

Day 35, June 4th - Blacksburg, VA

Took me 8 days to hike the 163 miles from Damascus to Blacksburg, where I am currently visiting a friend. I took out of Damascus with a vengeance, hot on the trail of the OTHER Penny Whistle. I caught up with her + her partner Tron after 2 1/2 days, and she accepted my challenge to duel. We decided to do it that evening at Partnership Shelter, so we could enlist other hikers to judge the contest. I hiked with Penny + Tron for the rest of the day, and by evening we were fast friends. They are some of the coolest people I've met on the trail! I decided it was an honor to share a name with her, so instead of duelling for the name we had the Thruhiker Penny Whistle Championships 2009! We each played 2 songs, and each played very well. Our judges refused to declare a winner: "You're both good!" they said. So it

is a stalemate for now - maybe we'll \ominus
have a re-match later in the summer.

I out-distanced Penny + Tron the next day (sadly), and continued north at my own pace. One good thing about hiking fast is that I have caught up with lots of the women on the trail! I hiked for a day with several of them, and it was wonderful to share a little female conversation after so long! Most of them started 2-4 weeks before I did, and I outdistance them all after a day.

All this has me thinking about my fierce independence + ambition on one hand and my need for meaningful relationships on the other. This hike is a microcosm of my life in that way - perhaps I will take this opportunity to experiment with new answers to that question. I like hiking fast, but I really miss having friends in camp at night!

P.S. I am now known as "Penny Whistle the Dueller." The other Penny is "Penny Whistle the Carnivorous."

Day 39, June 10 - Daleville, Virginia

After a lovely visit with my friend

Reilly in Blacksburg, I am back on
the trail. What should greet me at
the first shelter I came to but a
note from Plunder, my old friend from
the Smokies! He had caught up to me
during my 2 days in Blacksburg and
was now one day ahead of me! His
note said: "P.W. the D.: I challenge
you to catch up to me!"

Now, I am not called "the Dueller"

for nothing: I cannot resist a challenge!
This hike has shown me that competitiveness
is much more deeply rooted in my
personality than I thought, and it
seems that since acquiring my epithet
I may have become even more
competitive. I was overjoyed to
hear that Plunder was still on the
trail (last I heard he was down
with an injury somewhere behind me)
and very happy to once again have

someone to chase. It motivates me ^Q
like nothing else can.

So I took off after Plunder, and hiked 28 miles that day. Along the way I ~~had~~ encountered another note from him: "P.W. the D.: I retract the challenge. I decided to hike 25+ mile days." I did not accept this retraction, and decided to be good-naturedly offended at the implication that I can't catch someone hiking 25-mile days.

The next day I hiked 32 miles, my longest day yet. It was brutally hot and humid, with some steep climbs and long ridge hikes with no water. The first 21 miles was tough. I hiked the last 11 miles after dinner in the cool evening, and the last 4 after dark which was even nicer. I'll admit I hiked that last bit just to catch up with Hoover, who I'd met earlier

that day. He is trying to do the
trail in 100 days, and is the first
person I've met who is definitely
faster than me. Others come close,
but Hoover leaves me in the dust.

Next day I hiked 22, seeing
Hoover throughout the day - he takes nice
long breaks, but I have to get up
early & hike late just to keep up.
Toward the end of the day an alarming
thing happened - Plunder was no longer
signing the registers! Somehow I
had gotten AHEAD of him! Was he
injured again? Why hadn't I seen
him? "He probably just stopped at the
grocery store in Catawba," observed
Hoover, who was following my dramatic
chase with some amusement. I left
Plunder a note in the next register:
"I challenge you to catch up with me!"

Hoover and I spent some time on
top of McAfee's Knob, supposedly the

best view in Virginia. I got to Tinker Cliffs around sunset, and liked that view much better. I stopped to take pictures, play my penny whistle, and let the breeze dry my sweaty clothes (another hot day!).

Virginia has great wildlife - tons of deer (and fawns!), bears, raccoons, coyotes, bobcats. And lots of snakes. I see Black Racers every day, and garter snakes + green snakes several times a week. I saw a 4-foot rattlesnake on top of Pearis Mountain, as big around as my upper arm! Last night I think I saw my first Copperhead, but it slithered away so fast when the light of my headlamp hit it so I couldn't see its head well enough to confirm that it was actually a poisonous viper. I laid out my bedding a few dozen yards away (all the other campsites were full) and slept under the stars, confident that it was far

too intelligent a creature to approach
a large mammal like me during the
night. Well, pretty confident - it did take
me a bit longer than usual to fall
asleep!

Today I hiked into Daleville to
resupply, and called Plunder on his
cell phone: "I hiked 32 miles to catch
up with you, where are you?" I
demanded when I left a message.
A minute later I saw him come
walking across the grocery store
parking lot! Turns out he yellow-blazed
(hitchhiked) here from Catawba, skipping
20 miles of trail. He feels very
guilty about this, since he used to be
a real purist. I put it down to the
influence of Bullet, ~~the~~ our happy-go-lucky
friend from Florida who yellow- and blue-
blazes whenever he feels like it. But the
important thing is that now I get to
hike with Plunder and have both

Companionship and long days. Very ⑥ exciting.

Right now we are relaxing under a shade tree by the grocery store, eating continuously and waiting for the hottest part of the day to pass. We've swapped many stories of old friends and people we've met.

Apparently he convinced Union Break to hike a 40-mile day with him a few weeks ago! My record is only 32, so I have some catching up to do!

Soon, we'll be back on the trail - headed north, always north.

Day 52, June 26th - Blue Ridge Summit, PA

I think maybe I am done being competitive for a while. I am utterly exhausted. Yesterday I completed the 4-state challenge: I hiked From the Virginia border, through West Virginia and Maryland, to the Pennsylvania border in one day, a distance of 43.3 miles. I hiked it by myself, slowed down a little too much during the hottest part of the day, and ended up hiking the last 8 miles after dark. Unfortunately that included a steep, rocky downhill section that was difficult to follow and went very slowly by headlamp. Only sheer force of will kept me moving, and I didn't reach the state line until 1:30am, after having been on the trail 21 hours straight.

I threw down my sleeping mat behind a wooden picnic pavillion, assuming nobody would be around in the wee hours of the morning. An hour later I awoke to the sound of two drunken male voices very close. No chance of moving away without being heard - I was pretty scared and prayed hard that they wouldn't see me. But they did see me, from the picnic platform ten feet above, and called down to me. I gave them a fake name. "And who's the other person with you?" they asked. What other person? I was clearly alone - were they so drunk they were seeing double? I thought fast: "That's Billy."

"You boyfriend + girlfriend?"

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"Yeah."

"You swingers?"

"No."

"Oh." That established, they chattily moved on to other topics of conversation, and turned out to be quite harmless. After an hour or so they left me and "Billy Tyler," my imaginary boyfriend to sleep. By that time I'd figured out that in the dark they'd mistaken my backpack for a person sitting against the wall. I have been trying to pick a name for my pack, and had almost settled on "Malvolio" (a somewhat insulting Shakespearean reference), but after last night there's no question - my backpack's name is definitely "Billy Tyler"!

All these adventures came after a lonely 3-day visit with my friend David, who works on an organic farm in Northern Virginia; good conversation, plentiful fresh food, and even a contra dance in D.C.! It was a nice treat after keeping up with Hoover for 12 days (no one else has kept pace with him for more than 4). After day 7 he actually started talking to me, and we had some great conversations about religion (he is a Southern Baptist), libertarianism vs. anarchism, the free market, etc. He is one of those rare people you can have an intelligent political conversation with even though you disagree about all of the particulars. I find those are the most thought-provoking exchanges

anyway. In Berkeley it got boring ③ talking to people with identical politics all the time.

I outdistanced Plunder only a few days after catching up to him - not on purpose, and I kept expecting him to catch up, but now I've taken 3 days off and there's still no sign of him. No idea what happened there.

Well, I'm going to take a well-earned nap + let my battle scars heal: painful stiffness in my left shin, a blister on my right heel, and chafing/heat rash in too many places to mention. I think I may finally be ready to slow down a bit in Pennsylvania, which would be good for both my body and my social life.

My Southern friends approached the Mason-Dixon line with some caution, but I for one am glad to be back in the North! I can sense the reduced racism + sexism all around, like a sudden ~~big~~ change in barometric pressure. The South was very hospitable, but I heard some appalling things said there (by townsfolk, rarely hikers). It's good to be home!

-Penny Whistle the Dueller

Day 55, June 29, 2009

Boiling Springs, PA

I am happy to report that my 4-state-challenge limp is completely gone, my sleep deficit is greatly reduced, and life on the trail is back to normal.

I passed the 1/2 way point yesterday, and find that all my doubts about this trip have melted away with that milestone. Barring a major injury, I know I will finish! I celebrated the occasion in the traditional way — by attempting the half gallon challenge; eating a 1/2 gal of ice cream in one hour. I failed miserably and had to throw a third of it away. That is the first challenge I have failed to meet since I started — clearly I am a better hiker than speed-eater.

So far the Pennsylvania trails are flat and smooth, and the weather lovely! Love to all, Penny Whistle the Dueller