

A guide to the Benton MacKaye Trail from Georgia's
Springer Mountain to Tennessee's Ocoee River

Hiking the Benton MacKaye Trail

Tim Homan

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P E A C H T R E E
A T L A N T A



Published by
PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS
1700 Chattahoochee Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia 30318

Text © 2004 by Tim Homan
Photographs © 2004 by Appalachian Trail Conference Archives, Walt Cook, Jeffrey
Hunter, Mark Morrison, Michael Pullen, Dave Womble
Cover photograph © 2004 by Mark Morrison

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Interior illustrations © 2004 by Vicky Holifield
Maps page 8 and front foldout © 2004 by Mark Morrison
Section maps created by Ken Jones and Marty Dominy
with National Geographic's TOPO! software
Book design by Loraine M. Joyner
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 the Benton MacKaye Trail / Tim Homan.— 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 1-56145-311-0

1. Hiking—Benton MacKaye Trail (Ga. and Tenn.)—Guidebooks. 2. Benton MacKaye Trail (Ga. and Tenn.)—Guidebooks. I. Title.

GV199.42.G46H64 2004

796.51'09758--dc22

2004002162

Cover photo: Upper Falls

Photo credits: Page 26, Appalachian Trail Conference Archives; page 217 by Walt Cook; page 125 by Jeffrey Hunter; pages i, 30, 57, 77, 97, 143, 181, 203 by Mark Morrison; page 14 by Michael Pullen; pages 113, 161, 231, 255 by Dave Womble.

Contents

Overview Map: The Benton MacKaye Trail, Sections 1–12, Springer Mountain to Ocoee River.	inside front foldout
Acknowledgments	v
Preface	ix
The Benton MacKaye Trail: Questions and Answers, Present and Future	1
Locator map: The Future Route of the Benton MacKaye Trail	8
History of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association.	9
Benton MacKaye: A Brief Biography	19
Geology of the Benton MacKaye Trail	36
Forests of the Benton MacKaye Trail	39
Things to Know Before You Go	42
Water	42
Stream Crossings	43
Cold-weather Hiking and Hypothermia.	43
Poison Ivy	45
Yellow Jackets	45
Poisonous Snakes	45
Bears	48
Camping Rules	49
Trail Usage	49
Blazes and Signs	50
Hunting.	50

How to Use This Guide	53
Section Descriptions	53
Trail Ratings.	54
Benton MacKaye Trail, Sections 1–12	
Section 1: Springer Mountain to Three Forks	57
Section 2: Three Forks to Little Skeenah Creek	77
Section 3: Little Skeenah Creek to Skeenah Gap	97
Section 4: Skeenah Gap to Wilscot Gap	113
Section 5: Wilscot Gap to Shallowford Bridge	125
Section 6: Shallowford Bridge to Weaver Creek Road	143
Section 7: Weaver Creek Road to Bushy Head Gap	161
Section 8: Bushy Head Gap to Dyer Gap	181
Section 9: Dyer Gap to Watson Gap	203
Section 10: Watson Gap to Spanish Oak Gap	217
Section 11: Spanish Oak Gap to Chestnut Ridge	231
Section 12: Chestnut Ridge to Ocoee River	255
Environmental Guidelines	267
Usage Rules	
for the Cohutta–Big Frog Wilderness	272
Addresses and Maps	273
The Benton MacKaye Trail Association	275
BMTA Donors	275
Index of Nature Illustrations	277

Preface

DURING SPRING, SUMMER, AND FALL of two recent years—mostly on weekends and holidays—I walked all of the BMT sections included in this guide at least once, and all but two of them twice. On the first go-around, I rolled a measuring wheel—a bright orange, incessantly clicking, spoked mechanism that, especially to the jokers, resembles a unicycle. By pushing this wheeled counter, I was able to record distances to the exact foot (for example, Section 1 measured 32,763 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.

I measured the Benton MacKaye Trail because I wanted current information on the various reroutes, and because I wanted accurate mileages to all the features I intended to note. I was not the first to wheel the trail. Various BMTA members, especially Marty Dominy, had already wheeled and recorded distances on data sheets, precise to the hundredth of a mile. I thank them for all the information available to me when I started this project.

On the second go-around, I left the wheel at home and walked selected sections, taking comprehensive nature notes during springtime. After close to 200 miles of hiking on the Benton MacKaye—wheeling; nature note taking; wheeling reroutes; showing friends wildflower colonies, big trees, and the suspension bridge over the Toccoa River—I am pleased to report that I did not encounter a single poisonous snake, and I did not get stung by a single hornet or yellow jacket. I came to no harm worse than becoming wetter than I wanted from a couple of thunderstorms. My best wildlife sighting was a very young wild hog, 14 to 16 inches

long, yellow streaks still plainly showing on its flanks. It sprang off the edge of the treadway just in front of my footfall and hurtled downslope with astonishing speed for its small size.

I did experience one unforgettable moment of fear. I had walked a mile of Section 8, starting from Bushy Head Gap, when I felt the undeniable need to make a pit stop. I left the trail, walked down a woods road well out of sight, and dropped trousers. I had assumed the squat-and-strain position, both hands holding onto mountain laurel, when something gave my bare backside an emphatic nudge. A jolt of fight-or-flight adrenaline hit me with the instant insistence of an electric shock. I involuntarily hollered, jumped up, and twisted around to see what was behind me. But my adrenaline rush had neither clue nor care that my pants were wrapped around my ankles. As I began to fall, I saw a spooked-eyed hound, perhaps 60 pounds worth, frantic with his own fear.

I toppled onto the roadbed without harm. And as I sat there—letting my heart rate and adrenaline subside, pulling up my twisted trousers—Ranger padded up and properly introduced himself. He sat when commanded, gave me his paw when asked. I scratched behind his ears and told him he had scared the living ...daylights out of me. He trotted ahead of me—snake-sweeper and scout—for nearly three miles before turning back and heading home. This outing was not Ranger's first rodeo; he knew the trail, seemed to know the blazes, and made every turn correctly after only a moment's hesitation. So there you have it, my big moment of fear in the wild mountains did not come from bear or boar or rattler, but from a friendly dog who had a strange way of telling me he wanted to go for a walk.

—*Tim Homan*

How To Use This Guide

THIS GUIDEBOOK DETAILS the Benton MacKaye Trail's southern-most twelve sections, a distance of 92.8 miles from Springer Mountain, Georgia, to US 64 in Tennessee.

Section Descriptions

Each section begins with a map, followed by an elevation profile and a concise, at-a-glance summary of essential trail information. You can quickly refer to a section's location, length, difficulty rating (for both dayhiking and backpacking), and its starting and ending points with elevations given. Also provided here are trail junctions, blaze descriptions, topographic map names, DeLorme map references, counties, nearest cities, ranger districts and national forests, plus a brief listing of some of the section's outstanding features.

Note: The elevation profiles are visual aids only; because of slight inaccuracies in the computer program used to generate the profiles, the distances shown on the graphs do not always match the wheeled mileages in the text, which are accurate to the nearest tenth of a mile.

Following the information header, you will find a complete description of the route from south to north, with special attention given to forest types, views, trail junctions, stream crossings, grade difficulty, abrupt turns, and interior mileages to prominent physical features, such as mountaintops and gaps.

After the in-depth south-to-north narratives, a Nature Notes segment lists and describes some of the many wildflowers, ferns, shrubs, and trees you will encounter while walking that particular

section. The emphasis on spring wildflowers in the Nature Notes is by design. Fall color is widely heralded and hard to miss in season. Over the years, many hikers have asked me, “Where are all the wildflowers?” Invariably, those who asked the question were already too late for the best of the show. The better question is, “When and where are all the spring wildflowers?” The answer to the first part of the question is, “Earlier than most people think.” Many spring wildflowers have already bloomed or are in bloom when the hardwoods first shade the forest floor.

Additionally, this emphasis is intended to help spread trail usage over more of the year and to give hikers an incentive to get off their duffs during early spring—when days are often surprisingly warm, streams are full, winter views remain, life is stirring, and wildflowers are popping up in their perennial round of beauty.

At the conclusion of the Nature Notes, a truncated, north-to-south description—a short list of mileages to help you keep track of where you are—is provided for those wishing to walk the sections in that direction.

The last entry in each chapter provides detailed driving instructions to the section trailheads from several different points on the compass. Mileages and turns for setting a shuttle between trailheads are provided at the end of the directions.

When using this guide, keep in mind that trail sections often change; they are often rerouted by nature or man. Contact the BMTA or the appropriate ranger district for current conditions.

Trail Ratings

Difficulty ratings are inherently subjective and relative; there are no standardized norms that fit all the possibilities. Useful systems, however, are those that achieve consistency by limiting this subjectivity and relativity to a single region and a single

source. To this end, I have walked and rated all of the BMT sections described in this guide. Even if you do not agree with my ratings, I hope that you will find them consistent and, after a trip or two, useful.

The ratings utilized in this guide were based upon the usual criteria: the rate and length of elevation change, the way that elevation change is accomplished, the difficulty of a section compared to others, the length of the section, etc. In general, to reflect the cumulative effect of the grades, the longer sections were usually rated as slightly more difficult than shorter sections with roughly the same elevation change per mile. Occasional rough footing and stream crossings, while mentioned in the narratives, were usually given only minimal consideration: they are simply part of wildland walking.

The ratings employed in this guide apply only to the Southern Appalachians. They have been compared and calibrated only to other trails in the southern mountains—from the Cohuttas to the Southern Nantahalas, from Shining Rock to Slickrock. Thus, an easy-to-moderate rating means that I think the section is easy to moderate for a Southern Appalachian Trail, not one from Florida or one from the Colorado Rockies. Also, keep in mind that I rated these sections while I pushed a measuring wheel, carried a heavy daypack, and stopped frequently to look and write notes.

This rating system is also based on two assumptions. The first is that this scheme, or any other, does not apply to either end of the fitness-spectrum bell curve—those in excellent condition and those in poor condition. Hikers who are able to run long distances with little effort already know that ratings are meaningless for them. Conversely, people who become winded after climbing a flight or two of stairs would find difficulty classifications equally inaccurate, although much harder to ignore.

The other assumption is that a very high percentage of the people who hike or want to hike in the mountains exercise, at least occasionally. If you rarely exercise, it probably would be unwise to attempt a route ranked more difficult than easy to moderate. This approach is designed to accommodate those people who exercise, at least sporadically, and who fall somewhere in that broad, general category between slightly below fair condition and slightly better than good condition.

This guide utilizes three categories of difficulty: Easy, Moderate, and Strenuous. As you will notice, many sections have been assigned two designations. These split ratings are used to help bridge fitness levels when trail difficulty falls between obvious gradations. For instance, a section may be rated “Dayhiking: Easy to Moderate.” A person in good cardiovascular condition would consider this hike to be easy. A hiker in fair shape would probably rate the route as easy to moderate, and a walker with a poor fitness level would probably judge it moderate, perhaps even harder.

The decision to hike a certain BMT section is a commonsense personal judgment. When planning a trip, you should be aware of the trail’s difficulty, not intimidated by it; you should think of the rating as a recommendation, not a warning. If you keep the intended mileage reasonable, walk at a comfortable pace, take frequent rest stops, and are energized by mountain beauty, you will often be surprised at what you can accomplish.

Section

THE BENTON MACKAYE TRAIL

One

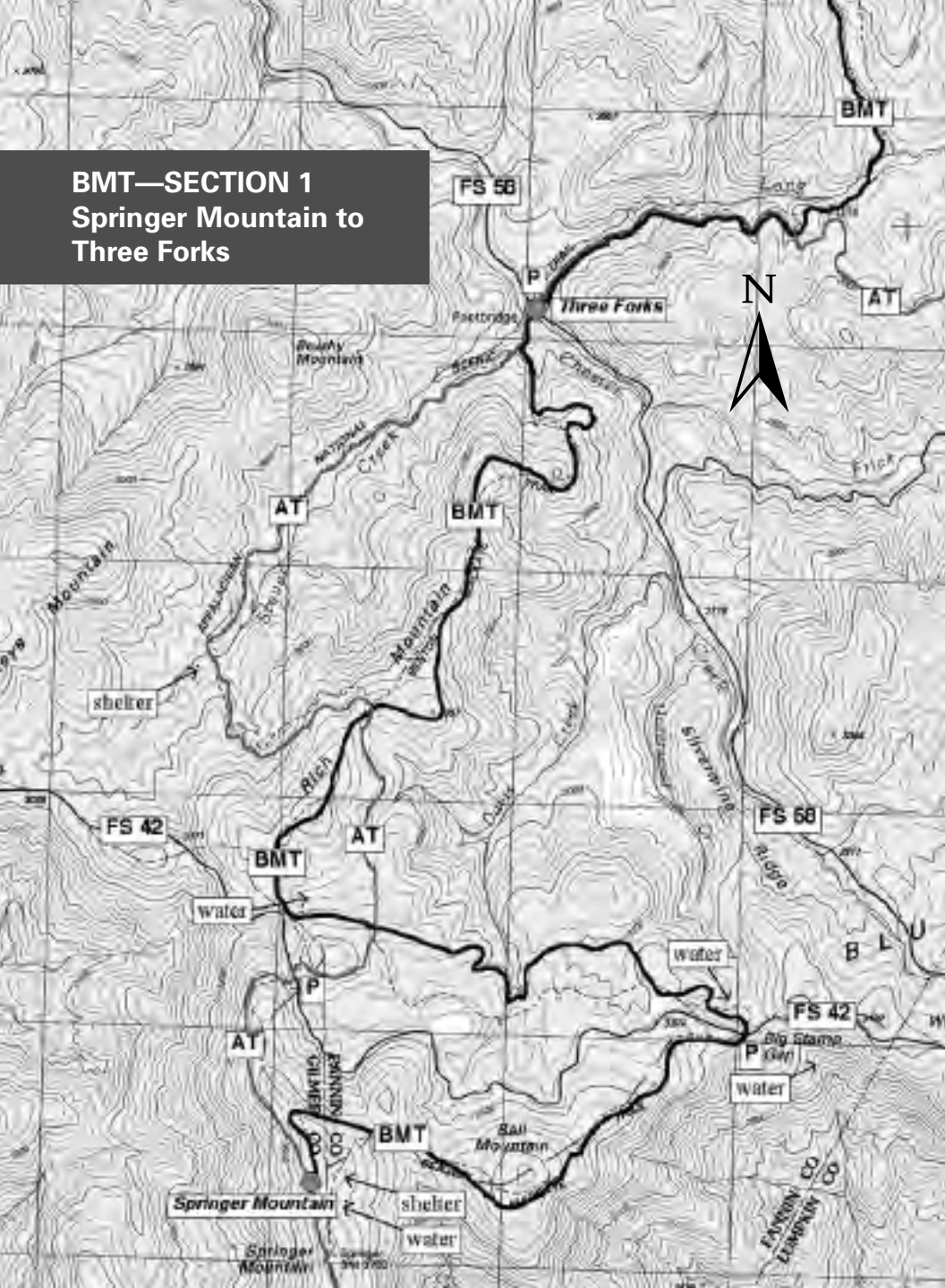
*Plaque commemorating
Benton MacKaye*



Springer Mountain
to Three Forks

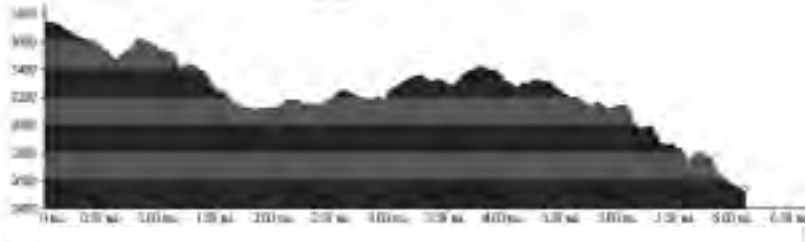
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BMT—SECTION 1
Springer Mountain to
Three Forks



Benton MacKaye Trail, Section 1

Southern terminus of the Benton MacKaye Trail at its Springer Mountain junction with the Appalachian Trail to Three Forks at FS 58



LENGTH 6.2 miles (see description)

DAYHIKING (SOUTH TO NORTH) Easy to Moderate

BACKPACKING (SOUTH TO NORTH) Moderate

VEHICULAR ACCESS AT ONE END ONLY Southern terminus atop Springer Mountain, 3,740 feet, does not have vehicular access. Access to the AT-BMT junction requires a 0.7-mile walk on the Appalachian Trail or a 1.8-mile walk on the Benton MacKaye Trail from FS 42. The northern end at FS 58, 2,510 feet, has vehicular access.

TRAIL JUNCTION Appalachian (see description)

BLAZES White diamond for Benton MacKaye;
white rectangle for Appalachian

TOPOGRAPHIC QUADRANGLE Noontootla GA

DELORME MAP GA-14

COUNTIES Gilmer GA, Fannin GA

NEAREST CITIES Ellijay GA (W), Blue Ridge GA (N),
Blairsville GA (NE), Dahlonega GA (SE),
Dawsonville GA (S)

RD/NF Toccoa/Chattahoochee

FEATURES Southern terminus for both the Benton
MacKaye and Appalachian Trails; Springer Mountain;
winter views; rock-outcrop overlooks; Three Forks;
extensive fern colonies

SPRINGER MOUNTAIN. Although Springer's summit, rocky and oak wrapped, is not lofty by southern standards, it is held in high esteem: it is a hiker's Mecca. Sooner or later, every serious Southern Appalachian hiker makes the short pilgrimage to the rock-outcrop overlook, the lone-hiker plaque, the southernmost white blaze. While Springer is technically the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, the mountain is hallowed by the yearly round of ritual—by handshakes, hugs, and kisses; toasts and lingering farewells; hoisted backpacks, determined smiles, and the first northbound footfalls—as the beginning. The overwhelming majority of thru-hikers—those intrepids who attempt to walk the entire 2,170-mile odyssey in one year—start at Springer and strike out north with late winter or early spring. They hope to avoid the worst of southern cold—a task more difficult than many imagine—to outlast summer heat, to beat the northern cold to Maine.

Springer is a mountain born for beginnings. From the south, a lone ridgeline leads to Springer's crown: an Appalachian outpost, the southernmost island of its elevation. At Springer the single ridge forks into two curving crests: the eastern Blue Ridge and the western Blue Ridge. Two-tenths mile north of the outcrop where the bronze backpacker revels in the year-round view, the first step

of the Benton MacKaye Trail splits away from the Appalachian. Here, like the first branch of a family tree, the father's trail (the AT) and the descendant named after the AT's founder—the Benton MacKaye—diverge with the two crests of the Blue Ridge.

In Georgia, the AT generally accompanies the eastern crest of the Blue Ridge north from Springer Mountain. With the exception of its first 1.8 miles to Big Stamp Gap, where it rides the eastern crest, the Benton MacKaye (once it reaches the ridgetop on Section 6) generally tags along with the western crest of the Blue Ridge through northernmost Georgia.

The shortest route to the BMT's southern terminus on top of Springer is a 0.7-mile walk on the AT from FS 42 (see directions). Once you have reached the AT-BMT junction, however, you will find it difficult to resist the nearly flat, 0.2-mile stroll to the Appalachian Trail's southern terminus. So while this section's length is 6.2 miles, you must stride a minimum of 6.9 miles to hike its entire length, and you will hike 7.3 miles if you make the side tour out to the Appalachian Trail's terminus and back. But don't let the additional mileage intimidate you. Trekked as described, from south to north, most of Section 1 is easily walked. This section—with fern fields, wildflower slopes, and silverbell ridgelines, with its own plaque and rock outcrop overlook—provides an excellent warm-up hike in spring, especially in late April and early May.

Starting from Springer, the much easier way to walk this section, the Benton MacKaye circumscribes a lumpy, lopsided, three-quarters oval—open to the west—before straightening out to the northeast along Rich Mountain to Three Forks. BMT-1 has four points of contact with the AT along its 6.2-mile length. The entire section is protected within the 23,300-acre Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area; it also lies within the sprawling

38,900-acre Blue Ridge Wildlife Management Area.

Hiked from south to north, the trail loses a significant amount of elevation. From its intersection with the AT atop Springer (3,740 feet), the track descends to 3,120 feet just across FS 42 at mile 1.9, then gradually rises to 3,450 feet on Rich Mountain at mile 3.8. The remainder of the walkway steadily loses 940 feet of elevation to Three Forks.

Because of its proximity to Springer Mountain and the AT, this stretch is one of the most popular BMT sections. Compared to the AT, however, this path remains scarcely trod. Section 1 is heavily used only where the two trails share the same course for the final 0.1 mile before Three Forks.

STARTING AT ITS SIGNED JUNCTION with the AT, the Benton MacKaye forks to the right away from the parent trail and blazes its journey's beginning through Springer Mountain's predominantly oak forest, squat and wind honed. After slightly less than 0.1 mile of nearly effortless walking, you will pass a plaque embedded on the face of a low line of outcropped rock to the right. The plaque pays tribute to Benton MacKaye, whose vision became a geographical and spiritual reality.

Beyond the plaque, the track begins a half-mile descent (a short easy-to-moderate grade is the most difficult) to a shallow saddle west of Ball Mountain. The BMT's first conifers, a few white pines, stand out in the otherwise deciduous forest at the upper end of the downgrade. At 0.2 mile the route curls to the right off the ridgecrest, continuing the scenic cakewalk on rich, north-facing slope. Excellent winter views span the short horizon from north to east. In season, the dark tread wends through a lacy, sweet-smelling colony of hay-scented fern, upslope and down as far as the eye can see.

By 0.4 mile the footpath gains the top of the eastern crest of the Blue Ridge, and remains on or near the famous keel down to the slight gap. Along the way, views through winter's hardwoods to the right showcase Springer's impressive bulk. These views come, in part, courtesy of a New York fern colony. Hay-scented and New York ferns produce their own herbicides: they poison many other plants. Where their colonies are especially large and dense, they change the character of the woods. A forest above ferns is more open and has fewer trees per acre; its shrub layer is also significantly reduced.

After ranging through the unnamed gap (3,470 feet) at 0.6 mile, Section 1 ascends (two short easy-to-moderate grades) with the ridge to the east. It bisects a hardwood and white pine forest for slightly more than 0.1 mile before slabbing to the right and skirting the uppermost southern sidehill of 3,660-foot Ball Mountain. (This dip to the south of Ball's crown is actually the southernmost point of the BMT.) At mile 1.0 the trail tops out at approximately 3,600 feet, then loses elevation all the way to Big Stamp Gap (occasional short easy-to-moderate dips the most difficult). BMT-1 quickly bends back to the spine, where it remains on or near the crest of the Eastern Blue Ridge. Here it heads through another fern field and past stands of small sassafras and American holly, their leaves as shiny as rain on rhododendron.

A double blaze and "view" sign mark the sidepath to the right at mile 1.4. A 65-yard walk leads to the Owen Overlook—a rock outcrop open straight out to the southeast. Deeply furrowed Jones Creek valley falls away at your feet. To the right and further in the distance, the outlying humps of Whissenhunt and Campbell Mountains rise above much lower land at 110 and 130 degrees respectively. In winter the view expands to include the higher peaks of the eastern Blue Ridge rolling toward the east

before bending away, their high crests sanctuary for the AT. Sasfras Mountain, at 70 to 75 degrees, stands closest, followed in outward line by Justus, Hogback, and Long.

Back at the Benton MacKaye's first double blaze, the course steadily descends with the ridgeline to its usually signed crossing of FS 42 at Big Stamp Gap (mile 1.8; 3,145 feet). Here, across the road, the BMT and the eastern crest of the Blue Ridge go their separate ways; they do not meet again. The downhill run continues on upper-hollow slope before swinging left into a grove of tall yellow poplar. Slightly more than 0.1 mile beyond FS 42, the long grade ends as the treadway rises beside a ravine, curves to the right across the furrow, then doglegs up and to the left onto a drier oak-hickory spur. Here the trailside forest is composed of American holly, white pine, and broadleaves, including blackgum, sourwood, red maple, and several hickory species mixed in with the oaks.

Across the broad spur, Section 1 heads down again, this time on the wide walkway of an old roadbed tunneling through evergreen arches of mountain laurel and rosebay rhododendron. Mile 2.3 dips to and rock-steps a branch, a Davis Creek feeder, before rising to a drier slope with tall white pine. The undemanding upgrade advances westward on the woods road beneath an oak-hickory canopy. At mile 2.6 the trail proceeds over a small spur, then descends (a short easy to moderate grade the most difficult) to its wide, rock-step crossing of another Davis Creek tributary (mile 2.7).

Now the hiking veers up and to the right above the brook, levels, and coasts downhill, where it crosses a smaller feeder branch at mile 2.8. Along the way, during or after the right amount of rain, you will pass by a fast chute sliding white over worn rock. Still traveling generally westward, the woods-road treadway gains elevation, easy overall, to the top of a spur fingering eastward from the main ridge that runs from Springer to Rich Mountain.

BMT-1 pushes forward up the spur, through a drier forest where chestnut oaks are abundant, until it reaches a low knob and drops to its first four-way junction with the AT at mile 3.2 (3,360 feet).

Beyond the intersection, the white diamonds lead you through a stand of Virginia pine: a short-needled, often short-lived, early-succession species that requires disturbance and plenty of light to gain a foothold in most habitats. The footpath leaves the spur, losing elevation to mile 3.4 (3,300 feet) before changing course to the right and down near FS 42. This usually signed sharp turn is now known as Crosstrails, named for the



Carolina silverbell

AT shelter that once stood nearby. Following a tenth-mile of no-strain walking, Section 1 starts a short upgrade (easy to moderate) to the keel of Rich Mountain. Here the trail roller-coasters with the main crest—up to a knob, down the other side, most of it easy—for the next 1.5 miles.

Rich Mountain is aptly named; it is fertile and unusually lush for its relatively low elevation. Here silverbells, both saplings and maturing trees, dominate much of the mid-canopy and understory. Their white bell-shaped blossoms, which sway in the spring breeze, normally open sometime between April 15 and May 1.

The mountain's north-south orientation is another of its interesting characteristics, one you will notice many times as you follow the white diamonds toward Tennessee and beyond. North-south-running ridges lead hikers through the driest exposure, south, on one side of their knobs and the moistest exposure,

north, on the opposite side. If you walk Rich Mountain from south to north, the uphill is south facing and the downhill is north facing. As you can readily see, the sweet birch and the stands of yellow poplar, the crest's dominant canopy tree, are more common in the saddles and on the downgrades, and the oaks and hickories are more prevalent on the rises.

The route ascends to the summit of Rich Mountain (3,450 feet) at mile 3.8 before dropping steadily (very short moderate the steepest grade) to a shallow gap (3,300 feet), where it crosses the wide and usually signed track of the AT again at mile 4.1. White pine and an occasional hemlock are the only conifers in the largely hardwood forest. The way through the woods undulates to the topknot of the next knob (3,360 feet) at mile 4.3, then descends (nearly 0.2 mile of easy to moderate) again. BMT-1 marches over its last slight bump (3,160 feet) at mile 4.8. Looks through winter's latticework afford views left and right; Buckeye Mountain is the first peak to the west.

By mile 5.1 the course curls to the right and down off the main fold onto fern slope and old roadbed, beginning the steady, overall easy downgrade to Three Forks. After threading through yet another fern colony, the walkway gains the top of a spur and resumes its elevation loss with a short easy-to-moderate downridge run. The trail swings to the left and down onto the open aisle of a woods road, and into the riparian green of rhododendron and hemlock at mile 5.7. Now you can hear Chester Creek, one of the forks, entrenched out of sight down the steep slope to the right. Here the nearly level hiking, shady and leaf cushioned, is particularly pleasant. The moist downslope forest, largely hemlock and hardwood, holds its crown gracefully high.

The track rounds a slight hollow with an intermittent spring at mile 5.9. A yellow poplar over 10 feet around is rooted (if it is still

alive) beside the trail just to the right of the hollow's downhill cleft. Approximately 70 yards beyond the notch, look down into the hollow. A lunker hemlock 12 feet 4 inches in circumference rises like a column (again, if it is still alive) just uphill across the crease.

The mild downgrade continues to its usually signed, three-way junction with the Appalachian Trail at mile 6.1. The Benton MacKaye turns right and shares the gravelly tread with the AT to Three Forks and FS 58. Section 1 finishes with a flourish; it crosses the sturdy 40-foot bridge over Chester Creek—a clear, cold, rippling run flanked by rhododendron and hemlock. Section 2 begins straight ahead, across FS 58.

THE FOUR POINTS OF CONTACT between Section 1 of the Benton MacKaye and the Appalachian Trail form three loops, one atop the other from south to north, from Springer Mountain to Three Forks. With four possible vehicular access points, the two trails and three loops offer a wide variety of distances and configurations. The following three routes, all starting from the AT parking area off FS 42, will lead you along all three loops, plus two short, doubleback side trips.

Route 1 (southernmost loop, 4.6 miles): From the Appalachian Trail parking area (fee-pay), walk the AT across FS 42 to the BMT-AT junction atop Springer Mountain. Continue straight ahead on the AT to its southern terminus, marked by a rock-outcrop overlook and two plaques. Backtrack to the BMT-AT junction, then follow the BMT (white diamonds, cross FS 42) to its next meeting with the AT, this one a four-way intersection. Turn left (200 degrees) onto the southbound AT and finish the short distance to the AT parking area.

Route 2 (the southernmost two loops, 6.2 miles): From the Appalachian Trail parking area (fee-pay), follow directions for Route 1

to the first four-way junction of the two trails north of FS 42. There, where the trails cross, proceed straight ahead on the Benton MacKaye to its next four-way intersection with the AT, this one on Rich Mountain at the top of the second loop. Turn right (130 degrees) onto the AT and travel south—straight through the first four-way junction—back to the AT parking area.

Route 3 (all three loops, 10.6 miles): From the Appalachian Trail parking area (fee-pay), follow the directions for Route 1 to Springer Mountain and the southern terminus of the AT. Backtrack to the BMT-AT junction, then hike all of Section 1 of the BMT (cross the AT twice) to Three Forks and FS 58. The two trails share the final 0.1 mile of treadway to Three Forks, which you will recognize by the bridged crossing of Chester Creek followed immediately by FS 58. Backtrack the 0.1 mile to where the trails split apart, then tramp the AT straight ahead, generally southward, all the way (cross the BMT twice) back to the AT parking lot.

Unlike the Springer Mountain plaques, the routes of the two trails are not set in stone. Varying lengths of treadway are rerouted from time to time for varying reasons. Check with the Benton MacKaye Trail Association or the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club to learn if the loops have changed significantly.

In addition to its shelter, Springer Mountain offers two overflow camping areas, designed and developed to disperse tent campers away from the immediate vicinity of the shelter and other overused spots, which the Forest Service and trail clubs wish to restore. If you walk the Appalachian Trail southward (toward its southern terminus) from the AT-BMT junction atop Springer, you will pass, after slightly less than 0.1 mile, the signed, blue-blazed sidepath leading a little more than 0.1 mile to the Springer Mountain shelter: a deluxe, two-story, A-frame cabinlike structure with a loft and picnic table. One hundred and

twenty yards down the well-worn treadway toward the shelter, you will come to a prominent path bending backward to the left.

This track leads to a large camping area—open and roughly oval in shape—with numerous designated sites, many tucked into the woods. Additional designated sites, rock lined and tucked into evergreen heath, are located across the spring beyond the shelter. The Forest Service and the two trail clubs request that you stay on existing paths as much as possible and camp at one of the two designated tenting areas.

NATURE NOTES

SEGMENTS OF Section 1 from Springer Mountain down to FS 42 and along the Rich Mountain ridge-line are a fairyland of fern and wild-flower in spring. If you walk BMT-1 from April 15 to May 10, you have a good chance of spotting—in bud, bloom, or leaf—dwarf and crested dwarf iris, bloodroot, Catesby's and



lousewort

painted trilliums, lousewort (several large colonies just above Big Stamp Gap) and toothwort, mayapple, foamflower, halberd-leaved violet, blue cohosh, yellow star-grass, giant chickweed, Solomon's seal, sourgrass (an oxalis or sorrel species with purple rimmed leaves), trailing arbutus, and pink lady's-slipper. You'll find the maximum number of bloomers in early May. Before the Benton MacKaye plaque, just after Section 1 dips for the first

time, an extensive lily-of-the-valley colony graces Springer's crest to the right of the tread. Rich Mountain's spine has a good aster display in late summer and early fall.

Over the past thirty years, the two most noticeable changes in forest composition near the Benton MacKaye Trail have been the



eastern white pine

dramatic decline in flowering dogwoods due to disease and the rapid increase in the numbers of eastern white pine. White pine saplings are much more abundant and widespread in the oak-hickory uplands than they were in the 1970s. The reason for this conifer's recent proliferation is twofold: fire suppression and the tree's shade tolerance. Especially when young, white pines cannot tolerate fire, but unlike most other eastern pines, they can tolerate shade and readily grow up through a hardwood canopy.

There is no mistaking an eastern white pine in the Southern Blue Ridge.

Everything about this evergreen—its growth rate; its height; its needles, cones, branches, and bark—is distinctive. It is the only five-needled pine in eastern North America. The slender needles, soft bluish green and 3 to 5 inches long, spray out five to a bundle or sheath. Its skinny cones are 4 to 8 inches long, tapering at either end, and often slightly curved. The branches spoke from the trunk in pronounced whorls, one whorl per year, a useful aid in estimating age.

The fast-growing and long-living (recorded maximums between 500 and 550 years) white pine is the tallest tree east of the Rockies. Mature specimens can often be recognized from a distance by their graceful, upward-sweeping tiers of branches, which tower pagodalike above the hardwoods. In eastern North America's now legendary virgin forests, many of these giants once ranged from 200 to 220 feet in height and 4 to 6 feet in diameter. The current Georgia state champion (an old-growth tree in Rabun County) is 12 feet 7 inches in circumference and soars skyward for 193 feet.

The distinctive rattlesnake fern is unusually common along the Rich Mountain ridgeline. Most ferns reproduce from spores located on the undersides of their pinnae (their leafy parts). A few species, however, produce fertile fronds, stems that bear only the sporangia (clusters of spores). The native rattlesnake fern is readily recognized by its fertile frond and



rattlesnake fern

by its obviously forked stem. One branch of the fork holds the fertile stalk; the other the sterile blade (the entire leafy segment). The fertile stalk continues straight up from the split, while the leafy blade leans away from the reproductive stalk at an approximate 45-degree angle.

Usually 8 to 24 inches in height, the deciduous fronds unfurl in April and last until frost. Branching from the sterile blade, the conspicuous, 6- to 14-inch-long fertile stalk withers earlier in the fall than the rest of the plant. The sporangia clump on short alternate stems. This fern's reptilian name came from a fanciful resemblance of its reproductive clusters to the noisy end of a rattler.

NORTH TO SOUTH Three Forks to Springer Mountain

Mile 0.0—From FS 58 at Three Forks, Section 1 immediately crosses the bridge over Chester Creek and shares the wide treadway with the AT.

Mile 0.1—At its usually signed, three-way junction with the AT, the BMT turns up and to the left, forking away from the gravelly AT.

Mile 0.5—Doglegs up and to the right away from the open aisle of the woods road.

Mile 1.1—Curls to the left and up onto the Rich Mountain ridgecrest.

Mile 1.4—Rolls over its first slight knob.

Mile 1.9—Reaches the high point of the next knob.

Mile 2.1—Descends to the shallow saddle, where it crosses the wide and usually signed AT at the first four-way junction with that trail.

Mile 2.4—Rises to the crown of Rich Mountain before descending.

Mile 2.8—Makes the usually signed sharp turn to the left and up at Crosstrails near FS 42.

Mile 3.0—Arrives at the second four-way junction with the AT.

Mile 3.5—Rock-steps across a Davis Creek tributary.

Mile 3.9—Rock-steps across another Davis Creek feeder branch.

Mile 4.4—Crosses FS 42 at Big Stamp Gap.

Mile 4.8—Passes a usually marked sidepath to the left, which leads to Owen Overlook.

Mile 5.2—Slabs to the left of the ridgecrest as it begins to skirt the upper southern slope of Ball Mountain.

Mile 5.6—Regains the ridgetop through a gap on the west side of Ball Mountain.

Mile 6.1—Passes the Benton MacKaye plaque to the left.

Mile 6.2—Section 1 ends at the BMT-AT junction on Springer Mountain, the southern terminus of the BMT.

DIRECTIONS

SECTION 1'S SPRINGER MOUNTAIN TRAILHEAD is located off FS 42, south of GA 60 and north of GA 52. A short walk from this trailhead leads to the southern end of Section 1, the southern terminus of the Benton MacKaye.

Approach from the west: From the US 76–GA 2–GA 282–GA 5 intersection in East Ellijay, Georgia, take the short (less than 0.1 mile) “To 52” spur to the T-intersection with GA 52 across the bridge. Turn right onto GA 52 East and travel approximately 5.2 miles before turning left (from a turning lane) onto signed Big Creek Road. Once on Big Creek Road, continue straight ahead on Big Creek–Doublehead Gap Road (Big Creek Road turns to the left, Doublehead Gap Road proceeds straight ahead). Follow Big Creek Road and then Doublehead Gap Road straight ahead for approximately 12.5 miles to the signed right turn onto the wide gravel entrance of FS 42. Forest Service 42 is additionally designated with prominent signs for Springer Mountain and the Blue Ridge WMA.

Approach from the south: From the GA 52–GA 183 junction west of Dahlonega, Georgia, follow GA 52 West approximately 11.5 miles to the signed right turn onto Roy Road. Slow down when you see the power apparatus on the left side of the highway. The entrance to Roy Road runs between a church and the old and new Stanley’s stores. Remain on Roy Road for approximately 9.4 miles to its T-intersection with usually unsigned Doublehead Gap Road, then turn right onto that road and advance approximately 2.1 miles to the right turn onto the wide gravel entrance of signed FS 42. Forest Service 42 is additionally marked with prominent signs for Springer Mountain and the Blue Ridge WMA.

Approach from the northeast: From the US 76–US 129 intersection in Blairsville, Georgia, where US 129 North crosses US 76 and leaves Blairsville, continue on US 76 West or turn onto US 76 West. If you approach this junction from the south, on US 129 North, circle three-quarters around the Blairsville Square, turn right to stay on US 129, then head 0.4 mile to an all-way stop. Turn right at the stop sign and gas station, follow US 129 for 0.1 mile, then turn left onto US 76 West. Travel 0.1 mile on US 76 West, then turn left onto signed Blue Ridge Highway (also known and signed as Old Blue Ridge Highway). After remaining on this road for approximately 7.5 miles, turn left onto signed Skeenah Gap Road and follow it for slightly less than 8.0 miles to its T-intersection with GA 60. Turn right onto GA 60, proceed 0.2 mile, then turn left onto signed and paved Doublehead Gap Road. Stick to Doublehead Gap Road for approximately 8.5 miles (approximately 4.7 miles of good dirt-gravel road until more is paved) to the signed left turn onto the wide gravel entrance of FS 42, also marked with signs for Springer Mountain and Blue Ridge WMA.

From the entrance of FS 42: Drive dirt-gravel FS 42 for approximately 6.5 miles to where the well-marked AT crosses FS 42. A very short distance beyond the trail crossing, you will see a large gravel parking area (fee-pay) to the left of the road. The AT crosses through the far end of the parking area. To reach Springer Mountain, walk the AT across FS 42 from the parking area.

If you wish to walk to Springer via the Benton MacKaye Trail, drive approximately 1.7 miles farther on FS 42 from the AT parking area to the BMT's usually signed and always blazed crossing at Big Stamp Gap (pull-off parking). Springer Mountain is uphill and to the right from this direction of travel.

Approach from the southeast: From the GA 52–GA 9 junction west of Dahlonega, Georgia, take GA 52 West for approximately 4.5 miles before turning right onto signed Nimblewill Church Road, further marked with a Forest Service sign on the left side of the highway. Follow Nimblewill Church Road for approximately 2.2 miles, then turn right onto signed dirt-gravel FS 28-1, also marked with a Forest Service sign for the Bull Mountain parking area. Travel slightly more than 7.0 miles to the four-way FS 42–FS 58–FS 77 junction at Winding Stair Gap. After approximately 2.1 miles the road forks; head up and to the left onto FS 77. Forest Service 77 is narrow and often winding.

Turn left onto FS 42 and proceed 1.0 mile to Big Stamp Gap (pull-off parking), where the signed Benton MacKaye Trail crosses the road, or 2.7 miles to the Appalachian Trail parking area (fee-pay) to the right of the road. The AT crosses through the far end of the parking area. To reach Springer Mountain, walk the AT across the road from the parking area.

Shuttle: If you followed the approaches from the west or south to Springer Mountain, a backtrack shuttle is about as good as any more complicated route. From the AT parking area continue approximately 2.7 miles farther on FS 42 before turning left and down onto FS 58 at a prominent, three-way intersection forming a triangle inside the roads. Follow FS 58 approximately 2.7 miles to the Three Forks Trailhead, then backtrack.

If you approach Springer from the northeast, or any route involving GA 60, however, your shuttle will be significantly shorter if you turn left onto FS 58 from Doublehead Gap Road. Follow directions for Section 2 (see page 93) to Three Forks, leave a vehicle there, then proceed approximately 2.7 miles farther on FS 58 before curling up and to the right onto FS 42. From here, it is 1.0 mile to the Benton MacKaye's crossing at Big Stamp Gap or approximately 2.7 miles to the AT parking area.

If you approach Springer from the southeast, via FS 77 to Winding Stair Gap, turn right onto FS 42, then immediately turn down and to the left onto FS 58. Follow FS 58 approximately 2.7 miles to the Three Forks Trailhead before backtracking to the FS 42–FS 58 junction. Finish the shuttle by turning to the right onto FS 42 and traveling either 1.0 mile to Big Stamp Gap, where the usually signed BMT crosses FS 42, or 2.7 miles to the AT parking area (fee-pay) to the right of the road.