

Benton MacKaye Trail - Section 10

Watson Gap to Double Spring Gap (GA/TN State Line)

8.5 miles

General

This section of the Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) lies primarily within the Cohutta Wilderness. Together with Section 11 in Tennessee, this section offers 13 miles of hiking inside the Cohutta Wilderness and Big Frog Wilderness. In addition, there are 15.7 miles of hiking without crossing a road. The BMT follows the western rim of the Blue Ridge for a short distance from Watson Gap. The trail then descends to the west to cross Mill Branch. After crossing the wilderness boundary, the trail descends through Peter Cove, crosses Bear Branch, and intersects the Jacks River Trail (JRT). The trail then ascends to the crest of the Blue Ridge and intersects the Hemp Top Trail (HTT). The combined BMT / HTT parallels the ridgecrest, passes the Penitentiary Branch Trail (PBT), crosses Hemp Top, and descends to Double Spring Gap on the state line. Elevations on this section range from 2430' at Bear Branch to 3580' on Hemp Top. The BMT lies entirely within the Cohutta Wildlife Management Area. This section is rated as "More Difficult".

Access

There are two access points to the BMT along this section. They are via Forest Service system roads which, while unpaved, are passable in all seasons with an automobile. One is a direct access to the trail, while the other indirectly connects to the BMT via two side trails. The access points are as follows:

- Watson Gap: BMT intersects FS 64, FS 126, and FS 22 at the north end of this section.
- Dally Gap: The JRT and HTT intersect FS 22 at a parking area in the gap. The JRT leads 0.75 mile southwest to the BMT. The HTT leads north 1.0 mile to intersect the BMT.

Double Spring Gap is in the midst of the designated wilderness and is not accessible by car. Access to the north of Double Spring Gap is described in Section 11.

Directions from Blue Ridge, GA

Start from the intersection of the Appalachian Highway (U.S. 76/GA 2 and 515) and GA 5 (at McDonald's); proceed north on GA 5 for 3.7 miles; turn left (at top of hill) on Old GA 2; follow Old GA 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 (Total Distance: 14.1 miles). Parking is on either side of the road. OR:

From Watson Gap, turn sharply right, uphill, onto FS 22; this road parallels the Blue Ridge (crest) for 3.0 miles to Dally Gap (Total Distance: 17.1 miles.). Park in either the parking area on the left or the overflow (and horse trailer) parking area around the corner on the right.

Shelters, Campsites and Water

There are no shelters on this section of the BMT but opportunities for camping abound. Due to the management policy for designated wilderness, no campsites can be identified or described in this text. Maintenance policy seeks to destroy and scatter visible remnants of past campsites so as to maintain a pristine character for the wilderness. Please practice Leave No Trace principles.

Shelters, Campsites and Water (continued)

Some known year-round water sources are as follows:

- Mill Branch (0.8 mile from Watson Gap, 7.7 miles from Double Spring Gap);
- Stream crossing (1.0 mile from Watson Gap, 7.5 miles from Double Spring Gap);
- Stream crossing in Peter Cove (2.0 miles from Watson Gap, 6.5 miles from Double Spring Gap);
- Bear Branch (2.3 miles from Watson Gap, 6.2 miles from Double Spring Gap);
- Springs 300 feet east and west of Double Spring Gap - note spring to east can be muddied by horses (8.5 miles from Watson Gap). Water sources in designated wilderness are not signed.

Points of Interest

- ◆ Mill Branch: old house site and clearing point to civilization in the not-too-distant past in this remote valley.
- ◆ Peter Cove and Bear Branch: rhododendron lined streams are featured in the isolated coves in the eastern extremes of the Cohutta Wilderness.
- ◆ Hemp Top (3580'): highest point on this section. Site of old firetower. Winter views to north, east, and west.
- ◆ Jacks River: while this is at least two miles west of the BMT, several loop hikes along this very scenic river are possible. Please note that hiking any part of the river requires multiple fords.

Trail Description - South to North

Mileage	Description
0.0	From the intersection of FS 64, 22 and 126 in Watson Gap (2700'), follow FS 22 north, uphill.
0.3	Switchback left from road onto graded trail into old clearcut area. Curve right along edge of clearing, ascending.
0.4	Reach ridgecrest (2850'). Descend along ridgecrest, then skirt right side of ridge.
0.6	Curve to left and return to ridgeline. Continue descent into cove and parallel streambed.
0.8	Enter remnants of old clearing, pass house site, and cross Mill Branch (2660'). Exit old clearing and follow old woods road through dense rhododendron.
1.0	Cross stream. CAUTION: Turn sharp left onto another old road. Ascend gradually, circling through several coves.
1.4	Cross ridgeline (2790') diagonally and enter Cohutta Wilderness. Descend along old abandoned woods road.
1.7	Avoid old road to left.
1.9	Swing right off old road and enter old clearing.
2.0	Enter woods and cross stream in Peter Cove (2490'). Continue along old road with beaver ponds on left. Cross streambed.

Mileage	Description
2.3	Enter dense rhododendron thicket and cross Bear Branch (2430'). Ascend graded trail to ridgeline. Continue along level ridgecrest through forest of huge hemlocks.
2.6	Intersect JRT. (The JRT leads left 1.3 miles to the Jacks River.) Turn right on the BMT / JRT. After 300 feet, turn left off JRT. (JRT leads straight 0.8 mile to Dally Gap and FS 22.) Ascend cove, switchback right, and follow level graded trail. Swing left into cove then switchback left.
2.9	Reach ridgeline. Ascend steeply for 350 feet. Continue along ridgecrest with only minor changes in elevation.
3.6	Turn left onto graded trail. Curve right into gap (2980') and continue broad right curve, ascending.
3.7	Reach ridgeline.
3.8	Return to the western rim of the Blue Ridge and the Tennessee Valley Divide on the high point (3040'). Enter old woods road and ascend.
3.9	Cross high point (3030').
4.1	Intersect HTT in gap (2930'). (The HTT leads right 1.0 mile to Dally Gap and FS 22.) Turn left on BMT / HTT and ascend gradually on old roadbed. Skirt left (west) side of ridge.
4.5	Curve sharp right to cross side ridgeline. Continue on left side of main ridgeline along level grade.
4.6	Enter saddle (3100') on ridgeline. Ascend and skirt west side of ridgeline.
4.8	Cross high point (3190').
5.1	Enter saddle (3130') on ridgeline. Skirt left side of ridge with little change in elevation.
5.5	Intersect PBT. (PBT leads left 3.5 miles to the JRT at the Jacks River.) Continue on BMT / HTT and enter saddle (3090'). Skirt west side of ridge and begin long, steady ascent.
6.2	Reach high point (3280').
6.3	Enter saddle (3220') on ridgecrest. Continue to skirt left side of ridge, ascending.
6.8	Curve right around point on side ridge.
7.2	Reach the summit of Hemp Top (3580'). (Old firetower site and remnants of old clearing can be found to right.) CAUTION: Turn left and proceed steeply downhill, avoiding flat ridge to north. Enter old woods road and begin more gradual descent. Continue to skirt west side of ridge with wintertime views of Big Frog Mountain directly ahead.
7.8	Enter saddle (3180'). Cross high point on ridgecrest, descend briefly, and resume ascent along easy grade.
8.1	Reach high point (3320'). Descend, follow nearly level trail, and skirt left side of broad ridgecrest. Curve right and begin steeper descent.
8.4	Switchback left.
8.5	Reach Double Spring Gap (3190'). Springs are 300 feet right and left here. A sign welcomes travelers to Tennessee and the Cherokee National Forest. See Section 11 Description for approaches to Double Spring Gap from the north.

Trail Description - North to South

Mileage	Description
0.0	From a sign welcoming travelers to Tennessee and the Cherokee National Forest in Double Spring Gap (3190') at the state line, follow BMT / HTT south along old woods road.
0.1	Switchback right. Ascend steadily. Curve left, skirt right side of broad ridgecrest, and ascend along easy grade.
0.4	Reach high point (3320'). Descend, briefly ascend, then descend again on easy grade.
0.7	Reach saddle (3180') on ridgecrest. Skirt right side of ridge on old road making long, steady ascent.
1.2	CAUTION: Turn left off old road and ascend steeply.
1.3	Reach summit of Hemp Top (3580'). (Directly ahead is the old firetower site and the remnants of the old clearing.) Turn right onto old firetower road and descend steadily.
1.7	Curve left around point on side ridge.
2.2	Enter saddle (3220') on ridgecrest. Continue to skirt right side of ridge, ascending.
2.3	Reach high point (3280'). Make long, steady descent along right side of ridge.
2.9	Briefly come into saddle (3090') on ridgeline.
3.0	Intersect PBT. (To right, PBT leads 3.5 miles to JRT and the Jacks River.) Continue on nearly level grade.
3.4	Enter saddle (3130') on ridgecrest. Ascend and skirt right side of ridge.
3.7	Cross high point (3190'). Descend alternately along ridgecrest or to right side of ridge.
4.0	Cross point on side ridge and curve hard left.
4.4	Enter saddle (2930') on ridgeline and intersect HTT. (The HTT leads left along old firetower road 1.0 mile to Dally Gap and FS 22.) Follow BMT straight ahead (right off old road), uphill.
4.6	Cross high point (3030'). Descend along ridgecrest, avoiding old road to left. Ascend.
4.7	Cross high point (3040'), leaving Tennessee Valley Divide for ridge leading southwest. Skirt right side of ridge.
4.9	CAUTION: Continue on long left curve through gap (2980') to south side of ridge. Turn right onto another ridgecrest. Continue along ridgecrest with minor changes in elevation.
5.5	Begin steep descent.
5.6	Switchback hard left onto graded trail, leaving ridgecrest. Switchback right in cove and bear right at bottom of cove. Swing left in second cove.
5.8	Intersect JRT (2480'). (The JRT leads left 0.8 mile to Dally Gap and FS 22.) Turn right on BMT / JRT.
5.9	Turn left, leaving JRT. (JRT continues straight ahead 1.3 miles to the Jacks River and beyond.) Follow BMT along broad, flat ridgecrest in forest of huge hemlocks and white pines. Skirt left side of ridge and descend.
6.1	Cross Bear Branch (2430') in dense rhododendron. Follow old road with stream and beaver ponds to right.

Mileage	Description
6.3	Avoid old road to left and cross streambed.
6.5	Cross stream in Peter Cove (2490'). Enter old clearing and bear right.
6.7	Exit clearing and come to intersection of old road. Ascend along old road.
7.0	Cross ridgeline (2790') diagonally and leave Cohutta Wilderness. Descend gradually, circling through several coves.
7.5	Turn sharp right onto another old road. Cross stream. Follow old road through dense rhododendron. Turn left off old road and enter clearing.
7.7	Cross Mill Branch (2660') and pass old home site. Ascend gradually through cove.
7.9	Bear left to reach ridgecrest. Briefly skirt left side of ridge.
8.1	Reach high point (2850'). Skirt left side of ridge on graded trail along edge of clearcut.
8.2	Switchback hard right onto FS 22. Follow FS 22 south.
8.5	Reach Watson Gap (2700') and the intersection with FS 64 and 126. FS 126 (dead end) leads right to the Jones Community. FS 22 leads back 3.0 miles to Dally Gap and the Tumbling Creek Community in Tennessee. FS 64 leads directly ahead 3.2 miles to Dyer Gap and to left 14.1 miles to Blue Ridge, GA.