

09

ROCK CREEK PARK: Wild Northern Section

KEY AT-A-GLANCE
INFORMATION

LENGTH: 9.3 miles (with shorter options)

CONFIGURATION: Modified loop

DIFFICULTY: Moderate

SCENERY: Gently rolling woodlands, stream valleys

EXPOSURE: Mostly shady; less so in winter

TRAFFIC: Usually very light to light; heavier on warm-weather evenings, weekends, holidays

TRAIL SURFACE: Mostly dirt or stony dirt; some pavement; rocky, rooty in places

HIKING TIME: 4.5–5.5 hours

SEASON: Year-round

ACCESS: Open daily, dawn–dusk

MAPS: USGS Washington West; PATC Map N; ADC Metro Washington; sketch map in free NPS Rock Creek Park brochure

FACILITIES: Toilets, water, phone at nature center (open Wednesday–Sunday, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.); toilets near Riley Spring Bridge (warm season only)

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Contact Rock Creek Park, (202) 895-6000 or www.nps.gov/rocr; read Gail Spilisbury's *Rock Creek Park*

IN BRIEF

The hilly and little-used woodlands of Rock Creek Park's northern section rank as one of Washington's best venues for off-street hiking in a wilderness-tinged setting.

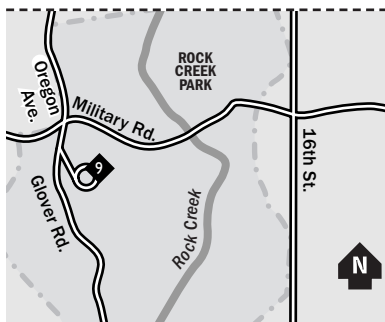
DESCRIPTION

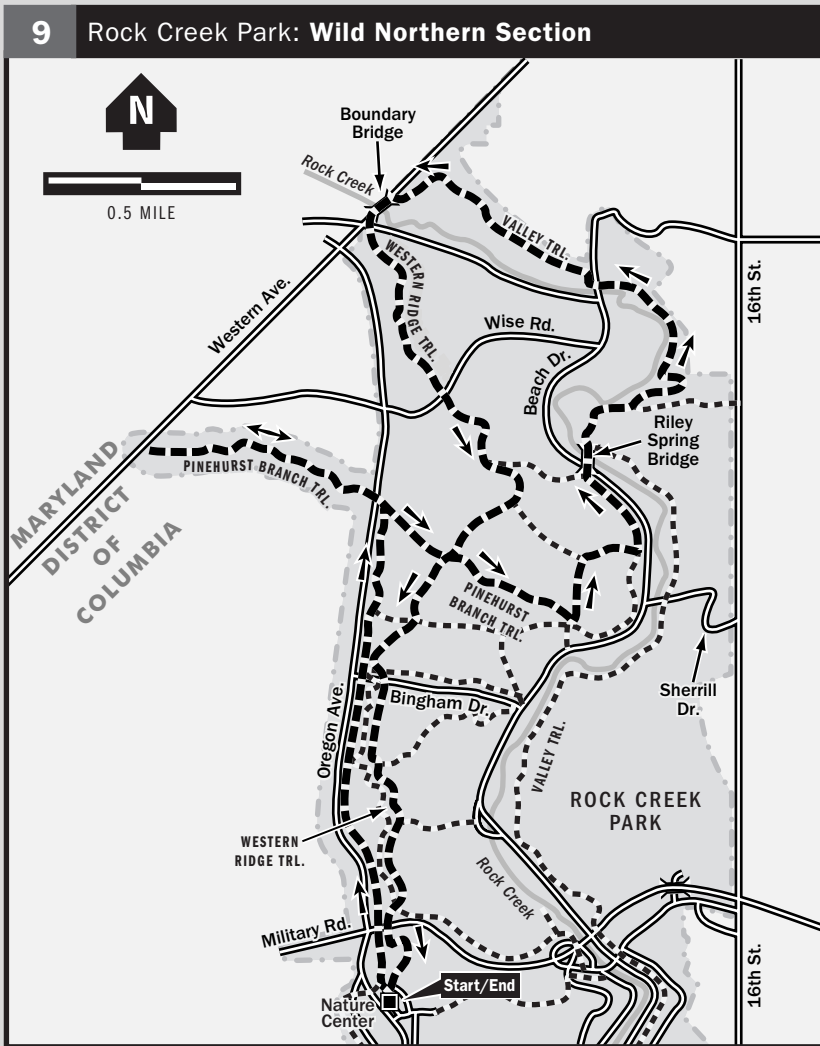
The same year that Congress accorded national park status to the three big chunks of California known as Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon, it also preserved a piece of its own backyard. It decreed that Rock Creek's valley would become "a pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people of the United States." That was in 1890. Today, covering about 2,100 acres, the park consists largely of woodlands and stream valleys that protect the environment and provide habitat for assorted flora and fauna. Most visitors head for the picnic areas or other recreation facilities. But

Directions

Head for Northwest Washington. From intersection of Connecticut and Nebraska avenues, head northeast on Nebraska for 0.4 miles. Turn easy (not sharp) right onto Military Road and drive east for 0.7 miles. Then turn right and south onto Glover Road to enter Rock Creek Park. Proceed for 0.4 miles, swinging left at fork and then taking first left to get to parking lot for Rock Creek Nature Center and Planetarium.

Or use Metro and your feet: From either Friendship Heights Metro station (Red Line) or Fort Totten Metro station (Red, Green lines), take Metrobus E2 or E3 along Military Road. Get off at Oregon Avenue (opposite Glover Road). From southeast corner of intersection, walk uphill on paved path for 0.2 miles to parking lot. Contact Metro, (202) 637-7000 or www.wmata.com.





informed hikers head for the hills and trails—and some also consult Gail Spilsbury’s heavily illustrated and history-rich *Rock Creek Park*.

This 9.3-mile hike consists of a modified loop that undulates enough to accumulate about 1,600 feet of elevation change. The major trails are blazed, named, and signposted. And there are several well-marked cross-park trails that you can use to create shorter hikes for yourself (see the map). Rain makes the unpaved trails muddy; horses make them even muddier. Beware occasional flooding and winter iciness, and do stay out of the poison ivy.

To get started from the nature center’s parking lot, pick up the nearby nature trail at the north end, at an “Edge of the Woods” sign. Bear right onto a paved



Hikers like to regroup at Boundary Bridge. Here (in back, from left) are veteran leaders Frank Turk, Ernie Bauer, and Paul Ray.

path next to a labeled chestnut oak. Proceed until you get to a small blue sign opposite a labeled spicebush. There, turn left onto a dirt path that takes the nature trail through the woods. At a paved woodland path, turn right and head downhill.

At Military Road, carefully cross and stay on the path as it goes uphill and back into the woods. For about 2 miles, follow the well-wooded western edge of the park northward. Watch for bikers; the path is one of the few off-road trails open to them in the park. The path gently curves, dips, and climbs as it passes through regal stands of mature tulip trees. After passing a fenced community garden on the right, cross a paved access road and jog to the left to pick up the path again and ignore whatever unpaved trails tempt you. Go through the same moves again when crossing a busier road (Bingham Drive). Then watch for a small yellow post next to trail junction. There, turn left for a side trip on the lovely Pinehurst Branch Trail.

The dirt trail follows Pinehurst Branch upstream for about 0.75 miles in a woodland corridor. Within 20 yards, cross Oregon Avenue, carefully, and look for the trail a few yards up on the right side of a driveway. Follow the yellow blazes as the trail winds through thickets and crisscrosses the stream. When the blazes end, you'll emerge in a residential area along Western Avenue, on the District-Maryland line. Look around, and then return to the yellow-post junction, but then keep going straight on what is the Pinehurst Trail for about 0.75 miles. Go straight through where the trail intersects the Western Ridge Trail. Then twice

cross the stream—Pinehurst Branch—to reach a point where several trails merge just upstream from the stream’s mouth on Rock Creek. That’s roughly the hike’s halfway point.

Cross the stream and turn left and then left again onto an unblazed dirt trail that goes uphill. At the top, turn right and descend on another unblazed trail, staying to the right at two successive forks. At an intersection just before a paved road (it’s Beach Drive), turn left onto an unblazed trail heading north. To the right, just across the drive, you’ll see and maybe hear the park’s northernmost picnic area. The trail stays in the woods and close to the drive. At a junction (past the toilets), turn right, carefully cross the road, and take Riley Spring Bridge across Rock Creek.

At a trail junction about 50 yards on, turn left onto the blue-blazed Valley Trail, the major north–south trail on the park’s eastern side. This northernmost segment is mostly a broad woodland path that curves westward across the park for almost 1.5 miles. In places, the nearby creek gives the impression of being a wilderness stream. Heading uphill, watch for an intersection overlooking a bend in the creek. Detour to the left (but not sharp left) and walk down about 40 yards to a rocky, off-the-beaten-trail spot where the slope is steep and the view is splendid. Then return to the main trail and continue.

The trail flattens out as it leaves the bluffs and eases across the creek’s wooded floodplain. After crossing a wooden bridge over a tributary (Fenwick Branch), either turn left to take the trail along the creek bank and under a road (West Beach Drive), or go straight and cross the road with due care (and dry feet, if the underpass is flooded). Then continue on the reunited trail, staying with the blue blazes but off the side trails.

If it’s spring, bear in mind that the stretch of trail leading to the Boundary Bridge passes through one of the District’s richest displays of wildflowers. So either soak up the color as you hike by, or slow down to savor whatever takes your fancy. At the bridge, pause to take in the view, and then move on.

A short paved path will take you to a small parking lot adjoining Beach Drive. Carefully cross the drive and, having just spent a few minutes in Maryland, head uphill on a narrow dirt trail marked with greenish blazes. It’s the Western Ridge Trail, the major north–south trail along the western side of the park, your route back to the trailhead, and near which you may see deer (but probably not the nocturnal coyotes known to be in this part of the park). On the 2.5-mile southbound journey, you’ll pass through mature woodlands. Along the way, watch on the left for a remarkable tulip tree with five full-sized trunks. At Wise Road, cross wisely. Then press on, past a couple of cross-park trails, the first of which leads to Riley Spring Bridge. After that, you’ll reach Pinehurst Branch and its trail—again. This time, cross both.

Walk through another intersection to reach Bingham Drive—again. Then take the paved path route back to the access road near the community garden. But this time, on emerging from the trees, turn left to walk along the blazed road. Just

before reaching a “Do Not Enter” sign, turn right and follow a dirt trail alongside a fenced paddock. At the far corner, turn left onto the reassuringly signposted Western Ridge Trail. Proceed into the woods and mostly downhill. Turn right at a junction (to the left is another cross-park trail) and continue, mostly upward. At the next junction, turn right (again, to the left is a cross-park trail), and then right again onto a paved trail leading a short distance to the paved trail on which you started out. Turn left and head for the trailhead.

To shorten the hike by 1.5 miles, don't do the side trip on the Pinehurst Branch Trail. Another shorter-hike option is to make use of the cross-park trails shown on the map.

NEARBY/RELATED ACTIVITIES

See and sample the activities listed in Hike 10, page 57. Consider joining the still-new advocacy group called the Friends of Rock Creek Park's Environment (FORCE), www.friendsofroccreek.org.