

Surprise and Delight Hiking the Meadow River

Text and photographs by Ed Rehbein

Towering sandstone cliffs, a boulder-lined riverbed, rolling white-water rapids—sounds like the New River area, doesn't it? Now add a rock-walled grotto, a 30-foot sandstone pinnacle, a stone chapel, a couple of waterfalls, and (if the season is right) an ice angel! Where can you find all this? Not at the New River but along the lower Meadow River in Fayette and Nicholas counties. If I had only one day to hike in southern West Virginia, this is where I'd go.

My wife, Phyllis, and I have spent many happy hours hiking the cliffs of the New River Gorge, yet we both prefer the cliffs bordering the Meadow River. We have found them to be unsurpassed in beauty, size, and variety. Around every turn lies a surprise. It might be a bold rock buttress, a sheer cliff face, a cave, or an overhanging rock ledge that defies gravity. Or it might be something more subtle, such as intricately carved weathering patterns etched into the sandstone cliffs, or mosaics of red and brown hues created by the weathering of iron-bearing minerals in the rocks. For us, hiking here offers continual delight and discovery.

With its headwaters in northern Summers County, the Lower Meadow River is fed by a series of glades, meadows, and wetlands known as the Big Meadows. This is where the river gets its name. Though born in the serenity of meadows and glades, the river's last few miles are anything but calm. Indeed, its lower reaches embody the wild character of West Virginia.

As the Meadow River approaches its confluence with the Gauley River at Carnifex Ferry, it picks up slope and speed. The last six miles of the river drop at a rate of 94 feet per mile. By comparison, the Upper Gauley River drops 28 feet per mile, and on the best stretch of whitewater on the New River, the slope is about 20 feet per mile. By any standard, the Meadow River's last run is swift and steep.

Phyllis and I also appreciate the Meadow River's accessibility. It is surprisingly easy to get to this untamed mountain

river. The best access is at the Kevin Ritchie Memorial Bridge, which crosses the Meadow River on U.S. Highway 19. (The West Virginia Legislature named the bridge in honor of Kevin Ritchie, a 34-year-old EMS paramedic who was killed while assisting accident victims on the bridge.)

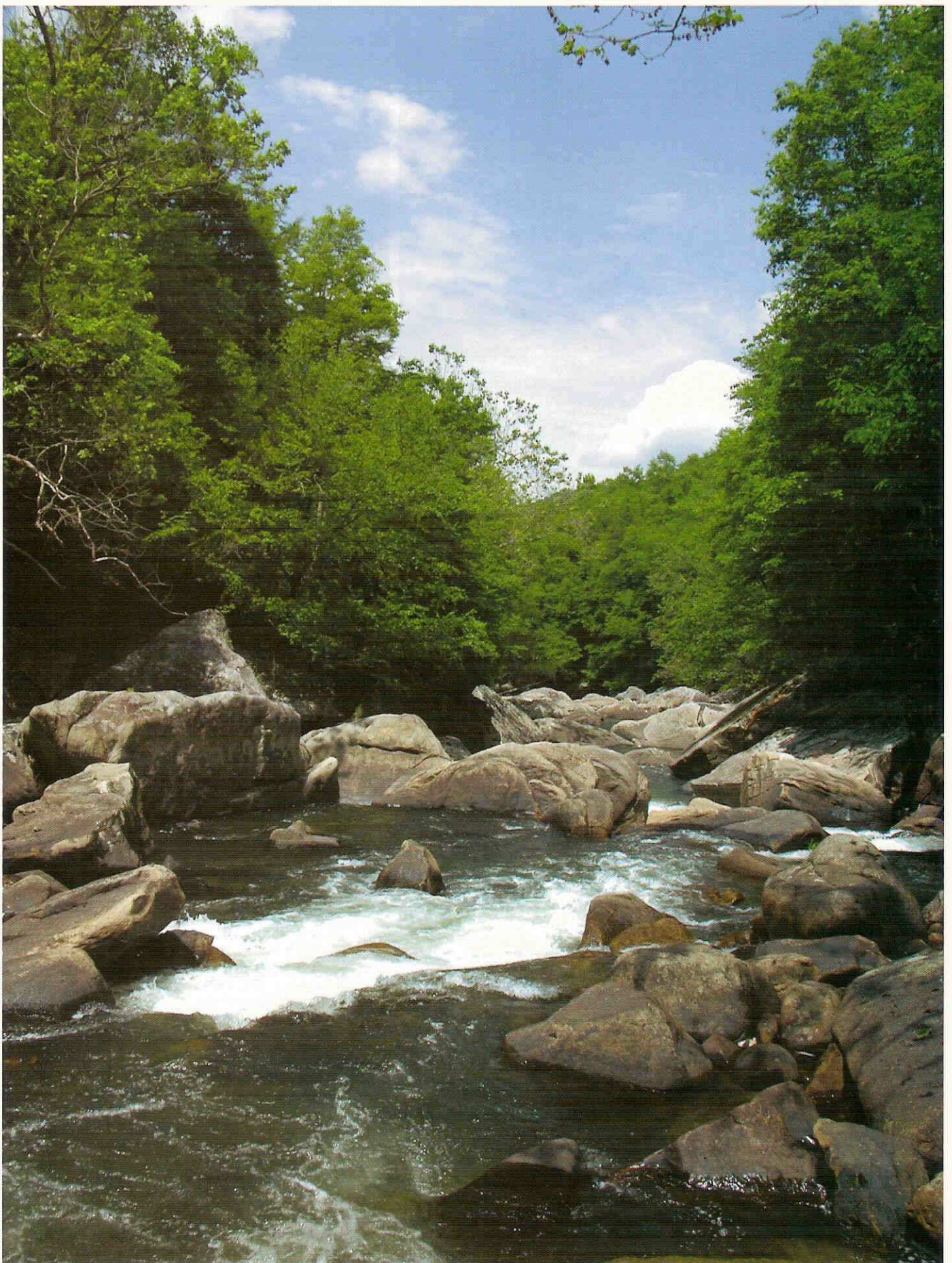
From time to time, while driving U.S. 19, I noticed a few cars parked off the berm just north of the bridge. I made a mental note to check it out some day. My only regret is that I didn't do this sooner. This is a great spot from which to explore the Meadow River both upstream and downstream. (Note: If you enjoy exploring areas that are off the beaten path, watch for parked vehicles in spots such as this one. They may indicate some interesting places that others already know about.)

However, rather than park off the highway, I recommend turning west on Underwood Road, which is the first intersection north of the bridge. Then take an immediate left turn onto Dietz Road and

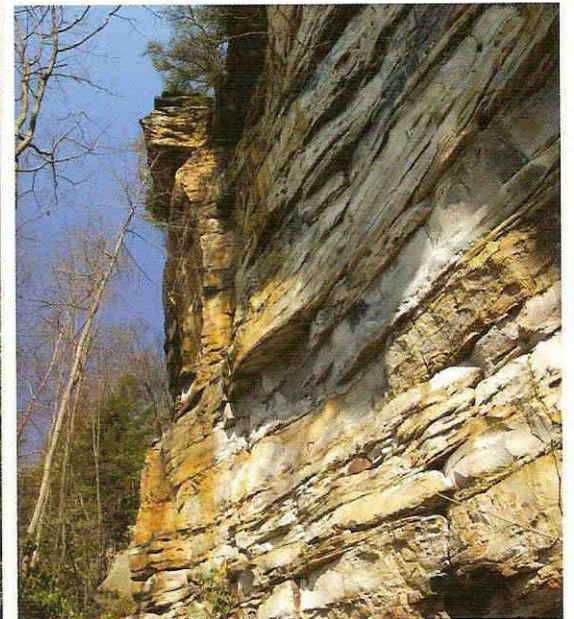
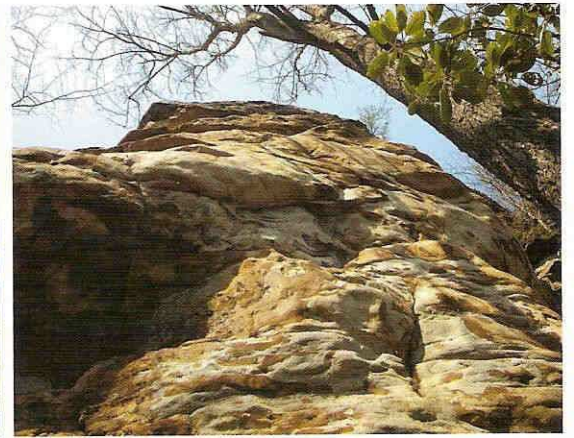
park at the pullout at the curve at the top of the hill. Hike down the dirt road that parallels U.S. 19. After passing a waterfall on your left, walk a few yards further down and look for an obvious fork in the road. It's next to a large rock outcrop with an overhanging ledge. The left fork is the best way to explore the Meadow River upstream. Take the right fork to explore the rock cliffs and the Meadow River downstream.

The downstream cliffs are called the Main Meadow in *New River Gorge, Meadow River, and Summerville Lake Rock*





The Meadow River offers some of West Virginia's most challenging and dangerous whitewater.



Hikers and rock climbers will find spectacular waterfalls and cliffs along the Meadow River.

Climber's Guide, Third Edition, Steve Cater's latest guidebook to rock climbing routes in southern West Virginia. This book is an excellent resource for hikers looking for new and interesting places. To find the Main Meadow, continue down the right-hand fork of the dirt road. As you proceed, the cliffs of the Main Meadow will be on your right and close to the road. But don't charge into the brush right away to reach the cliff face. Wait until you come to a wide spot in the dirt road where ATVs have made ruts around a mud hole. Then look to the right for a slightly worn path leading straight to the cliffs.

If you follow these directions, you will be at the base of the first set of cliffs called the Tan Wall, where the climbing routes begin. From here the challenge is to follow the base of the cliff line for about a half a mile to the Moon Wall, which is at the end of the Main Meadow section. Though not a long trail, it is challenging nonetheless because it isn't marked. Rather, the way has been forged by rock climbers exploring the cliffs. Some sections of the trail are level and flat along linear stretches of the cliff line. But occasionally, the cliff line breaks down, and boulder fields and rhododendron hinder progress. When picking your way through these

difficult stretches, a good rule of thumb is to hug the cliffs. And along part of this path, I mean that quite literally!

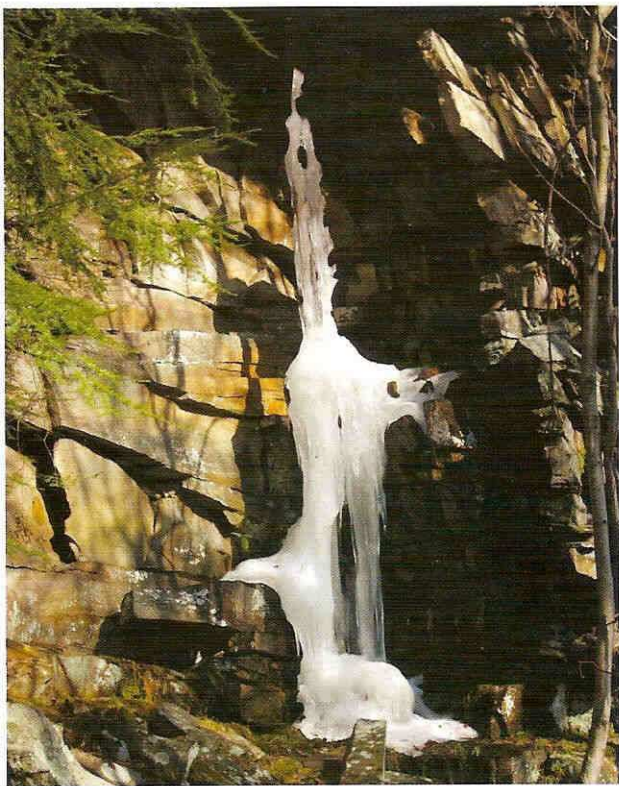
I won't describe the details of this portion of the hike because I'd rather that you discover it for yourself. I must mention, though, that there are two waterfalls along the way. They only have water during the spring or after a heavy rainfall in the summer, but they are good landmarks. The end of the Main Meadow cliffs is about 900 feet beyond the second waterfall. After reaching the end, double back until you find one of several paths that lead back down to the dirt road. There's a short, easy path about 150 feet east of the second waterfall.

Once on the dirt road, you can double back to the parking area or press on to the banks of the Meadow River, which are just a short distance down the road. At the Meadow River, the dirt road intersects an old, narrow-gauge railroad bed. This relic of bygone logging days runs on the north side of the river. (The main line railroad formerly ran along the opposite side of the river—that is, the south side—and that rail bed is gradually being converted into a rail trail.) The north side rail bed runs downstream beyond the road intersection for about a mile. Along the way, you'll

encounter two areas where the railroad bed has slipped away into the river. Don't let these breaks in the road deter you. Continue until you reach a true dead end. Phyllis and I tried to bushwhack beyond the end, but all we got for our efforts were a lot of scratches and a case of poison ivy.

Along this downstream stretch, the Meadow River is as rough and rugged as any West Virginia mountain stream. The grade steepens, the gorge narrows, the whitewater builds, and the boulders just get bigger. Some of the boulders are as big as a house. Brave men and women have kayaked this portion of the Meadow but only at great risk. This section has claimed the lives of three expert paddlers and may be the most dangerous stretch of whitewater in West Virginia. Though dangerous to kayak, the Meadow River is a thrill to watch. During high water, the rolling waves and thunderous rapids are exhilarating. Even in low water, its boulder-lined bed and tree-lined banks are beautiful.

Even with all this to boast about, there's still more to the Meadow River. Upstream another set of striking sandstone cliffs are definitely worth exploring because they hide a surprise or two. To access the river upstream, take that left-hand fork in the dirt road that I mentioned earlier. The road descends to the Meadow River and ends below the U.S. 19 bridge. It intersects the narrow-gauge railroad bed, which continues upstream. To explore the upstream cliffs, called the Upper Meadow Walls, hike the railroad bed for about three quarters of a mile. Look for a faint path breaking off to the left toward the cliffs. If you come to a little camp by the river's edge, you've gone too far. Backtrack about 80 paces to find the trail to the cliffs.



A lingering ice formation, or "ice angel," captures the author's imagination.

The trail leads to the base of one of the tallest sets of cliffs that I've seen in the New River region. Called the First Buttress, it's a vertical-to-slightly-overhanging wall of sandstone some 120 to 140 feet high. The wall is orange and brown from weathering and will have you craning your neck to appreciate it. Continue to the right along the base of the cliffs to the Second Buttress, and remember there are surprises around every corner. In this case, you'll be amazed by a column of sandstone some 30 to 40 feet high. My jaw dropped the first time I saw it. Pinnacles or pillars of stone are fairly rare around here and are exciting to find. This one is mushroom shaped with a tree growing on top. The pinnacle guards the entrance to a deep, V-shaped notch in the cliff wall. This secluded cove of stone, called the Grotto by rock climbers, has a couple of small caves, some overhanging roofs of stone, and a trickle of water down the back wall. The Grotto is a great place to spend some time exploring.

After leaving the Grotto, continue hiking east along the base of the Second Buttress. Watch the cliff wall carefully, for there is a unique structure carved in the sandstone. Look for a four-foot-wide, hemispherical hollow in the cliff at about eye level. The hollow was probably once filled with some soft material such as shale or mudstone. The soft material has eroded away and left a fascinating feature behind. The normally linear bedding layers of the sandstone cliff have been squeezed, sliced, diced, and rolled into an elaborate mosaic of color and stone. It defies description, but I liken it to the stained glass windows of a chapel. Because of the rounded roof and stained glass effect, I call this place the Little Chapel of Stone. To me, it is a work of art. I could study and reflect on its subtleties and beauty as much as any lover of the fine arts could relish the painting of a master.

The Third Buttress lies beyond an enclosed passage formed by a large slab of sandstone that slipped off the cliff and wedged itself against the wall. The Fourth (and last) Buttress is a little further upstream, but it's worth the trip. To see it, retrace your steps back to the road that runs along the Meadow River. Take the road upstream for about three quarters of a mile and watch for the first creek that crosses the road. Follow the creek up to the cliffs of the Fourth Buttress. This buttress is split by a small stream that cascades over the cliff and makes a lovely, little waterfall. It was in this small cove, cut by the stream, that I saw the "ice angel"—the remains of a large icicle that had grown on the cliff wall. Warm temperatures and sunshine had carved this mass of ice into an elegant sculpture that was hauntingly human in form. From the Fourth Buttress, the return trip to the parking area is about two miles.

If you're like me, you'll return to the Meadow River as soon as you can. Wonders abound, beauty is abundant, and the river is wild and wonderful. Happy trails! 🐾

Ed Rehbein is an avid hiker, photographer, and writer. He lives in Beckley with his wife and hiking partner, Phyllis. Ed's photography can be viewed online at www.photographyart.com.