



**Tim Homan**

*A guide to 25 wilderness and wild-river trails in  
northeastern Georgia and the western Carolinas*

# **Hiking Trails**

**of the**

**Southern Nantahala  
Wilderness**

**Ellicott Rock  
Wilderness**

**Chattooga  
National Wild and Scenic River**

**Tim Homan**

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Published by  
PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS, LTD.  
1700 Chattahoochee Avenue  
Atlanta, Georgia 30318

Text © 2002 by Tim Homan  
Cover and interior photographs © 2002 by Mark Morrison  
Interior illustrations © 2002 by Vicky Holifield  
Maps © 2002 by Mark Morrison

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Book design by Loraine M. Balcsik  
Book composition by Robin Sherman

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
First Edition

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Homan, Tim.

Hiking trails of the Southern Nantahala Wilderness, the Ellicott Rock Wilderness, and the Chattooga National Wild and Scenic River / Tim Homan.-- 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 1-56145-260-2

1. Hiking--Southern Nantahala Wilderness (Ga. and N.C.)--Guidebooks. 2. Hiking--Ellicott Rock Wilderness--Guidebooks. 3. Hiking--Chattooga River Region (N.C.-Ga. and S.C.)--Guidebooks. 4. Trails--Southern Nantahala Wilderness (Ga. and N.C.)--Guidebooks. 5. Trails--Ellicott Rock Wilderness--Guidebooks. 6. Trails--Chattooga River Region (N.C.-Ga. and S.C.)--Guidebooks. 7. Southern Nantahala Wilderness (Ga. and N.C.)--Guidebooks. 8. Ellicott Rock Wilderness--Guidebooks. 9. Chattooga River Region (N.C.-Ga. and S.C.)--Guidebooks. I. Title.

GV199.4 .H66 2002

917.58'2--dc21

2001007767

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## Preface

**DURING SPRING, SUMMER, AND FALL** of a recent drought year—on weekends, holidays, and vacation days—I walked all of the trails described in this guide at least once, many of them more. For various reasons—pushing an old, malfunctioning measuring wheel, walking shorter trails to reach longer ones, leading groups on dayhikes, looking for a stream the topo map told me I should have seen, searching for the real Ellicott Rock, etc.—I managed to prolong the pleasurable part of the process, the hiking part, into November, long enough to walk six or seven trails three or more times.

On the first go-around, I rolled a measuring wheel—a bright orange, incessantly clicking, spoked mechanism that, to some people, resembles a unicycle. By pushing this pain-in-the-ass apparatus, I was able to record distances to the exact foot (for example, the Fork Mountain Trail measured 33,829 feet), then easily crunch the large numbers to the nearest tenth of a mile. (If a measurement fell exactly between tenths, I rounded the figure upward; mile 1.65, for example, became mile 1.7.)

This time around I didn't feel the burning pain from a single yellow jacket sting, a first, but I did watch two copperheads crawl through camp, another first, early in the morning after a rainy night along the Chattooga. I encountered neither bear nor boar, but saw creatures rarer still: a pair of feathered skyrockets, peregrine falcons patrolling the blue mountain skies surrounding Pickens Nose. In mid-June, I was pinned down for ten anxious minutes atop Standing Indian by a devil of a thunderstorm—gust-driven rain lashed leaves in my face, multi-tined lightning torched the thunderstruck sky, head-drumming hail bounced off my hat near the end. The next time up, two weeks later, the mountain treated me to a clear-weather show, the peak of a heavy-bloom-year flowering of flame azalea and Catawba rhododendron. Later that summer, I lost a third of our

backpacking party atop the mountain for almost an entire day (he slept in, broke camp very late, then went the wrong way), but I found calm reassurance and good cheer from an old friend while we waited periodically for the hiker who never caught up with us.

As always, sweat washes away and fatigue is quickly forgotten, replaced by earned memories and easily recalled images of beauty: midnight lightning flashing strobelike across the froth-white face of a waterfall; the startling orange color of a red eft; the bright, star-sequined sky above a Standing Indian camp; large-flowered trilliums whitening the spring woods downslope from outcrop rock; scarlet tanagers and rose-breasted grosbeaks, sunlit and at eye level, perched near the top of Chimney Rock; the veery's spiraling song floating flutelike through a highcountry camp at dusk; swimming in Rock Gorge pools; standing behind the waterfall down in Three Forks; kidding a backpacking buddy because he always fails to remember a spoon, yet never fails to remember a discreet dram of ground softener.

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

*Tim Homan*



*Part I*

# **Southern Nantahala Wilderness**

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## Regional Directions and Access Points

**THE SOUTHERN NANTAHALA WILDERNESS** straddles the Georgia-North Carolina border between Dillard, Georgia, to the east and Hiawassee, Georgia, to the west. An 84-mile-long combination of state and federal highways makes a complete circuit—four sided and four cornered—around a larger area with the wilderness located somewhat in the middle. This circuit is defined by four sides and four intersections; three of the intersections are located in towns. The eastern side of the loop, US 441, stretches approximately 21.0 miles from the US 441–US 76 West intersection in Clayton, Georgia, to the US 441–US 64 West intersection in Franklin, North Carolina. The northern link spans approximately 28.5 miles from the US 64 West–US 441 intersection in Franklin to the US 64–NC 175 intersection east of Hayesville, North Carolina. The western leg runs slightly more than 7.5 miles from the US 64–NC 175 intersection to the US 76–GA 75 intersection in Hiawassee, Georgia (NC 175 switches to GA 75 at the state line). Completing the crooked loop, the southern segment extends a little more than 27.0 miles from the US 76–GA 75 intersection in Hiawassee to the US 76–US 441 intersection in Clayton.

The Southern Nantahala section of this guide utilizes a two-tiered system of directions. This arrangement is designed to avoid repetition, yet enable hikers to reach the five access points—two from the south, one from the east, and two from the north. The following introductory directions are those to the five access points: the highway circuit–wilderness approach road junctions. The numbers of the access points correspond to the numbers on the regional map (page 45). These directions lead hikers from the two nearest corners of the circuit, the two nearest intersections—one from the east and the other from the west, for example—to the access-point approach roads that lead toward the trailheads.

The second tier of directions, those following each trail description, begins at one or two of the closest access points. Final directions steer you from the access points to the exact trailheads.

### **Access Point 1**

This access point is the three-way US 64–West Old Murphy Road intersection located along that stretch of US 64 between Franklin, North Carolina, to the east, and Hayesville, North Carolina, to the west.

***Approach from the east:*** From the US 64–US 441 (Business 441) intersection in Franklin, travel US 64 West for approximately 12.0 miles to the left turn onto paved West Old Murphy Road. This turn is marked with signs for Wallace Gap and Standing Indian Campground in addition to the road sign.

***Approach from the west:*** From the US 64–NC 175 intersection east of Hayesville, travel US 64 East approximately 16.5 miles to the right turn onto paved West Old Murphy Road. This turn is marked with signs for Wallace Gap and Standing Indian Campground in addition to the road sign.

### **Access Point 2**

This access point is the three-way US 441–Coweeta Lab Road intersection just south of the small community of Otto, North Carolina. Otto is located along that segment of US 441 between Clayton, Georgia, to the south, and Franklin, North Carolina, to the north.

***Approach from the south:*** From the US 441–US 76 West intersection in Clayton, travel US 441 North for approximately 12.2 miles to the left turn onto paved Coweeta Lab Road (SR 1110). This turn is marked with a road sign and a prominent brown-and-white Coweeta Hydrologic Lab sign.

***Approach from the north:*** From the US 441 (Business 441)–US 64 intersection in Franklin, travel US 441 South slightly more than 8.5 miles to the right turn onto paved Coweeta Lab Road (SR 1110). This turn is marked with a road sign and a large brown-and-white Coweeta Hydrologic Lab sign.

### Access Point 3

This access point is the three-way US 76–Persimmon Road intersection located along that segment of US 76 between Clayton, Georgia, to the east, and Hiawassee, Georgia, to the west.

**Approach from the east:** From the US 76 West–US 441 intersection in Clayton, turn onto US 76 West (a left turn if you approach this junction from the south on US 441 North) and travel slightly more than 8.0 miles to the right turn onto paved Persimmon Road, designated with two signs, one for the road and the other for the National Forest Campgrounds along the Tallulah River. If the road sign is missing, look for the volunteer fire department at the beginning of Persimmon Road.

**Approach from the west:** From the US 76–GA 75 intersection in Hiawassee, where GA 75 heads north toward North Carolina, proceed slightly more than 19.0 miles on US 76 East before turning left onto paved Persimmon Road. This turn is designated with two official signs, one for the road and the other for the National Forest Campgrounds along the Tallulah River. If the road sign is missing, look for the volunteer fire department at the beginning of Persimmon Road.

### Access Point 4

This access point is the three-way US 76–Upper Hightower Road intersection located along that stretch of US 76 between Clayton, Georgia, to the east, and Hiawassee, Georgia, to the west.

**Approach from the east:** From the US 76 West–US 441 intersection in Clayton, turn onto US 76 West (a left turn if you approach this junction from the south on US 441 North) and travel US 76 West for approximately 18.7 miles to the right turn onto paved Upper Hightower Road. This turn is marked with signs for the road and Mount Pleasant Church of God at its entrance.

**Approach from the west:** From the US 76–GA 75 intersection in Hiawassee, where GA 75 heads north toward North Carolina, travel US 76 East for approximately 8.5 miles to the left turn onto paved Upper Hightower Road. Upper Hightower Baptist Church is located

on the left side of the highway just before the turn, which is marked by signs for the road and Mount Pleasant Church of God at its entrance.

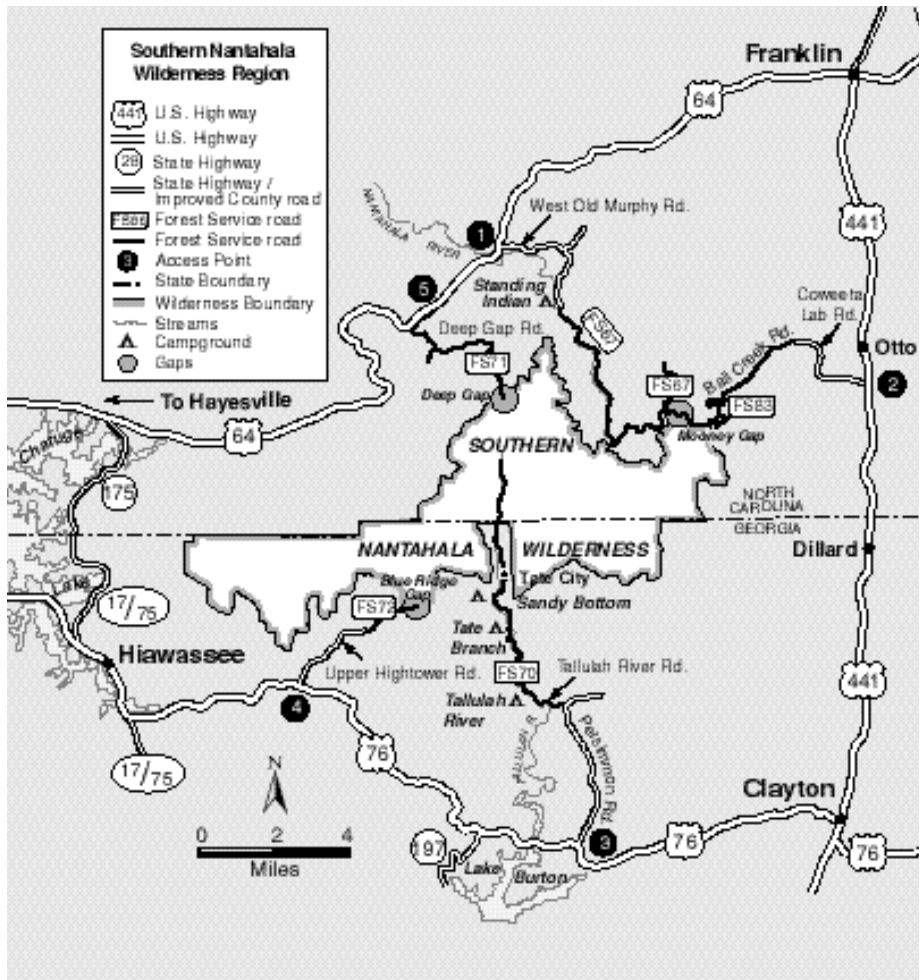
### **Access Point 5**

This access point is the three-way US 64–Deep Gap Road intersection located along that segment of US 64 between Franklin, North Carolina, to the east, and Hayesville, North Carolina, to the west.

***Approach from the east:*** From the US 64–US 441 (Business 441) intersection in Franklin, travel US 64 West for approximately 14.6 miles to the left turn onto paved Deep Gap Road (FS 71), usually marked with a small brown sign for Deep Gap.

***Approach from the west:*** From the US 64–NC 175 intersection east of Hayesville, travel US 64 East for approximately 13.8 miles to the right turn onto paved Deep Gap Road (FS 71), usually designated with a small brown sign for Deep Gap.






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*I thought as I sat there this was the quiet we knew in our distant past, when it was part of our minds and spirits. We have not forgotten and never will though the scream and roar of jet engines, the grinding vibrations of cities, and the constant bombardment of electronic noise may seem to have blunted our senses forever. We can live with such clamor, it is true, but we pay a price and do so at our peril. The loss of quiet in our lives is one of the great tragedies of civilization, and to have known even for a moment the silence of the wilderness is one of our most precious memories.*

—Sigurd Olson





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# Southern Nantahala Wilderness

## *Western Section*

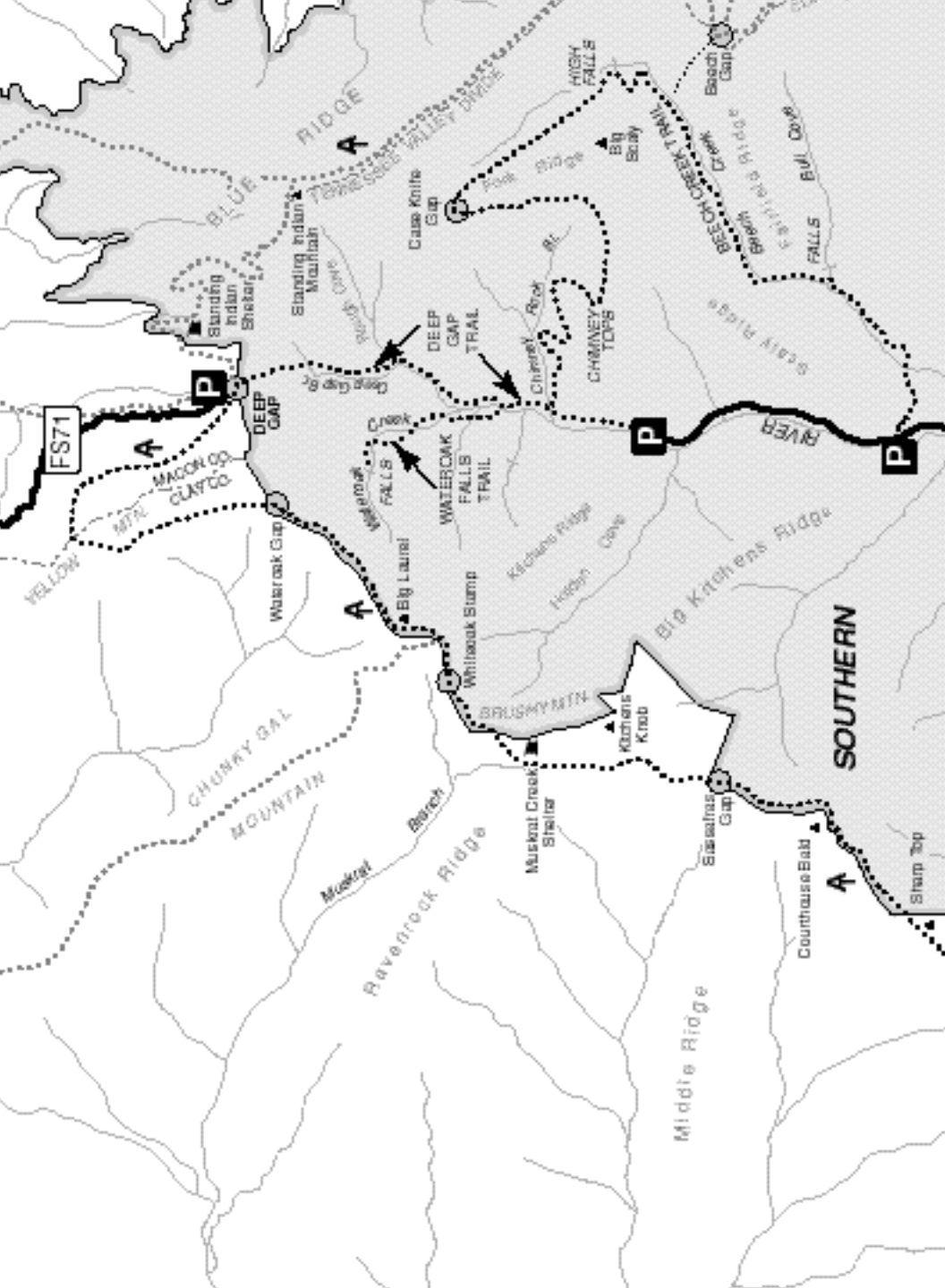


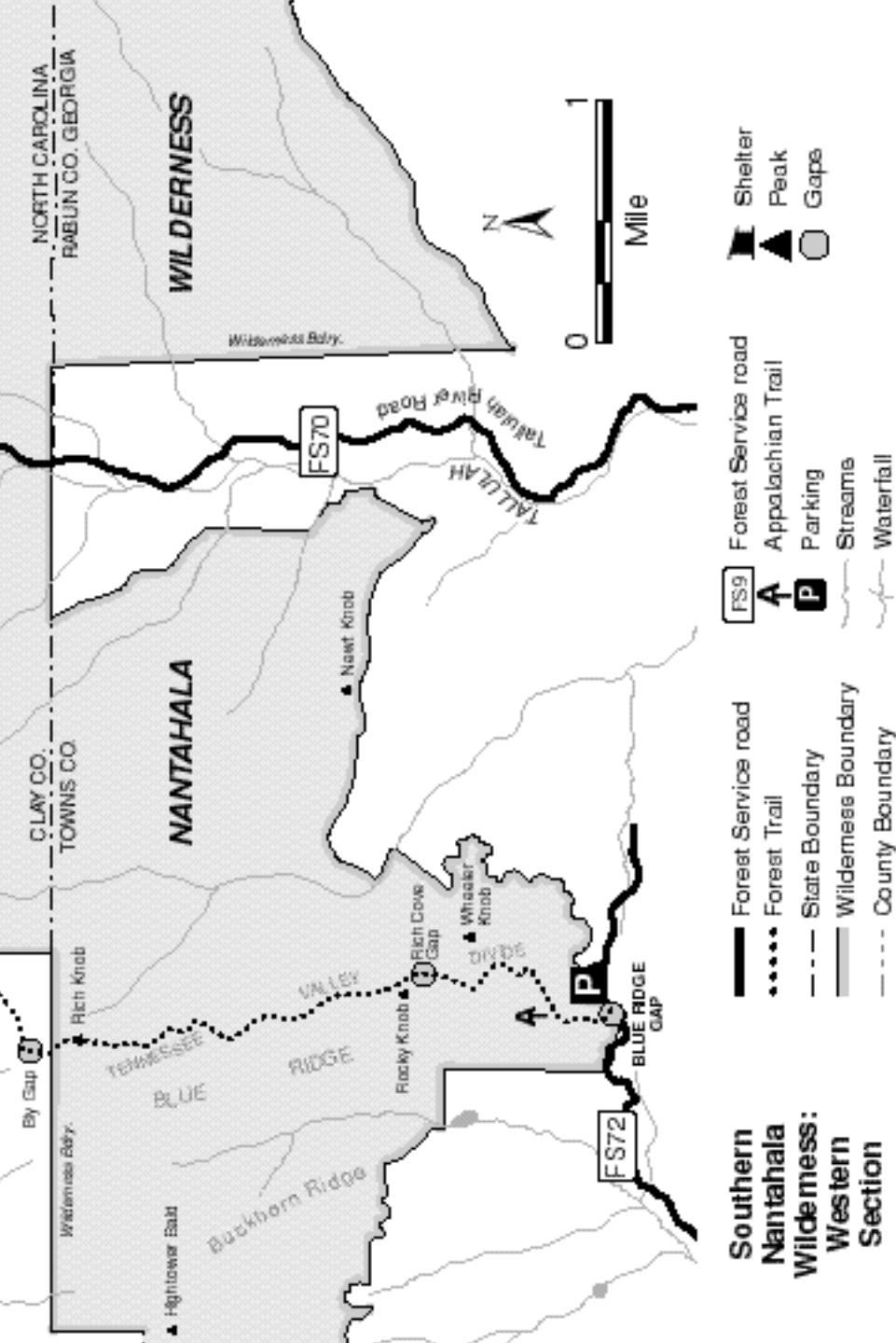
*Left: High Falls*  
*Right: Large-flowered trillium*  
*near Beech Creek Trail*



### **Trails**

- Beech Creek
- Deep Gap
- Wateroak Falls
- Appalachian Trail,  
Section 1





**Southern  
Nantahala  
Wilderness:  
Western  
Section**



## Beech Creek Trail

**Length 7.0 miles**

- **Dayhiking** Moderate in either direction
- **Backpacking** Moderate to Strenuous in either direction
- **Vehicular Access at Either End** Southern (lower elevation) terminus of the near loop at the Beech Creek Trailhead off Tallulah River Road, 2,600 feet; northern (higher elevation) terminus is the Tallulah River Trailhead (end of Tallulah River Road), 2,830 feet
- **Trail Junctions** Deep Gap, Wateroak Falls, unmaintained sidepaths (see description)
- **Topographic Quadrangles** Rainbow Springs NC, Hightower Bald GA-NC
- **Blaze** No official Forest Service blazing
- **RD/NF** Tusquitee/Nantahala
- **Features** Tallulah River; Chimney Rock; winter views; spring wildflower display; Beech Creek and its numerous cascades; rock outcrops; High Falls

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**T**HIS TRAIL DEFIES A SHORT, SIMPLE, LINEAR DESCRIPTION. It features far too many attractions and sidepaths demanding digression. First, Beech Creek's configuration, a near loop, is unusual within wilderness trail systems. Unmaintained routes lead left and right to a rock-climb overlook, two waterfalls, and a gap on the Appalachian Trail. If you poke around a bit near the beginning of the loop, you can find remains of the former Girl Scout camp. Just beyond the sidepath to High Falls, you'll have no trouble spotting the mining operation ruins.

More clifflike rock outcrops line this course than any other Southern Appalachian trail I have hiked. The wildflower display,

especially the extensive colonies of two trillium species, is impressive in early May. Near the middle of the loop, winter views of the surrounding ridges last until the second week of May. Last, but certainly not least, the final half of this loop often closely parallels its namesake stream—a clear, cold brook that tumbles and falls 2,180 feet in a little more than 3.5 miles from its beginning spring near Case Knife Gap to Tallulah River Road.

Like Deep Gap, Beech Creek traverses the upper Tallulah River basin, a drainage emphatically delineated by a high, sweeping, bell-shaped arc in the Blue Ridge. Here the famous ridge doubles as the Tennessee Valley Divide. All of the water south of the divide flows into the Tallulah, a Savannah River headwater stream that quickly enters Georgia.

Combined with a 1.2-mile segment of Tallulah River Road, Beech Creek Trail forms a complete loop, ending exactly where it begins. This route is described as it is most often and most easily walked, in a clockwise direction from the end of Tallulah River Road up to Case Knife Gap, then down with Beech Creek back to the road.

Starting at the road-blocking boulders, Beech Creek follows the gradual upgrade of an old road (it was still traveled by high-clearance vehicles until wilderness designation), which is the trail for all but the final 0.5 mile of the near loop. From trailhead to Girl Scout camp, the track often closely follows the scenic, creek-sized Tallulah River, here only 2 miles downstream from its highest headwater spring. The sheltering Tallulah valley supports a remarkably cool and moist hemlock-hardwood forest, especially notable for its species composition in a habitat below 3,000 feet and so close to the north Georgia border. Here among the expected beech, sweet birch, silverbell, yellow buckeye, yellow poplar, and northern red oak, two northern hardwoods—sugar maple and yellow birch (curly bark)—are growing very close to their southern limit in this part of the Southern Appalachians. If global warming proves to be as severe as many predict, the warmer temperatures will probably push these two species higher up the mountain.

At 0.3 mile the roadbed trail enters the former Girl Scout camp. To the right of the route saplings mark the site of a field that was,

with the exception of a few fruit trees, totally open when Congress designated the land as legal and biological wilderness in 1984. The walkway reaches its only officially maintained and signed junction at 0.4 mile. Deep Gap Trail leads to the left; Beech Creek Trail, just getting warmed up, continues straight ahead before curving to the right and climbing slightly harder into a stand of tall yellow poplar. Two-tenths mile beyond the fork, a rounded switchback curls beside Chimney Rock Branch, last call permanent water before the Beech Creek springs. On the rich wildflower slope before the next turn, rattlesnake ferns are easily identified by their unusual fertile stalks, held erect above their lacy foliage from midspring through early fall.

Continuing to change exposures as it winds to the northeast toward Case Knife Gap, the path traverses lush north- and northwest-facing slopes full of spring wildflowers. The long north-facing slope furnishes good looks at Standing Indian's 5,200-foot-high wall to the left (40 degrees to 60 degrees). The steady, easy ascent passes through rhododendron tunnels to a drier forest ruled by oaks—chestnut, scarlet, and northern red. At mile 1.2 the course gains elevation harder (short, easy to moderate) for the first time. Three-tenths mile further, it slants uphill even sharper, moderate at worst, to the crest (mile 1.7) of a westward-dropping spur from nearby Big Scaly—a ho-hum 5,060-foot peak in Standing Indian's shadow.

The treadway turns left onto the ridgeline before quickly slabbing to the left onto slope where chestnut logs from blight-felled trees that died 65 to 70 years ago are still slowly decaying. After gaining the spur top a second time, Beech Creek slips onto the northwest-facing slope again and ascends steadily (easy or easy to moderate) through an open hardwood forest with a largely herbaceous understory. At mile 2.1, well below the ridgeline, the route passes a worn loafing spot beside three or four boulders on the left side of the woods road. Opposite the boulders, a small cairn marks the sidepath that angles up and to the right, leading 0.1 to 0.2 mile through scenic terrain to Chimney Rock.

Located on Big Scaly's upper-west slope, Chimney Rock is a large and unusual outcrop, significantly higher than wide and open

to air all the way around. Starting from the rock's lower left side, a scramble up through rhododendron takes you to the upslope side. At the far upslope corner a foot- and hand-hold rock-climb route leads to the 360-degree panorama from the cap. The conical peak at 325 degrees is 5,020-foot Yellow Mountain. To the north, the high hump of Standing Indian breaks the mile-high barrier at 5,499 feet. From late April through early summer, this high perch is an excellent place to spot two of Southern Appalachia's most beautiful songbirds—the scarlet tanager and the rose-breasted grosbeak—in the eye-level and below-eye-level canopy of the surrounding trees.

Because we live in the land of the free and the frequently sued, Chimney Rock requires a disclaimer. Actually, a stern warning is the only responsible choice here. Although the rock's exposure is not sheer, a fall from the upper or middle sections will probably kill you. Young, fit, self-assured hikers will probably slither up in a hurry and think it's no big deal. Confident middle-aged hikers in reasonably good shape will think it's a challenge and go up haltingly. But if you are neither strong nor confident and are afraid of heights, Chimney Rock is no place for you. Don't let any prodding cheerleader convince you otherwise. As always, you undertake wilderness activities at your own risk. Just remember: natural selection never sleeps, and the dumb shall suffer.

Beyond the sidepath to Chimney Rock, the main trail climbs harder as it heads north on the western slope of Fork Ridge, a named Big Scaly spur. The often-rocky upgrades alternate between easy and easy to moderate, with a few short moderate pulls to make you work a little harder for your beauty. Two intermittent Chimney Rock Branch feeders, the first a waterslide and the second a regular rivulet, cross the track at mile 2.3 and 2.5. Up here above 4,000 feet, not a hemlock is in sight; all of the trees larger than rhododendron are hardwoods, increasingly oak. Along this stretch the wilderness walkway offers steady winter views of the Blue Ridge to the west and northwest. Above 4,500 feet, beech and yellow birch mix with the oaks. The treadway levels as it passes through the trail's high point—Case Knife Gap (4,740 feet) at mile 3.1. The planted fir trees in the



gap have not fared well; most have died since the mid-1980s.

Once through the gap, the route swings to the southeast and heads down, gradually at first, the upper Beech Creek valley between 5,000-foot peaks. Standing Indian's wall-like ridge bulks high above the track to the left (northeast); nearby Big Scaly hems in the valley to the right (southwest). The next 0.8 mile, all level or gentle down, provides the trail's easiest walking. Dense rhododendron clumps darken the woods; occasional old-growth trees—mostly gnarled, poor-form northern red oaks and yellow birch—escaped last millennium's logging. Just to the left of the trail at mile 3.3, Beech Creek's highest headwater spring flows cold and clear out of the black dirt. If you poke around in the rhododendron on the other side of the spring, you will find rusting strips of tin, remains of the former shelter that stood on the site until the late 1980s.

Narrowed to path by the lush vegetation, the course closely follows the shining stream, which quickly grows from the numerous seeps and springs. The rich northeast-facing slope above the creek nourishes an unusually lavish and diverse spring wildflower display. At mile 3.9 the often-rocky treadway begins a series of sharper downgrades (most easy to moderate, some moderate) as it switchbacks to the south away from, then back to, Beech Creek. The stream descends sharply here too, falling in short cascades, sluices, and slides between boulders or over bedrock ledges. Tall, gray outcrops line the near upslope as the walkway bends further away from the entrenched creek. A particularly high (70 to 90 feet) and scenic set of cliffs continues straight ahead where the route switchbacks down and to the left at mile 4.3. The descent proceeds through open, rocky, hardwood slopes where extensive large-flowered trillium colonies bloom below the outcrops in early May.

Where the roadbed trail doglegs to the right at mile 4.5, a usually signed sidepath to the left leads 0.1 mile down a very rich wildflower slope to High Falls. Approximately 75 to 80 feet tall, this small-volume falls is not much to look at during drought. But on a sunny day after the right amount of rain, the froth fans out into a dazzling lacework, joining and splitting in a repeated pattern as the

white skeins spill down the wide rockface.

Beyond the sidepath to the beautiful falls, the main trail descends steadily (moderate at first, then easy), downslope from another impressive set of rock outcrops. The track switchbacks to the right and down alongside Beech Creek at mile 4.8. To the left on the outside of the curve, a homemade, non-Forest Service sign points (or did when I hiked the trail) to an unofficial sidetrail leading, so the sign said, 0.5 mile to Beech Gap on the Appalachian Trail. I wheeled this unmaintained track to see if it was really 0.5 mile long, and if it really led to Beech Gap. It was, and it did. This blue-blazed AT connector is the steepest trail, official or otherwise, that I have ever walked or wheeled. It is so steep that when I stopped to catch my breath I had to lean backwards against a tree.

Almost immediately after veering above its namesake stream, the course passes a stacked-rock ruin, where corundum was crushed during the mining days. For the next 1.1 miles, from the switchback at mile 4.8 to the creek crossing at mile 5.9, the route works its way down the watershed to the southwest, closely following Beech Creek's wilderness-clear water. Steady downslope views offer excellent looks at the stream's numerous low falls and short white surges. The overall easy-to-moderate downstream run leads through a predominantly deciduous forest of tall second-growth trees. Hemlock is the only conifer in sight. To the right of the path at mile 5.4, a wet-weather rivulet spills down a 15-foot-high double-ledge drop.

The downgrade crosses Beech Creek just below a bank-to-bank ledge at mile 5.9. One-tenth mile beyond the first crossing, the trail rock-steps a Beech Creek feeder flowing out of Bull Cove. (Just before you cross the branch, a faint path to the left heads approximately 120 yards upstream to the 40-foot-high Bull Cove Falls, a small-volume waterfall.) The no-sweat hiking continues, at one point through a memorable, trail-crowding gauntlet of poison ivy. At mile 6.5 the treadway swerves to the right and down off the old road, which continues straight ahead into saplings. The final segment of the trail was rerouted off the road grade to avoid private property.

Less than 0.1 mile after the turn onto path, the track crosses Beech Creek for the second time. Now the walking slants up the slope—easy, then moderate-to-strenuous, then easy again—through a drier, south-facing forest. The ascent ends at mile 6.8, where the course passes through a gap in Scaly Ridge before dropping to the trail's southern end at Tallulah River Road. Two of the descents along this poorly routed downgrade are very steep.

### **Nature Notes**

Beech Creek's hardwood forest harbors an impressive spring wildflower display. Not only does this route offer diversity and abundance, but it also allows hikers to walk up and back into spring, to find freshly minted wildflowers high in the shadow of Standing Indian weeks after the blooms have withered down below. In early May, as the canopy closes overhead, extensive colonies of Vasey's and large-flowered trillium blossom at the lower elevations while windflower and trout lily still bless the highcountry near Case Knife Gap. The Vasey's rich, carmine-colored corollas are the largest among Southern Appalachian trilliums. This striking flower is far more numerous here than along any other trail I have ever walked.

You may find many other wildflowers near this trail. The speckled wood lily blooms beside the path to Chimney Rock; waterleaf and sweet cicely grow along the sidetrail to High Falls. Two other trilliums—wake robin and Catesby's—bloom alongside mayapple, yellow mandarin, and lousewort. You may also see hepatica, rue anemone, umbrella-leaf, foamflower, bloodroot, blue cohosh, showy orchis, and toothwort blooming during April or May.

Along Beech Creek's first half, which affords numerous views down hardwood slopes, you can pick out the distinctive bark of the black cherry trees from a relatively long distance. Its dark bark sticks out in a stand, especially in the diverse cove hardwood forest, where most of the species exhibit light gray or grayish brown boles. Cherry bark, broken into small platy scales with upturned edges, is dark brownish gray to nearly black. The centers of the scales often appear slick and shiny.

This species is one of the earliest hardwoods to leaf out in the southern mountains. As far as I know, only the yellow buckeye breaks bud substantially earlier within this wilderness. The foliage, twigs, and bark of the black cherry emit the distinctive aroma of bitter almond or hydrocyanic acid. The alternate, finely saw-toothed leaves—oblong and sharp pointed at the tip—are 2 to 6 inches long and  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 2 inches wide. When eaten fresh and raw, the leaves release prussic acid, a poison. Black cherry leaves have probably killed more



***black cherry***

Southern Appalachian livestock than any other plant.

The black cherry trees along this trail flower in late April or May when the leaves are not yet fully grown. Unfolding from the ends of the outermost branches, numerous small white corollas with orange stamens cluster tightly on racemes 4 to 6 inches long. You probably won't see the blossoms on the taller trees without binoculars, but if you happen upon a low-hanging bloom, a strong whiff at close range

will make you squint your eyes and wrinkle your nose.

The black is the largest native cherry in North America. This species reaches its largest proportions in the deep, rich, well-watered soils of the southern mountains, where it thrives from the lowest elevations to approximately 5,500 feet. People accustomed to the small, scraggly specimens (easily identified by their heavy infestations of tent caterpillars) along the roadsides of Piedmont Georgia and the Carolinas can hardly believe the stature and beauty of mountain-grown cherries. Achieving their best growth in coves and on north-facing slopes, the largest second-growth blacks already have grown 70 to 90 feet tall and 6 to 9 feet in circumference. In the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, a virgin-forest lunker along Ramsay Cascades Trail measures 124 feet in height and slightly over 13 feet in circumference.

Throughout its huge range, this hardwood is dispersed by birds and other animals that void the seeds well away from their meals. When the seeds hit the soil, wrapped in their pre-fertilized packets, they take root and grow on most sites except the very wet and very dry. The northeastern portion of the black cherry's widely disjunct range stretches from central Florida up to Nova Scotia, west to northernmost Wisconsin, then southward to east Texas. Following mountains from north-central Arizona to southern Mexico, the southwestern portion of its range is linear and much smaller. The southernmost limit of this tree's range is a pocket of mountainous habitat in Guatemala.

Birds and other wildlife, including bears, eat cherries when they ripen in late summer. Bears crave and concentrate on the fruits when they are the tastiest, usually in August and September. The bruins climb right up, crawl out onto limbs, and begin feasting. Biologists estimate bears can gain as much as 3 pounds per day eating cherries alone. Back when there were more large cherries and more bears, woodsmen considered "cherry bears" to be particularly irritable and best left alone.

Early mountaineers also harvested wild cherries and no doubt became belligerent themselves from time to time. In *A Natural History of Trees*, Donald Culross Peattie describes a cherry-flavored libation: "In the days when our woods were rich with such fine old cherry trees, the Appalachian pioneers invented a drink called cherry bounce; juice pressed from the fruits was infused in brandy or rum to make a cordial which, though bitter, was in high favor among the old-time mountaineers."

From just beyond the Beech Creek–Deep Gap junction to nearly mile 1.0, you will have no trouble finding the unusual rattlesnake fern on the rich, wildflower slopes above and below the old roadbed. This native fern is easily detected by its forked stem; one branch of the fork holds the fertile stalk (the spore-bearing part), and the other the sterile blade (the leafy part). The fertile stalk continues straight up from the fork; the blade leans away from the fertile stalk at an approximate 45-degree angle.

Usually 8 to 24 inches in height, the deciduous fronds (the entire leaf from the ground up) appear in April and last until frost. Branching from the base of the blade, the conspicuous, 6- to 14-inch-long fertile stalk withers earlier in the fall than the rest of the plant. The sporangia cluster densely on short alternate stems. The appearance of these sporangia probably led to the reptilian name; someone must

have thought the clusters resembled the buzzing end of a rattlesnake.

Highly variable in size and wider than tall, the broadly triangular sterile blades (the leafy part) are usually 5 to 12 inches in length. The opposite-stemmed foliage has evolved to delicately filigreed lace. This primitive, nonflowering plant is common throughout much of the Southern Appalachians in moist deciduous forests, particularly those with rich, well-drained soils. Its range is transcontinental: it is found throughout large portions of North America, Europe, and Asia. In North America the rattlesnake fern grows throughout most of the eastern U.S., across much of southern Canada, and, surprisingly, up the moist, moderate West Coast all the way to Alaska.



*rattlesnake fern*

## Directions

Beech Creek Trail nearly forms a complete loop. The route has either-end vehicular access—two trailheads 1.2 miles apart on Tallulah River Road. These two trailheads can be most easily reached from Access Point 3. (See the detailed description of the Access Points on page 40.) Closely paralleling and crossing its namesake stream, Tallulah River Road affords numerous excellent views of the Tallulah's trout pools, shallow riffles, and boulder-clogged cascades.

**Access Point 3:** From the US 76–Persimmon Road intersection, travel paved Persimmon Road straight ahead for approximately 4.2 miles, then turn left onto paved Tallulah River Road (FS 70), designated with a road sign and a brown-and-white national forest sign for campgrounds and the Southern Nantahala Wilderness.

Follow scenic Tallulah River Road to the north. (The pavement ends after 1.5 miles.) The road enters Tate City after 5.0 miles, crosses the bridge over Beech Creek after 7.1 miles, and enters North Carolina after 7.3 miles. From the Tallulah River Road–Persimmon Road junction, it is approximately 7.8 miles to the southern trailhead and approximately 9.0 miles to the dead-end northern trailhead. A Beech Creek sign points to the large parking area (turnaround loop and plenty of pull-in parking) for the southern trailhead on the left side of the road. Marked by a numbered (378) carsonite Forest Service sign and sometimes a wooden sign further in, the southern end of Beech Creek Trail begins 55 yards before and across the road from the parking area’s entrance.

The northern trailhead, known as the Tallulah River Trailhead, is impossible to miss; it is the parking area/turnaround at the boulder-blocked end of Tallulah River Road. The trail is the old road that continues straight ahead beyond the boulders and bulletin board.

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## Notes

## Deep Gap Trail

**Length** 2.5 miles

- **Dayhiking** (low to high) Moderate
- **Dayhiking** (high to low) Easy to Moderate
- **Backpacking** (low to high) Moderate to Strenuous
- **Backpacking** (high to low) Moderate
- **Vehicular Access At Either End** Southern (lower elevation) terminus at Tallulah River Trailhead (end of Tallulah River Road), 2,830 feet; northern (higher elevation) terminus at Deep Gap Trailhead, 4,340 feet
- **Trail Junctions** Beech Creek, Watroak Falls, Appalachian (end of Section 1 and beginning of Section 2 at Deep Gap), Kimsey Creek (at Deep Gap, nonwilderness and not included in this guide)
- **Topographic Quadrangle** Rainbow Springs NC
- **Blaze** No official Forest Service blazing
- **RD/NF** Tusquitee/Nantahala
- **Features** Tallulah River; Deep Gap Branch; AT approach

**D**EEP GAP TRAIL PROVIDES A GOOD ROUTE into the Southern Nantahala from the Georgia side of the wilderness. Combined with an equal length (2.5 miles) of the Appalachian Trail, Deep Gap offers dayhikers and backpackers a relatively easy, 10-mile round trip to the top of 5,499-foot-high Standing Indian Mountain.

Like Beech Creek, this north-south trail traverses the upper Tallulah basin, a drainage unequivocally delineated by a high, sweeping, horseshoe-shaped curve in the Blue Ridge. All water flowing within the basin is forced southward into Georgia and finally into the Atlantic at Savannah. Bisecting the upper end of the basin, Deep Gap closely parallels or loosely follows Atlantic-bound water—the Tallulah River