

Benton MacKaye Trail - Section 2

Three Forks (FS 58) to GA. Highway 60

11.4 miles

General

This is the longest and most remote section of the Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) east of GA 5. It follows the Appalachian Trail (AT) for the initial mile before turning north to share the path of the Duncan Ridge National Recreation Trail (DRT) for the remainder of the section. The DRT is a 36-mile trail stretching from Three Forks to Slaughter Gap. It is designated as Forest Service Trail #4 and is marked with 2"x6" blue paint blazes. The rating for this section is "Most Difficult" because of its uninterrupted length and frequent ascents. Elevations on this section vary from 3250' on "The Bald" to 1920' at the Toccoa River. The southernmost 9 miles lie within the Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area (formerly known as Springer Mountain National Recreation Area).

Access

There are two access points to the BMT along this section. The first is via a Forest Service system road that, while unpaved, is passable in all seasons with an automobile. GA 60, while winding, is a major artery in this rural area. It is impassable only in the event of heavy ice or snow.

Three Forks: BMT and AT cross FS 58 at confluence of Stover, Chester, and Long Creeks

Directions from East Ellijay, GA: Start from the intersection of U.S. 76 and the Appalachian (GA 2, 5, and 515); take GA 2 West for 0.1 mile; after crossing the Cartecay River, turn right on GA 52; 5.3 miles later turn left on Big Creek Road; continue 12.4 miles to Doublehead Gap; stay on paved Doublehead Gap Road into Fannin County; reach end of pavement after crossing Noontootla Creek; turn right on FS 58 2.8 miles from Doublehead Gap; follow FS 58 for 5.4 miles to Three Forks. Parking is both along the road and off the road at the AT and BMT crossing. (Total Distance: 26.0 miles)

GA 60 at Little Skeenah Creek

Directions from Dahlonega, GA: Proceed north on U.S. 19 / GA 60 for 9 miles; bear left on GA 60 where U.S. 19 turns right, and go 7 miles to Suches, GA. From the intersection of GA 180 and GA 60 in Suches, continue north on GA 60; go 14.8 miles to the GA 60 trailhead (Total Distance: 30.8 miles). Parking is along the right side of the road just beyond the trail crossing.

Shelters, Campsites, and Water

An AT shelter (the Hawk Mountain Shelter) is approximately 2 miles north on the AT from its junction with the BMT at Long Creek. This is the only shelter on or near this section. It is a three-sided shelter with wooden floor (no bunks) and a spring nearby.

Good campsites are as follows: Three Forks (though near a road); 0.1 mile north of the Long Creek crossing; just north of "The Bald" (no water); Bryson Gap; either side of the Toccoa River Bridge.

Some known year-round water sources are as follows: stream north of Long Creek; spring 200 feet east of Bryson Gap; stream near southeast corner of Toccoa River Bridge. Do not get water from the Toccoa River or Little Skeenah Creek, as there are livestock areas only a short distance upstream.

Points of Interest

Three Forks (2550'): The confluence of Stover, Chester, and Long Creeks to form Noontootla Creek gives Three Forks its name. FS 58 parallels Noontootla and Chester Creeks while the AT and BMT parallel Stover and Long Creeks. The entire area features a heavy growth of rhododendron as well as large stands of white pine, hemlock, and various hardwoods. Noontootla Creek is an excellent trout stream.

Long Creek Falls: A 500 foot side trail leads from the AT / BMT 0.8 mile north on trail from Three Forks. The major cascade is a 30-foot drop with a large pool at the bottom. Lesser drops are located above and below this cascade. This is a popular destination for day hikes.

"The Bald" (3250'): a.k.a., The Helicopter Pad. This clearing was originally a rectangular man-made clearing for helicopter landing and take-off practice of the U.S. Army Rangers. It was enlarged in 1989 to serve as wildlife opening. Good views can be had of Springer Mountain to the south. ***DO NOT*** camp or otherwise place obstructions in the clearing as the Rangers still use the area for training.

Toccoa River: The BMT / DRT crosses the river on a 260-foot suspension bridge. Each side of the river is lined with rhododendron and hemlock and a set of rapids begins at the bridge as the river cuts around the south side of Toonowee Mountain. Excellent campsites exist here, especially on the north side of the river.

Trail Description - South to North

Mileage	Description
0.0	From FS 58 at Three Forks (2550'), follow the BMT / AT, ascending gently on old roadbed along the south side of Long Creek. Good campsites can be found in the flats along the creek.
0.5	Bear away from the creek as it circles into several small coves.
0.8	Reach the intersection of the BMT / DRT and the AT. The AT continues straight ahead leading to Hawk Mountain Shelter, Hightower Gap, and Maine. Side trail leads left 500 feet to Long Creek Falls 20 feet before BMT / DRT junction.
0.9	Reach a side trail leading left 200 feet to Long Creek Falls. Continue on more level trail, with the top of the falls visible to the left.
1.1	Turn left on the BMT / DRT, crossing Long Creek on a bridge built in 1989. Pass through a good campsite along the creek and turn left up the west side of a tributary of Long Creek.
1.8	Leave the stream, turning northwest to begin a steep ascent of "The Bald".
2.1	Enter the wildlife opening on top of "The Bald" (3250') and cross directly to the other side. Good views to the south include the Chester and Stover Creek valleys, Ball Mountain, and Springer Mountain. There is no trail marking in the middle of the clearing, and although the distance across is only 150 feet, use a compass azimuth of 300 degrees to reach the other side in the event of fog. A good campsite is situated on the northwest side of the clearing although there is no water nearby. Continue on the trail, gently curving to the right along the flat crest of the mountain. Avoid the old track that forks left near the edge of the clearing. Continue by curving left along the side slope and descend, passing an intermittent spring.
2.6	Reach an unnamed gap (2900'). This gap is near the head of Mill Creek; however, the spring 500 feet to right may be difficult to find. After passing through the gap, ascend steeply along the ridgeline.
2.9	Climb less steeply, with an old timber clearing bordering the trail on the right. Continue along a flat ridge crest.
3.1	Reach high point (3240') and descend gently.
3.3	Ascend gradually, skirting the east side of the ridge.
3.5	Regain the ridgeline and crest. Begin a short series of descents and ascents.

Mileage	Description
3.9	Briefly skirt the east, or right, side of the ridge. Descend.
4.1	Reach gap (2980'). Here begins a timber clearing that borders the right side of the trail to the high point of Wildcat Ridge.
4.3	Wildcat Ridge (3130'). Bear left (NW) along the ridgeline, traversing a long saddle. Ascend gradually, skirting the east, or right, side of John Dick Mountain.
5.1	As the trail levels, pass through dense laurel to reach a view over a clear-cut. This view, on a clear day, includes Duncan Ridge, Brasstown Bald, and Blood Mountain. Continue along the gradual descent of a trail relocation constructed in 1991.
5.6	Come onto the ridgeline at Bryson Gap (2900'). There is a good campsite in the gap with a spring 300 feet east, or right, of the trail. Continue from Bryson Gap by skirting the west, or left, side of the ridge. (Avoid the old roads that run directly east and west out of the gap as well as the old road that forks slightly to the left 200 feet north of the gap. Also, beware of numerous old logging roads that cross the trail a various angles for the next quarter mile.)
5.9	Views of the Rich Mountain Range (winter and early spring only) to the west begin.
6.5	Regain the ridgeline and shortly thereafter reach Sapling Gap (2770'). Continue almost level for 100 yards then descend gradually.
6.7	Cross old road. Ascend and descend over yet another set of high points.
7.8	Begin descent.
8.2	Reach FS 333. Cross road and descend gradually.
8.3	Reach the south end of the Toccoa River Bridge (1920'). There is a stream immediately to the right of the trail at the south end of the bridge. At the north end of the bridge, a good campsite can be reached by turning right and descending to the bank of the river. Continue on the BMT / DRT by ascending through a pine forest severely damaged by pine beetles.
8.6	Cross the gated road (FS 816). (The gate is 100 yards on the left. Road leads 4 mi. to GA 60 at BMT / DRT crossing.) Continue gradual ascent of Toonowee Mountain.
8.8	Cross old timber road and ascend more steeply. After 0.25 mi., begin more gradual ascent along east, or right, side of ridgeline.
9.2	Reach short flat section.
9.5	Resume climb.
9.7	Cross the first of several high points on Toonowee Mountain. Continue descending and ascending over high points.
10.1	Reach summit of Toonowee Mountain (2720'). Resume the roller coaster ride, descending and ascending several times.
10.7	CAUTION: Turn sharply left here, leaving the ridgeline. Avoid old path that continues along the ridge. Descend steeply.
11.0	Intersect old woods road and turn left, descending more gradually. Cross streambed (flowing in wet weather) and swing right along streambed in cove. Leave cove, avoiding cabin straight ahead, and swing left.
11.2	Enter hemlock and rhododendron grove.
11.4	Descend steps to reach GA 60 (2028') at its intersection with FS 816. To left, GA 60 leads 16.6 mi. to Blue Ridge; to right it leads 30.8 mi. to Dahlonega. WARNING: The water from Little Skeenah Creek (across the highway) is not for human consumption. There is a store 0.3 mi. to the right on GA 60 (south). Limited supplies, water, and telephone are available there.

Trail Description - North to South

Mileage	Description
0.0	From GA 60 (2028'), at the intersection with FS 816 begin ascent of Toonowee Mountain. Climb steeply; enter a grove of hemlock and rhododendron.
0.2	Swing right along a streambed in a cove. Ascend along the streambed.
0.4	Turn left on old woods road. Shortly thereafter, turn right off the old road and ascend steeply. CAUTION: Do not continue along old road.
0.7	End steep ascent and turn right along the ridgeline. Begin the first of many ascents and descents along the numerous high points on the mountain. No ascent or descent between the peaks exceeds 110 feet; the average is 60 feet.
1.2	Reach summit of Toonowee Mountain (2720'). Beyond the summit, descend.
1.7	Come to high point of the final peak. Descend steeply.
1.9	Reach flat stretch on ridgeline.
2.2	Resume descent, following east side of ridgeline.
2.3	Begin steep descent.
2.6	Cross old timber road and descend more gradually.
2.8	Cross gated road (FS 816) (Gate is 100 yards to right. Road leads 4 mi. to GA 60 at BMT / DRT crossing.) Enter pine forest severely damaged by pine beetles and reach Toccoa River. Good campsite is downhill to left along the banks of the river.
3.1	Cross Toccoa River Bridge (1920') to reach south end of the bridge. Continue from the end of the bridge with a good stream 100 feet to the left. Bear right off old roadbed. Ascend gently.
3.2	Cross FS 333. Begin steep ascent upon crossing road.
3.3	Begin more gradual ascent.
3.5	Cross woods road. Ascend more steeply. Descend, ascend, and descend again.
4.2	Reach old logging road. Ascend.
4.6	Attain high point. Descend.
4.7	Cross another old logging road. Here, ascend gently, and change more from a westerly course to a southwesterly and southerly course.
4.9	Reach Sapling Gap (2770').
5.0	Leave the ridgeline, skirting the west, or right, side of the north peak of John Dick Mountain. Follow an old roadbed.
5.3	Continue on a graded trail with little elevation change. During winter and early spring months, there is a good view of the Rich Mountain Range to the west.
5.5	Begin gradual descent into Bryson Gap. Beware of numerous old logging roads that cross the trail at various angles.
5.8	Reach Bryson Gap (2900'). There is a good campsite in the gap with a spring 300 feet to the east, or left, of the trail. Begin gradual ascent to west, or right, of ridgeline. 500 feet from the gap, switchback left. Follow graded trail built in 1991 along the north slope of the south peak of the John Dick Mountain.
6.3	Skirt clear-cut with good views (on clear days) of Duncan Ridge, Brasstown Bald, and Blood Mountain. Descend very gradually through dense laurel to reach a long saddle on the crest of the ridge. Climb briefly.
7.1	Reach high point on Wildcat Ridge (3130'). From here to the gap, a timbered area borders the left side of the trail.
7.3	Cross an old logging road in the gap (2980') and make short, but steep, ascent along the ridgeline. Briefly skirt the east side of the ridge before beginning a series of gentle ascents and descents along the ridge that divides the Noontootla and Rock Creek drainages.
7.9	Again skirt the east side of the ridge, descending. Regain the ridgeline near the low point on the ridge. Climb gradually.

Mileage	Description
8.3	Reach high point (3240'). Another timbered area along the left side begins here. Summer growth may be particularly thick for the next 500 feet. Descend gradually at first, then steeply.
8.6	Reach unnamed gap (2900') at the head of Mill Creek. A spring is reputed to be 500 feet to the east (left), but it may be very difficult to find. Climb along graded trail in a southeasterly direction out of gap, bearing to the left and avoiding track straight ahead along ridgeline. Pass intermittent spring on right side of trail. Curve to the right, soon reaching a broad, flat mountaintop. Several good campsites are in this area, although there is no water nearby.
9.2	Enter a wildlife opening at the high point of "The Bald" (3250') and cross directly to the other side. The clearing is only 150 feet wide, but in the fog or other low visibility situations, use a compass azimuth of 120 degrees to cross the opening. WARNING: Do not camp or otherwise place obstructions in the clearing as it is still used for helicopter landings by the U.S. Army Rangers. Descend steeply beyond the summit.
9.6	Come alongside a tributary of Long Creek. Follow this stream through frequent patches of rhododendron. Pass through good campsite and follow Long Creek for a short distance.
10.3	Cross Long Creek on a bridge built in 1989. In 150 feet, turn right on wide trail. View the top of Long Creek Falls to the right of the trail. WARNING: Despite the obvious evidence of persons, who previously reached the falls from here, please resist temptation and use the side trail.
10.5	To right side trail leads 200 feet to Long Creek Falls.
10.6	Reach the intersection with the AT. To the left, the AT leads to Hawk Mountain Shelter, Hightower Gap, and all other points north. Turn right to follow the AT / BMT / DRT along an old roadbed. On AT / BMT / DRT continue to descend along old road through several coves.
10.9	Level out and come back within sight of the creek. Pass several good campsites in the flats along the creek.
11.4	You have reached FS 58 at Three Forks (2550'). To left, it is 23.6 mi. to Dahlonega; to right it is 26.0 mi. to East Ellijay.