

Experience scenic Gilmer area hikes on the BMT

BENTON MacKAYE
TRAIL ASSOCIATION

Some of the best hiking weather is just around the corner, and one of the premier hiking trails in the vicinity of Gilmer County is the Benton MacKaye Trail

(BMT).

"Whether you're out for a short hike with the kids, interested in a leisurely stroll through the woods or you want a more challenging 6-to-10-mile hike, the BMT has a great day hike for you," said Kelly Motter,

Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) hike director.

"For those who prefer hiking with a group, the BMTA offers several guided hikes every month," Motter continued. "To find the hike that's right for you

and to RSVP for the activity, go to the events calendar on the BMTA's website, bmta.org."

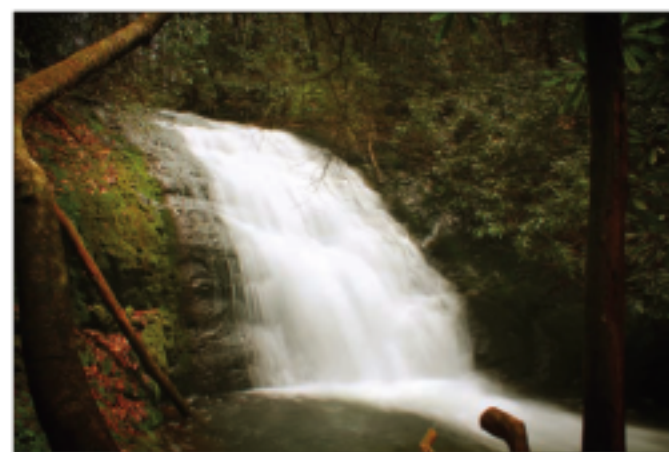
Approximately 82 miles of the 288-mile-long trail are in Georgia. Some of the most popular hikes in the Gilmer County area include the following:

Fall Branch Falls, where kids will love sprinting up and down the trail on a short half-mile hike to a stunning waterfall. Emerald green rhododendrons line the glistening white-water rushing down a 100-foot rock cliff.

For a longer, more strenuous hike, continue north on the BMT for about 2 miles to Rocky Mountain. Surrounded by great views of the valleys below, the mountaintop is the perfect setting for lunch or a snack.

Long Creek Falls is a great, 2-mile, round-trip day hike. It meanders through the forest on a rhododendron-lined trail to a waterfall with sparkling whitewater rushing down a 50-foot sheer rock cliff.

At Owen Vista, the spectacular overlook is named for BMTA founding member, George Owen, who discovered it. Just 0.4 of a mile south of the Big Stamp Trailhead, the vista fea-



BMTA/ RICHARD PARKS

Scenic sites that can be seen along the Benton MacKaye Trail include Shadow Falls, in the Cohuttas, above, and pink lady slipper orchids, right, blooming in spring along the Weaver Creek section of the trail.



tures breathtaking views to the southeast of the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountain range.

A 260-foot suspension footbridge over the Toccoa River is said to be the longest suspension bridge in Georgia. Along the trail to the bridge, Tooni Mountain offers awesome views of the valley to the east and west below.

Families with young children and seniors may prefer the 4-mile drive on Forest Road 816 to a parking lot that's just a quarter

mile from the bridge. For those preferring a longer, more challenging trek, the bridge is a 7.2-mile round-trip hike from the trailhead on Highway 60.

The Weaver Creek section of the BMT is the place to be for colorful spring flowers. A fairly strenu-

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HIKES

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ous 4-mile round-trip hike, the section features elegant pink lady slipper orchids, apple-tree size mountain laurel covered in delicate white blossoms, huge flame azaleas, trillium, dwarf-crested iris and more!

Shadow Falls is a well-hidden jewel in the lush forests of the Cohuttas featuring cascades of whitewater rushing down the rocky cliff. It's a short, 1-mile hike from the Dyer Gap Trailhead. Just take the South Fork Trail to Shadow Falls.

For hikers who prefer the challenge of a long-distance trek, the BMTA offers patches/rockers for a section or thru hike of the BMT, completion of the BMT Appalachian Trail 500-Mile Loop (a figure eight using the two trails) and the 1,000-Mile Challenge, which includes the AT, BMT and Pinhoti National Recreation Trails.

For more details on hiking on the BMT, see BMTA.org or email Motter at hikeleader@bmtamail.org.