

Hiking Trails of Unicoi County



Presented to:
Unicoi County Chamber of Commerce, the Residents of
Unicoi County and its Visitors

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The Hiking Trails of Unicoi County

Introduction

Unicoi County is blessed with many hiking opportunities, with destinations ranging from casual family strolls to thrilling waterfalls to open bald mountains providing spectacular views. Following is a description of some of these hikes. The list includes the famous Appalachian Trail and other maintained hiking trails within the Cherokee National Forest. It does not include unofficial trails, trails only accessible through private property, or unmaintained trails. Multi-use trails open to hikers but primarily used by other modes of transport (horses, mountain bikes, or motorcycles and ATV's) are not included. Information on those trails may be available through the Cherokee National Forest, the Backcountry Horsemen of East Tennessee, or the Northeast Tennessee Mountain Bike Association.

Unicoi County contains some of the most rugged terrain in Tennessee, with elevations ranging from less than 1700' where the Nolichucky River exits the county to 5516' atop Big Bald. Hikers should be prepared with sturdy footwear, clothing suitable for variable weather conditions including frequent and sometimes heavy precipitation, a good first aid kit, and adequate route information (trail description, map, compass, and/or GPS). It is always a good practice to let someone know your plans and contact them upon your return, particularly on overnight hikes. Hiking with companions provides extra security in case of an emergency. Cell phone coverage may be poor or nonexistent in remote locations. The poisonous timber rattlesnake and copperhead may be encountered. Avoid putting hands or feet where you can't see, such as across or beneath a log. Much more likely to be encountered are stinging insects, especially yellow jackets which nest in the ground in late summer and fall months. Hikers with allergies to these insects should carry appropriate first aid and are strongly encouraged to hike with companions. Black bears in Unicoi County are infrequently seen and are generally wary when encountered, but may be attracted by the smell of food or trash in camping areas. Cook away from your tent or shelter and hang food out of reach of bears. Never store food in your tent or in a shelter. Purification of drinking water by filtration, boiling, or chemical treatment is always advisable. Finally, vandalism to vehicles parked at remote trailheads can occur, more frequently though not exclusively to vehicles parked overnight. Consider a shuttle service, such as those listed on the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's website.

The Appalachian Trail

The best known hiking trail in America and perhaps the world, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail stretches 2,175 miles between Springer Mt. in Georgia to Katahdin in Maine. The Appalachian Trail (commonly referred to as the A. T.) was conceived of in 1921, originally completed in 1937, and was the first U. S. trail federally designated as a National Scenic Trail in 1968. Although the most well known users are the through hikers, thousands of whom set out

annually to hike its entire length with northbound hikers coming through Unicoi County usually in April or early May, many more users are day hikers or those on shorter backpacking trips.

Much of the A. T. in Unicoi County was originally located on roads, with the last major relocation in 1972 moving it across the peaks of Unaka Mountain. Minor relocations to reduce erosion or provide a more protected and scenic experience continue to this day. The Appalachian Trail enters Unicoi County from the south at Flint Gap. It follows along or close to the TN/NC state line, crossing the highest point in Unicoi County, Big Bald at 5516'. Not far beyond at Little Bald, the A. T. leaves Unicoi County for 6 miles fully in North Carolina, returning at Devils Creek Gap and staying fully in Tennessee through Erwin to Indian Grave Gap. From there, the Trail remains on the state line over aptly named Beauty Spot and massive, 5180' Unaka Mountain, exiting Unicoi County about a mile beyond Iron Mountain Gap. Overall there are 51 miles of the Appalachian Trail in Unicoi County, a total surpassed by only 3 of the 17 counties through which the Trail runs in Tennessee and North Carolina.

The A. T. in Unicoi County is managed cooperatively by the Nolichucky/Unaka Ranger District of the Cherokee National Forest, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, and volunteer Trail-maintaining clubs. In Unicoi County, the Carolina Mountain Club based in Asheville maintains from Flint Gap to Spivey Gap. The Tennessee Eastman Hiking & Canoeing Club (TEHCC) maintains from Spivey Gap to north of Iron Mt. Gap where the A. T. continues into Carter County. The Old Timers Hiking Club maintains the portion between Indian Grave Gap to Iron Mt. Gap as an "adopter" in cooperation with TEHCC.

These trailheads provide the most direct and convenient access to the A. T.

- Devil Fork Gap, on TN Highway 352, 4.2 miles from the community of Rocky Fork near Flag Pond to the NC state line (NC Highway 212). Roadside parking is on the left.
- Sams Gap, on U. S. Highway 23 6 miles from Flag Pond and 18 miles from Erwin. There is no direct access from Interstate 26 to the Appalachian Trail; hikers must take the old highway from Tennessee or North Carolina with good parking slightly into North Carolina. The Trail passes underneath the interstate.
- Spivey Gap, on U. S. Highway 19W 7 miles from U. S. Highway 23 in Ernestville, accessible from Exit 43 on Interstate 26. The A. T. crosses Highway 19W 1.5 miles into North Carolina from the state line; a small roadside parking area is on the right.
- Chestoa Pike, where it crosses the Nolichucky River. From Exit 40 on Interstate 26, turn right from Jackson-Love Highway, then pass the Holiday Inn Express and a convenience store. Turn left onto River Road (brown sign denotes whitewater rafting) for 0.4 miles to a four-way stop at the Chestoa Bridge, which the A. T. crosses. For the largest parking area, cross the bridge and turn right immediately onto Jones Branch Road, where roadside parking is available on the right a few yards from the intersection.

- Indian Grave Gap, on TN Highway 395. From Main Street in Erwin, most easily accessed from Exit 36 on Interstate 26, turn onto Tenth Street, reaching the entrance to Rock Creek Recreation Area in 3.3 miles. Indian Grave Gap is 3.3 miles further, on the state line at the height of land. Parking is available at a small pulloff on the left or roadside on the right. Gravel Forest Road 230 leaves Indian Grave Gap to the left, crossing the A. T. once (no parking) and nearing it several times, most notably at Beauty Spot on a short spur road 2.1 miles from Indian Grave Gap.
- Iron Mountain Gap, on TN Highway 107 10 miles from Unicoi at the NC state line. From Exit 32 on Interstate 26, go to the end of the road at Maple Grove Restaurant, turn right into downtown Unicoi, then left on TN 107. Roadside parking is on the right at the height of land.

Highlights of the Appalachian Trail in Unicoi County

- Unicoi County's high point, Big Bald at 5516', offers one of the most outstanding panoramic views in the Southern Appalachians. Only in the Smokies, the Roan Highlands, and the Presidential Range in New Hampshire does the elevation of the Appalachian Trail exceed that on Big Bald.
- The summit of 5180' Unaka Mountain is in a dense and pure forest of red spruce, with cool weather on the hottest of days. Unaka Mountain has the only natural spruce forest on the A. T. between Roan Mountain and the Smokies. Its shoulder Beauty Spot is well known throughout our region and along the length of the Trail for its spectacular views.
- The Nolichucky River along with the French Broad is the only free-flowing large river crossed by the A. T. in the Southern Appalachians. Outstanding views of the Nolichucky Gorge, Erwin, and the North Indian Creek Valley can be seen from Cliff Ridge, starting one mile from the Trail's crossing of the river at Chestoa.
- Spring wildflowers are abundant and showy at many locations of the Appalachian Trail in Unicoi County. Among the best displays are from north of Devil Fork Gap to Sugarloaf Gap and in either direction from Iron Mountain Gap.

Following is a listing of landmarks along the A. T. in Unicoi County and their distances from the nearest Trailheads.

Unicoi County Appalachian Trail Landmarks and Distances				
Location	Closest Trailhead	Distance from Closest Trailhead	Miles from Flint Gap	Miles from Iron Mt. Gap
Southernmost point, Flint Gap (Greene County line)	Devil Fork Gap	3.5 miles south	0	56.6
Flint Mt. Shelter	Devil Fork Gap	2.7 miles south	0.8	55.8
Devil Fork Gap	--	--	3.5	53.1
Sugarloaf Gap	Devil Fork Gap	1.8 miles north	5.3	51.3
Frozen Knob	Devil Fork Gap	3.3 miles north	6.8	49.8
Rice Gap	Sams Gap	3.6 miles south	8.4	48.2
Hogback Ridge Shelter	Sams Gap	2.4 miles south	9.6	47.0
Sams Gap	--	--	12.0	44.6
Street Gap	Sams Gap	2.3 miles north	14.3	42.3
Big Bald	Sams Gap	6.5 miles north	18.5	38.1
Bald Mt. Shelter	Spivey Gap	5.7 miles south	19.6	37.0
Little Bald	Spivey Gap	4.3 miles south	21.0	35.6
High Rocks	Spivey Gap	2.0 miles south	23.3	33.3
Spivey Gap	--	--	25.3	31.3
Devils Creek Gap	Spivey Gap	2.3 miles north	27.6	29.0
No Business Knob Shelter	Spivey Gap	4.9 miles north	30.2	26.4
Temple Hill Gap	Chestoa	3.9 miles south	32.6	24.0
Cliff Ridge	Chestoa	1.8 miles south	34.7	21.9
Nolichucky River (Chestoa)	--	--	36.5	20.1
Side trail to Nolichucky campground and outfitters	Chestoa	1.3 miles north	37.8	18.8
Curley Maple Gap Shelter	Indian Grave Gap	4.1 miles south	40.7	15.9
Indian Grave Gap	--	--	44.8	11.8
Beauty Spot	Indian Grave Gap	2.3 miles north	47.1	9.5
Deep Gap	Indian Grave Gap	3.8 miles north	48.6	8.0
Unaka Mt.	Indian Grave Gap	5.4 miles north	50.2	6.4
Cherry Gap Shelter	Iron Mt. Gap	2.7 miles south	52.9	2.7
Iron Mt. Gap	--	--	56.6	0.0
Northernmost point (Carter County line)	Iron Mt. Gap	1.0 miles north	57.6	1.0

Some Good Day Hikes on the Appalachian Trail in Unicoi County

- Nolichucky River to Cliff Ridge – fantastic views of Erwin and surrounding mountains

This hike begins at the bridge over the Nolichucky River at Chestoa. Park near the bridge and, facing upstream, go to the right side of the river. After walking a few yards up the road turn right into the woods and climb up a series of switchbacks. This was formerly a very steep section of trail but switchbacks have made it a much more pleasant and easy hike. After about a mile reach the first of several dramatic views down to the river, Erwin, and the surrounding mountains. The evergreen trees along the cliff are Carolina hemlocks, rare in Tennessee.

- Indian Grave Gap to Beauty Spot – great views from a grassy bald

At Indian Grave Gap at the North Carolina state line, there is a small parking area on the left and gravel roads going both left and right. The road to the left goes to Beauty Spot and across Unaka Mountain (not the summit) but can be rough for passenger cars. Beginning at Indian Grave Gap, go left on a gradual ascent for 2.3 miles to the open fields of Beauty Spot, elevation 4434'. There are excellent views of Roan Mountain, Mt. Mitchell, and many surrounding mountains.

- Devil Fork Gap to Sugarloaf Gap – profuse spring wildflowers

Reach Devil Fork Gap by taking Exit 46 off I-26 (Clear Branch), take old U. S. Highway 23 to Rocky Fork community near Flag Pond, turn right onto TN Highway 352, and follow it to the state line with parking on the left. From the road crossing bear left across a pasture and knob, cross a paved road at 0.5 miles, and climb gradually through a formerly settled area to a waterfall at 1.4 miles. Beyond, trilliums, spring beauties, trout lilies, and many other spring flowers grow in abundance with peak bloom in late April. Reach Sugarloaf Gap at 1.8 miles. Views of the South Indian Creek Valley can be had from Frozen Knob, 1.5 miles further.

- Sams Gap to Spivey Gap – high mountain scenery

One of the best long day hikes in Unicoi County is across Big Bald. It is almost 7 miles from either Sams Gap or Spivey Gap, but Sams Gap is several hundred feet higher so less climbing is involved. Take old U. S. Highway 23 to Sams Gap (parking is not available off Interstate 26). A nice short hike is to Street Gap, 2.3 fairly level miles from Sams Gap with a great view of Big Bald. The large open grassy meadow of Big Bald is reached 4.5 miles later. Descend through more meadows and sparse woods to Unicoi County's second highest point, 5185' Little Bald. From there the Trail enters North Carolina, passing fine views at High Rocks 2 miles from Spivey Gap, and reaches U. S. Highway 19W in Spivey Gap at 13.6 miles.

- Unaka Mountain Traverse – Iron Mt. Gap to Indian Grave Gap

Though lengthened a mile to 11.8 miles and still a challenging hike, recent relocations on the north side of Unaka Mt. have eased the grades by bypassing many summits without views. There is a few hundred feet less net elevation gain when hiked from Iron Mt. Gap to Indian Grave Gap. Spring wildflowers are profuse from mid-April through mid-May, with Catawba rhododendron and flame azalea framing small grassy remnants of balds near the top of Unaka Mt. Unaka's summit is covered with red spruce and has no views, but is a dark, cool, memorable place. Several fields south of Unaka Mt. culminate in the great views from Beauty Spot.

Other Unicoi County Trails

Unaka Mountain Area

Rock Creek Recreation Area

Rock Creek Recreation Area is the premier Cherokee National Forest developed recreation area in Unicoi County, with fine and pretty camping and picnicking sites and a large, ice cold swimming pool. To reach it, from Interstate 26 take Exit 36 to Main Street, turn right, and then left at a traffic light onto Tenth Street, TN Highway 395 (look for brown Forest Service signs). Proceed 3.3 miles to the entrance on the left. In addition to the longer trails described below, the Hemlock Forest, Trail of the Hardwoods, and Rock Creek Bicycle Trails all make nice short family walks within the recreation area. Hikers not staying in the campground should park at the swimming pool, before entering the campground.

- Rock Creek Falls Trail (FS Trail 148)

A pretty waterfall about 40' high is 2.1 miles above the pool at Rock Creek Park. From the swimming pool, hike 0.4 miles past the campground to the end of the road, then follow the trail to the right into the Unaka Mt. Wilderness. There are several creek crossings without bridges where you are likely to get your feet wet but are generally not difficult except in high water. The trail follows the creek and becomes more and more scenic, passing several smaller falls and cascades. The main falls is located in a secluded, rocky amphitheater.

- Rattlesnake Ridge Trail (FS Trail 26)

This challenging 4.4 mile trail climbs from Rock Creek Park at 2400' elevation to the Pleasant Gardens Overlook on Unaka Mt., elevation 4850'. The overlook is on a spur road 0.2 miles from Forest Road 230 at its high point on Unaka Mt., enabling a one-way hike with two vehicles. From the swimming pool, hike 0.4 miles past the campground to the end of the road and then follow the trail to the left. Climb for 0.4 miles to Dick Creek Gap and junctions with old roads converted to multi-use (mountain bike, horse, and foot) trails. Straight ahead, the Dick Creek

Trail, FS Trail 27, leads 2.6 miles to TN Highway 107. The Dark Hollow Trail, FS Trail 280, climbs out of the gap to the left. The Rattlesnake Ridge Trail makes a 90° right hand turn (look for a sign) and climbs steeply at first into the Unaka Mt. Wilderness at 1.3 miles from the pool. The ascent moderates but is steady, through first a dry ridge with some views into a northern forest with red spruce. When you see spruce trees you are near the top where all the highest mountains in Unicoi County are visible.

Limestone Cove

The Forest Service Limestone Cove Recreation Area is 3.6 miles from Unicoi along Tennessee Highway 107. The picnic area is to the left, along North Indian Creek. A new trailhead is on the right at the former campground site.

- Limestone Cove Trail (FS Trail 30)

The Limestone Cove Trail climbs 2200' from the recreation area in 3.8 miles to Stamping Ground Ridge. From the new trailhead, follow an old road for 0.3 miles to a wide, grassy trail. Cross Rocky Branch at 1.2 miles, then climb steadily with some steep sections up old logging roads. In a pretty gap covered with red spruce, reach a junction with the Stamping Ground Trail at 3.8 miles. A right turn leads 0.4 miles to the Stamping Ground Ridge overlook and parking area on Forest Road 230.

- Stamping Ground Trail (FS Trail 110)

The lower end of this 4.2 mile hiker and horse trail is on private land, with hopes to establish a public trailhead. The beautiful upper portion is accessible from Forest Road 230 high on Unaka Mt. Forest Road 230 intersects TN Highway 107 at 7.6 miles from downtown Unicoi. Watch for a right turn onto initially a paved road, reaching the Stamping Ground Ridge overlook at 6.7 miles. The trailhead can also be reached from Indian Grave Gap, 6.4 miles along Forest Road 230. Just past the rocks which block the trail to vehicle use are splendid views. The trail gently descends an open ridge to a gap where the Limestone Cove Trail bears left at 0.4 miles. The Stamping Ground Trail continues for 3.4 miles to its present terminus on private land; backtracking is required.

Clark Creek Area

Clark Creek is a clear, rocky stream isolated from the rest of Unicoi County. To reach it from Erwin, take TN Highway 81 down the Nolichucky River towards Jonesborough into Washington County. Turn left at the junction with TN 107 for about 5 miles. Watch closely for Clark Creek Road turning left just after crossing the creek. The pavement ends where the road enters the Cherokee National Forest and Unicoi County, becoming Forest Road 25. The Iron Furnace Trail departs to the left just across the creek from that point. The Hell Hollow Trail leaves to the right

2.8 miles past the end of the pavement. The Sill Branch Trailhead is 0.6 miles further on the left. The Long Arm Branch Horse Trail, Forest Trail 1901, branches left not far beyond. Forest Road 25 ends 4.2 miles past the end of the pavement where the unofficial Clark Creek Trail continues up the stream.

- Iron Furnace Trail (FS Trail 109)

Some publications refer to this as the Sally's Hole Trail. Just past where the pavement ends on Clark Creek Road, bear left. This trail, open to horse and mountain bike use, climbs along a small creek with many crossings. A view back towards Clark Creek is at 0.8 miles. A gap on Embreeville Mt. is reached at 1.2 miles. Old, unmarked routes continue into Bumpus Cove.

- Hell Hollow Trail (FS Trail 124)

This relatively easy 0.9 mile hiker-only trail begins 2.8 miles past the end of the pavement on Forest Road 25. Beginning as a dirt road where a small stream comes in from the right, the trail follows the stream through dense rhododendron and laurel stands often referred to as "hells" because of their difficulty to traverse. The trail fades out below Sampson Mt. at 0.9 miles.

- Sill Branch North and South Trails (FS Trails 115 and 116)

The Sill Branch North Trail (FS Trail 115) leads 0.6 miles to one of Unicoi County's prettiest and most accessible waterfalls, Sill Branch Falls. Park at an old dirt road leading left, 3.4 miles from the end of the pavement on the Clark Creek Road. At 0.5 miles up this trail, the Sill Branch South Trail, FS Trail 116, turns right and climbs 0.8 miles up the South Fork of Sill Branch. To reach the base of the falls, continue 0.1 miles further on the Sill Branch North Trail

Future Unicoi County Trails

Rocky Fork

The acquisition of the 10,000 acre Rocky Fork Tract by The Conservation Fund will enable several routes to be designated as official trails once those lands are acquired by federal or state government. About 70% of the tract lies in Unicoi County. The Appalachian Trail runs along the boundary of the tract for several miles Trail north (compass south) from Devil Fork Gap into Greene County.

Pinnacle Mountain

Efforts are underway to restore the fire tower atop Pinnacle Mountain, at 3540' the highest point on Buffalo Mt. Currently accessible by Forest Service Buffalo Mt. ATV Trail 29, a route intended for hiker and mountain bike use has been flagged from near the town of Unicoi and the proposed Tanasi Welcome Center.