

BEATING A PATH ...

New High Trail connector fulfills hiking dream

story by Zenda Douglas



Countless souls have left their footprints on the hills and mountains of North Carolina. From Native Americans to pioneers, settlers, hunters and fishermen, lumberjacks and railroad workers to outdoor enthusiasts, conservationists and hikers — all have tread, climbed, bush-whacked and meandered through this thickly forested terrain. Every year, thousands of hikers arrive from all over the world to explore, discover, challenge their skills, stay fit, appreciate natural beauty or simply find peace in the splendor of the outdoors that is Western North Carolina.

The Burnsville area of Yancey County is one of spectacular beauty and profound landscapes. It offers some of the best hiking opportunities in the country, giving people of all ages, ability levels and interests a chance to enjoy fresh air and natural wonders.

Whether seeking solitude or enjoying the camaraderie of companions, it is a welcoming place.

Yancey County is home to Mount Mitchell. At 6,684 feet it is the highest peak on the Eastern Seaboard. Sixteen additional peaks in the county rise over 6,000 feet. The trails that run between these peaks provide hikers with inspiration and challenge.

Burnsville's Mount Mitchell Trail ascends from a campground at 3,000 feet all the way to the summit. The rugged Black Mountain Crest to Deep Gap Trail elevates hikers through a forest of spruce and fir in a rare ecosystem like some found in Canada. Other trails include Devils Den Nature, Roaring Fork Falls, Big Bald, Big Butt, Colbert Ridge, Woody Ridge and South River Loop Trail. Combined, they form 100 miles of publicly accessible trails ... just in Yancey County.

A LONG-HELD DREAM

Now, an exciting, new opportunity awaits hikers as two of the area's most skilled and respected hiking experts and guides have introduced a connector route between Mount Mitchell and the Appalachian Trail.

Utilizing what they've dubbed "The Burnsville Connector," Jake Blood and Jennifer Pharr Davis have established the Appalachian High Route, a 343-mile loop that combines the Appalachian Trail, Mountain-to-Sea Trail and Black Mountain Trail.



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Photo by Sean Busher

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Jennifer Pharr Davis leads a group on the Black Mountain Crest Trail, part of the new Appalachian High Trail. Photo by Brew Davis

By connecting existing roadways and trails, the AHR gives access to 50 of the 54 peaks in the Appalachians that summit above 6,000 feet, including Clingmans Dome, the highest peak on the Appalachian Trail, and Mount Mitchell, the highest peak in the Black Mountains. To the delight of hikers and visitors, the

Burnsville Connector portion of the route runs right through Burnsville's town square.

Ideas for an Appalachian high route had swirled in Blood's mind for years. A lifelong outdoorsman and hiker, he was keenly interested in figuring out a way to complete the dream of Appalachian Trail visionary and founder Benton MacKaye, who planted the concept in 1921 of a trail along the Appalachian Mountains from Maine to Georgia. MacKaye wanted to connect the highest

mountains in the South and the North. However, problems arose acquiring access to private lands, creating a missing link.

A retired lieutenant colonel in the Air Force, Blood moved to Burnsville in 2006. He became immersed in leadership roles in tourism and economic development and founded the North Carolina High Peaks Trail Association, which has played a key role in trail education and maintenance. As a board member of the Mountain-to-Sea Trail, he planned a 45th anniversary celebration of the organization and invited Jennifer Pharr Davis as the keynote speaker.

Davis, born in Hendersonville, NC, is a world-renowned, long distance hiker, speaker, author of numerous guides and bestseller books and strong proponent of hiking and spending time outdoors. She has hiked more than 14,000 miles over six continents and still holds the speed record for hiking the entire Appalachian Trail. In 2008, she founded Blue Ridge Hiking Company. She is an advocate for women's safety, confidence and preparedness in the outdoors and eliminating gender-based barriers.

Davis also shared Blood's interest in linking Mount Mitchell to the Appalachian Trail and her intimate knowledge of the area's roadways and trails allowed her to visualize solutions to tricky connection challenges. While Blood was

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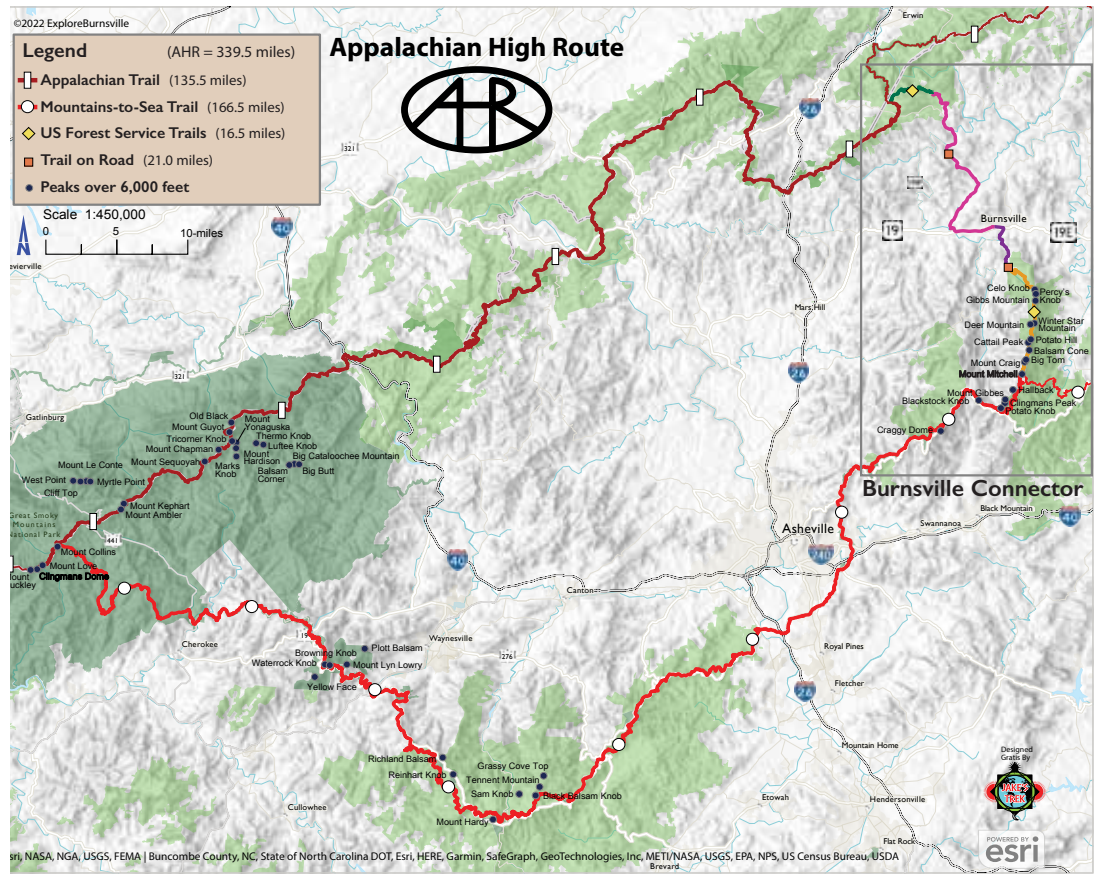
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thinking in terms of design, a talent that has allowed him to create extensive mapping of the resultant route, Davis could see the image behind it.

Their ultimate solution proved to be utilizing existing roadways, trails and even sidewalks. Working together to garner support from 20 partners and various trail organizations, the Appalachian High Route was laid out and a dream was realized.

Some 140 miles of the Appalachian High Route are on the Appalachian Trail; 170 miles on the Mountain-to-Sea Trail; 20 miles on U.S. Forest Service trails; and 21.5 miles on public roads. Upon reaching the end of the 19-mile Burnsville Connector, which filled in the missing piece of the route, Davis became the first person to hike the whole distance of the Appalachian High Route.

There are 96 miles of the Appalachian Trail in North Carolina with an additional 225 miles running along the North Carolina/Tennessee border. The entirety of the Appalachian Trail is roughly 2,200 miles through 14 states.



This map depicts the trails and several highlights that comprise the new Appalachian High Trail.




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TRAIL ESSENTIALS

Tens of thousands of people have used The North Carolina High Peaks Trail Association and the Blue Ridge Hiking Company for the important resources they offer about hiking mountain peaks and trails in Yancey County, including the AHT. Each organization offers guided hikes and educational opportunities, as well as expertise in conservation, maintenance and perseverance in the outdoors.

Check their respective websites for hike, class or event information and schedules: <https://nchigh-peaks.org> and <https://blueridgehikingco.com/>

While camping is abundant along trails and close by the rivers, those who prefer a softer bed at the end of a vigorous hike may want to seek out one of the comfortable lodgings in the Burnsville area. One of the newest and nicest is the 28-acre Mount

Mitchell Eco Retreat, located just off the Blue Ridge Parkway. Well-appointed rooms are free of chemical cleansers, pesticides and plastic containers, and guests can enjoy massages or energy healing and yoga classes. The elegantly styled Terrell House Bed & Breakfast, a 1900s colonial, is another option that balances a mountain trail with a lay-over in luxury.

Burnsville is an engaging small town that has attracted artists of all mediums for many generations. It has more artists per capita than anywhere else in the United States and offers a friendly downtown that greets visitors (and their dogs) with an appealing array of restaurants, gathering places and shops. It is also home to the Bare Dark Sky Observatory and Arthur Planetarium. (See the winter 2022 edition of *Upstate Lake Living*.) ■

{above left and right} Jennifer Pharr Davis shows off all there is to know about the new connector. • Combining their talents, Davis and Blood created and mapped the new Appalachian High Trail, a 343-mile connecting route on the 2,200-mile Appalachian Trail. Photos by Brew Davis

{below} One of the newest and nicest lodges on the Appalachian Trail is the 28-acre Mount Mitchell Eco Retreat, located just off the Blue Ridge Parkway. Photo by Sean Busher

