

“Earthen Paradise” Field Trip Report by Dave Lines



Visions of beautiful blue kyanite crystals danced in our heads as five members and one guest of our Southern Maryland Rock and Mineral Club converged on the entrance to “Earthen Paradise” --- a mostly undeveloped 102 acre parcel of woods hidden at the very end of a paved road near the hamlet of Prospect in Prince Edward County in south central Virginia. We arrived to find a propped up wooden pallet with a sign “Smile – You are On Camera” blocking the dirt road into the property. I removed the barrier and our 3 vehicles proceeded to a parking area past two BIG barking dogs --- one a rottweiler and the other a black lab mix. No one was home. I first decided to try to make peace with the dogs by sharing one of my lunch sandwiches with them. It worked and they calmed down. I then called the owner Jessica Callan who thought we were to arrive an hour later at 10 am. But not to worry because she directed us by cell phone where to go to start digging. She and her kids would arrive in about 30 minutes or so. Jessica mentioned that due to the heavy rain the night before we should be able to find plenty of kyanite right on the ground where we were parked. She was right as we immediately began spotting kyanite blades scattered everywhere we looked.

Amidst our initial excitement, we took a moment for a “before” picture of our group --- Dave, Carlos and his dad John, Rich, Sondra and her niece Ehren . Then we all walked the 100 yards or so down to the stream to find some kyanite. The path wound through a 70 acre area of cutover pine trees and was covered with weeds, small trees, stumps and piles of old logs and tree tops. Here and there were holes that had been previously dug in search of kyanite. And everywhere that there was any bare ground, we found loose blades of kyanite as well as kyanite embedded in schist and quartz.



The stream was in the woods and well shaded --- a very pleasant place to dig. The upstream portion of the stream was roped off to preserve it in its original natural state --- with clear spring water trickling over large mossy rocks and slabs of schist. Beautiful. The downstream portion of the stream was a different story with many signs of digging and sifting of the stream sand and gravel in search of kyanite.

We spread out along the stream. And each of us began to dig and screen the rocks and gravel in the stream bed. Some of us found kyanite on the surface and some found it screening. I chose to dig in a nearly dry "horseshoe shaped loop" of an old stream bed adjacent to the main stream. Nothing at first, but then as I dug deeper, I began to find loose crystals of kyanite as well as chunks of mica schist which contained blades of kyanite. Since the weather was cloudy during the first half of our visit, the kyanite looked gray in color. But later in the day, when I took some out into the sunlight, most of the kyanite was "see through blue" and very gemmy. Eureka! We found it!



At about 10 am or so, Jessica's oldest son Wyatt came down to the stream and introduced himself and said his Mom was up by the parking area and would be glad to show us around. I suggested to our group that they keep digging and I would collect the fee (\$20 per person because we were in a Rock Club) for everyone and deliver it to Jessica.

I (and John) then went up the Hill, met and paid Jessica, and we received a quick overview of the property from the hilltop above the parking area. About that time 2 more vehicles arrived --- Tom Leary and two newbies from the Tidewater (Virginia) Club. We did introductions and talked for about 10 minutes, while Tom was searching the ground in the parking lot and picking up blades of loose kyanite. He has incredibly good eyesight as well as a knack for spotting the not-so-obvious --- like a beautiful half-inch rectangular crystal of ilmenite (a titanium iron oxide) laying right on top!

John and I excused ourselves and returned to the stream to dig. Our group dug in various locations up and downstream along a 50 yard stretch, but the most productive spot was along the main stream where it took a sharp curve and a big loop to the right. On the inside of this looping curve, Tom Leary had previously started to cut a trench about 3 feet deep through the ten foot wide section of rock and gravel in the middle of the loop. When Tom arrived, our folks had abandoned the location and Tom resumed digging there. John joined Tom in the trench with Tom on one side and John on the other.



Meanwhile, I returned to dig more at my cut-off-old stream-loop. Rich had remained there and had done so-so finding kyanite. Eventually the 2 new men from Tidewater Club came by with Jessica leading them on a longer tour of the property. When they returned, I gave them my hole to continue digging in – they had found nothing thus far. I showed them where to dig and within a few minutes they found lots of small kyanite blades and schist chunks with embedded kyanite crystals.

I left them and Rich to join Tom and John at the trench. After watching them for a few minutes, I began to dig into the bank just upstream and adjacent to the trench. After about 20 minutes of digging out and removing sand and old leaves, I had created a hole about 4 feet wide and a foot or so deep. I removed several large rocks and began screening the gravel. I found some kyanite, but I needed to continue to dig into the stream bank in order to find more.

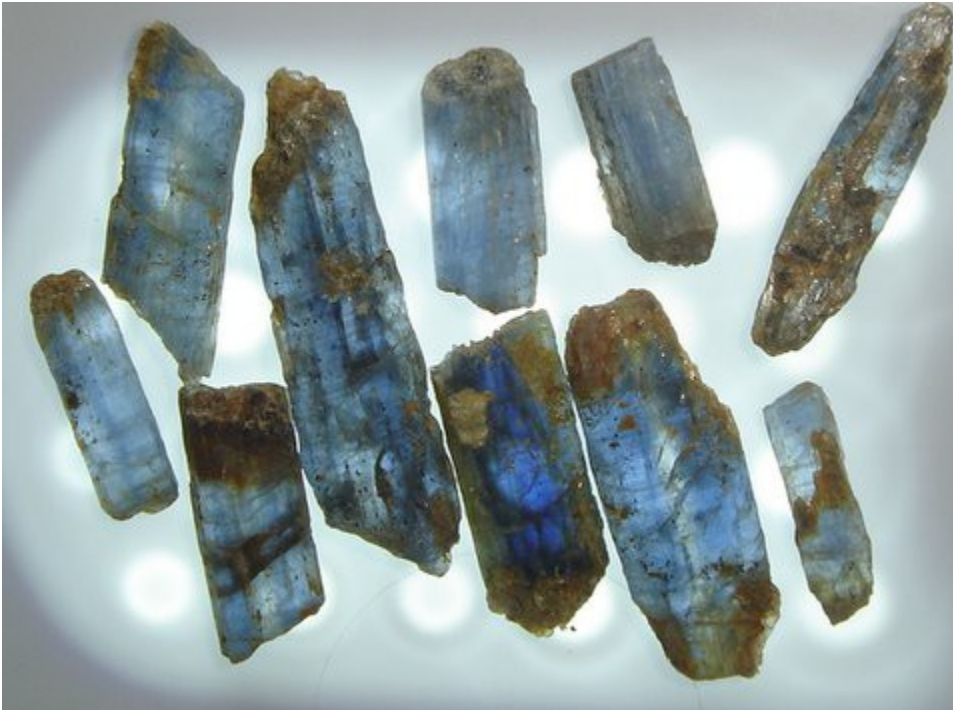


About that time, John generously offered me the area where he had been digging alongside Tom. I switched places with John and moved into the trench where my luck quickly improved with each screen that I washed off in the water. I steadily removed large pieces of rock that weighed up to 25 pounds each. As each large rock was removed, I dug out and screened the gravel from the water filled trench. I was getting 10 to 20 pieces of kyanite both loose and embedded in each screen of gravel. After an hour of this, I offered the site back to John, but he suggested that we go find Rich and let him have a turn in the trench. We did and Rich moved to the trench and continued to do well. Meanwhile, I tried to find Sondra and her niece, but they had left. Then I received a text from Sondra saying they were too tired to return to digging, but that they had had a good time and were returning home.

I decided to explore some of the property and I followed the path about a half mile through the woods along the stream. It crossed another stream which was rocky and steeper and I picked up several pieces of kyanite just lying on the surface of the gravel. I then followed the stream all the way to a large creek that marked the far end of Earthen Paradise property. The creek was about 20 feet wide and about 2 feet deep.

I returned to the trench area by about 2:30 pm and noticed that Tom was gone. He had panned out the material collected in a simple, but very effective, sluice consisting of an 8 foot long section aluminum gutter with the bottom lined with ribbed rubber matting. In his gold pan, there were several pieces of gold --- very small but definitely gold. Throughout the day as he was digging, Tom had been putting a handful of sand at the top of his sluice every 15 minutes or so. And as the water in the trench rose, it would eventually wash away the sand with a rush of water, collecting the fine gold in the ribbed matting. Genius!

At about 2:45 pm, I suggested that we start preparing to go home. The rest of our group agreed and we packed up, said our good byes, thanked Jessica and walked back up the hill to the parking area. In the parking area, we (minus Sondra and Ehren) posed for an “after” picture. Tom and his friends soon joined us and we all turned our attention to finding more kyanite lying on the surface of the parking area. It was everywhere and some was a VERY clear blue. Then Tom showed us a fist sized chunk of schist that was filled with nice long blades of really blue kyanite which he had just found in the path coming up the same hill we had walked. Incredible. He showed us another piece that he had previously found and cleaned with muriatic acid – it was beautiful. I took a picture of the 2 pieces lying next to each other --- his new piece was the better of the two.



Tom then showed us some gold he had found with the Central Virginia Prospectors. Exquisite gold with some of the pickers the size of a pea. Tom then invited our club to join him on a gold panning trip near Willis Mountain. We would have pay a guest fee of \$10 each and sign a waiver. Sounds good to me.

We all said our goodbyes once again and left for home about 3:30 pm. Overall the trip was excellent – everyone was pleased with their finds and we were safe. [FYI, about 5 miles away, Rich and I stopped at “Scuffling Acres” farm and talked with Mr. and Mrs. Simpson (aka Mary Kay) about their amethyst dig site. She gave us permission to check it out and we did. The trench was HUGE compared to my previous visit there. It was at least 15 feet deep and up to 40 feet wide. The vegetation was very sparse --- short crabgrass – and we spotted smoky quartz and amethyst scattered around everywhere. We picked up a couple of handfuls and gave it to the two ladies from North Carolina who were there looking for crystals. More later on a possible future trip to this location.]