



# Benton MacKaye Trail Association always on the move

By Michael Andrews  
Mountain Life Editor

The Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) is on the move year-round with its membership both enjoying and maintaining the almost 300-mile namesake nature trail.

Named for noted forester, conservationist and Appalachian Trail (AT) originator Benton MacKaye, construction of the MacKaye Trail was conceived by founding BMTA member Dave Sherman, who was inspired by MacKaye's interest in establishing spur trails to extend the AT farther south.

Building the sister trail to the AT, which begins on Springer Mountain in Georgia and ends at Davenport Gap in the Great Smoky Mountains, led to the BMTA's formation in 1980. The Georgia-Tennessee line portion of the trail was finished by 1989 and a section through the Smokies was completed in 2005.

## A growing group

Today, the trail association has members throughout Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina. There are no state-specific chapters. Instead, the BMTA is one big group with the shared goals of enjoying the great outdoors while keeping the trail and its features in good, usable condition.

"We are growing quite a bit. We are now at 465 members. That's up about 100 from last year. Our task as an organization is to maintain and protect the Benton MacKaye Trail, which is 287.6 miles long. We're responsible for the

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Joy Forehand, Benton MacKaye Trail Association vice president, front, leads a hike also enjoyed by Jan Hitt, Karen Steinberg and Wanda Stewart.

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Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) volunteers team up to tackle a maintenance project. The BMTA is responsible for maintenance along the almost 300-mile trail.

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entire trail," confirmed Joy Forehand, BMTA vice president.

An extensive maintenance project finished in 2018 found the group re-routing a worn section of the trail near Fall Branch Falls. Years of foot traffic had eroded the path to the scenic waterfall near Blue Ridge and Cherry Log. Over three years, volunteers put in 1,480 work-hours to build the half-mile reroute and connect it with the old trail.

"We also recently completed the Big Stamp parking area at the trailhead there," Forehand said.

This year, the group is tackling blown-down trees along a path from Tennessee's Thunder Rock Campground into North Carolina.

"It's to the point that they're like an obstacle course," Forehand said. "The forest service is still concerned still that they will not have the ability to go and rescue somebody if there's a problem.

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Consequently, they won't allow the use of chain saws. Usually, we can use chain saws except in wilderness (areas). Now we have to use crosscut saws everywhere and that's a little more work."

It's not all hard work, though. The BMTA also offers a number of guided group hikes each month.

Those scenic hikes, which cover different sections of the trail, are rated by their difficulty level. They are free to join and open to the public.

"You don't have to be a BMTA member to go on a hike or come on a work trip and help us out. Anyone in trail maintenance thoroughly enjoys hiking. You have to carry your tools and you may be hiking in about 5 miles sometimes before you go to work," said Forehand. "We also have hikers who are sometimes a little bit older. They can hike the trail, but (some do not) do trail maintenance. However, we do have one gentleman who's in his 80s

and is a regular at every trail work trip. All are welcome."

Ken Cissna, one of the group's regular hike leaders, said helping out on work trips is what led him to join the BMTA in 2009.

"I was up here only part-time then, but I began going on the Saturday trail maintenance trips when I was in town. I've liked the outdoors and hiking since I was a kid and this got me out in the woods, gave me some exercise and let me meet some people that shared that interest," he said.

"I've learned that the nice trails people enjoy walking on are that way because volunteers put in hundreds of hours to make them that way. Giving back to the community makes sense to me. Working on trails and leading hikes are ways I can do that," Cissna added.

The COVID-19 pandemic has

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Young adventurers Travis Jones and Ross Branch enjoy a weekend, family hike conducted by the Benton MacKaye Trail Association.

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caused the BMTA to adopt some new safety procedures including no car-pooling to excursions, keeping more distance between hikers, keeping stopping car-involved shuttle hikes. Despite those changes, the group did not cease conducting its group hikes during or after the statewide health emergency shutdown.

"We know how to do hiking well and we've figured out how to do it safely during this time. When hiking, it's pretty easy to keep your distance," Cissna noted.

Trail workdays were temporarily suspended due to the health crisis ensued, but they eventually resumed in May, Forehand confirmed.

## 'Something for everyone'

The trail association is using social media and its newly redesigned website, BMTA.org, to offer information on different types of hiking options

that can be enjoyed by groups, families and individuals.

"We want to get new members and the people who usually come to us are (already) hikers. If people come up here on vacation and they're looking for a hike to do, we (list) weekend hikes for the family, hikes with amazing views, etc.," Forehand said. "On our website, we have the information they need for going on day hikes, for backpacking or if they want to thru-hike the entire trail. The site also provides a glimpse of what it takes to maintain the trail."

A newspaper blurb about BMTA hikes led Forehand and her husband, Frank, to get involved and eventually join the association, which, she said, offers "something for everyone" who enjoys hiking.

"For 12 years, Blue Ridge was our vacation getaway from Florida. When we finally were able to relocate there in 2011, we saw a notice in the paper

about a BMTA-sponsored hike to the Brawley Fire Tower. By the end of the hike, we were hooked," she said.

"We have a couple of members who were previously with the forest service, but the vast majority are people who came up here on vacations and enjoyed hiking the trail. As they learned more about us and about the trail, they wanted to find out what it takes to maintain it. We have people from every walk of life."

There's no expectation for anyone to join the group if they do decide to come on a BMTA-led excursion.

"I always tell people, hey, come join us on a trail. You don't have to worry about how to get there or find the trailhead. If you enjoy the hike, that's great. You know how to get there and you can maybe go back and do it again sometime. If you don't enjoy the hike so much, you don't have to worry about it," Forehand said. ☐

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