but private, hiking trails. Shortly thereafter, the road becomes bordered with a series of old stone fences. It reaches its highest elevation, at about 1300 feet, at the aptly-named “Top of the Loop” road. After a sharp bend to the right, Greasy Creek reaches the road, and runs alongside it for about 2 miles, until “the Loop” rejoins Bentonville Road. From Bentonville Road until returning to Browntown, the hiker should be mindful of vehicles and walk facing traffic. After passing the OJ Rudicille General Store (where a cold soft drink or an ice cream may be had), cross over Gooney Creek for the last time on one of the last paved one-lane bridges in Warren County, turn left onto Browntown Road, and return to the Community Center.

We hope you enjoy these hikes in and around Browntown. Remember to Leave No Trace as you hike!