

MacKaye trail hikes continue, but with new safety practices

By MICHAEL ANDREWS
MOUNTAIN LIFE EDITOR

The great outdoors is still being explored and enjoyed by members of a local hiking group.

The Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA), a nonprofit that hikes and helps maintain the Appa-

lachian Trail's sister pathway, plans to still conduct group hikes in trail areas that haven't been closed by emergency orders.

"The BMTA normally schedules five or more hikes per month. Of course, these are not normal times. Nevertheless, because hiking in the outdoors is good

for one's mental and physical health, we encourage (our) members and others to continue hiking during this national health crisis and to do so safely. To that end, we are continuing our hiking program and welcome people to hike with us," said Ken Cissna, group hike director.

"Of course, we're not hiking on any trails that are closed, nor will we select trails to hike that are likely to be crowded. Under the circumstances, we don't want to hike where there's a whole lot of people. Our hike leaders are experienced, knowledgeable hikers and safety is our first

priority."

Cissna said the BMTA is using additional safe practices during its excursions including keeping increased distance between hikers and suspending carpooling.

"We had a conversation among the board on whether to continue this, drop it entirely or if we continue it, how (to do so). The (emergency) order from Gilmer County identifies hiking and walking as essential activities. We know how to do hiking well and we've figured out how to do it safely during this time," Cissna said.

"We usually meet up at some place, like (a) park and ride. Say we were going to hike at Springer Mountain. We would meet at the park and ride, leave some people's cars there and take a smaller number of cars to the trailhead. We're not doing that now. We may still meet up somewhere, but we'll caravan to the trailhead and stick to our own cars."

Shuttle hikes, too, have been discontinued.

"A shuttle hike is where you drop a car at one end and drive back to the beginning, then hike down to the other car and drive back. We don't do that anymore because it's impossible to do without getting in someone else's car," Cissna explained. "Instead, we're doing what we call in-and-out or down-and-back hikes where you hike a portion of a trail, then turn around

and hike back to the starting place. Or we go on a loop hike, which is where you go around in a circle, then end up back at the beginning."

The group is recommending anyone who plans on taking part in a group hike, but feels sick to err on the side of caution and stay home.

"A potential hiker who's feeling ill, has traveled within the past 14 days to a location with a significant number of cases of COVID-19 or has been exposed within the past 14 days to a person who has been confirmed as, or is even suspected of having COVID-19 must not come on a hike," Cissna noted. "If you're feeling a tickle in your throat that wasn't there last night or if your chest doesn't feel quite right or you're the slightest bit warm, there will be other hikes. Please stay home."

All BMTA group hikes are being limited to a maximum 10 participants, he added.

"So far, we've had fewer than that, which is fine. Before, during and after a hike, participants must maintain an appropriate social distance from one another — an absolute minimum of six feet, but 10 is desired. These rules are explained to prospective hikers in advance of the hike and again at the meeting place," Cissna said. "The last time we had a hike, the thing about wearing masks



BENTON MACKEYE TRAIL ASSOCIATION

Steve Pruett and Sara Stembridge enjoy a recent Benton MacKaye Trail Association hike of the Wagon Train Trail at Brasstown Bald.

closed campgrounds, group recreation sites, picnic pavilions and restrooms, as well as several trails, dispersed recreation sites and roads in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest area. Those closings came on the heels of numerous Appalachian Trail access points and trailheads being shut down the previous week.

"The entire Appalachian Trail in Georgia is closed. I'm not sure if it's closed if you head further north or they're just requesting peo-

section to Weaver Creek, which is just before the trail crosses Highway 515 between Ellijay and Blue Ridge," Cissna said.

"I can't read the minds of the forest service, but I think they're trying to close the trails and trailheads they think are the most popular and most likely to draw crowds."

Although some of the group's planned excursions have been canceled due to those trail closures, parts of the MacKaye trail are still open to hikers.

The group will not host any trail maintenance days for the foreseeable future, Cissna confirmed. BMTA work days are typically hosted once a month along the Georgia and Tennessee/North Carolina sections of the trail.

"When hiking, it's pretty easy to keep your distance. Personally, I like it to be more than six feet (between people), but that's a lot more difficult when you're doing trail maintenance," Cissna said.

April hikes scheduled

The following BMTA hikes are scheduled for the month of April:

◆ Monday, April 27. A moderate difficulty 6-mile hike on the BMT from Hudson Gap to McKinney Gap toward Fowler Mountain. Fields of trillium and other spring flowers can be viewed along the way.

◆ Tuesday, April 28. A 6-mile moderate difficulty hike on the Towee Creek Loop with views of the Hiwassee River in Reliance, Tenn.

◆ Wednesday, April 29. An easy-to-moderate 1.5-mile wildflower stroll and picnic lunch at Mulky Gap.

For more details about any of these group hikes, email HikeLeader@BMTA-Mail.org.

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