

Chestnut Ridge Trip Report by Dave Lines



“Perfect weather” --- two words that best described this trip. It was already 59 degrees at 4 am in La Plata and stayed that warm on the entire 178 mile drive to the Shenandoah Valley. From the Burger King where we met in Staunton to the farm where we had permission to park at the foot of Chestnut Ridge, the temperature “dropped” to 51 degrees. And during the rest of the day --- despite an overcast sky --- the temperature rose to the mid 70’s. Incredible for late March!

We arrived about 9:15 am at the farmhouse and I held a safety brief. I also reminded folks (six of us – John B., Ralph B., Joe, Wendy, Leo and myself) what to expect on the hike to the top. 3 of us had been here before – and 3 were first timers. Lots of enthusiasm – everyone was looking forward to finding some crystals – especially after our 6 year hiatus. I told them to start the climb while I first visited the neighbor because I would catch up later. At least that was my intent.



That all changed when I visited the next door neighbor with whom I had called previously to let him know our plans. The short version is that I talked another 30 minutes with him and his visiting son (from Florida), so it was 9:45 a.m. when I started up the mountain to mark the trail with surveyor tape for everyone to follow. In reality, everyone was so far ahead that my marking a trail was a bit irrelevant except for the trip back down the mountain. About ¼ of the way up, I heard someone pounding on a rock --- it was Ralph and he said that was he was going to stay there. About the same time, I passed Leo. Continuing up, I passed all the familiar landmarks and about 100 yards from the top, I could hear voices. But when I finally reached the top about 11:00 a.m. (I am not as fast as I used to be), no one was in sight. Not a soul. I whistled and “yahooped” --- no replies. So I started looking around.



The area had not been visited for several years --- lots of fallen leaves and old limbs covered the ground --- and the crystals. I found one area where someone had dug a large hole about 2 feet deep. There was a pile of dirt and rocks next to it and some quartz crystals showing. I picked up a few and moved over several feet to the left where I scraped away the surface leaves and started digging gently with my rock hammer. Almost immediately, I began finding small clusters and single crystals which I set aside. About then, I heard Leo below me talking to someone. It turned out to be Wendy who was about 150 yards from the top on a very steep slope --- she said she was finding a few, but I recommended she keep coming up the mountain to the top where it was easier.



Leo had followed the marked trail and soon was up near me. I suggested he try a nearby “stump hole” (when a large tree falls with its rootball attached, the hole that is left is a “stump hole”). He dug in that hole for the rest of the day --- with good success. A few minutes later, John showed up and I pointed out the crystals that were on the dirt/rock pile next to me. He was elated and, within a few minutes,

showed me a nice 3" cluster which he declared was "the biggest crystals he had ever found". He was a very happy first timer to this fine old mountain!



About then, I remembered a homemade steel pick/mattock that I had previously hidden up near the top, so I started looking for it --- I could not find it, but I did find an old sifting screen with a rotten wooden frame. The 1/2" mesh screen was still okay, so I knocked off the rotten wood, folded up the sides of the wire hardware cloth and made quite an acceptable sifter. I returned to my spot and started sifting the dirt as I removed it from the hole with a garden trowel. I put the singles in a plastic bag and, after removing the red dirt with a stiff brush to determine the quality of the crystals, I set the clusters aside.



Another few minutes later, we welcomed Wendy who was "bright red" and sweaty. (This mountain will do that to just about everyone!) After looking around, she picked a spot about 20 feet to my right and

started finding crystals as soon as she pushed aside the leaves. Another happy rockhound. And, after brushing the dirt off some of the "larger rocks" that she was finding, she discovered several nice crystal clusters that she had missed. She was thrilled.

Around noon, Joe showed up. He had been looking for an outcrop which he remembered from a previous trip. According to Joe, the outcrop had been laced with cracks and crevices filled with crystals and he had been thinking about it for years since. But he could not locate it. He was a bit frustrated and tired since he had wasted 2 hours searching --- all the while carrying an 8 pound hammer that he had planned to use. When I showed him my bag of crystals, he snapped out of it, got a screen out of his backpack and started sifting for crystals about 15 feet to my left. He hit pay dirt immediately. In short order, Joe had a good pile of singles. Unfortunately, during his enthusiasm, his foot nudged his bucket over and it began rolling downhill – slowly at first, then picking up speed. It was a little sickening to watch, but also – I admit --- somewhat humorous. That bucket rolled and tumbled furiously down the mountain at least 100 yards scattering its contents the entire way. Poor Joe! But I must give credit to him --- he did not get upset or mad --- and he went all the way down that steep dropoff, retrieved his bucket and returned to the top picking up every scrap of paper and stuff that was scattered along the way. My hat is off to him!



Joe went back to sifting for crystals and persuaded John, who had been testing several spots without much success, to come over between Joe and me to sift. In this new location, John found a lot of nice crystals including some double terminated ones and some nice small clusters.

Eventually, Ralph arrived. He said he had found some very good crystals down below where I had seen him. He had broken them out of a large boulder. He said they were good quality crystals with sharp clean points. He talked with us for a few minutes, then walked off looking for another area. About 2 p.m. he returned and Joe decided to go back down the mountain with him. The rest of us kept digging until about 3 p.m. when we stopped to high grade our finds, wrap our clusters and pack them for the trip back down to the cars. We also spent a good deal of time filling in our holes and covering the area over with leaves and old tree branches to protect the soil from erosion. In the process, we found a few old plastic soda bottles and took them back with us. Our group did a great job, because when we left, you could hardly tell where we had been digging.

We four left the top about 4 p.m. and removed our surveyor tape as we descended. John was the speediest of our group and he went down and returned to help the rest of us. Wow – that was super! Joe and Ralph were still pounding on rocks when we reached them. Ralph joined us and said he had had enough and that his legs felt like “noodles”. This mountain will do that!

Near the bottom, John came back a third time and took my bucket of specimens, while I diverted across the hillside to the neighbor’s house to thank them again. We (Joe, too) all rejoined about 5:30 p.m. at the vehicles where the air temperature (according to my vehicle) was still 71 degrees. Three of us (Leo, Wendy and me) decided we would attend the Ruritan “All-You-Can-Eat Spaghetti Dinner” that we had seen advertised to be held at the Community Center in Deerfield on our way home. John decided to start his drive back, while Joe returned to pick up his heavy bucket of rocks. Joe and Ralph said they planned to drive directly home.

During our return to Deerfield, I stopped our caravan on the paved road --- there was no shoulder --- (with the truck flashers on for safety) and proceeded to wash my face and hands to remove some of the dirt and grime with some cold, clean spring water which was coming out of a hose held up by an old wooden post right beside the road in front of an old house. In the country, that is a hospitable way to help travelers like us. Spring water has been flowing out of that hose ever since I can remember --- at least for the last 20 years that I have been going to Chestnut Ridge.

By the way, the spaghetti dinner was great. I never ate beyond the first plate full because I made the mistake of telling the fellow serving that I was hungry. He heaped up my plate about 3 inches deep! Then we had cake for desert. What a meal!

It was another enjoyable trip and everyone stayed safe. See you next time.