

FREE

Welcome

TO FANNIN COUNTY, GEORGIA & EAST POLK, TENNESSEE

**EVENTS &
THINGS TO DO
WHERE WE LIVE & PLAY**

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Friends in the Benton MacKaye Trail Association take a break together during a hike. Planning their next steps are, from left, Kathy Gushwa, Daphne Martin, Steve Hayden and Steve Pruett. **Photo/Jackson Elliott**

Sell Your Couch

Trail time offers nature's beauty, chance to know others

By JACKSON ELLIOTT

Ten miles on the Benton MacKaye Trail was enough to learn that Steve Pruett lives a secret life as Tarzan. The experienced and retired trail hand swung on a vine with practiced ease as he skillfully navigated through the forest.

He was one of four Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) members taking a June 30 hike.

The group walks “hundreds” of miles each year, Pruett said.

After a safety briefing, Pruett, Steve Hayden, Daphne Martin and Kathy Gushwa started off.

Their ten-mile trail that day was a short hop out of more than 300 miles of the BMTA’s winding paths.

Hikes like these offer everyone a break from modern life and its distractions.

Out in the woods, there’s just beauty, conversation and the next footstep.

It was obvious that this wasn’t the group’s first hike as they hugged each other on meeting.

“There’s no better way to get to know someone than trail time with them,” Hayden said.

“We can concentrate on what everyone’s saying,” he said. “Nature teaches you.”

The most beautiful parts of the hike struck like sudden flashes of inspiration.

Rhododendron blossoms traced the outline of a stream that filled the forest with music.

Thick trees on a hillside suddenly parted to reveal beams of light.

A large white mushroom contrasted eerily with green trees and brown dirt.

A single, perfect turkey feather rested on the ground like an art exhibit.

Somewhere along its course, a secret spot held two beautiful waterfalls with freezing but refreshing swimming holes.

Even among these wonders, the greatest highlight was the people.

After getting away from cell phone reception, there's nothing to do but learn the stories of the people you're walking with.

Their likes, dislikes and lives will become as familiar as the turns of the trail.

Martin is a stay-at-home mom who has just seen her last child become an adult. These days, she hikes incredible distances.

"Everybody's got one of those stories where it didn't work out as planned," she said of hikers. "And they had to walk." At her hip, she carries a pistol to guard against wild hogs.

Pruett became a vegetarian to impress a girl many years ago, even though he loathed the tofu he had to eat on one of his early dates.

The habit has kept him healthy, he said.

Today, he hikes long distances to help maintain the BMT.

Pruett is skilled in digging scrapes that let water off the trail.

Water can quickly destroy a poorly maintained trail, he said.

Gushwa, a Buddhist, once served in the US military. Today, she often enjoys silent retreats.

Many hours on the trail have made Hayden an "honorary woman" because he can keep up with some of BMT's most devoted female hikers.

To him, hiking has become an exercise in observation.

At first, a forest looks like just trees, Hayden explained. But it actually tells a



Steve Pruett swings on a vine Tarzan style while hiking the Benton MacKaye Trail.
Photo/Jackson Elliott

hidden story.

Lots of fast-growing pine means it was once heavily logged, and only recently recolonized by trees.

White pine trees tell their ages based on their layers of branches.

"You can see where the tornadoes have come through," Hayden said.

No matter your level of ability, there's

a hiking trail somewhere in Fannin County where you can draw closer to others.

"And no one wishes they had spent less time hiking," Hayden said.

A little while ago, he gave a presentation that detailed the secret of how to hike more.

"Sell your couch and drive," he said.

Looking for a great outdoor adventure?

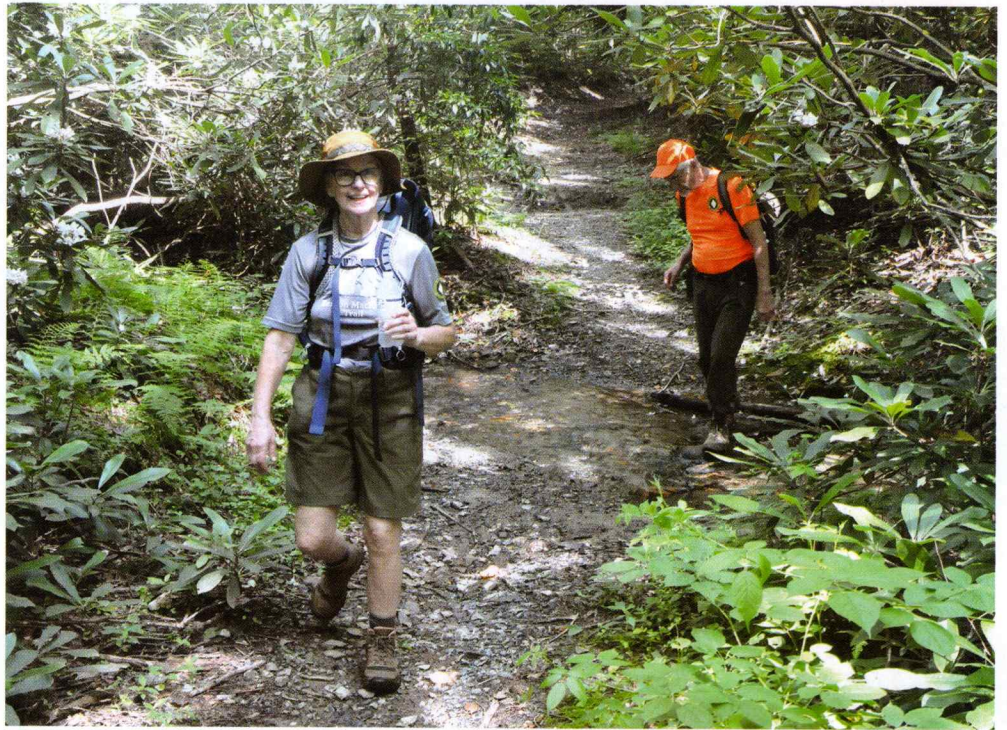
Here are five hikes with just what you may be looking for

By JACKSON ELLIOTT

With cooler weather, beautiful views and opportunities to see wildlife, it's the perfect time of year to hike.

Fannin County has a wealth of trails to explore. Whether you want long or short, easy or hard, there's something for you.

Steve Hayden, director of Membership for the Benton Mackaye Trail Association, offered five great trails to enjoy this fall. He suggests:



Kathy Gushwa and Steve Pruett explore the Benton MacKaye Trail together. Photo/Jackson Elliott



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• **Falls Branch Falls** is an easy hike about three quarters of a mile long. Hikers are rewarded with a double waterfall flanked by rhododendron and mountain laurel.

Parking to begin the trek is available at the Stanley Creek Road Parking Area.

• **Long Creek Falls** is a two mile round trip that offers hikers a beautiful waterfall view. Hikers can start off on the hike from Long Creek Falls Trailhead.

• The **Swinging Bridge** crosses the Toccoa River. At 270 feet long, it's the longest swinging bridge east of the Mississippi.

After crossing the bridge, trails nearby offer several trips.

Reach the Swinging Bridge from Blue Ridge by taking Old Highway 76 for 6.1 miles. Then, turn right onto Morganton Highway. After 11.8 miles, turn right onto Forest Service 816. The trail's parking lot is at the end of the road.

• One beautiful stretch of the Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) goes from **Wilscot Gap up to Brawley Mountain**. There, hikers can see an old fire tower currently used for communications.

This trail has great seasonal views, especially as leaves start to fall. The trail is a 6.2 mile round trip. If hikers tire on the way, they can follow Forest Service Road 45 back to the trailhead for a slightly easier path back.

Hikers can find parking for the Brawley Mountain section of the BMT at Wilscot Gap on Morganton Highway.

• **Owen's Vista** is a scenic overlook on the BMT. Named after Benton MacKaye Trail Association founding member George Owen, it provides breathtaking views and scenery.

Reach Owen's Vista from Blue Ridge by taking Aska Road south for 13.5 miles. At the fork, take Newport Road for 4.5 miles before turning right onto Doublehead Gap. Go another 2 miles to Forest Service Road 42 before turning left. Then drive to where the BMT intersects the road.

Hikers can find parking for Owen's Vista, which lies on the southern terminus of the BMT, on Forest Service Road 42 between Doublehead Gap Road and Winding Stair Gap Road.

No matter where you hike, it's important to prepare well, leave no trash or food behind and not go alone.

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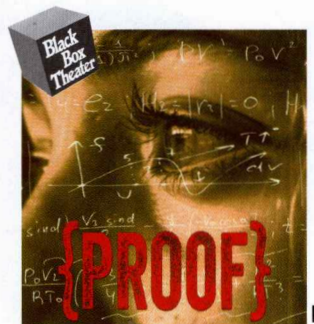
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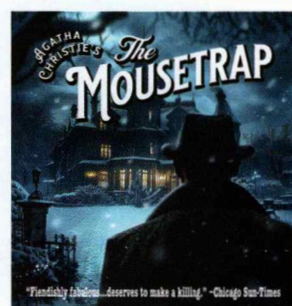
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