By Trail Contributor: Jeff Monroe

This a lollipop (or lariat) hike, almost entirely within federally designated wilderness, that takes you to the largest watershed in Shenandoah National Park. It also reaches the most remote parts of the entire park – you will find yourself over four miles away from the closest public trailhead. For this reason, this is also a great route for an overnight backpack, as there are multiple fine campsites along Big Run (though no facilities – so be sure to know how to camp using Leave No Trace principles!)

This hike alternately can be completed as a clockwise loop (heading downhill to Big Run from the first trail intersection) or counter-clockwise (remaining on the Brown Mountain Trail). If hiking this as a day hike, we recommend descending to Big Run at the beginning. If you first hike the entire Brown Mountain Trail, you will have an unrelenting climb of 1400 feet over the last three miles of this hike. Hiked in either direction, there is a stiff climb over the last 0.7 miles of the trek, as you return to the high point of the journey – the trailhead.

This is a challenging hike, so here are a few caveats. Be sure to bring plenty of water and/or a filter if hiking this route in the summer. Parts of this loop are exposed to the sun and can be very dry. Also bring a good map of the area as there are multiple trail intersections along the way. The best trail map for this area is the PATC Map 11 – Shenandoah National Park South District (available for sale within the Park), as it is regularly updated and checked for accuracy. And Big Run may be difficult or impossible to ford in times of high water. A good map can help you plan for alternative routes if you are challenged in any stream crossings.

Mile 0.0 – Parking for this hike is located at the Skyline Drive's Brown Mountain Overlook, located just north of Milepost 77. A short rock wall behind the overlook is where the blue blazed Brown Mountain Trail starts. Take this downhill from the overlook.

Mile 0.7 – Reach a saddle where the Rocky Mountain Run Trail meets the blue blazed Brown Mountain Trail. You can choose either direction here, but turning left down the Rocky Mountain Run Trail is recommended and is described here. The trail dips and rises several times before summiting Rocky Mountain, with occasional nice views along the way. Shortly afterward is the best overlook on the trail, looking west towards the Skyline Drive and your vehicle – waiting for you at the trailhead. If you still have a snack or water, you will want to stop here and enjoy the view.

Continuing on the Big Run Portal Trail past the bridge would take you out of federally designated wilderness. The trail continues a little further to the Rockytop Trail, which heads back to the Skyline Drive several miles south of your trailhead. There is no public access to this valley from outside of the national park. It is as remote as you can get in Shenandoah National Park.

Mile 5.3 – The intersection with the blue blazed Brown Mountain Trail is here, but continue on the Big Run Portal Trail for a few more feet to come to a metal bridge spanning Big Run. Here you can get the full effect of the "Portal," which are high rocks on either side of the stream. This bridge is a wonderful spot to soak in the solitude, listen to the birds, and look at the trees. Take your time here!

Make sure you have enough water for the rest of your hike. Once you leave Big Run there are no more water sources on this hike. This hike’s entire climb lies in front of you, as you are at the low point of the hike right now, and the high point is back where you left your vehicle.

Mile 6.5 – Backtrack a few yards to the intersection with the Rocky Mountain Trail and take a left at the concrete mileage post. Take a right at the second post, only a few feet further, and start climbing Brown Mountain. As you climb, you will notice that there is not much tree cover in this part of the hike. This is the result of a 1986 fire that was started, like the 2016 fire, by a camper's careless use of fire. Another reminder to please be careful if making this an overnight!

Mile 7.4 – After ascending multiple switchbacks over rocky trail where you can catch views of the Big Portal area as you climb, and further west see the southern tip of the Massanutten range, you will crest the top of Brown Mountain and come to a rocky area with some obstructed views of nearby mountains. Only about 500 feet further, if you care to climb the steep slope on your right side of the trail after the trail cuts to the left of the ridge, you crest at a spot with spectacular views. But it isn’t marked, and there is no trail.

Mile 8.7 – The trail dips and rises several times before summiting Rocky Mountain, with occasional nice views along the way. Shortly afterward is the best overlook on the trail, looking west towards the Skyline Drive and your vehicle – waiting for you at the trailhead. If you still have a snack or water, you will want to stop here and enjoy the view.

Mile 9.6 – The trail drops off of the crest of Rocky Mountain and descends to complete your loop at the intersection with the Rocky Mountain Run Trail at a saddle in the ridge. The last 0.7 miles involves a backtrack uphill to the Skyline Drive and your vehicle.

Mile 10.3 – Return to the parking area and look back to check out the entire valley you traveled through.<0024>