



UPDATE — Camping on the cheap

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— The U.S. Forest Service calls them “restricted-use area” campsites. Campers who use the sites call them heavenly.

“You can’t beat these sites,” said Mike Bragg, a chemical worker from Winfield who spent two weeks camped at a restricted-use site along the Williams River near the Webster-Pocahontas county line. “They’re away from crowds, they’re quiet and they’re free.”

Under current Monongahela National Forest policy, campers may stay at 62 restricted-use area sites without paying nightly camping fees. Campers claim the sites on a first-come, first-served basis and may stay up to 14 days.

Thirty-four of the sites are located along two of West Virginia’s most popular trout streams, the Cranberry and Williams rivers in Webster and Pocahontas counties. Jane Bard, acting ranger for the Forest Service’s Gauley District, said the sites are heavily used.

“During the peak of the spring trout-fishing season, the sites are always full,” Bard said. “They also tend to be full on weekends through the summer, during miner’s vacation and during deer-hunting season.”

Each of the 30 Williams River sites has a parking spur, a picnic table, a fire ring with grill, a bear-proof trashcan and a lantern hanger. All sites can be used for tent or trailer camping. Several of the sites have pit-style toilets nearby.

Each of the 14 Cranberry sites is more rustic, with a picnic table, a lantern post and a trashcan. One pit toilet is located near sites 7 through 11.

Some Forest Service officials refer to the facilities as “dispersed sites,” because they tend to be strung out along roads that parallel rivers. Bragg believes the areas’ isolated nature adds to their appeal.

“I’ve stayed in campgrounds, and I like this better,” he said. “My grandpa brought us up here camping 50 years ago. I’ve camped here at least twice a year for the last 20 years.”

A 34-foot motor home keeps Bragg, wife Peggy and grandchildren Alexis, Donovan and Dorian comfortable during their stay.

“I have a generator for electricity, and we pump water from the river,” Bragg said.

Not all campers take such an elaborate approach. On any given day, the number of tents in the campsites tends to equal the number of trailers and motor homes.

Restricted-use sites also are available at Pocahontas County’s Bird Run and Island campgrounds. Williams and Cranberry sites are available from April 15 through Nov. 30. Island Campground sites close on Dec. 1, and Bird Run Campground sites close on Dec. 8.

Ranger Bard said Forest Service officials have spent the past several years upgrading many of the restricted-use sites.

“Partly, it’s been for environmental reasons,” she explained. “We want to have better control of the garbage and sewage that gets generated at these sites, but also we wanted to upgrade them because they’re so heavily used.”

The ongoing expense of upgrading and maintaining the sites has forced Forest Service administrators to propose a nightly fee for the sites.

“We’re asking for public comment on a proposal to start charging \$5 a night for those sites,” Bard said. “It hasn’t yet been approved, but the public comments we’ve received seemed pretty receptive toward it. As long as the money is used to enhance our management of those sites, people seem to be OK with the idea.”

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