

## Highland VA and Pendleton WV

**Feb 11-12 2023**

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Highland County, VA is busy in February as the residents of the rural mountain community prepare for the biggest event of the year: the Highland County Maple Syrup Festival. Everywhere along the roadsides you can see the taps collecting sap from Maples. If you ask nicely the farmers will sometimes let you sample the sap, which has a mild sweet flavor. You can thank them by perhaps buying one of their bottles of finished Maple Syrup which is much more complex tasting and less sugary than supermarket varieties.

On the drive up to Blue Grass Valley sadly my first mammal was a road killed **Grey Fox**. I saw a **River Otter** foraging in a beaver swamp along Rt. 250 (38.450408, -79.651916).

Bramble Hill (38.534274, -79.521906)

is a property donated to the Virginia Society of Ornithology and the Nature Conservancy, it's managed for Golden-Winged Warblers so it remains a brushy meadow. This makes it one of



the best spots for **Appalachian Cottontail**. There were droppings all over and I was quickly able to spot one hiding in a brush pile. Wimer Mountain Road, leading up to Bramble Hill is also good for **Fox Squirrels**. Look in the dead snags where they often hang out.



After dark I drove across the state line to the site of the cave complex I would explore in the morning. The caves are found on a steep hillside and along rocky bluffs. Shining the edge of the bluff turned up a **White Footed Mouse** and an **Allegheny Woodrat**. Spotted the woodrat via eyeshine, but it immediately dove down its burrow and I was unable to get a photo. I turned off my headlamp and waited in the dark for almost an hour listening for the sound of it coming outside and foraging again. Eventually I decided to just leave and come back hoping it would be out. When I returned 45 minutes later sure enough it was out in the open again and gave great



views. In the morning I fully explored the caves. The balmy 55 degree weather inside the cave was a welcome change from the freezing outdoor temperatures. Unfortunately human disturbance and White Nose Syndrome has decimated bat hibernaculum numbers. But it was still nice to see a good variety of species including two rare ones. I saw both **Indiana Bat** which is in steep decline and federally endangered, and the “**Virginia**” **Townsend's Big-Eared**

**Bat**, the rare relic subspecies of the western ranging bat. I was also able to see **Tricolored Bat**, **Big Brown Bat**, and **Eastern Small Footed Myotis**



Indiana Bat



Eastern Small-footed Myotis, note the orange chiggers that are common in this species





Tricolored Bat



Big Brown Bat



Virginia Big Eared Bat



Virginia Big Eared Bat