

## Seneca Creek Wilderness Area (Proposed)

**Size:** approx. 23,985

**Location:** Randolph, Pendleton Counties

**Watershed:** South Branch of the Potomac; Cheat

**Topographic Maps:** Onego, Whitmer, Spruce Knob, Circleville

**Elevation Range** (approx.): 2520 – 4744 ft

**Dominant Vegetation:** Mixed Hardwoods, Red Spruce/Balsam Fir



Photo © Mary Wimmer

Covering nearly 24,000 acres of contiguous Forest Service land, the proposed Seneca Creek Wilderness Area is our largest wilderness candidate, and if designated, would be the second largest wilderness area in West Virginia. Located in Randolph and Pendleton Counties, the area covers most of Spruce Mountain north of Spruce Knob, west to Seneca Creek, and up and over Allegheny Mountain to Gandy Creek. It is bordered on the south mainly by FR 112 and on the north by private land and a natural-gas pipeline. The area drains into two major watersheds: Seneca Creek into the North Fork of the South Branch of the Potomac, and Gandy Creek into the Dry Fork of the Cheat.

The Seneca Creek Area is situated along the Allegheny Front, where the Appalachian Plateau transitions into the Ridge and Valley Province of West Virginia. Seneca Creek's erosional valley sits between the Horton Anticline and the Stoney River Syncline. Most of the rock and soils come from the Devonian-aged Hampshire formation characterized by non-marine shales and micaceous sandstones, with lesser amounts of siltstone and conglomerates. Greenbrier limestone underlies the red shales of the Mississippian Mauch Chunk that occur higher up the hillside. It is the source of Judy Springs and over half of Seneca Creek's flow in summer.

The vegetation of the area is diverse. High elevations on Spruce Mountain support red spruce, balsam fir and mountain ash as well as heath barren plants such as blueberries, huckleberries, and reindeer and sphagnum mosses. This alpine ecosystem transitions to mixed northern hardwoods as one proceeds down slope into Seneca Creek. The Seneca Creek area provides exceptional habitat for Black Bear, Wild Turkey and other wildlife species that prefer low levels of human disturbance. Deer, raccoon, fox and a wide variety of birds are among the many other species present, as well as the federally-endangered West Virginia Northern Flying Squirrel.

Outstanding scenic vistas abound throughout the area from a wide-spread system of hiking trails. A central visual feature is the sharply-defined, forested valley of Seneca Creek, which is easily viewed from the Spruce Knob lookout tower, and the ridge-top and high meadows of Spruce Mountain. Approximately 9 ½ miles of Seneca Creek, its headwaters and side tributaries that feed it, lay within the proposed wilderness area. The gorge section drops approximately 1,400 ft. in elevation, or nearly 150 ft. per mile. As a result, hiking along the Seneca Creek Trail, one is continually treated with exceptional waterfalls of all sizes, shapes and sounds. Seneca Creek and its tributaries boast excellent water quality from the lack of disturbance within the watershed. In fact, the proposed Seneca Creek Wilderness Area contains the highest number (14) of Tier 2.5-designated streams (special streams whose high water quality and topography support reproducing native trout populations) of all wilderness candidates. Seneca Creek provides some of the best trout fishing in the Mid-Atlantic States. The lower reaches are characterized by falls and deep pools with riffles. The upper portion is flatter with riffles and shallow pools. Native Brook Trout and wild Rainbow Trout inhabit Seneca Creek and are willing to take the fly of a wary angler.