



Photo by George Guo

Sterling Mackert, Jack Bell, Barbara Schlefman and Lucy Herring, shown from left, warm themselves around a campfire during a chilly camping trip. Fall can be the perfect camping season with its crisp mornings and cool nights.

Camping offers a chance to get away from it all

Are you and your family avid campers? Perhaps, with all the craziness in the world it's more appealing now and you'd love to give it a shot. Well, we at The News Observer asked Benton MacKaye Trail Association Vice President Joy Forehand to share camping experiences from herself or others in the group. In the words below, she and others show the beauty and fun of backpack camping.

Ready to get away from it all? Take your family on a weekend journey into the woods. Introduce them to the peaceful beauty the forests hold. Follow a winding pathway across babbling brooks. Stand in awe of splendid waterfalls and look out on the majestic views of far off mountains. Then spend a night

under a canopy of glittering stars.

If you and your family enjoy the outdoors and are in shape for a moderate to moderately strenuous backpacking trek and campout, a hike on the Benton MacKaye Trail from Three Forks to the Swinging Bridge, concluding at the Hwy 60/Little Skeenah Creek trailhead is a perfect weekend adventure for the family.

Begin at the Three Forks trailhead. In the first mile, you'll notice bouquets of New York ferns, violets and pungent Galax. More hardwoods appear as the elevation increases, followed by Rhododendron thickets as you descend to Long Creek Falls.

"Everyone loves a waterfall, and the kids will be especially impressed with

the cascades of water pouring down the 50-foot high rock cliff," said Clare Sullivan, secretary of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association.

As you continue northbound, you'll come to an unnamed bald with expansive views of the surrounding mountains.

"Be sure to get the kids involved," said Sullivan. "'Play 'Match a Track' by matching animals to paw prints you find on or near the trail. Sing an old favorite, '99 Bottles of Milk on the Wall,' or have the kids make up their own hiking song. See who can be the first to identify birds, trees and wildflowers."

After 8.6 miles, your first day concludes at the 268-foot Swinging Bridge over the Toccoa River, one of the longest

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foot trail suspension bridges in the East. Several campsites are available adjacent to the bridge over the picturesque river.

"A campfire sets the tone for a leisurely dinner," said Sullivan. "And, s'mores are a must. That's every camper's favorite dessert!"

"Then relax under a night sky filled with stars. It's a great opportunity for family time," Sullivan added. "The kids love playing 'Skunk in the Campground' (similar to 'Old Maid')."

The next morning, it's a 3.6-mile hike from the Swinging Bridge to Hwy 60 and the conclusion of your weekend adventure. On your way out, enjoy beautiful overlooks from Toonowee ("Tooni") Mountain.

Learn more about backpack hiking and camping opportunities on the Benton MacKaye Trail by visiting bmta.org.

On the other hand, if the family isn't quite ready for a moderately difficult backpack camping hike, below are several other camping options for you and your family or friends.

Fannin County has recreation areas that are open year-round for camping: Cooper Creek/Mulky campgrounds and the Deep Hole Recreation Area, as well as the Morganton Point Campground.

The Cooper Creek Recreation Area, which includes Mulky Campground, is situated near the 1,240-acre Coopers Creek Scenic Area in the North Georgia Mountains. The recreation area offers 25 campsites with picnic tables, tent pads and grills.



Young backpack campers Sophie Spataro and Clara Haley refuel by the campfire after a day's hike.

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A few of the sites are located on the waterfront. The campsites are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Restroom facilities and potable water are available; however, potable water is not available during the winter months.

To visit the Cooper Creek Recreation Area: From Blue Ridge, travel north on Highway 515 to Highway 60 and turn right. Follow Highway 60 through Morganton, then south for 16 miles toward Dahlonega. Turn left on Coopers Creek Road and travel six miles to the campground.

The Deep Hole Recreation Area offers camping, boating and fishing along the banks of the Toccoa River, a year-round trout stream that is popular for rainbow and brown trout, as well as rock and small-mouth bass.

The campground consists of nine camping sites equipped with tent pads, picnic tables and a grill. There are no water or electric hook-ups, or a dump station available in the campground. Campsites are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Visitors can take the 13.8-mile Toccoa River Canoe Trail from the Deep

Hole Recreation Area to the Sandy Bottoms Recreation Area. The area has a restroom and campsites are accessible to people with disabilities, as is the path to the canoe launch and fishing deck.

Anyone wishing to fish should check state fishing regulations before fishing. Deep Hole Campground is open all year and is located 16 miles south of Morganton on Highway 60. Fees for camping, fishing, and launching are required at Deep Hole Campground.

To visit the Deep Hole Recreation Area: From Blue Ridge, take Highway 515 north for 4 miles to Highway 60, turn right and go 2 miles to Morganton. In Morganton, turn right on Highway 60 for 14.8 miles to the campground on right.

The Sandy Bottoms Recreation Area includes a small camping area with four campsites. There are no water, electric hook-ups or dump station available at the campground. Parking for the campsites is across the road in the day use parking area. Standard amenities include a grill, picnic tables and a lantern post.

To get to Sandy Bottoms Recreation



Gathering around a campfire is fun and comforting.

Area from Blue Ridge, go south on Aska Road 8.5 miles. Turn left and go across Shallowford Bridge over the Toccoa River. Turn right on Shallowford Bridge Road and travel 1.3 miles to Old Dial Road and turn right. Travel

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0.6 miles on Old Dial Road to the recreation area.

Morganton Point Recreation Area in Morganton overlooks Blue Ridge Lake and consists of 43 camp sites, including two double sites and seven tent walk-in sites.

To get to Morganton Point, take Highway 515 north from Blue Ridge to Highway 60. Turn right and travel three miles to Morganton. In Morganton, turn right on Lake Drive for one mile to the campground. Morganton Point campground is open year-round. Reservations are available through the National Recreation Reservation Service (NRRS) by calling 1-877444-6777 or visiting www.recreation.gov.

Information regarding campgrounds, recreation areas and hiking trails within the Chattahoochee National Forest is available by call-



Sophie Spataro, in front, and Clara Haley, hike with backpacks full of camping gear.

ing 706745-6928 or visiting www.fs.usda.gov/conf.

Information and maps of the North Georgia area, hiking trail maps, campsite locations and a variety of other recreation information is available at the Fannin County Chamber of Commerce. The chamber is located on Orvin Lance Drive, in Blue Ridge, phone 706-632-5680, or online at www.blueridgemountains.com.