

Near the Hazel Mountain Overlook at sunrise.

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The 500 Mile Club

It's an elite group, but membership is open to anyone willing to go the distance in Shenandoah National Park.

—BY KIM O'CONNELL—

HEATHER ANTONACCI WAS LOOKING for just the right spot in Shenandoah National Park. She'd hiked in sub-freezing temperatures and in face-melting heat. She'd hiked in high wind, no wind, snow and rain. She'd hiked with friends and she'd hiked solo.

The Scottsville resident was carefully planning out her hikes so that she would complete her quest to hike every trail in the park in a memorable location. After some consideration, she chose the Stony Man Cliffs, a rocky overlook at the end of a steep climb to the park's second-highest summit at 4,011 feet. When she got there in June 2016 and stood beneath a bluebird sky, she flung out her arms in triumph. She had become, in that moment, a member of the Shenandoah 500 Mile Club.

Established in 1936, Shenandoah is a 196,000-

acre park in the Blue Ridge Mountains that attracts nearly 1.5 million visitors a year, many of whom come for Skyline Drive, the scenic roadway that traverses the length of the park.

In 2014, Lauralee Bliss, a long-distance hiker and writer in Charlottesville, launched the Shenandoah 500 Mile Club as a way to encourage people to get out of their cars and hike the park's more than 500 miles of trails.

Outdoor sports have always attracted "completists"—people who set out to attain any number of challenging goals, such as through-hiking the 2,100-mile Appalachian Trail (AT) or climbing all of Colorado's 53 "fourteeners," mountain peaks with a minimum elevation of 14,000 feet. In Virginia, hiking the 101 miles of the AT within Shenandoah was already a popular ambition. Bliss decided to

take it a step (or many steps) further.

"I've done all the trails in Shenandoah and done many of them multiple times," says the 55-year-old, who runs *BlissfulHiking.com*.

"After hearing about a similar program in the Great Smoky Mountains, I thought it would be great to have this kind of program here."

The program, which is not affiliated with the National Park Service, is run primarily through the Shenandoah National Park Hikers Facebook group, for which Bliss serves as administrator.

Hikers can download a spreadsheet, maintained by group member Bill Fawcett of Lacey Spring, in Rockingham County, which details every trail in the park, including name, location and distance, all tagged to the corresponding page in the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club's guidebook to the park. Currently the spreadsheet includes 511 miles of actual trails, but 500 was a neat round number to use for the program, explains Bliss. Also, new trails are sometimes added and others decommissioned, so the actual number could continue to fluctuate.)

Promoting the club is a group effort. For extra motivation, Antonacci designed a full-color patch that hikers can purchase from her directly once they've completed the 500 miles.

The embroidered patch features one of the park's signature black bears standing on the Stony Man Cliffs, as Antonacci herself once did, with a blazing sun in the background. (It took Antonacci about two years to earn her own patch, which she has sewn both on her day pack and on her backpack for longer trips.) Completers can also purchase a country-code-style car window decal that says "SHEN500."

"I found hidden treasures on every single hike in Shenandoah," says Antonacci, who owns Equus Springs Farm in Scottsville, where she teaches horseback riding. "Most people who visit the park will only see a very small percentage of it and go to the highest trafficked areas, such as Dark Hollow Falls or the Hawksbill summit. The Shen500 encourages people to explore the more remote and quiet corners of their park."

Trails in Shenandoah range from leg-stretchers such as the 1.3-mile Limberlost Trail to ghostly hikes past historic structures such as the Poccosin Mission to the all-day rock scramble up to the top of Old Rag Mountain.

Because of the range of trails and the availability of lodges, dining, and other visitor amenities, Shenandoah is a particularly welcoming place for all hikers, especially novices, Bliss says. The Shenandoah 500 can easily be done in sections, at one's own pace, although hardy souls could certainly tackle the whole thing in one epic trip too.

So far, 16 people (and one dog) have completed the 500 miles, according to Bliss, but she knows others who are hiking their way towards that milestone. Whether they get there or not, Bliss is just happy they're out on the trails. "The main idea is to get people out of their houses and enjoying the outdoors," she says. "I just wanted people to experience the park as I have and to enjoy hiking, and if the 500-mile goal helps motivate them, that's good too." 