



Tim Homan

REVISED AND UPDATED

24 TRAILS IN NORTH-CENTRAL GA AND SOUTHEASTERN TN

**2ND
EDITION**

**Hiking
Trails**
of the
**Cohutta &
Big Frog
Wildernesses**

Tim Homan

Hiking Trails

**of the
Cohutta &
Big Frog
Wildernesses**

Second Edition



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Contents

Acknowledgments	v
Preface	x
The Combined Wilderness	1
Cohutta History	4
Big Frog History	10
Benton MacKaye Trail History	12
Things to Know Before You Go	14
Camping Areas	14
Rivers	14
Fording Tips	16
Stream Crossings	17
Deadfalls and Trail Maintenance	18
Signs and Blazes	18
Horse Usage	19
Hunting Seasons	19
Problem Bears	21
Road Closures	22
Forest Service Regulations	
for the Beech Bottom–Jacks River Falls Area	23
Important Changes	23
Hemlock Woolly Adelgid	24
How to Use This Guide	28
Trail Descriptions	28
Trail Ratings	28
Regional Directions and Maps	31
Access Points	32
Maps	37

Part I—Cohutta Wilderness

Conasauga River Watershed	41
<i>Conasauga River Watershed Map</i>	42
Conasauga River Trail	43
Chestnut Lead Trail	52
Tearbitches Trail	59
Hickory Creek Trail	66
Panther Creek Trail	73
Cohutta Mountain	81
<i>Cohutta Mountain Map</i>	82
East Cowpen Trail	83
Jacks River Watershed	91
<i>Jacks River Watershed Map</i>	92
Jacks River Trail	94
Benton MacKaye Trail, Section 10	103
Rough Ridge Trail	109
Hickory Ridge Trail	115
Rice Camp Trail	122
Horseshoe Bend Trail	128
Penitentiary Branch Trail	133
Beech Bottom Trail	138
Big Frog Mountain	145
<i>Big Frog Mountain Map</i>	146
Hemp Top Trail (Section 1)	147
Hemp Top Trail (Section 2)	156

Part II—Big Frog Wilderness

Big Frog Wilderness	165
<i>Big Frog Wilderness Map</i>	166
Wolf Ridge Trail	167
Grassy Gap Trail	173
Big Creek Trail	179
Yellow Stand Lead Trail	186
Big Frog Trail	192
Rough Creek Trail	199
Fork Ridge Trail	204
West Fork Trail	209
Licklog Ridge Trail	214
The Idea of Wilderness	221
The Wilderness Act	223
Environmental Guidelines	225
Before the Hike	225
On the Trail	225
No-Trace Camping	226
Backcountry Courtesy	227
Tips for Beginning Hikers	229
Trail Volunteers	234
Addresses and Maps	236
Index of Nature Descriptions	237
Other Books by Tim Homan	238

Preface

I WALKED DOWN TO JACKS RIVER for the first time in 1975, the year the Cohutta received wilderness designation. Back then, Beech Bottom had two small houses and a large hunting cabin with a screened-in porch. On the Jacks River Trail that day, railroad spikes were much easier to find than other hikers.

My Cohutta hiking first turned systematic in 1979, when I walked all of the wilderness trails for inclusion within my guide, *The Hiking Trails of North Georgia*. I saw my first wild hog—a large, prominently tusked male—early on a May morning along Rough Ridge.

I employed a pedometer to measure mileage for the first edition. When it came time for a major revision of the little book in 1986, I rolled an incessantly clicking, orange measuring wheel borrowed from the Forest Service. By using this pain-in-the-ass apparatus I was able to record distances in feet, such as 87,013 feet for the Jacks River Trail, then easily convert the large numbers to the nearest tenth of a mile. If a measurement fell exactly between tenths, 2.75 miles for example, the figure was rounded upward to the nearest tenth. (On my second go-around in the Cohutta Wilderness, I saw a bobcat from Rice Camp Trail, my first and thus far only sighting of that predator from a Southern Appalachian Trail.)

I wheeled the trails in neighboring Big Frog and those in the Cohutta yet again in 1990 in order to write a hiking guide for the combined wilderness. Even though the hiking was completed, I failed to finish the book for reasons that seemed compelling at the time.

Life is short, but it is sometimes long enough for second chances. In 1998, from April through November, on weekends, vacation days, and three-day holidays, I hiked and wheeled the trails in the combined wilderness again—and enjoyed every river-wading and ridge-walking day of it, even the backpacking trip when tent, canteens, Therm-a-rests, and some other seemingly necessary items didn't make that all-important trip from living room to car. But the

weather was dry, the ground soft enough, and best of all, the packs were very light.

As Peachtree's stockpile of this book dwindled during the spring of 2006, I began to check directions and trailheads, to hike and ask questions in order to update this guide. I was surprised and dismayed by the amount of change, some of it totally unexpected. There were new street names, new controversial wilderness regulations, a new first fatal bear attack in a Southern Appalachian national forest, a new major trail realignment, new blazes to mark the fords of the two wilderness rivers, a new Jacks River bridge in a slightly different location, a new campground, a new exotic insect pest killing its way toward the combined wilderness... The list goes on.


An arson fire changed the forest along Beech Bottom and Jacks River Trails. A deluge from the counterclockwise spin of a hurricane caused landslides and dramatic flooding on the wilderness watercourses, especially the Jacks and Conasauga Rivers. The Forest Service decided to abandon a trail because of the extensive hurricane damage. The new trail realignment changed the lengths of three trails and totally eliminated a fourth.

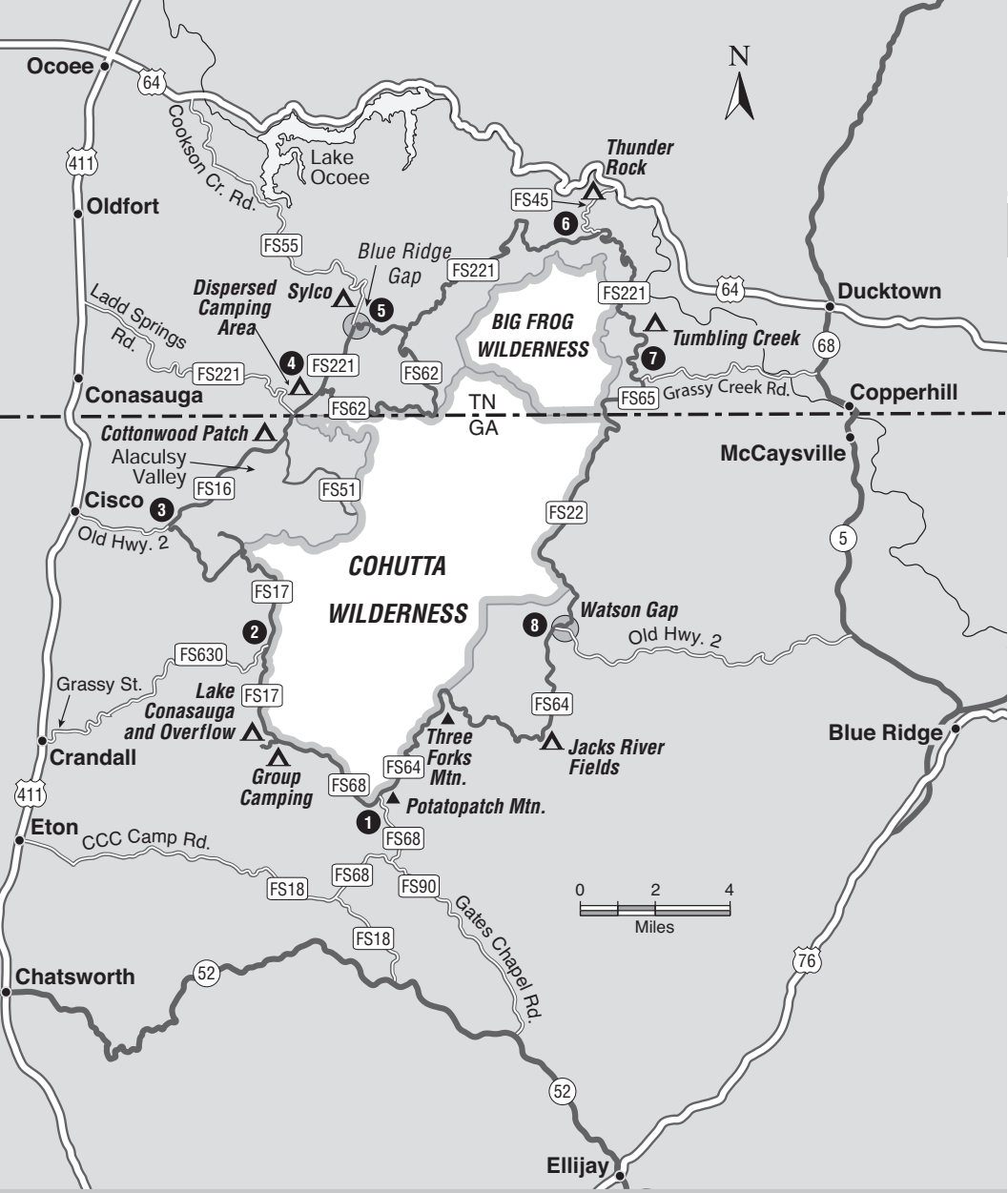
Happy Trails.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tim Homan". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.

*Climb the mountains and get their good tidings.
Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows
into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness
into you, and the storms their energy, while cares
drop off like autumn leaves.*

—John Muir






Combined Wilderness Overview

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| U.S. highway | Wilderness boundary | Access point |
| Primary state highway | U.S. highway | Gap |
| Forest Service road | Primary state highway | Peak |
| Access road (paved or unpaved) | Forest Service road | Campground |
| State boundary | | Streams |

Cohutta Wilderness

*I am glad I shall never be young without wild country
to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without
a blank spot on the map?*

—Aldo Leopold



Conasauga River Watershed



*Hiker fording
Conasauga River*

Trails

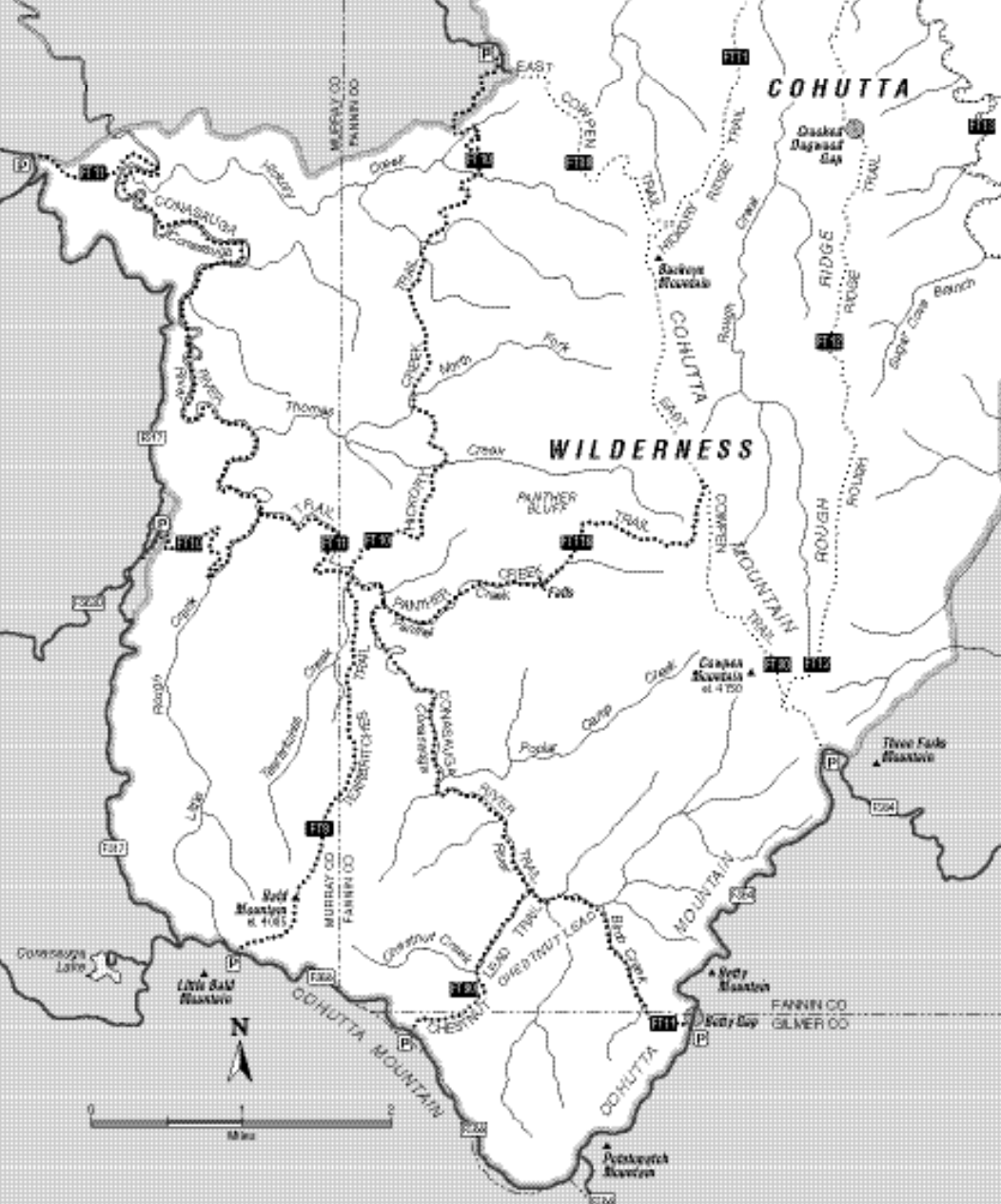
Conasauga River Trail

Chestnut Lead Trail




Tearbitches Trail

Hickory Creek Trail

Panther Creek Trail



Conasauga River Watershed

-  Forest Service road
-  Forest trail
-  County boundary
-  Streams
-  Wilderness boundary
-  Forest Service road
-  Forest trail
-  Parking
-  Gap
-  Peak
-  Knob
-  Falls

Conasauga River Trail

Foot Trail 11: 13.0 miles

- **Dayhiking** Easy to Moderate in either direction
- **Backpacking** (low to high) Moderate
- **Backpacking** (high to low) Easy to Moderate
- **Vehicular Access At Either End** Northwestern (low elevation) terminus off FS 17B, 1,640 feet; southeastern (high elevation) terminus at Betty Gap, 3,100 feet
- **Trail Junctions** Chestnut Lead, Panther Creek, Tearbitches, Hickory Creek
- **Topographic Quadrangles** Dyer Gap GA, Hemp Top GA-TN, Tennega GA-TN
- **Features** Giant hemlock; 38 fords; Conasauga River

FORMED FROM FEEDER STREAMS draining the southwestern corner of the Cohutta Wilderness, the Conasauga is without question one of Georgia's most beautiful rivers. The origin of its name, however, is hard to pin down. It might have come from the word *gansagi* (derivation unknown), the name of several settlements in the former Cherokee country, or from *kahnasaugh*, the Cherokee word for grass. But a more likely candidate is the Cherokee word for strong horse, which the settlers spelled *conasauga*. Perhaps a Cherokee named Strong Horse lived near the river, or maybe the Cherokee named this steep-sided mountain river for the strong horsepower of its floods.

The origin of the name for the southeastern trailhead, Betty Gap, is less mysterious. During the logging days, a widow named Betty sold meals and lodging to travelers. Her home was in a gap halfway across the Cohutta Mountains.

The Conasauga River is the usage magnet for the smaller, southwestern section of the Cohutta Wilderness. West of East Cowpen, all trails either end at, cross, or follow the river. Conasauga River is the

second longest (13.0 miles) and the second wettest (thirty-eight fords) trail in the combined wilderness. The 6.3-mile stretch beyond Little Rough Creek is the longest segment of trail without a junction in the entire Cohutta–Big Frog Wilderness. This fact becomes most salient after heavy rain raises the river and forces you to decide between potentially dangerous fords or a long bushwhack out.

The Conasauga River Trail is described as it is most often walked, from southeast to northwest, from near the river's headwater springs to near its exit from the wilderness. Starting at Betty Gap, the initial 0.2 mile drops very sharply, the first of only two difficult grades on this predominantly easy trail. A sliding rivulet, a Birch Creek feeder, emerges from its spring source beneath a stand of tall white pine near the top of the descent. The rest of the forest at this high, cool end of the route is hemlock and hardwood—oaks, sweet birch, basswood, white ash, a few cucumbertrees, and yellow poplar.

Where the land slopes down to the left after the path crosses the rivulet, look for a giant hemlock (hopefully still alive) 20 to 25 paces downhill at 0.4 mile. This topped-out survivor—with a best-as-we-could measurement of 15 feet 3 inches in circumference—is the thickest trailside tree in the combined wilderness. Ringed with slowly rotting burls, the result of centuries of sapsucker pecking, this huge, hoary old tree is best described not as old growth, but as primeval growth. Eighty yards beyond the hemlock, look for the Georgia state record blackgum—measuring a modest 10 feet 5 inches in circumference—60 or 70 feet to the left of the trail.

The track proceeds on an easy downgrade parallel to the shallow, often tumbling upper run of Birch Creek. Here the treadway frequently runs along the rocky bottoms of small feeder streams. In places the path is all rock and muck, root, water, and rhododendron. Further down, the walkway descends a little steeper and angles away from the creek toward the Conasauga through forest where yellow poplar and sweet birch are abundant. At mile 1.3 the trail reaches the river and ford number one—narrow, shallow, and small rocked—easier than all the fords yet to come. Lime-green blazes mark all of the fords.

For the next 10.4 miles to the thirty-eighth ford, the trail parallels the Conasauga as it winds to the northwest, bisecting the basin almost as cleanly as the river itself. It often leads up and away or out

and away from the stream, but always returns to ford. Despite these repeated roving, the route frequently remains near the bank, where there is only a sparse screen of rhododendron between you and the rushing water. The Conasauga River Trail—like its longer twin, the Jacks River Trail—is the pleasant result of logging-rails-to-wilderness-trails succession. After the first ford, you will enter a railroad aisle promenade, a level or very easy walk down through the dark shade of rhododendron, hemlock, occasional white pine, and summer hardwoods. Beyond the first long set of cascades, the riverway arrives at its first junction, usually signed Chestnut Lead, at mile 1.9.

Its headwaters rising within the wilderness, the Conasauga flows cold and quick and clear, so clear that the shadows of trout holding in shallows have fins. The Conasauga, rippling white in the rapid water between pools, has that rhythm and magic, that inherent grace and glinting beauty of undefiled Southern Appalachian streams. The generally level treadway closely follows the crystalline Conasauga, which falls over 100 feet per mile to Bray Field. Just beyond the Chestnut Lead junction, the fords and low cascades begin again. Here the route makes seventeen river wades in 3.0 miles to the far bank of the eighteenth ford at mile 4.9. The river runs through occasional boulder-jumble dams and over high bedrock ledges pocked with water-swirl drill holes.

While the water is still squeezing through your shoes after the eighteenth ford (from right to left to the west bank), you should find the usually signed Panther Creek junction on the right edge of the trail. Panther Creek Trail fords the river immediately; the Conasauga Trail continues straight ahead toward its only dry stretch between fords. The track quickly climbs up and over a spur, descends to and crosses Tearbitches Creek, then enters what's left of Bray Field (1,920 feet) at its Tearbitches Trail connection at mile 5.4. A former cabin site and now a grassy, often congested camping area, Bray Field is the most important trail junction in the western half of the Cohutta Wilderness. Tearbitches ends here; two trails, Conasauga River and Hickory Creek, pass through the small clearing. Seventy-five yards beyond the Tearbitches junction, at the sign for the Hickory Creek ford, Conasauga River Trail turns 90 degrees to the left and follows an old road away from the river into the Bray Field floodplain.

Hickory Creek and Conasauga River Trails share the same treadway from the sharp left turn to where the fords start again at Little Rough Creek. The combined trail makes a flattened half loop away from, then back to, the river. The formerly farmed field now supports an impressive stand of second-growth trees—hemlock, sweetgum, white pine, and tall, straight yellow poplar. Christmas fern (also known as evergreen) is common beside the old wagon track. Before curling back to the river, the route passes beside an old, grassed-in beaver pond, still holding open water near the dam.

The next 0.7 mile is easy downhill walking on cobbly road above the river. The Conasauga is now wider and deeper; some of its gray, streambed boulders are as big as whalebacks. A steady whitewater cascade runs well below the grade. At mile 6.7 the trails split apart at the usually signed junction. The Conasauga River Trail angles to the right and quickly resumes its river walking ways. Only here, below the mouths of Panther, Tearbitches, and Little Rough Creeks, the lower Conasauga has more water and tougher fords than the section above Bray Field. The twentieth ford, a fast sluice above a cascade, is definitely dangerous at higher water levels and always tricky. As you make this ford from right to left, look for the railroad-cut gap in the rocks a few feet in from the bank. The railroad bed treadway heads through the cut at a right angle away from the river.

A short climb to the top of the bluff on the west bank below the twentieth ford gives you a good view of the cascade below. From this vantage point you can also see the long, straight vein of quartz running through the last third of the long plunge pool.

At the twenty-first ford, a low, broken bluff rises on the far bank. The small-leaved dwarf rhododendron blooms a light reddish purple here in late May and early June. Beyond this ford the Conasauga makes an entrenched, gorgelike bend—all slide, sluice, cascade, and short pool—between bluff and bedrock slanting back from river's edge. Two tenths mile beyond the twenty-second ford (right to left), Thomas Creek falls into the Conasauga on the far bank. Look for the narrow flash of white well above river level.

Starting with the twenty-third ford at mile 7.8, the riverway follows its usual pattern of parallel and ford—sixteen times in 3.9 miles. The woods along the lower river is a mix of conifers—white,

Virginia, and loblolly pine, plus hemlock—and second-growth hardwoods. The abundance of sweetgum and the presence of sycamore and loblolly pine are proof of low elevation. The lower river is often flanked by steep, rocky slopes, the west-facing side noticeably dry, thin-soiled, and dominated by Virginia pine. The trail passes above a particularly long and scenic shoal with sparkling swimming holes at mile 10.3. The aquahiking is over after the thirty-eighth and final ford at mile 11.7.

Twenty-five yards beyond the last ford, at approximately 1,260 feet, the course turns 90 degrees to the left and climbs away from the river. An easy-to-moderate upgrade quickly leads you into a drier forest of Virginia pine, chestnut oak, mountain laurel, and deciduous heath shrubs. On the way up, a ridgecrest affords good summer and excellent winter views of Cohutta Mountain back to the left. Cohutta Mountain is a long ridgeline string of knobs and named peaks stretching away to the south, then southwest. Buckeye Mountain is almost due east; Cowpen Mountain is further south at 120 degrees.

The ascent to Conasauga River's northwestern end, no worse than moderate, winds along ridgetop and slope and around wet hardwood hollow. The track passes a wilderness sign at mile 12.7. Beyond the sign, the forest—thin yellow poplar and white pine in places—was logged a second time. With less than 0.1 mile remaining, the usually signed route turns left onto a woods road.

Nature Notes

If you walk a river-fording trail during warm weather, and especially if you wade about searching for swimming holes, you will probably see snakes on the river rocks. You can rest assured that these snakes are water snakes, not water moccasins as is commonly assumed. You will find no water moccasins (also known as cottonmouths) in the Cohutta Wilderness. None. Not a one. Nor will you encounter this poisonous reptile in the Southern Appalachians eastward and northeastward from the Cohuttas. Mountains cold enough for rhododendron, hemlock, and trout are too cold for water moccasins.

The large, banded reptile that inhabits the streams and rivers of the Southern Highlands is the northern water snake. Although the

larger specimens of this species will readily strike if provoked, they are nonpoisonous. Cuts caused by a water snake's strike often bleed profusely because of an anticoagulant in the snake's saliva. If the jabs don't fend off would-be predators or human pesterers, water snakes have another little surprise waiting for their enemies. When threatened, they expel a foul-smelling musk from glands at the base of their tails.

The northern water snake (*Nerodia sipedon*) is just one of numerous species and subspecies in the *Nerodia* genus. In almost every suitable habitat throughout the eastern United States and west to the southern Great Plains, you can find one or more species of water snake. True to its name, the northern water snake is the only *Nerodia* species that ranges into Maine and across the southernmost regions of eastern Canada. This water snake can tolerate the cooler temperatures up to approximately 4,800 feet in the Southern Appalachians.

Mature northern water snakes are 22 to 53 inches long; females are generally larger than males. This species is identified by its pattern of alternating light and dark bands, most of which are highlighted with a separating line of dark brownish black. Especially along the first half of the snake's length, the darker bands widen toward the back, and the lighter bands, or blotches, widen toward the belly. The wider dark band is usually a warm orangish brown and the narrower light band is usually brownish beige.

The snake's skin darkens with age and with time elapsed since the last shed. Young snakes are more brightly colored than adults. Their dark bands are often bright orange-brown, strikingly beautiful when wet, especially in the sunlight.

Active day and night in warm weather, northern water snakes feed on fish, crayfish, frogs, salamanders, and even small mammals. They hibernate in winter. Female water snakes typically give live birth to fifteen to thirty young. Occasionally, however, they give birth to a slither of fifty—more than any other genus of North American snakes.

On the Conasauga, Jacks, and other similar Southern Appalachian rivers, I have witnessed over the years the results of numerous obligatory bludgeonings—a quick stick or rock to the head of a northern water snake presumed to be a moccasin. Even if every last

one of these snakes had been a water moccasin, they should not have had their heads smashed to smithereens. If nongame species cannot live unmolested in wilderness, where then can they live free from meanness and ignorance? Spread the word. There are no water moccasins in the high mountains of North Georgia. And there are no legitimate reasons for killing water snakes in wilderness.

For nearly twenty years the Cohutta Wilderness was home to a succession of three straight state record hemlocks. In the late 1970s there was a “state record hemlock” sign near the still-living (as of summer 2006), topped-out giant 20 to 25 paces downhill from the left side of the trail at 0.4 mile. By the mid-1980s a nearby hemlock—a magnificent specimen 15 feet 2 inches in circumference and at least 150 or more feet in height—had dethroned its very close neighbor. The same sign was moved a few hundred feet back toward Betty Gap to mark the new record holder.



eastern hemlock

The second champion died by 1990. The third state record hemlock, the larger of two towering together along that short section of treadway shared by both the Benton MacKaye and Jacks River Trails, crashed down in the mid-1990s. The current state champion hemlock, until someone finds a bigger one in the Cohuttas, is in Towns County.

While the eastern hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) occurs in nearly every habitat throughout the combined wilderness, this graceful conifer is most numerous and reaches its largest proportions on north-facing ridges, moist slopes, and stream margins. Where hemlock is abundant, its dense foliage darkens the forest floor. The size of its needles and cones makes the eastern hemlock one of the easiest of all trees to identify at any time of year. Its flattened needles are $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{2}{5}$ of an inch long, with two whitish stripes on the undersides. Its roughly oval cones, averaging $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch in length, are much

smaller than those of any other native Southern Appalachian pine, fir, or spruce. With the lone exception of the planted firs atop Bald Mountain, the hemlock is the only small-needled evergreen along the trails in this guide.

In most parts of its large range the eastern hemlock is a medium-sized tree—60 to 80 feet in height and 2 to 3 feet in diameter. But at the rainy southern end of the Appalachians, this evergreen can grow much larger, up to 175 feet in height and 5 to 6 feet in diameter. The national champion eastern hemlock, a giant gracing the Greenbrier area of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, is 16 feet 10 inches around and 165 feet tall. These giant, slow-growing conifers are the oldest trees in the mountain forests of the eastern United States. The record age, rings actually counted, is nearly 1,000 years.

Directions

Conasauga River has either-end vehicular access. Conasauga River's southeastern (upper-elevation) trailhead at Betty Gap can be most easily reached from Access Points 1 and 8, and its northwestern (lower-elevation) trailhead can be most easily reached from Access Points 2 and 3. (See the detailed description of the Access Points at the beginning of this guide.)

Southeastern trailhead at Betty Gap

Access Point 1: From the three-way FS 68–FS 64 intersection at Potatopatch Mountain, turn right onto FS 64 and proceed approximately 1.4 miles to the well-marked trailhead—bulletin board, trail sign, and pull-in parking—on the left side of the road.

Access Point 8: From the four-way intersection at Watson Gap, turn left onto FS 64 and follow that road for approximately 11.3 miles to the prominent trailhead on the right side of the road.

Northwestern trailhead off Forest Service 17B

Access Point 2: From the four-way FS 630–FS 17 intersection, turn left and downhill onto FS 17, then proceed approximately 4.1 miles before turning right onto FS 17B at the Conasauga River Trail sign. Follow FS 17B for 0.3 mile to the trailhead parking area and bulletin board.

Access Point 3: From the three-way FS 16–FS 17 intersection, turn right and uphill onto FS 17, following the sign for Lake Conasauga. Travel approximately 3.5 miles before turning left onto FS 17B at the Conasauga River Trail sign. Continue on FS 17B for 0.3 mile to the trailhead parking area and bulletin board.

The one-way shuttle distance between trailheads is approximately 13 miles.

Notes