

WALKING THE BENTON MACKAYE TRAIL

From Springer Mountain to Double Springs Gap, the Georgia section of the Benton MacKaye Trail offers hikers and backpackers a pathway less-traveled...and well worth traveling.

WALTER COOK

Georgia's mountains feature many long hiking trails like the well-traveled Appalachian Trail and the lesser-known Bartram Trail, but there is another gem of a mountain walkway that comparatively few have traveled—the Benton MacKaye Trail.

Just like the older and better known Appalachian Trail, the 288-mile Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) begins (or ends) at the summit of Springer Mountain. For the first seven miles, these two trails cross and re-cross, but at Long Creek Falls, the BMT meanders northwest, crosses the Toccoa River twice, and in due course reaches Tennessee at Double Springs Gap in the Cohutta Wilderness Area.

From there, the trail follows the highland-spine that forms the Tennessee-North Carolina boundary, treating hikers to superb Southern Appalachian wilderness scenery. Eventually, the BMT re-crosses the Appalachian Trail and follows existing trails through Great Smoky Mountains National Park before ending at Davenport Gap, between Knoxville and Asheville.

Let's Build a Trail

The BMT is named for Benton MacKaye (rhymes with sky), the New England forester and regional planner who first proposed the Appalachian Trail in the early 1920s. Half a century later, David Sherman, then Director of the Division of Planning and Research for the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, proposed the BMT. Sherman, a self-proclaimed "map nut," spent many hours in 1975 studying topographic and land-ownership maps of the Georgia mountains, sketching several possible routes. He also spent many days on the ground evaluating each alternative.

By May 1976 Sherman was ready to make his recommendation to the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club (GATC). He proposed a long loop trail from Springer Mountain to the Great Smoky Mountains to relieve some of the overuse of the Appalachian Trail. He followed this with similar recommendations in 1978 to the Appalachian National Scenic Trail Advisory Council and Blue Ridge Parkway National Park. In one



The BMT crosses the Toccoa River by means of this attractive suspension bridge.

letter, Sherman referred to the proposed pathway as the Benton MacKaye Trail to honor its namesake, who had unsuccessfully advocated a more western course for the Appalachian Trail that would have routed it through the Cohutta Mountains rather than down the Blue Ridge to Springer Mountain.

According to Nancy Shofner in *Friendships of the Trail*, a 1973 National Park Service proposal to extend the Blue Ridge Parkway into Georgia was a serendipitous event in the birth of the BMT. The parkway would have displaced much of the Appalachian Trail in Georgia, leading the GATC and U.S. Forest Service to build the Duncan Ridge Trail as an alternate route. Fortunately, opposition to the parkway extension project convinced the Park Service to drop the proposal. The Duncan Ridge Trail then became a "side trail" alternative to the Appalachian Trail.

In July 1980, the GATC relinquished jurisdiction over the Duncan Ridge Trail from Springer Mountain to Rhodes Mountain. That segment, with its scenic and imposing sus-



Ice and snow are frequently encountered when Benton MacKaye Trail volunteers participate in the annual Martin Luther King holiday work.

pension footbridge over the Toccoa River near Tooni Mountain, became the first 22 miles of the Benton MacKaye Trail.

David Sherman was active in creating the Benton MacKaye Trail Association, the organization that would build and maintain the BMT. After the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club declined to accept responsibility for the new trail, many GATC members joined the new organization to help with planning and construction. Randy Snodgrass, then Regional Director of the Wilderness Society in Atlanta, accepted the challenge of leadership, and the Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) was born in the early spring of 1980.

Fire Rakes and Pulaskis

The work of flagging and clearing the route and digging a 24-inch-wide, 60-mile-long trail from Blue Ridge Mountain clay and rock began on June 7, 1980. Twelve volunteers led by George Owen met to cut and dig a mile-and-a-quarter stretch from Skenah Gap, in Fannin County, towards Rhodes

Mountain. Over the last 30 years, Owen has led many of the monthly work crews, has held nearly every BMTA office, and is currently construction director and a frequent leader of group hikes.

Marty Dominy flagged the particularly rugged and remote section of the BMT northwest of Blue Ridge and led many of the work groups that completed that section. Finally, in 1989, the BMT was complete to the Tennessee line at Double Springs Gap. Needless to say, there was a victory celebration. More than 100 attended a gala picnic, with speeches, music, and a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the Dyer Gap cemetery shelter west of Blue Ridge.

The arduous task of clearing and digging 60 miles of trail in Georgia had now become the arduous task of monthly work trips to maintain that trail. The work takes place in all kinds of weather; until this winter, just one Saturday workday had been cancelled due to inclement weather, when an ice storm made travel on mountain roads too hazardous.

Volunteers performed the original construction of the BMT and see to trail maintenance today. Chainsaws are used for larger trees lying across the trail, but only crosscut saws are permitted in Wilderness Areas like the Cohuttas. On some remote sections northwest of Blue Ridge, the time required to walk in and walk out is greater than the time left at the site to actually do the required work.

Some BMT volunteers have never before seen a fire rake or a Pulaski (mattock). The crews carry first aid kits and empha-

Two backpackers enjoy the lush trailside vegetation commonly encountered on the Benton MacKaye Trail during the warmer months.



LEFT: Volunteers like these (on the BMT in Georgia) do all the trail maintenance. RIGHT: The trees seem to say "winter," but this BMT work crew is on the trail at the North Carolina/Tennessee line in early May.



size safety when cutting and digging. In 30 years of labor, BMTA volunteers have never suffered a serious injury, but yellow jackets, poison ivy, unfriendly wildlife, and the possibility of a fall are always on their minds. A serious accident two miles from a vehicle parked in a remote area distant from the nearest hospital is a sobering possibility.

BMT World Headquarters

The result of all this effort is an exceptional foot trail through the Chattahoochee National Forest in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Georgia. All but a few BMT miles are on public land. Beginning at Springer Mountain, about 200 yards north of the starting point of the Appalachian Trail, the BMT first crosses Ball Mountain, with a grand vista overlooking mountain scenery to the south. Then the BMT intersects the AT close to the trailhead parking lot on Forest Service Road 42, then again at Three Forks amid some ancient hemlocks and pines.

The BMT leaves the AT near Long Creek Falls, goes over several tops, and descends to the 260-foot-by-3-foot suspension bridge across the Toccoa River. Commonly known as the "swinging bridge," this handsome structure has become a popular tourist attraction—at least for those willing to take a walk in the woods. The U.S. Forest Service built this bridge in 1977. By 2001, the wood planks had deteriorated to the point that bridge was unsafe. So BMTA volunteers replaced the planks and railings using lumber and tools paid for by a generous grant from the American Hiking Society. No one who has walked across this rustic wood-and-cable structure that spans the Toccoa's sparkling shoals will forget the experience.

To remain on Forest Service property as much as possible, the BMT takes some odd bends. Upon leaving the Toccoa, the trail ascends Tooni Mountain, crosses Ga. Highway 60 between Suches and Morganton, and then passes over Wallalah, Licklog and Rhodes Mountains on the way to Skenah Gap. From there, the path continues to Payne Gap, Deadenden Mountain, and Wilscot Gap, where it crosses Ga. Hwy. 60 for the second time.

The next section of the BMT, from Tipton Mountain to Bushy Head Gap, re-crosses the Toccoa River and includes a number of road walks. This stretch also crosses Ga. Highway

5/U.S. 76 between Ellijay and Blue Ridge; then the north-bound hiker walks through a log-house subdivision on Cherry Log Mountain. Developer and log-house manufacturer Joe Sisson generously allowed the trail to pass through the subdivision, which features the BMT's only backpacking shelter. Sisson also donated a tool shed, which has been affectionately dubbed the Benton MacKaye World Headquarters.

After a few more miles of road walking, the trail re-enters the Chattahoochee National Forest and begins the most remote segment of the trail in Georgia. The 12.7-mile section from Bushy Head Gap to Dyer Gap has some of the best spring wildflowers on the trail. It is also the most likely place to encounter a black bear, a European black boar, or a rattlesnake.

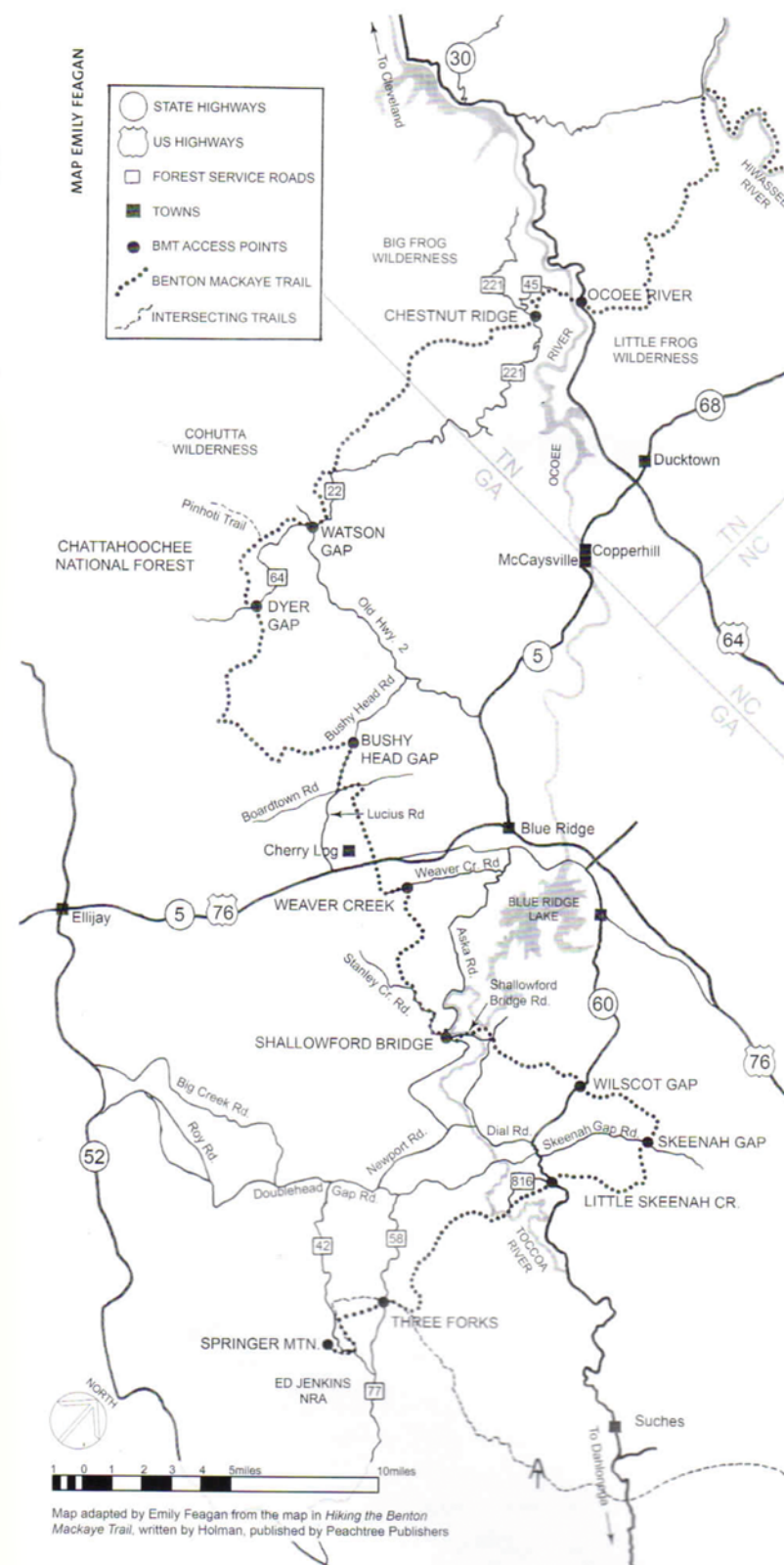
From Dyer Gap, the trail heads generally north to the South Fork of Jacks River, then intersects the Pinhoti Trail, which originates in Alabama. The BMT soon enters the rugged Cohutta Wilderness Area, where the distinctive white-diamond trail blazes are restricted to the few intersections with other trails and old woods roads. The BMT continues to Spanish Oak Gap, where it merges with the Hemp Top Trail for the haul to Double Springs Gap at the state line.

Those interested in detailed information about backpacking the BMT might want to consult Jim Homan's *Hiking the Benton MacKaye Trail*, published in 2004. This excellent guide includes detailed maps along with interesting descriptions of trailside flora and fauna, water sources, and many other tidbits that will enhance the hiking experience. The newly published *Benton MacKaye Trail Guide (Georgia Section)* is available from the BMTA.

Hikers should obtain current information about the BMT before setting out. Sections of the trail may be rerouted as the BMTA seeks to maximize the portion on public land and to minimize the amount of road walking. The BMTA's website (www.bmta.org) is a good source of up-to-date information.

Beyond Georgia

Efforts to complete the trail through Tennessee's Cherokee National Forest did not proceed as smoothly as did the project in Georgia. The early planning and permission phase in Georgia's Chattahoochee National Forest had gone compara-



tively smoothly, partly because U.S. Forest Service supervisor Pat Thomas supported the trail, and partly because environmental regulations, which at times can complicate the process, were not as extensive.

Not so with the Cherokee National Forest. Some of the delays were due to lawsuits unrelated to the BMT brought by environmental organizations. Final approval for the BMT in the Cherokee National Forest did not come until December 2003, and was largely due to the patience and diplomacy of the BMTA's "point man," Ken Jones.

Through Jones's hard work, the BMT was quickly, one might say suddenly, extended along the wild, beautiful and remote border between Tennessee and North Carolina to Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The U.S. Park Service then quickly assented to the planned route through the park over existing trails—the same route that then-park Superintendent Boyd Evison had proposed to Sherman back in the late 1970s. Finally, in 2005—the BMTA's 25th year—members could proudly point to a successful completion of the trail. Today, hikers can enjoy a 288-mile trip through the southern mountains from Springer Mountain, Georgia, to Davenport Gap, Tennessee, or vice versa if you're so inclined. ■

Retired from the University of Georgia School of Forest Resources, Walter Cook is a BMTA volunteer who lives in Athens. For more information about volunteering with the BMTA, visit www.bmta.org. The author acknowledges the assistance provided by BMT founder David Sherman and trail veterans George Owen and Chuck Logan in the preparation of this article.

The work of the BMTA is not done! Maintenance of a trail through a forested mountain corridor requires constant effort, which the association provides through monthly work details. Hurricane Opal, for instance, set the group back nearly a year by dropping countless trees across the trail.

Most trail maintenance involves sling-blading or weed-eating trailside vegetation, which grows surprisingly fast during the spring and summer. Volunteer maintainers are responsible for each one-to three-and-a-half mile section of the BMT in Georgia, and they work two or three times a year. In addition, the white-diamond blazes require re-painting about every four to five years.

As you might imagine, all of this work is a labor of love by those devoted to the Benton MacKaye Trail. So, the next time you need a quiet getaway in the mountains, take a hike...and if you happen upon a BMTA volunteer, be sure to wave—you might be asked to join!