

CENTENNIAL CAMPAIGN HIGH-IMPACT INITIATIVE

Ridgerunner Program

THE VISION

Every visitor to the Appalachian Trail has the knowledge to enjoy a world-class recreational experience and help protect the Trail for the benefit of all.

THE NEED

In 2025, the A.T. had 16.9 million recreation visits. Nearly half of the American population can access the Trail within a day's drive. The Trail's accessibility is part of its enduring appeal, but it also increases the stress on the footpath and surrounding natural resources.

Iconic destinations face obvious threats—litter, graffiti, trampled vegetation—and less visible impacts, such as biodiversity loss and compromised water quality. Recent trends indicate the number of under-prepared hikers visiting throughout the year will continue to grow. They are often less knowledgeable about responsible recreation practices. Additionally, milder winters have increased the number of days in the hiking season.

THE SOLUTION

A proven model for on-the-Trail visitor education exists but has not been implemented at scale: the ATC's Ridgerunner Program. Ridgerunners are assigned specific sections of the Trail during high-use periods, which vary by season and region.

They spend their days hiking an assigned section of the A.T., in all kinds of weather, and their nights sleeping in tents or shelters. They encounter visitors with varying degrees of knowledge and experience and educate them about how to recreate responsibly. **Leave No Trace** principles are the core message Ridgerunners convey to visitors, and they haul hundreds of pounds of trash and abandoned gear from the Trail each year. They are often the face of the A.T.'s cooperative management system, introducing visitors to the local A.T. Club, land manager, and the ATC.

In addition to interacting with hikers, Ridgerunners collect data on visitor numbers, overnight site usage, and trail maintenance needs that informs local decision-making. Some Ridgerunners also complete basic but critical trail and overnight site maintenance, such as clearing brush from the Trail, cleaning shelters and outhouses, and even removing small blowdowns in certain sections of the Trail.

"As someone who thru-hiked the A.T., it's a dream to give back to the Trail as a Ridgerunner. My favorite part is meeting thru-hikers and hearing what brought them to the Trail."

—RIDGERUNNER CHRIS MINNICH, Georgia



THE APPROACH

As advocates of Trail stewardship, Ridgerunners embody the ATC's mission. They act as boots-on-the-ground in protecting the A.T.'s most beloved places, while respecting Trail values of self-reliance and solitude in nature for those who seek it.

Working with Trail-maintaining clubs and federal partners, the ATC will gradually increase the size of the Ridgerunner program over the next three to five years.

THE INVESTMENT

\$6 Million

The Ridgerunner program is poised for expansion. An investment at this level would increase the presence of ATC Ridgerunners on the Trail and provide support for our partners' critical Ridgerunner programs.

Outcomes

- Increased Ridgerunner coverage in areas of the A.T. where it's needed most
- Additional training and professional development for Ridgerunners on the cultural and historical significance of the Trail as well as the work that the ATC is doing to protect and steward the A.T. landscape
- Ridgerunners provided with housing stipends, travel reimbursements, and a gear allowance
- A new trailwide Ridgerunner program coordinator position
- Increased support for partner Ridgerunner programs

"I was fortunate enough to run into a Ridgerunner at Gooch Gap in Georgia. Not only did she provide us with Trail info and point out Leave No Trace principles, but she was also very knowledgeable about current trail conditions. Thank you for finding people like this to monitor and protect the trail." —2024 HIKER



RIDGERUNNER IMPACT IN 2025

31
Ridgerunners

12,626
cumulative hours
on Trail

62,872
visitor interactions



To learn more about how your investment can help the ATC achieve its vision for the Ridgerunner Program, contact philanthropy@appalachiantrail.org or 304.535.6331.

appalachiantrail.org