GROUPS:
Planning Your Hike In the Mount Rogers High Country

Greetings from the Mount Rogers High Country! In our little corner of the world, you will find beautiful vistas, refreshing mountain springs, herds of wild ponies and a place to introduce the young people in your life to your childhood memories of summer days spent in the woods, reconnecting with the natural world.

The Grayson Highlands area of Virginia is one of the most beautiful and beloved places in the southern Appalachians. We understand the draw these balds and high elevation forests have on people, from first-time visitors to the residents who live on their slopes. While we enjoy sharing these special experiences with everyone, we need your help to make sure we aren't loving our mountains to death.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy has partnered with the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area and Grayson Highlands State Park to develop this brochure for groups visiting the highlands. We are providing some suggestions on what to do, where to camp, what to bring, and how to practice the Leave No Trace principles.

Thank you for taking the time to read over this information. We hope you take our suggestions to heart when planning your group’s trip and help us protect this special place for generations to come.

So, what are we protecting?

The 20,000 acres of the Mount Rogers High Country are located in Grayson, Smyth and Washington Counties of Southwest Virginia. The MRNRA has defined the High Country as all the land managed by the US Forest Service that is:

- South of VA-603 & North of US-58 and
- East of VA-600 & West of VA-16

This region includes the 5,000-acre Crest Zone featuring elevations over 4,000 feet, large rock formations, a mixture of mountain balds and spruce-fir forests; herds of wild, free-ranging ponies; and the summit of Mount Rogers, the highest peak in the state of Virginia, at 5,729 feet above sea-level.

The High Country encompasses two Congressionally-designated Wildernesses where the imprints of human activities are minimized. It also contains many habitats rarely found in the southeast, such as high elevation open grasslands, bogs, seeps, and spruce/fir forest. Because these areas are protected, the High Country is home to many rare plants and animals including the federally listed endangered Northern Flying Squirrel, Weller’s Salamander, Pigmy Salamander, Blue Ridge St. John’s Wort, Roan Mountain Rattlesnake, and Long-Stalked Holly.

And how are we supposed to protect it?

Protection of the natural resources of the High Country starts with a few simple steps. Practice Leave No Trace outdoor ethics by planning ahead and preparing for your visit, by hiking and camping on durable surfaces, by disposing of your waste properly, by leaving what you find, by minimizing campfire impacts, by being respectful of wildlife, and by being considerate of other High Country visitors. Reduce the impact of your group by abiding by posted signs, by avoiding peak visitation times, and by limiting your group to no more than 10 members.

Many groups come to the High Country for a combination of recreation, teaching or preparation for longer outings. Take the time to ensure your members understand why natural areas are special and deserve their protection. Encouraging young people to fully connect with the backcountry while giving them the knowledge, skills and sense of responsibility to minimize their impact on the environment is the greatest gift we can give to both our future generations and wilderness areas.

The recommendations in this brochure were collected with input from:

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy
appalachiantrail.org
Virginia Regional Office: 540-904-4316

Mount Rogers National Recreation Area
George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, Forest Service, USDA
www.fs.usda.gov/gwi
3714 Virginia 16,
Marion, VA 24354
(276) 783-5196 or 800-628-7202

Grayson Highlands State Park
www.dcr.virginia.gov/state-parks/grayson-highlands.shtml
829 Grayson Highland Lane
Mouth of Wilson, VA 24363
(276) 579-7092

Mount Rogers Appalachian Trail Club
www.mratc.org
To plan a great trip to the Mount Rogers High Country, you’ll need a great map. The Trails Illustrated National Geographic Map 318: Mount Rogers High Country, you’ll need a great map. The Trails Illustrated National Geographic Map 318: Mount Rogers High Country.

In case of emergency, ALWAYS call 911 and have the following information available:
Nature of emergency: Medical, Cardiac or Trauma
Location: County, GPS coordinates, trail and/or closest road intersection

For More Information

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy’s mission is to preserve and manage the Appalachian Trail – ensuring that its vast natural beauty and priceless cultural heritage can be shared and enjoyed today, tomorrow, and for centuries to come. To become a member, volunteer, or learn more, visit www.appalachiantrail.org

Please visit Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Excellence, at www.LNT.org

The High Country of Mount Rogers, including the Grayson Highlands, is a very special place. Each year, more and more organized groups visit the High Country.

This guide, developed by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service and Virginia State Parks, can help you plan a safe and enjoyable trip for your group that protects the natural beauty of this fragile environment for the next visitor...and for your next visit!

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When should we visit?
If possible, avoid visiting the High Country during periods of peak use. Your group will have a better experience if you avoid the crowds, and you’ll help protect the fragile areas that are already heavily impacted during these times.

Peak Use dates to avoid:
Holiday Weekends (for example Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Columbus Day)
Appalachian Trail northbound thru-hiking season: mid-April thru late-June
Weekends in October: fall foliage season

What should groups know about the Appalachian Trail?
Marked with white blazes, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, or “A.T.” is one of the longest footpaths in the world, measuring roughly 2,180 miles in length. The Trail goes through 14 states from Springer Mountain, Georgia, to Mount Katahdin in Maine.

The A.T. is also our nation’s longest-running volunteer project! Since its conception in 1925, the Trail has been constructed, maintained, and protected by volunteers.

The A.T. through the Mount Rogers High Country is maintained by volunteer members of the Mount Rogers Appalachian Trail Club (MRATC). Volunteers keep the trail open, paint blazes, install signs, build bridges and repair the Trail when it becomes eroded or muddy.

You can show your appreciation for the beautiful resources of the A.T. by doing a little Trail maintenance or monitoring. Contact the Mount Rogers Appalachian Trail Club (MRATC) for suggestions: mtrogersatc@gmail.com

Where should we camp?
High country land managers agree that some areas are more appropriate for group camping than others.

BEST places for group camping...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Scales</th>
<th>Along the Crest Trail (FS Trail #4605)</th>
<th>Brier Ridge area</th>
<th>Cabin Ridge area</th>
<th>Along the Springs Trail (FS Trail # 4625)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why?</td>
<td>By camping in these less heavily used backcountry areas, you can help the places that have been damaged by heavy use recover. You’re also more likely to find a campsite!</td>
<td>Each of these campgrounds makes a convenient “base camp” for hikes in the High Country. Facilities like bathrooms and fire rings make it easy for your group to practice low-impact camping.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

AVOID group camping here...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wilderness Areas</th>
<th>Why not?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are two federally designated Wilderness Areas in the High Country: Lewis Fork Wilderness and Little Wilson Creek Wilderness.</td>
<td>Federal Wilderness Areas are preserved as places “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled.” You can help keep Wilderness wild by passing through quietly, leaving no trace, and camping elsewhere.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What rules do we need to know?
Group size must be 10 people or fewer throughout the High Country. This group size restriction applies to both day and overnight use. Groups larger than 10 could be fined under federal law 36 CFR 281.57 (a) in Grayson Highlands State Park, overnight camping is restricted to the Campgrounds.

In order to protect the sensitive high-elevation forest, campfires are not allowed at Thomas Knob Shelter. If the members of your group are paying to participate, your outing is considered commercial use. You must obtain a Special Use Permit from the US Forest Service. To find out more call 800-628-7202 well in advance of your outing.

Plan Ahead and Prepare
Travel and Camp On Durable Surfaces
Dispose Of Waste Properly
Minimize Campfire Impacts
Respect Wildlife

If you love the High Country, you want to keep it beautiful. Graffiti, litter, waste, and unsightly fire rings are all avoidable impacts. Your group can help protect this special place by learning the seven principles of Leave No Trace. Specific Leave No Trace recommendations for groups can be found here:
http://tinyurl.com/ATLNTforGroups

Here are a few Leave No Trace considerations specific to the Mount Rogers High Country:

- If possible, avoid visiting the High Country during periods of peak use.
- Plan your trip well in advance.
- Respect wildlife and their natural habitat.
- Keep campsites clean and free of litter.
- Use proper campfire techniques. If the fire is too big, it’s better to find another spot.
- Pack out all trash and waste.
- Use natural materials for campfires and do not exceed 15% of the site’s natural biomass.
- Do not cut down trees or other vegetation for campfire purposes.
- Do not disturb animal nests or other natural structures.
- Do not feed animals. By doing so, you are altering their natural behaviors and increasing the risk of human-wildlife conflict.
- Do not leave your campsite littered, and make sure to leave it as you found it.
- Do not discard items such as food waste, trash, or other refuse at the campsite.
- Do not bring your pet on a Leave No Trace compliant outing, as it is considered a form of disturbance.
- Do not build personal or “special” features in the campsite, such as bridges or ditches.
- Do not use natural resources such as water or firewood in excess of what is minimally required.
- Do not discard clothing or personal items at the campsite.
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What is Wilderness?
Each of us has our own personal definition of “Wilderness”. However, on federal lands, “Wilderness” is a specific defined area designated by Congress to be kept in its natural state where the impacts of human activities are minimized to preserve its special characteristics and opportunities. The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines Wilderness as:
...lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition...
...an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man...
...generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable...
...has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation...
...shall be devoted to the public purposes of recreation, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation and historic use.

How can we help protect Wilderness?
Wildernesses are places for solitude and challenge. You can help keep Wilderness wild by passing through quietly to preserve the Wilderness experience for others. Read your map, look for signs to familiarize yourself with the Wilderness boundaries, and plan to camp outside of Wilderness.

DON’T:
- Stay off trails and stick to the designated campsites.
- Do not cut down trees or other vegetation for campfire purposes.
- Do not disturb animal nests or other natural structures.
- Do not feed animals. By doing so, you are altering their natural behaviors and increasing the risk of human-wildlife conflict.
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DO:
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- Respect wildlife and their natural habitat.
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Why not have a campfire?
Because the High Country’s environment is so fragile, having a campfire is one of the most destructive things a group can do here—even if they follow Leave No Trace low-impact practices. How can your group experience the comfort and camaraderie a campfire provides, without damaging the High Country?

Cook on a camp stove, and enjoy hot chocolate instead of s’mores. Bring a few candle lanterns or a solar lantern to gather around at night. Be creative, and be a Hero to the High Country!

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