

It's early April (2010) and the right time for trailing arbutus, but the weather has been warm and the arbutus around my home has flowered and is already waning. So the camera gear is packed and we're off to the Slate Run area north on 44 where my trusty wildflower expert and eagle eye Alissa found a healthy patch last year. We hope being north and in the mountains delayed the blooming a bit.

I'd just heard of a letter to the editor of the Williamsport Sun-Gazette warning motorcyclists of back roads in ruin, but I wasn't prepared for what I encountered. We passed lots of tanker trucks coming at us from the north, one was a convoy of four trucks. The trucks haul our clean water to the gas wells, and water contaminated in fracking from them. The tiny asphalt roads are crumbling, down to the dirt with clumped and disintegrating black heaped in bunches where flat hard surface used to be.

The arbutus was there but not in primo shape. It was not past their bloom but there were brown spots on the petals. Maybe it had been too dry. The flowers are tiny, as long as my trimmed fingernail but not as wide. Leathery leaves on vines creeping along the ground, they are shy and it's always a joy to find them. I wonder if they will stay.

Some arbutus photos are taken, and a couple of the disintegrating road. There is no time to spare since the sun is descending and we are expected at friends' for dinner.

We take a detour on the way back to Hyner View which is just over the hill. It overlooks the Susquehanna River and is a jumping off point for hang gliders. We'd never been there and this was an opportunity to see it. It is spectacular. Beautiful lofty views of the undeveloped rolling mountains and lush river winding its way. There are concrete fixtures from which to look. They let people get right to the edge of a cliff without falling. Pretty cool. Some pictures of the valley and then we are homeward bound.

I take a road guessed to hook us back up with 44. It's a small mountain lane that leads to ... a gas compression station on the mountaintop in the wild, next to Hyner. Cylinders and pipes, tubes and gauges and a large unit with a huge fan reside on the site. There are a series of large pipes with wheels to open and close valves. Friends in the Salladasburg area have one on the adjacent hill which makes loud noises in the countryside, day and night.

I am perplexed at this facility in the middle of nowhere which we stumbled upon by accident. How many others are there, what will the underground and surface activity mean for the pristine nature area enjoyed by so many? I remember a statement by representative Garth Everett at a public meeting about gas in October: "Some people think we need roads into the wilderness so people can get there to see it." He also joined representative Gene Yaw in blocking a severance tax which could help refurbish roads laid to waste by the tanker trucks.