

Benton MacKaye Trail - Section 8

Bush Head Gap to Dyer Gap

12.8 miles

General

This section of trail is the longest and one of the most remote in Georgia. The Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) follows or is closely parallel to the western rim of the Blue Ridge and the Tennessee Valley Divide for the duration of this section. The elevation on this section varies from 2090' at Bush Head Gap to 3732', the second highest point on the BMT in Georgia, at Flat Top Mountain. Beginning at Bush Head Gap, the trail leads southwest along the Blue Ridge, passing through Hudson, McKenny, and Hatley Gaps. Beyond Hatley Gap, the trail climbs abruptly to the summit of Fowler Mountain. Here the trail turns to the north and northwest. After passing through Halloway Gap, the BMT climbs to an immense flat upland that makes up Flat Top Mountain. The trail crosses the headwaters of the Jacks River, reaches the high point on Flat Top Mountain, and makes a long descent to Dyer Gap. While trail improvements over seven years have improved the grade of the trail, this section must be rated as "Most Difficult" due to the total length and amount of ascent and descent encountered.

Access

There are three access points to the BMT along this section. Each is via either county roads or Forest Service system roads, which while unpaved, are passable in all seasons with a passenger automobile.

- Bush Head Gap: BMT intersects Bush Head Gap Road (Gilmer County Road #14) at the south end of this section.
- Flat Top Mountain: The old Flat Top Mountain Firetower Road (Forest Service Road #64A) leads from Dyer Gap. This road is recommended for four-wheel-drive vehicles only. Suggested parking is 0.1 mi. southeast of the summit.
- Dyer Gap: BMT intersects Forest Service Road #64 at the north end of this section.

FS 793 intersects the BMT at three points. This road is used for administrative purposes only and is not open to the public.

Directions from Blue Ridge, GA

Start from the intersection of the Appalachian Highway (U.S. Highway 76, GA Highways 2 and 515) and GA Highway 5 (at McDonald's); follow the Appalachian Highway south (and west) for 7.7 miles; turn right on Lucius Road (County Road #187) and go 2.8 miles to the stop sign at Boardtown Road; turn right and proceed 0.5 mile to Bush Head Gap Road; turn left; pavement ends after 1.0 mile; reach Bush Head Gap, 1.8 miles from Boardtown Road (Total Distance: 12.8 miles). Parking is 0.1 mile north of the gap where FS 793 turns left.

OR:

Start from the intersection of the Appalachian Highway (U.S. Highway 76, GA Highways 2 and 515) and GA Highway 5 (at McDonald's); proceed north on GA Highway 5 for 3.7 miles; turn left (at top of hill) on Old GA Highway 2; follow Old 2 for 9.4 winding miles to the end of the pavement; continue on steep ascent for another 1.0 mile to reach Watson Gap; continue from Watson Gap by taking the left fork, uphill; follow FS Road #64 for 3.2 miles along the Blue Ridge to reach Dyer Gap (Total Distance: 17.3 miles). Parking is on the right side of the road beyond the cemetery.

Shelters, Campsites, and Water

There are no shelters on this section of the BMT. The meeting ground at Dyer Gap Cemetery has an open sided shelter that can be used temporarily in an emergency. Here, emergency is defined as illness or injury; heavy snow, hail, or rain; or nearby and frequent lightning.

Areas not otherwise posted against camping are open for camping. With the exception of the ridgeline in the 0.7 mi. from Bush Head Gap and a short segment 0.3 mi. east of McKenny Gap there is no private property bordering the trail. Look for red paint boundary marks in these areas and respect the rights of private property owner. Opportunities for camping abound along this section. The major restriction is the proximity of water to the prospective campsite. Camping in the wildlife openings on Flat Top Mountain is prohibited by hunting regulations and shall be discouraged here.

Water is available from undeveloped water sources along the trail. It is imperative that one adequately treat all water from these sources before consumption. Please do not drink untreated water simply because it looks clean.

Some known year-round sources are as follows: spring 500 feet west from gap (0.8 mi. from Bush Head Gap, 12.0 mi. from Dyer Gap); spring 400 feet south of Hudson Gap (2.6 mi. from Bush Head Gap, 10.2 mi. from Dyer Gap); spring 10 feet south of trail 0.3 mi. east of Hatley Gap (5.0 mi. from Bush Head Gap, 7.8 mi. from Dyer Gap); stream crossing 0.1 mi. west of Hatley Gap (5.4 mi. from Bush Head Gap, 7.4 mi. from Dyer Gap); stream 800 feet north of Holloway Gap (8.6 mi. from Bush Head Gap, 4.2 mi. from Dyer Gap); spring 100 feet west of trail near Double Hogpen wildlife opening (9.7 mi. from Bush Head Gap, 3.1 mi. from Dyer Gap); stream crossing near Double Hogpen (10.3 mi. from Bush Head Gap, 2.5 mi. from Dyer Gap); and stream crossing south of Flat Top Mountain (10.7 mi. from Bush Head Gap, 2.1 mi. from Dyer Gap).

Points of Interest

Bearden Mountain (2860'): This mountain has five distinct peaks between Bush Head Gap and Hudson Gap. None are particularly outstanding by themselves, but two have good views of the Rich Mountain Range to the southeast.

McKenny Gap (2730'): The slopes and coves near this gap are particularly noteworthy for their botanical richness. The month of May is the best time for flowering displays here.

Fowler Mountain (3380'): While there is no view here, this mountain is significant due to the abrupt change in direction of the western rim of the Blue Ridge. The divide leading from the summit forms a "V" shape.

Flat Top Mountain (3732'): The summit of this mountain lies at the northern extreme of a large mountaintop with approximately one square mile in area above the 3500 foot elevation. In addition, this mountain has one of the highest annual rainfall totals in Georgia, exceeding 100 inches in many of the years that measurements were taken. This combination of factors leads to a very large fern population on top of the mountain. The headwaters of the Jacks River can be found on the southwest side of the mountain. Good views to the north and west can be had from the old fire tower site at the summit.

Trail Description - South to North

Mileage	Description
0.0	From Bush Head Gap Road in Bush Head Gap (2090'), ascend graded trail to top of cut on west side of road. Turn left and follow ridge for a short distance with road to left. Leave ridgeline, skirting northeast side of ridge on graded trail. Follow switchback to ridge crest and continue gradual ascent with private property to left marked by red blazes on trees. Proceed south along level section of ridge.
0.6	Cross old road.
0.7	Ascend to high point (2500') with view to left. Descend along ridge crest.
0.8	Reach gap (2420'). Old road to downhill left leads 500 feet to spring. Re-cross old road in gap, follow level section of road to northwest for 50 feet, then turn sharp left uphill and ascend via switchbacks. Follow graded trail along northeast and north slope of ridge. Return to ridge crest.
1.1	Reach high point (2680'). A good view to the SE is to the left of the trail. Descend.
1.2	Old road comes in from left. Follow old road uphill.
1.3	Take left fork on graded trail. WARNING: Avoid steep eroded road straight ahead and road leading to the left. Continue to ascend as trail takes long curve to right to regain the top of the ridge. Reenter old road and continue straight ahead along easy grade. View Flat Top Mountain to west and Big Frog Mountain to northwest. Skirt the south side of ridgeline.
1.7	Reach high point (2860') on old road. Descend, pass through saddle on ridge crest, and skirt west side of ridge.
2.2	Reach level section of trail in long saddle on ridge crest (2700'). Continue descent, skirting northwest side of ridge.
2.6	Cross FS 793 in Hudson Gap (2630'). Spring is in cove 400 feet to north, or right, of the trail. Follow old road along ridgeline for a short, steep ascent from Hudson Gap.
2.7	Level out for easy walking.
2.9	Resume ascent, skirting southeast side of ridge.
3.1	Reach high point (2940'). Follow long, level section of trail along ridge crest.
3.4	CAUTION: Take right fork.
3.6	Swing right, leaving ridge crest. Descend along graded trail, which skirts the north side of the ridge.
3.8	Enter deep gap (2670'). Begin ascent and continue to skirt north side of ridge through cove with rich vegetative (summertime) cover. Intersect ridgeline and continue to climb.
4.1	Reach high point (2860'). Swing left, avoiding faint old road leading down a ridge to the north.
4.2	Cross FS 793 in McKenny Gap (2730'). Leave ridge crest almost immediately after leaving McKenny Gap. Swing left and follow graded trail on contour around south side of mountain. Ascend only slightly on trail along sideslopes, which are very steep at times. Pass long, narrow rock outcrop with view to south.
4.7	Enter old road. Climb steeply for short distance, then follow level trail to intersection of ridge crest.
4.8	Leave ridge crest, turning right to follow old road into cove. Descend less steeply. Pass spring 20 feet to right of trail at low point. Continue on old road with brief ascent before resuming descent. Pass to left of cul-de-sac at end of FS 793.
5.3	Reach Hatley Gap (2630'). The old road turns right to continue downhill into Cashes Valley. Begin ascent of Fowler Mountain, skirting the north side of the ridge crest.
5.4	Cross stream in cove and follow graded trail across point of ridge into a second cove. Curve left through cove, then right around point of ridge. Circle left around head of cove.
5.8	Turn hard right onto main ridgeline. Follow trail along level ridge crest, make brief, steep ascent, then resume easy grade. Avoid old trace that leads to left, downhill
6.3	Cross high point (3370'). Descend for short distance on easy grade. Avoid track used by All-Terrain-Vehicles that leads to right along north side of Fowler Mountain.

Mileage	Description
6.6	Cross summit of Fowler Mountain (3380'). Here, the primary direction of the trail for its duration in Georgia becomes north. Follow long right curve from top of mountain.
6.8	Enter gap (3300'). An old road leads right, downhill into Cashes Valley. Avoid an old road, which leads left off the ridge. Continue on the BMT by ascending gradually along old woods road along ridge crest.
7.0	Cross high point (3450').
7.1	Reach low point (3330').
7.5	Cross next high point (3450').
7.6	Reach next low point (3420').
7.8	Attain the high point of Horse Ridge (3542'). Avoid the prominent crest of Horse Ridge, which leads east (right). Turn left and descend along broad ridge crest.
8.1	Reach low point (3380').
8.3	Climb to broad peak (3490') where all signs of a distinguishable ridgeline disappear. Begin gradual descent to the northwest (azimuth 315 degrees) before curving left onto graded trail leading southwest across slope.
8.6	Enter old road and turn sharp right. Reach Holloway Gap (3230'). A good stream (headwaters of Fightingtown Creek) is north 800 feet. Continue along ridge crest, ascending gradually.
8.8	Reach high point (3310'). Descend to low point (3290') with a considerable number of old timber downfalls. 300 feet to the left of trail are scattered rock outcrops on the steep southwest slope of the ridge. Fort Mountain can be viewed from these openings. Ascend along the ridge crest and then skirt the east side of the ridge on graded trail.
9.3	Return to the ridge crest and descend along gentle grade.
9.5	Continue along level trail where ridgeline forks right.
9.7	Spring is 100 feet to the left. Skirt southeast corner of wildlife opening and enter narrow access road.
9.9	Reach road intersection on ridge crest. Road to left leads to north end of wildlife opening while road straight ahead leads 1.3 mi to gate at Flat Top Mountain Firetower Road. Follow BMT, which leads between the two forks of the road, to top of rocky ridge (3690'). Turn left at top of ridge and begin gradual descent. Enter old road.
10.3	Turn sharp left off road. Cross stream. Enter another old road.
10.5	Cross streambed below remains of decaying bridge. Turn left off old road to cross another streambed.
10.7	Cross stream (headwaters of Jacks River) (3510'). Ascend from stream and continue gradual ascent through gently sloping hardwood forest with tremendous summertime fern under story.
11.4	Enter clearing and site of old fire tower at the summit of Flat Top Mountain (3732'). View Cohutta Mountain and Big Bald to the west, the Jacks River Valley to the northwest, Hemp Top and Big Frog Mountain to the north, and the Copper Basin to the northeast. Where the loop of the old fire tower road leads east, follow the BMT north through an overgrown part of the clearing. Turn sharp right at the edge of the woods and begin descent along graded trail, which follows the western slope of the mountain.
11.8	Briefly come onto ridge crest near saddle. Curve to left, then switchback hard right.
12.2	Cross rocky spur.
12.5	Turn right in saddle (3020'), avoiding old logging road, which leads uphill. Immediately turn left onto the Flat Top Mountain Firetower Road (FS 64A). Descend along road.
12.8	Reach Dyer Gap (2870'). FS 64 leads left to Lake Conasauga and right 3.5 mi. to Watson Gap. The Dyer Gap Cemetery is in sight to the right.

Trail Description - North to South

Mileage	Description
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Mileage	Description
0.0	Begin this section of the BMT at the intersection of FS 64 and 64A in Dyer Gap (2870'). Follow the Flat Top Mountain Firetower Road (FS 64A) south, ascending.
0.3	Turn right off road and immediately turn left onto graded trail. Ascend along west side of ridge.
0.6	Cross rocky spur. Take switchback to left, continue ascent, and swing right on long curve to reach ridge crest. Follow ridge crest for a short distance and then climb along graded trail on west side of ridge. Reach the edge of the woods and turn sharp left. Pass through overgrown clearing.
1.4	Reach the summit of Flat Top Mountain (3732'). A clearing with the site of the old fire tower is directly across the fire tower road. View Cohutta Mountain and Big Bald to the west, the Jacks River Valley to the northwest, Hemp Top and Big Frog Mountain to the north, and the Copper Basin to the northeast. Turn right on the old fire tower road. Continue straight on trail where road continues loop to left. Enter woods. Descend along easy grade through gently sloping hardwood forest with tremendous summertime fern under story.
2.0	Cross stream (headwaters of Jacks River) (3510'). Cross streambed and turn sharp right onto old road.
2.3	Cross streambed below remains of decaying bridge.
2.5	Cross stream and turn right onto old road. WARNING: After 300 feet take left fork onto woodland trail, leaving old road.
2.9	Swing left onto rocky ridge (3690'). Turn sharp right and reach intersection of narrow woods roads. The access road to right leads to the north end of a wildlife opening. The road that comes in from the left and behind leads 1.3 mi. to a gate at the Flat Top Mountain Firetower Road. Follow access road straight ahead, downhill.
3.1	Skirt southeast corner of wildlife opening and come to end of road. A spring is 100 feet to right just beyond. Continue on level trail.
3.3	Return to ridge crest.
3.5	Climb easy grade along ridge crest to high point. Descend along graded trail on east, or left, side of ridge. Return to the ridge crest and enter broad saddle (3290') with a considerable number of old timber downfalls. 300 feet to the right of trail are scattered rock outcrops on the steep southwest slope of the ridge. Fort Mountain can be viewed from these openings. Ascend along the ridge crest to high point (3310').
4.1	Descend into Halloway Gap (3230'). A good stream (headwaters of Fightingtown Creek) is north 800 feet. Continue from Halloway Gap on old road to south.
4.2	Switchback hard left onto graded trail, leaving old road. Ascend to the northeast, make broad curve to right, and follow broad slope with no distinguishable ridgeline southeast (azimuth 135 degrees).
4.5	Reach high point (3490').
4.6	Reach low point (3380'). Ascend along broad ridge crest.
5.0	Cross the high point of Horse Ridge (3542'). Avoid the prominent crest of Horse Ridge, which leads east (left). Turn right and descend.
5.2	Reach low point (3420'), cross high point (3450'), and descend to next low point (3330').
5.8	Cross next high point (3450'). Continue on the BMT by descending gradually along old woods road along ridge crest.
6.0	Reach gap (3300'). An old road leads left, downhill into Cashes Valley. Avoid an old road, which leads right off the ridge. Ascend along ridge crest. Avoid track used by All-Terrain-Vehicles that leads to left along north side of Fowler Mountain.
6.2	Cross summit of Fowler Mountain (3380'). Here, the primary direction of the trail for the remainder of this section is northeast. Descend for short distance on easy grade.
6.4	Cross high point (3370'). WARNING: Avoid old trace that leads to right, downhill. Continue to descend along ridge crest.

Mileage	Description
6.9	Make broad hairpin curve to left off ridgeline and onto graded trail. Curve right across the head of a cove, then left around the point of a ridge. Descend into cove and curve right around ridge.
7.4	Cross stream in cove.
7.5	Reach Hatley Gap (2630'). The old road to left, downhill, leads into Cashes Valley. Ascend along old road on ridge crest.
7.6	Pass to right of cul-de-sac at end of FS 793. Begin steep ascent along old road on north side of ridge. Reach high point and make brief descent.
7.8	Spring is 20 to left of trail. Climb, at first gradually, then more steeply.
7.9	Intersect ridgeline and turn left. Follow old road for short distance along ridge crest, then to south side of ridge.
8.0	Where old road turns right and downhill, continue ahead on graded trail, which curves left.
8.1	Pass long, narrow rock outcrop with view to south. Continue on graded trail, descending slightly.
8.6	Reach McKenny Gap (2730'). Cross FS 793. Ascend along ridge crest.
8.7	Reach high point (2860'). CAUTION: Avoid old road leading north down ridge. Turn right and descend steeply to saddle on ridge. Turn left and follow graded trail through cove with rich vegetative (summertime) cover.
8.9	Reach gap (2670') and ascend along graded trail on north side of ridge.
9.1	Return to the ridge crest and follow old road with little change in elevation.
9.6	CAUTION: Avoid left fork at high point (2940') and descend on old road to right. Descend to badly eroded area, follow level trail and then descend steeply.
10.1	Reach Hudson Gap (2630'). Cross FS 793 and follow old road along north side of ridge.
10.4	Come onto saddle on ridge crest. Swing left of ridge crest and continue ascent. Return to ridge crest.
10.9	Where an old road forks left, skirt south side of ridge.
11.1	After easy climb, reach high point (2860') on old road. Swing left, then right into saddle on ridgeline.
11.2	CAUTION: Leave old road where it curves left and begins steep descent. Follow trail straight ahead over broad point on ridge. Swing left on long curve to north side of ridge.
11.4	Reenter old road on ridge crest. Descend on eroded section of road.
11.5	Follow trail straight ahead along ridge crest, while old road turns right.
11.7	Reach high point (2680') with view to southeast. Turn right, descend along ridge crest, skirt north side of ridge and then descend by switchbacks.
12.0	Enter gap (2420'). CAUTION: Avoid road leading ahead and left, along contour. Ascend along trail on ridge crest.
12.1	Reach high point (2500') with good view of Rich Mountain Range to right. Descend. Keep left of private property marked by red paint blazes.
12.2	Cross old road. Continue along virtually level section of ridge crest before beginning descent. Turn sharp right around point on ridge and follow graded trail along northeast slope of ridge. Intersect ridge crest and continue east short distance to top of road cut.
12.8	Follow graded trail down cut to Bush Head Gap Road in Bush Head Gap (2090'). To the right, it is 5.1 mi. to the Appalachian Highway via Bush Head Gap, Boardtown, and Lucius Roads. Thence, Blue Ridge is 7.7 mi. to the left and East Ellijay is 11.6 mi. to the right.