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Spring hiking etiquette and safety tips

Posted by [Jane Harrison](#) | Mar 3, 2026 | [Outdoors](#)

Be ready to hit the trail this month with tips on hiker safety and etiquette



Benton MacKaye Trail Association members embark on two or more hikes a month. The BMT spans almost 300 miles in north Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina and is known as a sister trail to the Appalachian Trail. The southern terminus of both are on Springer Mountain, near the Dawson/Gilmer county line.

As North Georgia emerges from winter's grip this month, area trails beckon hikers into the woods to explore spring's arrival. Folks who curled up under throw blankets on icy January weekends and dreamed of striding through north Georgia's verdant forests hit the trails as trilliums blossom and leaf buds open. March, traditionally known as a prime month for prospective Appalachian Trail thru-hikers to begin their northbound journey, also brings out thousands of day-hikers on shorter paths. Whether planning a 2,000+ mile epic trek from Georgia to Maine or a half-mile jaunt to a waterfall, practicing certain safety measures and hiking principles can help trail users have fun, meaningful outdoor ventures.

Lakeside News spoke to officials from three area hiking organizations to get their advice on hiking safety and etiquette. The Georgia Appalachian Trail Club (GATC), Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA), and Northeast Georgia Hiking (NEGH) all preach Leave No Trace (LNT) standards that promote

safety and courtesy on the trails. The principles apply not just to hiking clubs, but to solo hikers and unaffiliated groups as well.

“Safety is a big component in the mountains,” said Bob Cowdrick, BMTA president. Rough hilly terrain, slick rocks and roots and changing weather conditions challenge unprepared or unaware hikers. A hiker’s realistic self-evaluation of their skill and fitness to tread a certain trail is inherent to the first LNT principle: plan ahead and be prepared. “Choose hikes you feel comfortable doing,” said Cowdrick, whose organization leads hikes and performs trail maintenance on the 288-mile path through north Georgia into Tennessee and North Carolina. Prior to putting boots on the ground in club hikes, leaders research trails through internet reviews and first-hand descriptions. They may pre-hike to find out about downed trees, rutted treadways, or re-routes. They inform club members about what to expect so they can decide if they are up to it. They frequently check weather forecasts and will cancel hikes due to risky conditions.



NE Ga Hiking Club crossing Smith Creek.

“Before we hike, we brief everyone on where we’re going,” said Mike Bell, NEGH leader. He emails descriptions of the group’s Tuesday hikes in advance and reiterates the day’s course when hikers meet at the trailhead. “I take a look at everybody,” he said, to make sure they have supplies they need, are dressed appropriately and appear physically fit for the day’s journey. Bell added that most members of the close-knit club based in Habersham and Stephens counties have hiked together for “quite a number of years” and are aware of each other’s abilities. “We keep an eye on each other.” The same can be said of GATC and BMTA hike leaders who also regard participants’ readiness for the path ahead. All take extra water, first aid kits, and other essentials, just in case a hiker is in need.

CJ Bradbury, GATC Outreach Director, said a list of 10 essentials forms the “seatbelt of hiking.” A day pack stocked with water, food, first aid kit (including flexible bandages), navigational aids (such as map APP or download on a cell phone or another navigational piece plus a paper map), a headlamp or flashlight, sun protection, rain jacket and/or other clothing layer, and a whistle can provide item(s) that can save an outing from becoming uncomfortable or even catastrophic.

Hike leaders ask participants to provide an emergency phone contact, usually a family member or close friend. They advise solo hikers to inform someone about where they are going and what time they expect to return. They recommend lone hikers and unaffiliated woods walkers research trail routes and conditions and check weather forecasts. "Not knowing about the situation is where people get off trail," said Cowdrick. Such meanderings not only run the risk of hikers getting lost, they also cause erosion and damage to vegetation.



Members of the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club hike several times a month on Georgia trails. The club sets an example with Leave No Trace principles.

Although cell phone reception may be poor to nil on area trails, a phone call can summon help if calls can be completed. A navigation APP or downloaded map may keep a hiker on trail. Having a fully charged cell phone and portable charger can be lifesavers or at least help point the right direction.

"Politeness and common courtesy" foot the basics of trail etiquette, Bell said, adding that most folks enjoying a hike are friendly to others doing the same thing. "I've never encountered anybody who was ugly or aggressive on the trail. Most speak and say hello." Cowdrick concurs. "Be courteous. Say hello. You can meet some good friends."

Bradbury stated there are no "hard, fast, black and white written rules" of trail etiquette. Some of the basics are situational, based on the specific experience and common sense. For instance, when meeting other hikers on a hill, downhill facing walkers generally yield to those heading uphill. However, that can vary. It makes more sense for a single hiker heading downhill to step aside to let a group of 10 or so uphill hikers pass. "It causes more disruption to the trail area for 10 people to step off than one person," Bradbury said.

Hikers report encountering a growing number of trail runners, especially on the Benton MacKaye Trail. "We step off and yield to them," Cowdrick said. On multipurpose trails, where foot travelers, mountain bikers, and pack animals might share the path, hikers generally move over. Although mountain bikers are instructed that hikers have the right-of-way, many situations make it easier for those on foot to yield. "Pedestrians usually get out of the way," Bradbury said.

Trail manners also apply to hikers with dogs. "Ninety-nine point nine percent of dogs are on a leash," Cowdrick said, which makes trail encounters more comfortable for other hikers, with or without dogs.

Hikers who enjoy stepping to their own beats should be aware not everyone on the trail wants to hear their music. "Put earbuds in if you've got tunes going," Cowdrick said.

Courtesy extends to leaving no trace of your passage on the trail. Litter—including snack wrappers, banana peels, and water bottles—mars the path for others and upsets natural ecosystems.

Education is key to safely enjoying the activity that will bring more than 2,000 hikers to the near 80-miles of the AT in Georgia this month and multitudes to other area paths. GATC Trail Ambassadors and Ridgerunners will be out spreading the word and setting examples on safety and courtesy as hopeful thru-hikers begin their adventure. BMTA members expect to greet hundreds of hikers on **National Trails Day June 6** with “Leave No Trace” tips. Hikers meeting NEGH will get a friendly hello and a maybe a trailside chat.

Leave No Trace (LNT) standards form basics of trail safety, etiquette

Trail clubs follow and promote Leave No Trace Standards that stress safety and respect for other trail users and the natural environment. The framework of LNT centers on seven principles:

- 1) Plan ahead and prepare
- 2) Travel and camp on durable surfaces
- 3) Dispose of waste properly
- 4) Leave what you find
- 5) Minimize campfire impact
- 6) Respect wildlife
- 7) Be considerate of others

Source: <https://lnt.org/why/7-principles/>

If you get lost

Sometimes the unexpected happens, even to prepared, experienced hikers. The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest website offers advice if a hiker cannot find their way:

- Pay close attention to your surroundings and landmarks and relate this to your location on a map.
- Stay calm. Panic is your greatest enemy. Try to remember how you got to your current location.
- Trust your map. Do not walk aimlessly. If you are on a trail, don't leave it.
- Stay put if it is nightfall, if you are injured, or if you are near exhaustion.

As a last resort, follow a drainage or stream downhill. This can be hard going but will often lead to a trail or road.

Source: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/r08/chattahoochee-oconee>

Find Trail Partners in Area Trail Clubs

The three hiking organizations cited by Lakeside News offer regular hikes with leaders who plan ahead for each event. They form a valuable resource to meet new hiking friends, enjoy the outdoors, and get exercise on the trails:

- Benton MacKaye Trail Association: www.bmta.org
- Georgia Appalachian Trail Club: www.georgia-atclub.org/
- Northeast Georgia Hiking: www.neghiking.com

Photos: courtesy Benton MacKaye Trail Association, Northeast Georgia Hiking Club, Georgia Appalachian Trail Club, home page feature photo by Tom Bell, NEGH Hike Leader.