



MAR 17, 2022 · SARA LEIBOLD THE TREK

# The Benton MacKaye Trail: 290 Secluded Miles in the Southern Appalachians

One hundred years ago, MacKaye's idea for a recreational and economic plan revolving around a footpath extending the length of the Appalachians was published in an article titled "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning" in the October 1921 issue of *Journal of Landscape Architecture*. MacKaye's vision has now flourished into the premier long trail in the world and has provided millions of people access to meaningful and healing natural experiences.

But if you want to hike the Southern Appalachians *without* all the crowds of the AT? Then look no further than the Benton MacKaye Trail. Named for the man who envisioned the Appalachian Trail, this 289.7-mile trail follows his original route from Georgia's Springer Mountain through the Great Smoky Mountains.

## The Benton MacKaye Trail At a Glance



**Length:** 289.7 miles. Finishers are considered 300-milers.  
**Trail Type:** Point-to-point (can also be made into a 500-mile loop with the Appalachian Trail)  
**Time to Complete:** 3-4 weeks  
**Best Time to Hike:** Spring or fall  
**Difficulty:** Moderate to difficult  
**Pronunciation:** mack-eye

**Location:** Southern Appalachians. The Southern Terminus lies on Springer Mountain in Georgia, just 0.2 miles north of the summit. The Northern Terminus is Baxter Creek Trailhead in North Carolina at the Northeastern edge of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The trail goes through Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina.



Southern Terminus on Springer Mountain, Georgia (left). Northern Terminus at Baxter Creek Trailhead, North Carolina (right).

## Terrain

Trail difficulty is similar to that of the southern sections of the Appalachian Trail: moderate to difficult. A third of the trail lies within designated Wilderness areas where you'll walk through temperate forests with mountain laurel slicks and rhododendron tunnels. You will ford numerous small creeks and cross over the Toccoa River on a swinging bridge. The trail runs 93 miles through Great Smoky Mountains National Park, making it the longest trail in the park. You'll start out following the Lakeshore Trail along Fontana Lake, walk through a 1000ft tunnel, and even share parts of the trail with equestrians. The highest point on the trail is Mount Sterling at 5829ft. Over the course of the trail, there are about 15 miles of road walking.

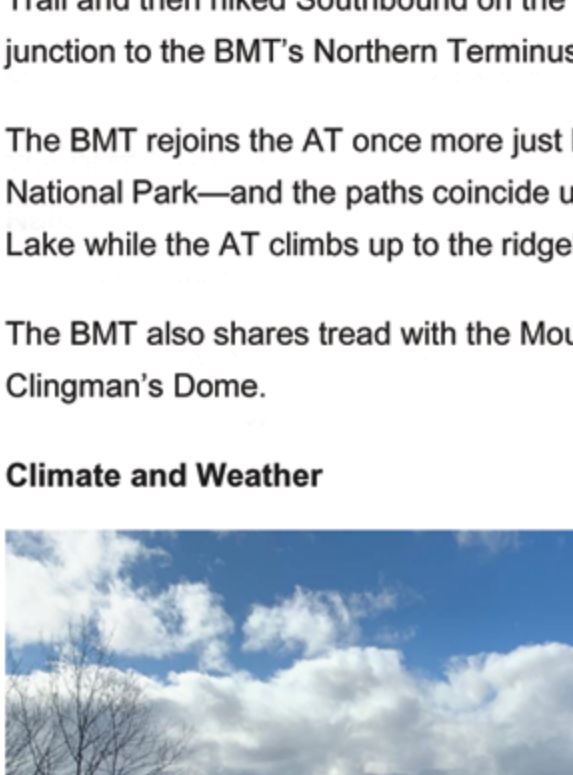
I will also add that I found sections of the trail to be fairly overgrown. As a lesser-known trail, it is not as well maintained as, say, the much more used Appalachian Trail. I remember a section before hitting Fontana Dam headed northbound where I couldn't see the trail or the ground due to heavy vegetation. Besides being slow going working your way through the brambles and vines, overgrowth is also prime tick habitat—so be extra cautious, and perhaps go volunteer on a trail crew after your hike!

## Getting There



To get to the Southern Terminus on Springer Mountain, one can fly into Atlanta and drive toward nearby trail towns of Ellijay, Suches, and Dahlonega. To get to the Northern Terminus at Baxter Creek Trailhead, which is about two miles from where the Appalachian Trail exits the Smokies, you can take Interstate-40 from Asheville or Knoxville. Standing Bear Farm/Hostel is 13 minutes away from the Northern Terminus, and lodging is available in the town of Newport, Tennessee, about 30 minutes away.

## Permits



The only permit you need for the Benton MacKaye Trail is for the 93-mile section through Great Smoky Mountains National Park. You can make your backcountry reservation online up to 30 days in advance, or if you're like me, just a couple days before. However, depending on the season in which you are backpacking will determine how busy and full the backcountry campsites will be. Most of the sites have a capacity ranging from 6-12 people, with Proctor being one of the largest and accommodating up to 20.

When I hiked a section in mid-May I made my reservation a couple days before and all but one site had availability. Then when I hiked the last section in November I made the reservation the night before and only one other was at the site with me. The backcountry reservation fees are \$4.00 per person, per night, maxing at \$20.00 per person. I ended up paying for an extra day since the fee was non-refundable.

## Planning Resources

The [Benton MacKaye Trail Association](#) has a helpful website and offers a guidebook. You can also purchase relevant National Geographic trail maps for the Smokies via the Association's website.



The Benton MacKaye Trail is marked with a white diamond blaze on trees. Along with the BMTA's guidebook, [FarOut has a guide](#) you can use on your phone. The only trouble I had with FarOut was when I reached Springer heading Southbound on the BMT, as the icons were not very clear as to where the BMT hit the AT in relation to the summit of Springer and the parking lot. Once I got there I was able to add a comment to the application clearing it up for future Southbounders. The BMT's Southern Terminus is where it hits the AT 0.2 miles north of the summit. Then you can take the AT either up to the summit or down 0.7 miles to the parking lot.

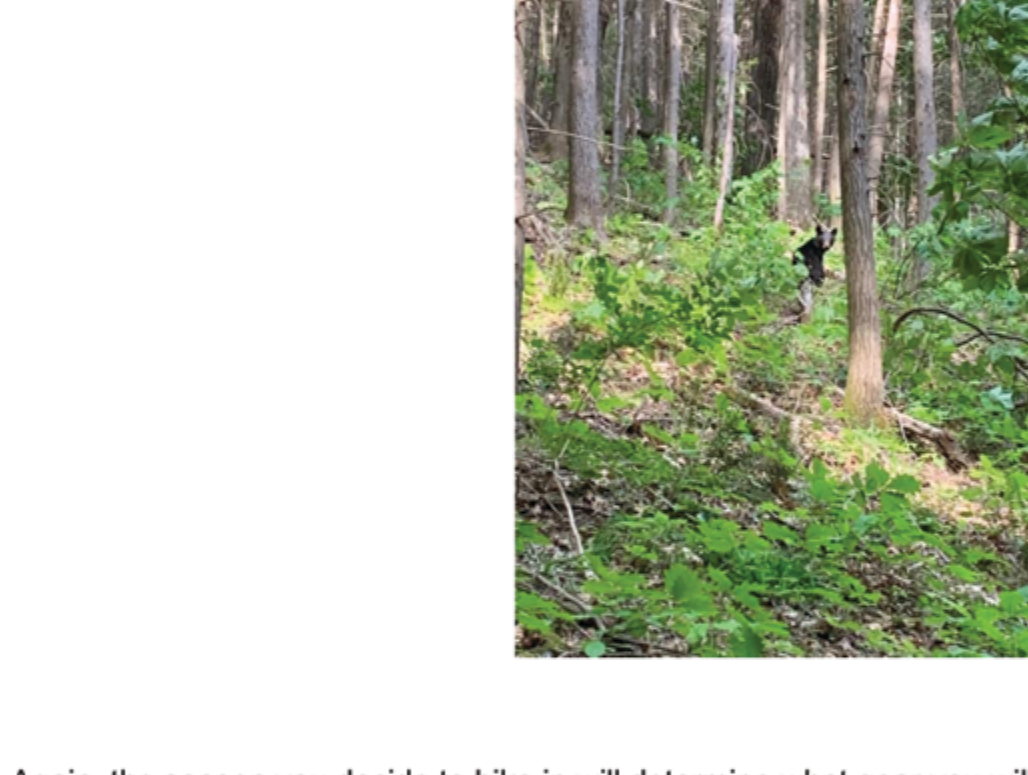
In the first seven miles heading northbound, you will cross the Appalachian Trail four times and join the AT for a mile after Three Forks, where you will see both diamond and rectangle blazes on Long, Creek until the trails split at Three Forks Falls.

At mile 71, the BMT intersects the Pinhoti Trail, an Appalachian Trail connector trail, which starts back in Alabama on Flagg Mountain, the first mountain over 1000ft in the Appalachian Range. (I thru-hiked the Pinhoti Trail and then hiked Southbound on the BMT to Springer, then later hiked Northbound from the Pinhoti/BMT junction to the BMT's Northern Terminus).

The BMT rejoins the AT once more just before Fontana Dam Shelter—just south of Great Smoky Mountains National Park—and the paths coincide until after crossing the dam. The trails split as the BMT follows Fontana Lake while the AT climbs up to the ridgeline.

The BMT also shares tread with the Mountains-to-Sea Trail from mile 242-251, as it descends down from Clingman's Dome.

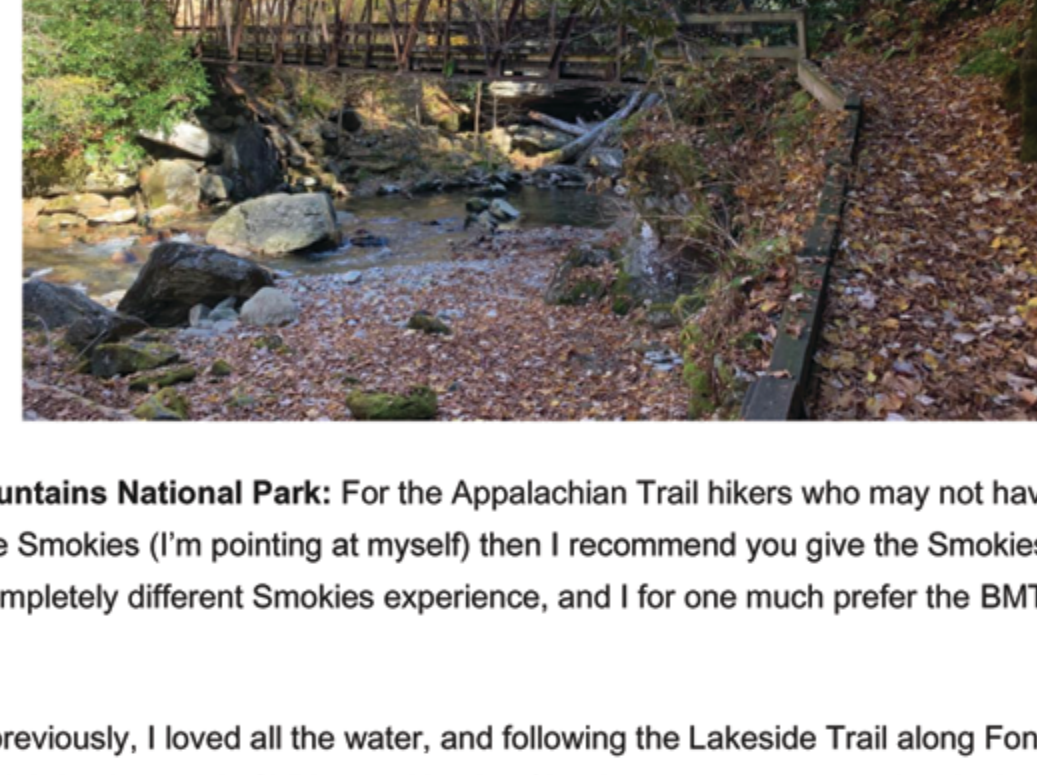
## Climate and Weather



The Benton MacKaye Trail is open year-round to hikers, and depending on what season you enjoy hiking in, it is your's choice. Since I section-hiked the trail in four pieces, I hiked in both spring and fall, specifically May and October/November. It's a real treat to be able to witness the trail in different seasons, and I loved both the bright green trees and flowers as well as the fall foliage and crunchy leaves.

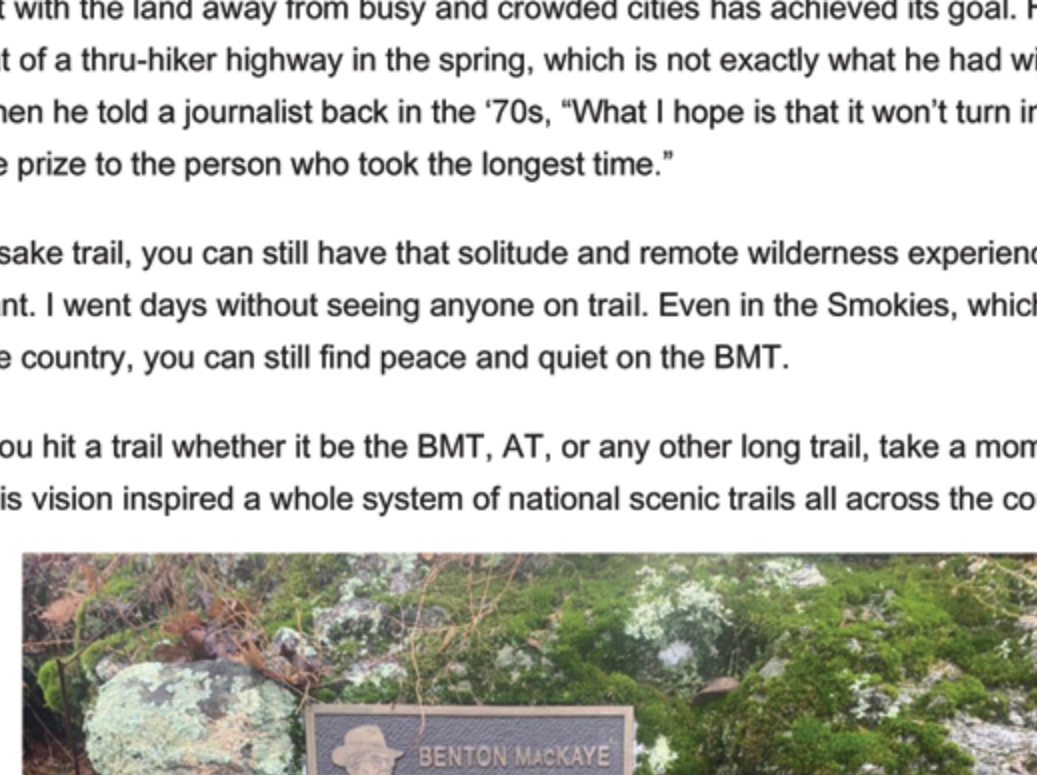
I would probably not recommend hiking in the middle of the summer due to the heat and bugs, nor would I suggest hiking in the winter since you are higher up in the mountains.

## Camping



There are only three shelters on the Benton MacKaye Trail: one at mile 50.3, the Fontana Dam Shelter (shared with the AT) at mile 193.8, and Laurel Gap Shelter in the Smokies at mile 273.8, just 16 miles from the Northern Terminus. FarOut marks other established campsites you can use, or you can practice Leave No Trace ethics and make sure to camp on durable surfaces and several yards off trail. Again, in the Smokies camping is only allowed at designated backcountry sites and a permit is required.

## Water Sources



There are plenty of water sources along the trail, and most are marked on FarOut. There are several larger creeks that have to be forded along the trail and depending on when you hike will determine just how deep that water will be. You can sit and relax at the foot of several waterfalls along the trail such as Long Creek Falls near Springer and Fall Branch Falls in Cherry Log, Georgia. A highlight of the trail is crossing the Toccoa River on a swinging bridge. You'll also cross over larger rivers like the Ocoee River, where I used to go whitewater rafting as a kid, and the Hiwassee River.

I was shocked at the number of water crossings there were in the Smokies, so much that I like to joke that I crossed more creeks on the BMT than I did on the whole Appalachian Trail. Seriously, so many water crossings. And the bridges in the Smokies were a wonder to behold. I love a good bridge and I was not disappointed, from 20ft. log bridges to full-on metal bridges that I assume were built back before the Smokies was designated a national park in 1940.

The metal bridges over Eagle and Enloe Creek were an amazing sight to see, especially when I had hiked nine miles or more from the nearest road and felt as if I was in the middle of the wilderness. They were intriguing and brought up questions like, "when was this built?" and "how did they get the materials here?" I was so fascinated by these bridges that I even emailed the park's cultural resources manager about getting placards installed stating the year they were built.

## Resupply Options

According to the BMT Association's website, there are 16 trailheads and access points in Georgia, 24 in Tennessee/North Carolina, and five in the Smokies, so there are plentiful options for resupply. The road walks pass by restaurants and allow access to resupply points in Blue Ridge, GA. There is a campground right off trail at the Ocoee River and an outfitter and store by the Hiwassee River. I went into Tellico Plains to resupply around mile 167. You'll walk past lodges where you can eat or stay the night like Tapoco Lodge and Fontana Village Resort. The marina by Fontana Dam has a convenience store and there is a hostel nearby.

Once in the Smokies, the main road crossing is Newfound Gap Road, just 30 miles before reaching the Northern Terminus. From that road, you can head East to Cherokee, North Carolina, for resupply or head west up and over the mountains to Gatlinburg.

## Gear Suggestions



Again, the season you decide to hike in will determine what gear you will need. Gear lists would look similar to what you'd pack for the [Appalachian Trail](#). Since I hiked the trail in sections I was able to pick stretches with no rain in the forecast and was able to try out my newish hammock that I didn't have a proper rainfly for. Other times I've used a freestanding tent.

The backcountry sites in the Smokies all have bear cables where you can hang your food. I use an odor-proof [Loksak Opsak](#) inside a 9L dry bag and I find that works for me. Although I didn't see any black bears in the Smokies (I did see two further south near the Ocoee River), we did have a curious juvenile bear visit camp. The bear swiped at two tents that night, ripping holes in them even though no one had food in their tent. I didn't sleep well that night due to trying to listen in case the bear came back and was planning on visiting my tent next. Of all my times backpacking, this was the first time there was a bear encounter at my campsite.

My go-to for when I hear animal noises during the night is to roll around on my [Therm-a-Rest NeoAir](#), which makes a very obnoxious noise, in hopes that it scares said animal away. I also carry a whistle that can be used to deter bears, aggressive dogs, and even creepy humans.

## Why Hike the Benton MacKaye Trail?



**Great Smoky Mountains National Park:** For the Appalachian Trail hikers who may not have cared for the stretch through the Smokies (I'm pointing at myself) then I recommend you give the Smokies another shot on the BMT. It is a completely different Smokies experience, and I for one much prefer the BMT to the AT in the Smokies.

Like I mentioned previously, I loved all the water, and following the Lakeside Trail along Fontana Lake for 35 miles was beautiful. I daydreamed of hiking and having friends meet me at campsites by boat and cooking out... maybe next time.

**History and Culture:** Plus, there is much more of a historical and cultural element to the BMT than on the AT. Early on in the hike along Fontana Lake there were rusted abandoned cars from the early 1900s along the trail. After walking 10 miles into the park I came across a full-blown house, and here I thought I was deep in the park, deep in the woods but lo and behold there's a house.

Built in 1928, Calhoun House is one of the only structures remaining from the town of Proctor that was located there before the Smokies was designated a national park. Now there is a campsite where there once was a mill town in the early 20th century. You could see remnants of the train and old roadbeds.

Also, many of the bigger creeks had big steel bridges spanning them. It was such a sight to see when you are in the middle of the forest.

**Solitude:** Lastly, I think it's fair to say that MacKaye's vision for the AT to become a wilderness respite where one can reconnect with the land away from busy and crowded cities has achieved its goal. However, it has also become somewhat of a thru-hiker highway in the spring, which is not exactly what he had wished for and even stated as much when he told a journalist back in the '70s, "What I hope is that it won't turn into a racetrack. I for one would give the prize to the person who took the longest time."

Well, on his namesake trail, you can still have that solitude and remote wilderness experience where you can go as slow as you want. I went days without seeing anyone on trail. Even in the Smokies, which is the most visited national park in the country, you can still find peace and quiet on the BMT.

So the next time you hit a trail whether it be the BMT, AT, or any other long trail, take a moment to remember Benton and how his vision inspired a whole system of national scenic trails all across the country.

