

Appalachian Tundra

From atop a cluster of windswept boulders, the mountains undulate toward the horizon. A carpet of stunted coniferous trees, checkered by vast boggy meadows of low grass, fills the space between rocky outcrops and feels similar to what you'd find in the alpine tundras of Northern Canada. But I'm in the heart of the Appalachians.

This part of the 17,000-acre Dolly Sods Wilderness sits at upwards of 3,000 feet atop Western Virginia's Allegheny Plateau, bordered by nature preserves and national wildlife refuges, and criss-crossed with nearly 50 miles of trail. Before even leaving the Bear Rocks Trailhead, I'm greeted by a sweeping meadow full of low-growing grasses and sedges, wildflowers, and boulders, ending in a wall of pines stretching as far as the eye can see. The trail cuts through this idyllic meadow before entering the forest then quickly reopens into vast boggy lowlands with views of forested peaks begging to be traversed and explored.

Among the hiking trails in the wilderness, the 26-mile loop beginning here, tracing Red Creek (rust

colored thanks to the tannic acid released by decomposing plants) and Stonecoal Run is the best, rife with viewpoints overlooking the long ridge of the Allegheny Front to the east and the valleys of the Cheat River to the west, tumbling waterfalls, and countless protected campsites.

Looking out across the low red spruce, maple, and birch, over swampy meadows choked with cran and huckleberries, Appalachia has never felt so far north.

— SAM NORTON

RED TAPE

DOLLY SODS WILDERNESS

BEST MAP: Purple Lizard Maps' Dolly Sods-Seneca Rocks Lizard Map lays out many of the long list of campsites in this area.

BEST GUIDEBOOK: Allen de Hart and Bruce Sundquist's Monongahela National Forest Hiking Guide covers more than just Dolly Sods, but it's the most comprehensive guide to navigating this area's back-packing routes.

WHEN TO VISIT: Although the Dolly Sods Wilderness is open year-round, Forest Roads 19 and 75 are closed from January to April. Late summer to mid-fall are the most popular times to visit due to the comfortable temperatures, absence of swampy conditions, and lush foliage.

NEED TO KNOW: The military used the Dolly Sods Wilderness for mountain training during World War Two, so the Forest Service recommends not touching any potentially unexploded ordnance you come across.

TRAIL TOWN: The Dolly Sods lie in a sparsely-populated area of West Virginia, but the small twin towns of Davis and Thomas along U.S. Route 48 offer visitors plenty of lodging, restaurants, and gear shops.