

Tennessee's Wilderness Path: The Benton MacKaye Trail

Text and Photos By Jeff Hunter

With thousands of miles of hiking trails throughout Tennessee, there are plenty of options to choose from if you want to take a hike. These choices include 90 miles of the Benton MacKaye Trail, a trail that is 300 total miles from Georgia to North Carolina.

The story of the Benton MacKaye Trail is interwoven with other trail/road planning efforts. Perhaps the best-known trail in Tennessee and in fact the entire United States is the Appalachian Trail. This 2,178-mile hiking trail stretches from Springer Mountain, Georgia, to Mt. Katahdin, Maine. Along the way it passes through East Tennessee, where for much of the way it straddles the North Carolina/Tennessee border.



A view of the Benton MacKaye Trail.
Photo by Jeff Hunter.

Back in the 1970s, there was talk of extending the Blue Ridge Parkway down into Georgia. A number of concerned individuals, including a USDA Forest Service employee named Dave Sherman, were concerned about the impact that this might have on the Appalachian Trail. As a result, they looked into an alternate route for the A.T., in the event that the parkway was extended into Georgia. When the parkway project was cancelled, they decided to continue with the development of a new trail, named after the father of the Appalachian Trail. Thus, the Benton MacKaye Trail was born.

For the first 25 years of its existence, the trail was almost totally located within the state of Georgia. Sharing a southern terminus with the Appalachian Trail at Springer Mountain, the Benton MacKaye Trail runs west of the A.T. Until 2005, the northern terminus of the Benton MacKaye Trail was in the Cherokee National Forest at the Ocoee River in southeast Tennessee. But the volunteers with the Benton MacKaye Trail Association had a grander vision. They wanted to extend the trail all the way to the northeast corner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park; a place known as Davenport Gap. Their dream was realized in 2005 after years of hard work by volunteers like Ken Jones.

Jones, a retired TVA employee, worked tirelessly with representatives of the Cherokee National Forest to find a route from the Ocoee River to the boundary of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. "We had to look on the map, find our options, evaluate the pros and cons of the options, and pick out the routes that made the most sense," said Jones. Then the hard part began; ground truthing.

"Most of the time we'd go out for a day and look at four or five places that wouldn't work before we found a route that did," says Jones. After almost 10 years of survey work and trail construction, the completed trail was dedicated at a ceremony held at Mud Gap off of the Cherohala Skyway.

Today, the Benton MacKaye Trail stretches nearly 300 miles from Georgia to North Carolina. Over 90 miles of the trail can be found in the Volunteer State. The segment in Tennessee is arguably some of the wildest on the entire trail, as it passes through or adjacent to four different existing federal wilderness areas and three wilderness study areas. The wilderness study areas proposed additions to America's National Wilderness Preservation System.

The Trail in Tennessee

In the southeast corner of the state, the Benton MacKaye Trail leaves the Cohutta Wilderness in Georgia and enters the Big Frog Wilderness in Tennessee. The Cohutta-Big Frog Wilderness complex is the largest U.S. Forest Service wilderness area in the east, and is home to a healthy population of Black Bear and other wildlife.

Climbing steeply, the trail crosses the summit of Big Frog Mountain, at 4,224 feet. Although the views from the summit are limited, the climb to the top offers a workout for hikers of all ages and abilities. At the request of the U.S. Forest Service, the trail is not blazed in the wilderness area, so a map and compass is essential for all hikers. In addition, the resident bears have a habit of tearing down the signs marking some of the many side trails. They evidently find them quite handy as scratching posts. Without a map and the ability to read it, you run the serious risk getting lost in this area.

Continuing north, the trail drops steadily, leaves the wilderness, and crosses a couple of U.S. Forest Service roads on its way to the Thunder Rock Campground on the Ocoee River. This Forest Service campground would make a great base camp for the hiker, paddler, and mountain biker to explore the world-class recreation opportunities found

in this part of the Cherokee National Forest. At just over an hour distance from downtown Chattanooga, it is heavily visited during the summer months, and for good reason.

At the Ocoee River, the trail crosses U.S. 64 and climbs out of the Ocoee Gorge on a dual designated trail (Dry Pond Lead – Benton MacKaye Trail). The trail climbs steadily through hardwood forest, passing under a power line right-of-way on its way towards the Little Frog Wilderness. After passing through the wilderness, it continues on towards the Hiwassee River – following linear wildlife openings for nearly two miles. These old gated logging roads have been seeded and are a great place to see wildlife. The area is frequented by bear, coyote, bobcat, and wild turkey.

The trail eventually emerges from the woods on the south side of the Hiwassee River in the town of Reliance. After crossing the river, the trail follows the John Muir Trail heading northeast. This trail is named after the famed conservationist who walked through Tennessee in 1867 on his way to the Gulf of Mexico.

Leaving the Hiwassee drainage, the trail continues north. Near the small community of Coker Creek, the Benton MacKaye Trail connects with one of North America's oldest known trails – the Unicoi Turnpike. Native Americans once used this trail as part of a commerce route.

Continuing north, the Benton MacKaye Trail reaches the North Carolina – Tennessee state line near Sandy Gap. From this point, it follows a ridge along the southern boundary of the Upper Bald River Wilderness Study Area. This 9,112-acre area was recommended for wilderness designation in the 2004 Cherokee National Forest Plan. In this area, the hiker needs to pay close attention to their map and compass and the treadway. This is wild country, with vast sections of roadless forest on either side of the state line. The reward for hiking here is solitude, the kind that is rarely found in the east. The observant hiker should be able to discern abundant signs of wildlife.

The trail plunges into the heart of the Upper Bald River drainage as it follows Brookshire Creek downhill into a forest filled with hardwoods and Eastern Hemlocks. Sadly, the hemlocks may not live much longer, as they are threatened by the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid; a non-native pest that is killing hemlocks all across the east.

Continuing north, the trail crosses the Tellico River adjacent to the Tellico River Trout Hatchery. The hatchery is a worthwhile stop along the way. If you have some time, and a fishing license, the Tellico River is also a good place to drop a line.

North of the Tellico River, the trail traverses old railroad grades as it climbs steadily towards Whigg Meadow. At 4,938-feet in elevation, this grassy bald is a treat for many hikers, and makes a great destination for a short day hike from Mud Gap on the Cherohala Skyway. Here, the Tennessee Ornithological Society has been conducting research on migratory birds. In the springtime, you might encounter someone tending the mist nets on "The Whigg," as it is referred to by some locals.

After crossing the Cherohala Skyway, the trail enters the Citico Creek Wilderness. This vast area is adjacent to the Joyce Kilmer Slickrock Wilderness – on the North Carolina side of the border. This section of forest has a large population of feral hogs, and the observant hiker can see signs of this pest's destructive habit of rooting along the sides of the trail. The 12.5-mile section of trail between Beech Gap and Farr Gap offers the hiker a great wilderness experience. With abundant water and plentiful campsites, this segment of the Benton MacKaye Trail makes an ideal location for a weekend backpacking trip.

After leaving the Citico Creek Wilderness, the trail tacks east into North Carolina. On the north side of the Little Tennessee River, the trail re-enters the woods near the Cheoha Dam. The final five-mile section of the Benton MacKaye Trail crosses lands that were only recently opened to the public. The Tapoco lands were opened up as part of a hydroelectric relicensing agreement with the federal government. The trail in this area follows an old woods road until it finally reaches U.S. 129 at the boundary of Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Trip Planning

If you are interested in getting out and experiencing the Benton MacKaye Trail and all it has to offer, you'll want to visit the Benton MacKaye Trail Association Web site. The trail is maintained by volunteers, so if you are interested in participating in a work trip, or adopting a section of trail, the association is always looking for new members and volunteers. For more information about the trail, please visit <http://bmta.org>.

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