



Maintaining the Benton MacKaye Trail

A Comprehensive Guide for Surveying for Future Maintenance Trips

by Joe Cantwell

The Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) spans 288 miles through some of the most picturesque and rugged terrain in the Southeastern United States. Regular maintenance is crucial to ensure the trail remains safe and enjoyable for hikers. As a trail maintainer, conducting surveys is essential to identify and prioritize maintenance tasks.

This guide will help you systematically assess your section of the BMT, noting specific issues and their exact locations.

Blowdowns

What to Look For:

Location and Documentation: Record the precise location of each blowdown to the nearest 0.1 mile.

For example, "Blowdown at mile 4.3".

Size: Measure the diameter of the blowdown. Note whether it is small (<6 inches), medium (6-12 inches), or large (>12 inches).

Level of Effort: Estimate the effort required for removal. Small blowdowns may require a hand saw, while larger ones will need a chainsaw and possibly additional manpower.



This is how Bigfoot measures a blowdown! HA!



Introduce grandkids on how to measure.



You can use your BMTA bandana to measure as well.

Water Diversions

What to Look For:

Existing Water Diversions: Check if current water diversions are clogged with debris. Note their locations and the extent of the blockage.

Need for New Diversions: Identify areas where water is eroding the trail and mark potential sites for new diversions.

Location and Documentation: Record the location of all water diversions needing attention, e.g., "Water diversion clogged at mile 6.2."



Brushing

What to Look For:

- ◆ **Vegetation Overgrowth:** Identify sections where vegetation is encroaching on the trail, making it difficult for hikers to pass.
- ◆ **Required Tools:** Determine if the section requires a brushcutter or a string trimmer. Heavy brush may need loppers.
- ◆ **Location and Documentation:** Document the specific areas needing brushing, e.g., "Heavy brush at mile 2.5 to 3.0."



This trail is hidden with overgrowth.

Trail Blazes

What to Look For:

- ◆ **Condition of Blazes:** Check if the blazes are faded, missing or damaged.
- ◆ **Need for Refreshing:** Identify areas where blazes need to be repainted or replaced.
- ◆ **Location and Documentation:** Note the exact locations of blazes that need attention, e.g., "Blazes faded between mile 7.0 and 7.5."



Not only do blazes lose their luster of paint but trees continue to grow, distorting the blaze.

Campsites

What to Look For:

- ♦ **General Condition:** Assess the overall condition of campsites, including the cleanliness and usability of the area.
- ♦ **Fire Rings:** Inspect fire rings for excessive ash buildup, trash, or if they need to be rebuilt.
- ♦ **Location and Documentation:** Document the condition of campsites and fire rings, e.g., "Campsite at mile 10.1 needs fire ring cleanup."



Access and Road Conditions

What to Look For:

- ♦ **Road Access:** Verify if access roads to the trailhead are passable. Note if the road is gated.
- ♦ **Road Conditions:** Assess the condition of the roads, noting any issues like heavy side brush, erosion, or obstructions.
- ♦ **Location and Documentation:** Record the condition of access roads, e.g., "Forest Service Road 73 is gated and requires high clearance vehicle."



Survey Checklist

- ♦ Blowdowns: Location, size, and removal effort.
- ♦ Water Diversions: Location, condition, and need for new diversions.
- ♦ Brushing: Areas needing attention and required tools.
- ♦ Blazes: Condition and locations needing refreshing.
- ♦ Campsites: Condition, especially fire rings.
- ♦ Access: Condition of access roads.

Conclusion

Maintaining the Benton MacKaye Trail requires attention to detail and careful documentation. By systematically surveying of a section and noting specific issues and their locations, you can prioritize tasks for our Saturday work trips. Regular maintenance trips, guided by thorough surveys, will help preserve the beauty and integrity of this iconic trail.