GEORGIA’S
Mountain Treasures
The Unprotected Wildlands of the
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

By Jess Riddle
for Georgia ForestWatch
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Anyone who has spent time in the Southern Appalachians knows how remarkable they are. Waterfalls, wildlife, and the landscape itself create beauty that draws people in, enriches their lives, and becomes part of them. Birds, salamanders, and wildflowers take so many varied shapes, sizes, and colors that seeing them all can become a lifelong quest. The beauty and diversity produce memories and the places that families come back to year after year. The need to cherish and protect this landscape is obvious.

However, these mountains have not always been valued. Viewed as raw materials waiting for harvest, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries the mountains were stripped of trees and floods buried the valleys under soil that had once nourished the forests. Even as nature tried to knit itself back together, new roads and development cut apart the recovering forest.

Some areas, though, have remained intact. They are large tracts that offer safe haven to wildlife, clean water, and tranquility. A few of them are permanently protected through Congressional designations. The rest have an uncertain future. We call these unprotected special areas Mountain Treasures.

These special places would need allies, so in 1992 The Wilderness Society started the *Mountain Treasures* series. For the national forests in each state in the Southern Appalachians, it released a report filled with accurate, detailed, and important information that citizens could use to learn about and advocate for worthy wild areas. The reports coincided with the revision of the forest plans that would guide national forest management. Armed with sufficient information, the public could speak for these special places.

Committed citizens who were invested in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests proved highly effective at speaking for the areas in *Georgia’s Mountain Treasures*, first released in 1995. The 2004 Forest Plan treated many Mountain Treasures fairly and recognized their unique character. Today people can visit these areas in a relatively pristine condition. However, that recognition and protection lasts only until the Forest Plan is revised.

This edition of *Georgia’s Mountain Treasures* started from scratch. Georgia ForestWatch reevaluated roadless areas using the latest data. We assessed candidate areas in light of the science of conservation biology. Ultimately, careful analysis led us back to where we began, with a set of sites very close to the original Mountain Treasures. Boundaries may have changed, but the areas profiled here truly are the special places of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests.

Georgia ForestWatch also went beyond the map layers, databases, and limits of other analyses to consider what can only be known through first-hand experience. We’ve had the privilege of visiting all 40 Mountain Treasures. We’ve forded streams, surfed through rhododendron thickets, recorded coordinates for rare plants, collected samples from ancient trees, and tried not to leave footprints. Through all that, we’ve gotten to know these areas. Each has its own flavor and personality. We’ve tried to convey that uniqueness in these profiles, but fear we’ve come up short. We hope, though, that you will get to know some of these areas yourself, and speak for them.

*Rock overhang near Three Forks*  
*Photo by Sue Harmon*
Even describing places where there are no villages takes a village. This report would not have been possible without the assistance of many people. Ben Cash, Tom and Sally Colkett, Ian Cowie, Marie Dunkle, David Fann, David Govus, Sue Harmon, Robin Hitner, Shepherd Howell, Jack Johnston, Brent Martin, Lindley McKay, Olya Milenkaya, John Moeller, Dan Rawlins, Andrew Rodgers, Michelle Ruigrok, JP Schmidt, Cliff Shaw, Jan and Dennis Stansell, Jim Sullivan, Melanie Vickers, Jim Walker, and Buzz Williams helped with fieldwork, and paid for information about Georgia’s Mountain Treasures with yellow-jacket stings, boots full of creek water, and seemingly endless crawls through mountain-laurel thickets. Their knowledge of these special areas greatly improved the detail and quality of this report, and their ability to keep smiling on the way up a steep mountain was always appreciated. Ben Cash, JP Schmidt, and Jim Sullivan deserve special thanks for sharing their expertise and many years of field experience in the Piedmont Cluster, which allowed us to include that area in this report.

Many of the same people reviewed drafts of area descriptions. Nicole Hayler of the Chattooga Conservancy, Bruce O’Connor, Bruce Roberts, and Larry Winslett also reviewed drafts. The additional information, technical corrections, and proofreading they provided greatly improved the accuracy, readability, and completeness of the descriptions.

Of course, to have site descriptions, sites must first be identified. The analysis to identify sites rested on data supplied by Forest Service staff and Hugh Irwin of The Wilderness Society’s Southern Appalachians office. Eric Schwartz’s digitization and analysis of the Chattooga River Watershed Old-Growth Assessment allowed us to determine how much old-growth was within each Treasure in the Chattooga Watershed Cluster.

Words alone could not do justice to the Mountain Treasures, and more than anyone, Larry Winslett deserves credit for showing the beauty of these areas. Drawing on his experience with conservation, publishing, and photography, he helped determine what subject matter was needed, provided photos, and edited photos. Peter McIntosh was also very gracious in allowing us to use many of his photos throughout this publication, including our beautiful front and back cover photos. The Bowen Center for the Arts and the photographers who participated in the “Appalachian Mountain Treasures” photography show were also instrumental in gathering appropriate photographs. Dayle Faulkner and Bill Hester also helped obtain photos for specific Treasures.

We are very grateful to Eleanor Thompson for her artistic eye, expertise, and patience in helping us produce a final document that highlights Georgia’s special places.

Several people offered us the wisdom and lessons they gained in working with other Mountain Treasures publications. Jill Gottesman and Hugh Irwin with The Wilderness Society’s Southern Appalachians office and Brent Martin – all instrumental in producing North Carolina’s Mountain Treasures – helped us with everything from content to printing and saved us many pitfalls. Patrick Hunter, Sarah Francisco, and Sam Evans with the Southern Environmental Law Center provided a big picture perspective as well as technical guidance on how this report could contribute to the forest planning process.

We are grateful to and thank all of these people for giving voice to these special places that cannot speak for themselves.

Finally, we thank all those who appreciate the natural wonders of the Southern Appalachians, and all who have spoken up for them.

Georgia’s Mountain Treasures is indebted to the R. Howard Dobbs, Jr. Foundation, an anonymous donor, the Dobbs Fund, The Wilderness Society, Fund for Wild Nature, Patagonia, The Sapelo Foundation, the Georgia Chapter of the Sierra Club, Turner Foundation, and Georgia ForestWatch members. Their enduring support and generosity were essential to both the publication itself and all the research that went into it.

— Jess Riddle and Mary Topa
INTRODUCTION

In a 2015 National Academy of Sciences report titled “US protected lands mismatch biodiversity priorities” (Jenkins et al. 2015), the United States government and the conservation community were soundly criticized for their emphasis on protecting the American west when the stronghold for biodiversity in America is in the southeast. The report reflected the disproportionate amount of conservation dollars (private and public) that flow to the American west, with the eastern U.S. getting but a fraction of what these large iconic landscapes receive. Since the southeast also has the highest rate of endemism (species found nowhere else) and vulnerable species, along with the highest population growth in the nation, the report stresses the need for increased attention to conservation efforts here, ranking the southern Blue Ridge Mountains as the number one priority conservation area in the U.S. To secure a functioning network of enduring conservation lands in the Southern Appalachians that will protect habitat for wildlife and rare species, clean mountain streams, and areas that offer solitude, recreation and renewal to humans, we must protect Georgia’s remaining wild and unfragmented areas, both public and private.

Over 20 years ago, The Wilderness Society began a project documenting areas in the Chattahoochee National Forest that were largely unroaded and had special conservation values such as rare plants and animals, special recreational opportunities, or old-growth forest. Georgia ForestWatch was an integral part of this project. Volunteers with a deep passion for the mountains of north Georgia contributed to this effort, volunteers who knew the landscape intimately, whether it be its birds, plants, animals, trails, or streams. These dedicated citizens spent countless hours exploring and researching these areas, bushwhacking their way with maps in hand, and no GPS units at their disposal. Collectively, their efforts produced Georgia’s Mountain Treasures. Similar efforts soon began for other Southern Appalachian National Forests, as they too were in line for new management plans, and Mountain Treasures publications were soon published for them as well. Not only were these publications created to assist the public in advocating for these special places, but for creating blueprints that would inspire citizens to push for appropriate designations for some of these areas during revision of management plans for these forests.

Even today, there remains on all six of the Southern Appalachian national forests pockets of forested land that are largely wild and without roads. Some of these places are permanently protected within the National Wilderness Preservation System. Others are along protected Wild and Scenic River corridors, and still others enjoy some measure of safety because they are federally Inventoried Roadless Areas, or fall within management categories now considered unsuitable for road building and commercial logging.

But many important tracts remain at risk to inappropriate uses for what are north Georgia’s last remaining wildlands. This new edition of Georgia’s Mountain Treasures focuses on the unprotected wildlands of the Chattahoochee National Forest and special natural areas in the Oconee National Forest, all of which deserve special consideration in the next revision of the Forests’ Land and Resource Management Plan. Georgia ForestWatch and its partners have identified 40 areas in these two National Forests that deserve such consideration and urgently need it. These areas not only contribute to the health and viability of the globally-significant Southern Appalachian ecosystem, but also provide innumerable
recreational opportunities, which are critical drivers of local economies. The most popular are traditional uses that include hiking, camping, fishing, hunting, and paddling, yet growing significantly are birding and wildlife viewing, nature photography, rock climbing, and mountain biking. The streams in these areas also have growing importance as part of the water supply for millions of people. These remaining wild places offer unspoiled scenic beauty and an escape from our fast-paced, modern lives.

This publication briefly looks at each Mountain Treasure area, and describes its important ecological, scenic, recreational, and wilderness values and resources; together they comprise some of the wildest lands in north Georgia. As the surrounding private lands become increasingly developed, these areas are becoming the last remnants of a contiguous forest that once blanket the Georgian mountains. We have chosen to highlight these core forest areas as they serve critical ecological, social, and economic functions and lack long-term protection, thus remaining at risk of losing their special characteristics. The current status for these areas ranges from areas with partial protection, to areas with few restrictions on industrial logging and roadbuilding. Nearly all of the areas qualify under the national forest 2012 Planning Rule as roadless areas, now called “potential wilderness areas,” though certainly not all are Congressionally-designated Wilderness candidates. Clearly, some areas currently are better protected than others. But there is some level of uncertainty about permanent protection for any of these areas.

How we got where we are

National forests are governed by the National Forest Management Act which requires forests to create Land and Resource Management Plans (“Forest Plans”). These plans basically divide the forest into different zones (called “prescriptions” in Georgia) and designate specific goals and restrictions for each zone. As examples, some prescriptions may emphasize timbering, some may emphasize ecological restoration, and still others may emphasize certain types of recreation. In 2004, the U.S. Forest Service adopted the current Forest Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, which emphasizes restoration and management of forest ecosystems, forest health and resilience, and high-quality recreation opportunities. The 1995 Georgia’s Mountain Treasures report made a solid case for giving nearly 240,000 acres of the approximately 867,000-acre forest some level of protection during the plan revision process. And some of those areas were protected. Some were placed in management prescriptions that preserved their special characteristics. Nearly 8,000 acres were recommended for Congressional Wilderness designation, and 65,000 acres were protected under the 2001 Roadless Rule, which restricted road building and logging in national forest roadless areas. Unfortunately, many areas did not receive sufficient protections, and despite their unique characteristics, are treated the same as less-special areas of the forest. Today these areas remain unprotected and at risk of losing their special values.

The Forest Service is required to create a new forest plan for each national forest every 10-15 years. We are optimistic that a new plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests can result in a stronger science-based plan, collaboratively developed, that can be implemented without controversy. And that is the goal of this new edition of Georgia’s Mountain Treasures. We hope that this new edition of Georgia’s Mountain Treasures will inspire people to speak up for these special places both now and once the forest plan revision process starts.

How you can get involved

Our national forests belong to all Americans, a part of our birthright and our heritage as U.S. citizens. Congress has enacted laws to ensure we all have a voice in how these lands are managed and cared for. Strong, informed public participation does make a difference. Our challenge is to take full advantage of the opportunity to make certain that these rich and beautiful lands survive intact, not just for us but for the many generations to come.

You can contact the Forest Service and ask to be put on a mailing list to receive all information and notices regarding official activities on the national forest and the forest planning process. Write to:

Forest Supervisor
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests
1755 Cleveland Highway
Gainesville, GA 30501
www.fs.usda.gov/conf

Information on forest planning and on the national forests generally is available at the Forest Service’s website: https://www.fs.usda.gov/conf. You can also stay abreast of what is happening by going to Georgia ForestWatch’s website, www.gafw.org. And you can join Georgia Forestwatch, and learn more through our outings, newsletters, alerts, and events. We encourage you to get out and explore these places, and to support their protection through your own social media outlets, photography, blogs, websites, art, and writings.
WHY PROTECT WILD AREAS?

We need wilderness preserved – as much of it as is still left, and as many kinds – because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed. The reminder and the reassurance that it is still there is good for our spiritual health even if we never once in ten years set foot in it. It is good for us when we are young, because of the incomparable sanity it can bring briefly, as vacation and rest, into our insane lives. It is important to us when we are old simply because it is there – important, that is, simply as an idea.

– Wallace Stegner,
from his Wilderness Letter

For well over a century, Americans have been setting aside certain public lands for protection in an undeveloped state. For much of that time, the practice was uniquely American, though many other nations now embrace it. Why? Stegner argued that there is something about wild country that resonates deeply in the American spirit. Today’s wilderness lovers would agree, even as they find the question of “why wilderness” an odd one. For them, it is simply enough that wild areas are there; to question its value is to question the value of such things as art, music, the brilliance of a brook trout flashing through a mountain pool, a sunset, a child’s laughter.

For many of us, the values of wild areas are intrinsic, self-evident and have little to do with utilitarian accounting. We share Albert Einstein’s view: “Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted.” But the process of protecting wild areas on our federal public lands is finally a political one. As such, wild areas must contend in both the marketplace of ideas and the marketplace itself. Fortunately, they contend very well in both venues.

Start with outdoor recreation, a huge and growing part of our economy. Families do not outfit themselves for adventures in clearcuts and strip mines. They seek peaceful places, natural quiet and natural sounds. At the high end of that scale are protected wild areas. They draw countless hikers, backcountry hunters and anglers, campers, whitewater paddlers, all of whom spend money, lots of it, to equip themselves and simply to get there. The Outdoor Industry Association says that economic engine tallies up to 27.3 billion dollars of actual spending in Georgia each year.

We also know from years of research that some of the most economically robust places in the nation are those nearest wild country. Businesses relocate to such places, knowing that competent, well-equipped workers are either there or will come, seeking what teeming cities are so often unable to provide: a high quality of life, what some refer to as “a paycheck from God.”

Large tracts of protected forest also provide critical habitat for many species of wildlife. Backcountry hunters and anglers know this both intuitively and from much-valued personal experience. Not only are hunting and fishing allowed in protected wilderness,
wilderness provides the best of those pursuits for true sportsmen and women, those for whom the hunt itself is every bit as important as the harvest. While the hunting can be more demanding due to remoteness and lack of motorized or wheeled access, hunters often report bigger deer and bear due to less competition. Not to mention the greater challenge. The same goes for fishing.

Science is telling us, too, that interior forest songbirds may need relatively unbroken areas of mature forest in order to maintain viable populations. And other wide-ranging species such as black bear seem to prefer wild settings. Our knowledge of these species and their needs grows all the time. As we learn more about our native flora and fauna, prudence suggests that we let some of our public land stand undeveloped rather than risk erasing the complex web of sustaining elements critical to their well-being.

Our faucets bring home the importance of keeping wild areas intact. Researchers show how forests keep sediment out of the streams that flow through them, and the water ready for us to use. Fishermen and women count on forest shade to keep temperatures cool enough for trout. We all count on large wild areas to limit flooding. These services ease the bottom line for municipalities by reducing the need for water supply and treatment infrastructure.

Wilderness and unbroken backcountry serve these functions admirably and they will do so sustainability if we have the wit and the will to let them. Their role becomes ever more important as we lose precisely those attributes on private land at an accelerating rate. As undisrupted habitat and open space dwindle on other ownerships, their retention on natural public lands becomes more and more vital.

If we were to single out one purpose for our public lands that surpasses all others it would be this: to provide things that private lands cannot or do not provide. Among those are public recreational opportunities, opportunities for solitude and primitive experiences, undisrupted habitat, and natural settings.

“This work articulates the importance of our last wild places in the north Georgia mountains, places that not only preserve old-growth forests and rare plants and animals, but offer a refuge for us humans. Georgia ForestWatch has been fighting for these places since its inception over 30 years ago, testimony to the spirit of people committed for the long haul to guard nature from being exploited and sacrificed for short-term gain. This is a beautiful vision for our forests.”

– Janisse Ray, author of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* and *Pinhook: Finding Wholeness in a Fragmented Land*
In 2014, almost three million visitors came to the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests for recreational reasons. Most telling is how this number grew almost 40 percent over a five-year period, as 2009 data showed a little over two million recreational visits to the forests. With the enormous growth that north Georgia has experienced over the last two decades, it is not surprising that over half of these visits were from residents who live within a 50-mile radius of the forest.

Of the 30 different recreational uses identified for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, the number one reason to visit the forests was for hiking and walking (32.4 percent), followed by: viewing natural features (24.8 percent), fishing (10.8 percent), “other non-motorized uses” (5.6 percent), “some other activity” (4.1 percent), and hunting (3.8 percent). Most other uses, such as backpacking, developed camping, bicycling, and horseback riding came in at under 2 percent of recreational use.

By 2060, the number of southern adults participating in the top 10 outdoor recreation activities is projected to increase, with the largest increase projected among hiking (70-113 percent) and the lowest increase among hunting (8-25 percent). Activities such as birding, wildlife viewing, nature photography, and mountain biking are among the fastest growing recreational activities on the forest. Increases are projected across all recreational sites, including Wilderness, day use and overnight developed sites, and general forest areas. As tourism around this recreation increases, so does its role in supporting the economies of rural north Georgia communities. With finite places to recreate receiving increasing use, the importance of protecting scenic natural areas like Georgia’s Mountain Treasures also increases.
There is a lot at stake regarding the future of our Southern Appalachian forests. The next forest plan revisions will decide key questions about how we choose to protect and manage these forests for the future. The Appalachians are globally-significant mountains, running from Quebec south for 1,500 miles to Alabama. The range is impressive along its length, but it is in the Southern Appalachians that the chain is at its most scenically spectacular and biologically rich.

Here, a unique combination of physical factors creates the perfect recipe for astonishing animal and plant species richness. These ancient, rugged mountains range in elevation from 700 feet up to Mount Mitchell’s 6,684-foot summit. Many places receive 80 inches of rainfall each year, encouraging the growth of over 2,000 species of plants, including over 130 species of trees – more than are found in all of Europe. Aquatic biodiversity ranks among the highest on the planet. Much of this biodiversity is contained on the 4.5 million acres of federal public lands that stretch across parts of five states from Georgia to Virginia and include the largest remaining expanses of natural habitat in the eastern United States. Georgia’s Chattahoochee National Forest comprises 750,000 acres of this acreage, and represents the southernmost portion of this invaluable public resource.

The high diversity of the Southern Appalachians can be attributed to several factors, one of which is the alignment of the mountains. The northeast-southwest orientation of the Appalachians provided a corridor for species to use during the last ice age. Instead of going extinct as they struggled to migrate over high mountains – which happened in the east-west oriented mountains of Europe – species were able to follow the natural passages in the Appalachians down to warmer temperatures, thus keeping pace with their southward-moving habitat. Many species found habitat within the Southern Appalachians themselves, where glaciation never reached. As glaciers began to recede some 18,000 years ago, species that had migrated to the Appalachians stayed, having adapted to their new home and landscape.

Another cause for Appalachian diversity is the large number of different habitats offered in the mountains, as moisture, temperature, and resources fluctuate dramatically in short distances throughout the region. Two sides of a mountain may exhibit wildly different characteristics, each side accommodating species that could not survive on the other. Similarly, gorges and summits each can host very different flora and fauna, offering temperature change across geographic gradients that would require hundreds of miles of migration in a flatter, plains-type habitat. This diversity in habitat means that the Appalachians have many different community types, including dry forests, moist forests, wetlands, rock outcrop communities, and aquatic communities, as well as micro-site variation within each of these communities.

“Even narratives about natural treasures need updating, reevaluating, reinterpreting, redefining, or simply reconfirming. These narratives also need ground-truthing. Wild places are most real underfoot, not merely in the words compiled about them. Ideas of wilderness and wildness are now often challenged, especially in the Anthropocene, so an update of an important work like Georgia’s Mountain Treasures is important. I look forward to adding this new edition to my shelf of essential works on some of the watersheds I love most.”

– John Lane, author of Chattooga: Descending into the Myth of Deliverance River

A spotted salamander peers off of its wet perch. With dozens of species, the Southern Appalachians are a global hotspot for salamander diversity. Photo by Larry Winslett – www.larrywinslettphotography.com
VULNERABLE HABITATS

Conditions rapidly fluctuate in the Southern Appalachians, the result of which is a complex puzzle of ecosystems, many of which are small and isolated. These represent habitats that are especially at risk from climate change and other anthropogenic influences, as habitat loss would require the affected species to travel through inhospitable habitat to reach an area that could support them. Bears, for instance, have large territories and still rely on corridors of suitable habitat to connect broader habitat patches. On the other hand, populations of species with small ranges (like frogs, salamanders, and turtles) and many soil-dwelling organisms that require undisturbed soil habitat may not recover from disturbances that decimate quality habitat within their range. For some highly specialized species, the loss of their current habitat would mean local extinction (extirpation) as they would not survive migration. Thus, scale is an important consideration when considering certain vulnerable habitats and species loss, particularly endemic species.

The Appalachians are home to many groups of animals and plants; prominent among them are salamanders, fungi, trees, mosses, millipedes, spiders, moths, birds, small mammals, large mammals, fish, freshwater mussels, aquatic invertebrates, crayfish, beetles and snails. Of these species, many have carved a specific niche for themselves in the Southern Appalachians, and can be found nowhere else in the world – endemic species. For example, the Appalachians are home to 55 species of Salamander, 21 of which are endemic.

OLD-GROWTH FORESTS

In a January 1990 letter to Dr. Mary Byrd Davis, then Chattahoochee National Forest Supervisor Kenneth Henderson stated that “there are no stands of virgin forests on the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests.” Dr. Davis was attempting to document existing old-growth across the eastern United States. Not long after Dr. Davis published Eastern Old-Growth Forests: Prospects for Rediscovery and Recovery (1996) she contacted the new Georgia ForestWatch office in Ellijay, Georgia, inquiring about any data ForestWatch might have to counter Henderson’s claim. This was a fortuitous meeting, as Jess Riddle had just become part of the ForestWatch team in 2001, and his sole job was to document old-growth on the Chattahoochee National Forest.

Some old-growth research had begun in 1995 with Paul Carlson in the Chattooga River watershed. But it was Jess Riddle of Georgia ForestWatch and Rob Messick of the Western North Carolina Alliance who began a comprehensive forest-wide study. Messick had...
developed a science-based methodology for old-growth assessment based off surveys completed in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Carlson’s work in the Chattooga River watershed. Messick and Riddle compiled a list of candidate old-growth sites on the Chattahoochee from many sources and prioritized them on the likelihood that they contained old-growth, and on their vulnerability of being logged by the Forest Service. They then winnowed the list of these sites down based on the following criteria: remoteness and lack of roads; and the presence of steep slopes, including walls, gorges, massifs, precipitous mountainsides, and odd, variegated ridge and valley slopes.

Over the next three years, Riddle inventoried 7,000 acres of old-growth that had survived on the Chattahoochee. Approximately 4,000 additional acres had been documented in 1995 by Paul Carlson in the Chattooga River watershed, including parts of Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina.

Defining old-growth is hard in the eastern U.S. with its great diversity of forest types; but for the sites identified in this publication it is sufficient to say that these sites were never clearcut or extensively logged. Old-growth can include areas with many old trees and some evidence of human disturbance in past decades – for example, forests where the chestnuts were removed following the blight, and nothing else. Old-growth forests provide crucial resources that younger, immature forests cannot supply. By providing fallen, decomposing trees, old-growth forests sustain a web of life that extends from soil-building microorganisms, all the way up the food chain. In the middle of that sequence, standing dead trees provide shelter for mammal, bird and insect species. Indeed, insects and related arthropods reach their highest diversity in old-growth forests because of their stable temperatures and relative humidities, species richness, and structural complexity (Schowalter 2017). Some species like flying squirrels and black bears decline in places because of the lack of mature, sheltering trees. Finally, with old trees come mortality and the natural creation of early successional habitat as trees fall and create gaps in the forest canopy, starting the process anew. The proven antidote to many of our forest health problems is to simply allow the forest to mature and grow old. These forests can also in turn provide a baseline to forest managers, who can compare active management practices with the natural processes of such forests.

**THREATS TO THE LANDSCAPE**

Land-use change or habitat loss is projected to have the largest global impact on biodiversity by the year 2100, followed by climate change, invasion of exotic species, and atmospheric pollution (Chapin et al. 2000). It has never been more important to keep all of our ecosystems healthy and protected from degradation, as they represent a diverse group of – often vulnerable – habitats and provide critical ecosystem services like clean water and flood protection. Local habitat loss can occur from degradation of a particular habitat due to disturbances like logging, road building, recreational overuse, and invasion by exotic species. If the area is given time to heal with no further disturbance, or restoration is attempted, many species can recover. But land use changes resulting in fragmentation of existing plant and aquatic communities (e.g. converting forest to residential areas) result in the greatest habitat loss and extinction of local species.
The north Georgia mountains are changing, and the rate and range of change are remarkable. Some change comes quietly with the arrival of invasive exotic species, and some comes more visibly with the steady advance of burgeoning populations and attendant development. These impacts create an uncertain future for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, and this section of Georgia’s Mountain Treasures looks at some of these threats and the changes they foreshadow. These threats will influence the health of our public forests for years to come.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Every spring for millennia, Appalachian forests have filled with the sound of arriving neo-tropical songbirds and the beauty of early spring wildflowers. Go for a walk in our Georgia mountains in late April and you will hear the sounds of hooded warblers, wood thrush, black-throated green warblers, and much, much more. Wildflowers will have pushed their way up before leaf-out to get maximum sunlight for photosynthesis – blood-root, trilliums, jack in the pulpit, and many more signaling spring’s arrival. But in 50 years, this could be a very different experience. According to a recent peer-reviewed report by the Audubon Society, more than half of our 588 North American bird species are in trouble from climate change (National Audubon Society 2015). Three hundred fourteen species are predicted to lose half their current summer range by 2080, and 126 of these are “climate endangered,” meaning they will lose their current summer range completely with no place left to go. The remaining 188 are “climate threatened,” meaning their ranges will become limited, with the long-term possibility of even greater reduction in range as temperatures continue to rise.

It is hard to imagine a north Georgia spring without the melodic song of a black-throated green warbler, but Audubon predicts that by 2080 this bird will only be found within three percent of its current summer range, gone from the southern mountains, and forced to adapt quickly to a completely new breeding range. Wood thrush is predicted to lose 82 percent of its current range by 2080, and 34 percent of its breeding range. Ruffed grouse will not only be gone from the Southern Appalachians in 2080, but could disappear from the entire lower 48 by the end of the century. The same goes for climate sensitive species such as golden-winged warbler, which is predicted to be completely absent from its current breeding range by 2080.

According to The Southern Forest Futures Project: technical report (Wear and Greis 2013), a comprehensive report published by the Forest Service’s Southern Research Station, climate change will also impact forest composition, spread non-native invasive species, increase forest pest and disease outbreaks, extend fire seasons, and alter hydrology. Many of these stressors will be exacerbated by urbanization, land conversion, and water demand.

In particular, climate change could have a major impact on our mountain hardwood forests, as the predicted northward expansion of more southern species could invade these forests and replace them. High-elevation forest communities are particularly vulnerable, as many species in such forests are restricted geographically; with nowhere to migrate, they will be replaced by those species which can adapt, creating new forest assemblages and permanently altering native ranges.

Water supply stress will also increase under all climate change projections. Higher temperatures result in more water evaporation, but this will also be coupled with extreme drought in some areas, along with increased demand for drinking water. Past efforts to capture north Georgia water will no doubt continue into the future as north Georgia’s population continues to grow, and how this demand is met could have a significant impact on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests.

Given the current and predicted impacts from climate change on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, a plan to mitigate those impacts and slow the pace of climate-change effects will be essential. In fact, the 2012 Planning Rule directs the Forest Service to take climate change into account when making new forest plans. The plan should certainly include protecting and creating corridors between large unfragmented areas such as Mountain Treasures. Corridors connect fragmented patches of habitat in the landscape and can vary greatly in size, shape, and composition. The main goal of corridors is to assist the movement of species through both dispersal and migration, and to maintain gene flow and diversity between local populations. This lowers the chance for extinction and offers greater support for species richness.

“More than 250 species of birds rely on Georgia’s forests for breeding, foraging and safety. Diverse structure and content plus large tracts of contiguous forests are especially important to both residents and neotropical migrants as they make up for their losses from one breeding season to the next.”

– Georgann Schmalz, Ornithologist and President of Birding Adventures, Inc.
In the north Georgia mountains, where habitat fragmentation is largely the work of human activities, and loss of forested land to residential development is increasing at a high rate, corridors are more vital than ever. Plants and animals need these corridors for dispersal and migration under climate change scenarios. When a corridor is present it provides an unbroken path of suitable habitat that can provide safe passage for animals or plants without being hindered as they travel through agricultural or urban landscapes. Protecting and connecting Georgia’s Mountain Treasures is one way to address this concern, while at the same time working with local county and government officials to ensure that private land corridors receive adequate funding and incentives to complete the picture.

NON-NATIVE INVASIVE SPECIES

PLANTS:
All federal agencies are directed to detect and rapidly respond to control populations of non-native invasive species (NNIS). That direction considers a species as non-native if it is not native to the ecosystem under consideration, and if its introduction is likely to cause harm to human health, to the environment, or to the economy. NNIS have been identified by the Forest Service as one of the four significant threats to National Forest ecosystems. In response, the Forest Service has identified a national strategy composed of four program elements: 1) prevention; 2) early detection and rapid response; 3) control and management; and 4) rehabilitation and restoration.

Both plant and animal NNIS are a major concern on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, as they exist almost everywhere that our native forests occur. With the exception of some of our unroaded areas, which are more resistant due to their remoteness, NNIS threaten native ecosystems by degrading habitat and displacing the native plants and animals that are normally present. Outcompeting native species leads to the decline of many sensitive native species that require unique habitats, while exotic pests, such as the hemlock woolly adelgid, may impact entire ecosystems by destroying forest cover and all species dependent upon it. At another scale, rare plant communities, such as mountain bogs, are being invaded by Japanese stiltgrass (Microstegium vimineum), requiring an enormous volunteer effort. Volunteers must not only remove this species, but cage rare plants from the destructive rooting of wild hogs.

EXISTING INVASIVE SPECIES DATA FOR THE CHATTahooCHEE-OCONee NATIONAL FORESTS

Forest Service inventories have documented many NNIS infestations in hardwood and mixed hardwood stands, primarily Japanese stiltgrass (Microstegium vimineum), followed by Chinese privet (Ligustrum sinense), Japanese honeysuckle (Lonicera japonica), autumn olive (Elaeagnus umbellata), and trifoliate orange (Poncirus trifoliata). Below is a partial list of NNIS plants that occur on the Chattahoochee-Oconee:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
<th>Common Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ailanthus altissima</td>
<td>Tree of heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albizia julibrissin</td>
<td>Mimosa; Silktree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celastrus orbiculatus</td>
<td>Oriental bittersweet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Hedera helix</td>
<td>English ivy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lespedeza cuneata</td>
<td>Sericea lespedea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ligustrum sinense</td>
<td>Chinese privet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lolium arundinaceum *</td>
<td>Tall fescue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonicera japonica</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melia azedarach</td>
<td>Chinaberry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microstegium vimineum</td>
<td>Japanese stiltgrass; Nepal grass</td>
</tr>
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<td>Miscanthus sinensis</td>
<td>Chinese silvergrass</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paulownia tomentosa</td>
<td>Princess tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polygonum cuspidatum</td>
<td>Japanese knotweed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poncirus trifoliata</td>
<td>Trifoliate orange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pueraria lobata</td>
<td>Kudzu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa multiflora</td>
<td>Multiflora rose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorghum halepense</td>
<td>Johnson grass</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiraea japonica</td>
<td>Japanese meadowsweet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vinca major</td>
<td>Large periwinkle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vinca minor</td>
<td>Small periwinkle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisteria sinensis</td>
<td>Chinese wisteria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Applies only to endophyte-enhanced cultivars, (e.g. KY 31 tall fescue)

“Every time I drink a glass of water from my faucet, I thank the Chattahoochee National Forest. It is the source and protector of our drinking water here in Atlanta. The most important product from a healthy forest is clean water, and I shudder to think what Atlanta would be without the Chattahoochee National Forest.”

– Charles Seabrook, Columnist and environmental writer for the Atlanta-Journal Constitution and author
ANIMALS:
One of the most damaging invasive and exotic animals in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests is wild hogs. Although hogs were brought in as early as the late 15th century by Spanish explorers, and subsequently by early colonial settlers, the feral hogs in north Georgia today are mostly descendants of Eurasian hogs (also known as Russian boar). Most of these Eurasian hogs were originally introduced for hunting at a wild game preserve on Hooper Bald in western North Carolina in the 1920s. These pure Eurasian hogs escaped and hybridized with domestic hogs, furthering their spread. State game agencies also introduced these animals in the 1970s in far western North Carolina based on hunter demand for them. A Eurasian sow can reproduce at six months of age and have up to 13 offspring in one litter. Despite year-round hunting and trapping with no limit, they remain a destructive force to native plants and animals.

Wild hogs are omnivorous, eating anything from farm crops to dead animals. Acorns, roots, and other plant matter are a preferred and major part of their diet, but they will also consume invertebrates such as centipedes, leeches, earthworms and crayfish. Damage caused by feral hogs has been reported throughout Georgia, and much of this damage harms all species of native wildlife that depend upon limited natural food supplies. This includes hard and soft mast (especially acorns), and impacts high-demand game animals such as deer, wild turkey, quail, blackbear, and ruffed grouse. They have also been documented destroying the nests of other ground nesting birds, as well as threatened and endangered plants and their habitat, along with contributing to sedimentation and the bacterial contamination of streams and other water bodies.

INSECTS:
While the Asian native hemlock woolly adelgid has been in the news for well over a decade in the Southern Appalachians, and has destroyed most of our hemlock forests, there are many other exotic pests that have been infesting our forests and wreaking havoc on native forest communities. Much like the adelgid, insects such as emerald ash borer threaten to destroy most of our native ash trees in the north Georgia mountains and elsewhere. Emerald ash borer is believed to have been first introduced into the U.S. through packing material brought in through Michigan in 2002, and is now in 31 states, including Georgia. While the adult insects feed primarily on ash foliage, causing little damage, the larvae feed on the inner bark, disrupting the flow of
nutrients and the tree’s ability to transport water. The imidacloprid insecticide that works on hemlocks is also an option for emerald ash borer. Like hemlocks, many of our ash trees in residential areas will likely remain healthy if homeowners regularly treat with insecticides, or where communities can find funding to treat ash trees in parks and urban settings. We will likely see extensive mortality of ash trees in our forests because the Forest Service lacks the funding and capacity to treat most of our ash trees.

Walnut twig beetle has also been discovered on the Tennessee-North Carolina border near the Chattahoochee, and is a vector for a fungus known as thousand cankers disease. The fungus is introduced through spores carried by the beetle, which then disrupts nutrient flow, and ultimately kills the tree. Though this beetle is native to the American west, its inexplicable jump to Tennessee in 2010 has caused great concern for our eastern walnuts. Its continued spread is likely.

Laurel wilt disease is another exotic insect-borne disease that has been spreading in Georgia since its introduction into the port of Savannah in 2003. Transmitted by the invasive Asian redbay ambrosia beetle, this disease has caused massive mortality of redbay in the coastal plain and has now spread throughout the southeast. It attacks other members of the laurel family as well, but for our north Georgia mountains the species of most concern is sassafras. Ambrosia beetles are spreading inland, and have killed sassafras in the absence of redbay.

While there are many other species of native trees in trouble from non-native insects and diseases, the changing climate will likely exacerbate these infestations. Strategies for saving many of our native trees will continue to evolve over time, and will no doubt involve an increased commitment and partnership from government agencies and communities.

**URBANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT**

According to the 2007 U.S. Forest Service report, *National Forests on the Edge* by Stein et al., between 2000 and 2030 a substantial increase in housing density will occur on more than 21.7 million acres of rural private land located within 10 miles of national forests on the lower 48 United States. The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests are expected to see the second highest increase of the 155 national forests – 35 percent – in the amount of development on private lands within 10 miles of the forest. Close behind are the adjacent Cherokee and Nantahala-Pisgah National Forests.

Projections for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests are not surprising given Atlanta’s current and projected growth. Metro Atlanta’s population is projected to grow from its current population of almost five million to nine million in the next 30 years. Several of the 29 counties that make up the greater metropolitan Atlanta area are close to or adjacent to the southern edge of the Chattahoochee, and several of these counties, such as Cherokee, Pickens, Dawson, and Hall, are already among the fastest growing. Proximity to such a large urban population led to the Chattahoochee’s designation within the Forest Service as an “urban national forest,” meaning that it is within an hour’s drive for over a million people.

As these rural counties fragment with the loss of forest and farmland, and as road and housing densities increase, new pressures are put on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests for recreation and resources. This increased fragmentation only makes protection of Georgia’s Mountain Treasures more important.

**RESOURCE EXTRACTION**

The Hidden Creek Campground illustrates how different values of a natural area can be lost and found. Drive up to the Hidden Creek Mountain Treasure today (page 25), and you’re greeted by a little loop road through the woods lined with short spurs. In 1964, right after the Accelerated Works Program built...
the campground, those spurs each had a picnic table, fire ring, and tent pad. The setting was scenic. Dry Creek, whose intermittent flow gives the area its name, came down from the mountains right beside the campsites. The high canopy of oaks, hickories, and beech that shaded the area was one of the oldest on the Armuchee Ranger District. Decades earlier, iron furnaces, saw mills, and the plow consumed most sites with such fine potential for helping people relax and enjoy themselves.

By 2006, the campground had been decommissioned, but the area retained its scenic value and still saw use for picnicking and camping. At that time, a proposal came forward that included harvesting the stand containing the old campground. The proposal missed what had been seen 50 years earlier. It would have compromised the area’s unique character and damaged the scenic value for decades to come. Fortunately, public input and a field trip led to recognition of the area’s value. Timber harvests in low diversity stands of planted pines remained in the project to help restore those sites, but the harvests along Dry Creek were dropped. Today, the area remains as inviting as ever.

Timber harvests, and management in general, have become more ecologically sensitive on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests since the last edition of Georgia’s Mountain Treasures. However, timber harvests and associated road-building activities still create erosion, compact soils, fragment habitats, invite non-native invasive plants, and interfere with natural ecosystem processes. They are not appropriate for many Mountain Treasures. In other Mountain Treasures, limited logging may be appropriate for purposes like woodland ecosystem restoration, but there still need to be limits guided by restoration goals. Ninety-eight percent of Georgia is open to timber harvests and development. Given all the 21st-century threats to the Southern Appalachian landscape and its rich biodiversity, careful planning is necessary to set aside scenic areas, biological corridors and watersheds.
HOW TO PROTECT WILD AREAS

PROTECTING PUBLIC LANDS THROUGH THE WILDERNESS ACT OF 1964

There are many ways to protect wild places, but historically nothing has been more important to the long-term protection of them than the 1964 Wilderness Act. This Act was passed “In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States...leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.”

That was the why of it. Here is the what: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

In that Act, a planetary first, Congress established a National Wilderness Preservation System and included within it an initial 9.1 million acres. Wilderness could also only be designated through Congressional legislation. Since the Act’s passage, the system has grown to almost 110 million acres, with almost half of that in Alaska. The 1964 Act only designated three Wilderness Areas in the east: two on the Pisgah National Forest: 7,655 acres in a place called the Linville Gorge and another 13,400 acres at Shining Rock.

Populations in the eastern U.S. continued to grow in the years following the Wilderness Act, becoming more mobile and demanding more wild places in which to escape urbanization. Despite citizen entreaties to Congress for more eastern Wilderness designations, the Forest Service adopted its own interpretation of the Wilderness Act. In what came to be known as the “purity theory,” the Forest Service declared that no land with evidence of past human impact was eligible for wilderness designation, even going so far as to state that no national forest land in the eastern part of the U.S. should be considered for wilderness. In 1971 the Forest Service drafted a bill that sought to essentially make their “purity theory” law.

But if there was any confusion about what the 1964 Act meant and intended, Congress eliminated it with the passage of the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act in 1975. With the 1975 Act, Congress stated its intention to consider lands that were wild again, not just those that had been wild forever. For example, Shining Rock Wilderness in North Carolina was included in the initial 1964 Act, even though timber from a portion of the boundary drainage was being logged when the Act was signed. This view of Wilderness eligibility endured as Congress continued to designate new Wilderness Areas that had seen logging, roads, or other exploitation. The new Act designated 15 new Wilderness Areas in the eastern U.S., including north Georgia’s 35,000-acre Cohutta Wilderness (2,940 acres were added to this Wilderness in later legislation).

Prior to the 1975 Eastern Wilderness Areas Act, the Forest Service had launched the RARE process (for Roadless Area Review and Evaluation), starting with 1,149 potential areas containing 56 million acres. When the agency called the process complete, it designated a meager 274 wilderness study areas totaling 12.3 million acres across the entire Forest Service system. The flaws in the process were clear to citizens who demanded that it be redone. They argued that the analysis gave especially short shrift to deserving areas in the national grasslands and in the forest lands of the eastern U.S.

In response, the agency initiated RARE II. When that review was completed in 1979, the agency identified 2,919 areas – around 62 million acres – as lands having wilderness characteristics, a far cry from the findings of the earlier review. Of these, the Forest Service recommended Wilderness designation on 15 million acres, called for further planning consideration for 11 million acres, and proposed non-wilderness management for the remaining 36 million acres. Though it was a vast improvement over the original RARE, citizens still found much to fault in RARE II. And when forest Wilderness legislation came up for consideration in the years following, Congress went beyond the agency recommendations more often than not in designating Wilderness. The RARE II review, then, established a starting point for future wilderness protection efforts on national forests.
In Georgia, the RARE II inventory identified close to 220,000 roadless acres, yet recommended only 39,000 of those acres for Wilderness. Georgia’s first Wilderness Act came in 1984, when north Georgia Congressman Ed Jenkins introduced legislation that protected 12,000 acres of the Southern Nantahala Wilderness on the North Carolina state line (North Carolina’s Wilderness bill that year added similar acreage on the North Carolina side) and added 2,000 acres to the Ellicott Rock Wilderness (designated with the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act of 1975). Just two years later in 1986, Congressman Jenkins introduced legislation to protect an additional 42,500 acres with another Georgia Wilderness Bill. Congressman Jenkins went to work for Georgia Wilderness again in 1991 with the Chattahoochee National Forest Protection Act. This bill recommended 24,200 acres of new Wilderness along with 30,000 acres of National Recreation and Scenic Areas.

With this final bill in Jenkin’s legacy, there are now 116,521 acres of designated Wilderness in north Georgia. But RARE II inventoried 220,000 acres of potential Wilderness in 1978, and Jenkin’s legislation only permanently protected 84,000 acres of this as Wilderness. Thirty thousand of these acres were also given some level of protection with Coosa Bald Scenic area and the Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area (NRA). Unfortunately, significant swaths of the remaining 100,000 acres have been logged and roaded. By 1995 the Forest Service only recognized 11,000 acres as roadless. Georgia ForestWatch challenged the Forest Service’s determination which turned on the definition of “roadless” at the time: “an area with no more than a half mile of improved road per 1,000 acres.” With Georgia ForestWatch’s input and mapping, the Forest Service eventually recalculated its inventory to 63,000 acres. Still, the Forest Service only recommended that 8,000 of those acres be designated as Wilderness, and those were all additions to existing Wilderness Areas. Our state’s roadless areas have changed in the decades since RARE II, and with far too few exceptions, the changes have been losses, and some of them major ones.

The areas identified with the RARE II process are listed on the next page, followed by their subsequent designation, if any, with the Jenkins Wilderness bills of 1984, 1986 and 1991. If they were not designated, their roadless status is listed with the current forest plan. The difference between RARE II acreage and Wilderness/NRA/Scenic/Roadless is the acreage lost to road building since RARE II. In some areas, bills actually designated more than the RARE II acreage, which is part of the flexibility of the Wilderness Act.
The final 2012 Forest Planning Rule – which guides forest plan revision – was developed after over two years of public input and over 300,000 public comments. This rule replaced the 1982 Planning Rule, and has a significant increased emphasis on collaboration, science-based decision making, protecting and enhancing water resources, increased public involvement, sustainable recreation, and partnerships.

Perhaps most importantly for Georgia’s Mountain Treasures are the new directives regarding roadless inventories. Under the 2012 directives the agency’s inventory is to be “reasonably broad and inclusive” to capture all areas which may have one or more Wilderness characteristics. While inventoried areas will not all be carried forward as Wilderness candidates, recognition of Wilderness values, increasingly rare in light of the threats mentioned above, suggests the area should be given careful consideration during plan revision. Most of the areas listed here should qualify under the 2012 roadless inventory criteria. The Mountain Treasures presented in this report were identified using those criteria as a guide. Some, though not all, of these areas may well qualify for protection under the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act. But there is some level of uncertainty about permanent protection for any of these areas because attempts are consistently being made in Congress to retract the Roadless Rule, open Wilderness areas to high impact recreation and increased access, as well as sell off our public lands.

### AREAS IDENTIFIED WITH THE RARE II PROCESS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chattahoochee National Forest</th>
<th>RARE II</th>
<th>Wilderness</th>
<th>Roadless in Current Plan</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Tray Mountain</td>
<td>36,300</td>
<td>10,414</td>
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<td>Chattahoochee River (Mark Trail)</td>
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<td>Southern Nantahala</td>
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<td>Foster Branch</td>
<td></td>
<td>165</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL WILDERNESS</strong></td>
<td><strong>219,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>116,521</strong></td>
<td><strong>64,784</strong></td>
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* The Cohutta Wilderness was designated prior to RAREII except for the Hemp Top area.

### THE 2012 FOREST PLANNING RULE: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PROTECTION

The final 2012 Forest Planning Rule – which guides forest plan revision – was developed after over two years of public input and over 300,000 public comments. This rule replaced the 1982 Planning Rule, and has a significant increased emphasis on collaboration, science-based decision making, protecting and enhancing water resources, increased public involvement, sustainable recreation, and partnerships.

Perhaps most importantly for Georgia’s Mountain Treasures are the new directives regarding roadless inventories. Under the 2012 directives the agency’s inventory is to be “reasonably broad and inclusive” to capture all areas which may have one or more Wilderness characteristics. While inventoried areas will not all be carried forward as Wilderness candidates, recognition of Wilderness values, increasingly rare in light of the threats mentioned above, suggests the area should be given careful consideration during plan revision. Most of the areas listed here should qualify under the 2012 roadless inventory criteria. The Mountain Treasures presented in this report were identified using those criteria as a guide. Some, though not all, of these areas may well qualify for protection under the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act. But there is some level of uncertainty about permanent protection for any of these areas because attempts are consistently being made in Congress to retract the Roadless Rule, open Wilderness areas to high impact recreation and increased access, as well as sell off our public lands.
OTHER PROTECTIONS

While Wilderness is the highest form of protection that can be given to an area, this designation is not always compatible with preexisting uses, restoration needs, or recreational activities not allowed by the Wilderness Act. There are also areas where restoration goals are of paramount importance, where active management is necessary to return the area to a native forest type, or where a specific threatened or endangered species requires intervention in order to create or restore specific habitat.

The goal for the protection of Mountain Treasures areas is some level of protection, whether it be Wilderness, designated old-growth, roadless, research natural areas, scenic areas, National Recreation Areas, or protective prescriptions in the Forest Plan. For example, during the last management plan revision for the Chattahoochee, Georgia ForestWatch mapped and described 235,000 acres of Mountain Treasures that we felt deserved some level of protection. Of these 235,000 acres, we recommended roughly only 36,000 acres for Wilderness. Working with many other forest stakeholders in Georgia, ForestWatch further recommended specific management prescriptions for all other Mountain Treasures areas. Dependent upon what we considered as the most important ecological, scenic, or recreational values of each individual area, we then recommended management prescriptions that emphasized these values. Georgia has a history of protecting areas with other designations, such as the Coosa Bald Scenic Area and the Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area. These designations emphasize conservation and recreational values over resource extraction, while allowing some management options for restoration forestry. Such designations can also accommodate mountain bike use, and open roads within them, as well as management for game. It is important before and during the planning process that forest stakeholders coordinate and communicate so that recommendations made in the plan can have broad support and ensure each area’s long-term protection.

In the Cooper Creek Scenic Area, an ancient tulip poplar swallows a curious hiker.
The 65,000 acres of national forest land west of I-75 stand apart from the rest of the Chattahoochee. The word Armuchee is Cherokee, and translates as “land of flowers.” The area is rich in Cherokee history, and their last capital was at New Echota, where prior to their brutal removal in 1838 they maintained a constitutional government, a printing press, churches, and farms. It is also significant for its Civil War and early industrial history. The battle of Chickamauga was fought near the district’s northern boundary, and Sherman then fought his way down the Ridge and Valley with major battles near Rocky Face and Resaca. The ridges of the Armuchee contain numerous civil war battleworks. Following the Civil War, and prior to its inclusion in the national forest, iron ore mines were common in the area, and much of the timber had been cut for charcoal to fuel the mills used to process the ore in nearby Chattanooga, Tennessee and elsewhere.

Today, gently rolling farm fields spread out between forested ridges, lending a pastoral quality to the landscape. The broader physiographic province that the cluster is part of, the Ridge and Valley, takes its name from this repeating pattern of broad parallel valleys and narrow ridges. The ridges run southwest-northeast, rising within Alabama’s Talladega National Forest and across the state line near Rome, Georgia. They are often unbroken for dozens of miles, but rarely rise more than 1,000 feet above the adjacent valleys.
Deer were once nearly eliminated from Georgia, but now number over one million. Found in a wide variety of habitats, they thrive with a mixture of open and cover, as is common in the Armuchee Ridges.

The Armuchee Ridges are different to their core from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the east. Rather than metamorphic rocks that have been reshaped by the heat and pressure of mountain building, sedimentary rocks like sandstone, siltstone, and shale hold up the often thin-soiled ridges. Indeed, fossils from ancient seas poke out of several Forest Service road banks in the area. The lower elevation of the Armuchee, entirely below 2,000 feet, also makes it hotter and drier than the mountains to the east. During summer, many of the smaller streams dry up with larger streams too warm for trout. However, this unique combination of geology and climate produces habitat for many other species rare or absent from the rest of the national forest.

Traversing the whole area is the long-distance Pinhoti Trail, which begins to the southwest in Alabama’s Talladega National Forest, and ends at its intersection with the Benton MacKaye Trail in the Cohutta Wilderness Extension Mountain Treasure. The Pinhoti Trail is a multiple-use trail, and offers interconnected horse and mountain biking opportunities. The Armuchee Ridges also offer quail hunting in addition to the more widespread turkey and deer opportunities. The Pocket Recreation Area and Keown Falls Scenic Area are both popular with hikers and campers.

Unfortunately, the history of the Armuchee Ridges is one of development and exploitation. They contain a denser road network than most of the higher mountains, and the prevalence of farming adjacent to Forest Service ownership leaves forests more fragmented. The area also contains dozens of old pine plantations where loblolly pines were planted on sites they would not occur on naturally, which leaves them especially susceptible to southern pine beetle outbreaks. In recent years, the Forest Service has made significant progress towards transitioning these plantations to healthier and more diverse forests, but much work is still needed.

The three Mountain Treasures identified for the Armuchee Ridges have an interesting history. In 1992, at the behest of The Wilderness Society and Georgia ForestWatch, then Congressman Buddy Darden introduced a rider on that year’s Interior Appropriations Bill to withhold all proposed logging projects in these areas until a new forest plan was accomplished and they could be studied for their wilderness and recreational potential. The rider was not reintroduced the following year, due to redistricting of Darden’s district, but the Forest Service agreed to postpone logging in the areas until a new forest plan was complete.

All of the Armuchee Mountain Treasures are based on the largest roadless areas in the region, but we have chosen not to strictly follow the roadless area boundaries. The higher road density and long linear ridges of the region lead to somewhat linear roadless areas. While containing occasional dead-end roads, together they represent the three most contiguous blocks of forest in the Ridge and Valley, and should receive high levels of protection in the new forest plan.
Hidden Creek

Approximate size: 7,970 acres
Old-growth known: 9 acres

The normally parallel Armuchee Ridges form a giant “X” west of Calhoun. Horn Mountain, Mill Mountain, and Calbeck Mountain converge in tangled mass of twisting ridges. The broadest swath of Forest Service land in the Georgia Ridge and Valley, this area probably offers the best opportunity for solitude in the region. The ridges block sights and sounds from farm land in adjacent valleys. Depending on the direction, the high ridges offer winter views of pastoral farming scenes, Lake Marvin, or forested mountainsides. The camping that the Hidden Creek Recreation Area still receives, despite no longer being maintained, attests to the area’s scenic quality and recreational draw.

The native hardwood and mixed hardwood-pine forests in this area are unusual for the Armuchee Ridges in both their extent and diversity. Many parts of the Armuchee have long series of parallel drainages with the same bedrock that are separated by ridges occupied by non-native loblolly pine plantations. In Hidden Creek, drainages range from dry southwestern aspects to moist northeastern ones, and native forests occur from low streamside areas to high ridges. Pine plantations occur on some, but far from all, of the ridges. Pockets on other ridges support unusual pignut hickory-dominated forests with grassy groundcover.

The ridges are also interesting for their history. Civil War rock walls still dot strategic locations. The valley would not have made a good stronghold though. The area’s name comes from the tendency of Dry Creek, which drains the south side of the “X”, to run clear for a few days then disappear.

Access: From Calhoun, take GA Highway 156 west about seven miles to Everett Springs Rd, turn right and go 1.9 miles to Rock Creek Rd, turn right again and go 3.2 miles to Forest Service Rd 955. The Mountain Treasure is on both sides. N34.5141 W85.0742

Hickories and grasses in unusual abundance dominate this forest on Horn Mountain. Running along the crest of many Ridge and Valley ridges, these areas likely once supported park-like woodland ecosystems.
Johns Mountain

Approximate size: 8,709 acres
Old-growth known: 0 acres

The north end of Johns Mountain lies at the recreational center of the Armuchee Ridges. The extensive Dry Creek horse trail complex makes an interconnected network of pathways on the western slope. The 1.8-mile-long Keown Falls loop trail starts at a delightful picnic area with a gurgling stream and rock-lined paths made by the Accelerated Public Works Program. The trail leads to twin waterfalls and connects with the 3.1-mile Johns Mountain loop trail. The latter trail can also be accessed from the Johns Mountain Overlook, which provides some of the best views in the region. The Pinhoti Trail ties all of these areas together as part of its trek from Alabama to Georgia’s high mountains. This area also lies adjacent to the Pocket Recreation Area with its campground, trail, and impressive spring.

Acidic soils derived from crystalline bedrock underlie almost the entire Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. Some of the rare exceptions are the limestone that approaches the surface around Dry Creek, The Pocket, and the very north end of Johns Mountain. Where the Pinhoti Trail rounds the end of the mountain, carbonate bedrock, mature forest, and moist soils combine like nowhere else on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. Uncommon trees like black walnut and slippery elm thrive in the canopy. Species normally found in floodplains, such as sugarberry and trumpet creeper, grow high on the slope, and rare wildflowers dot the forest floor. Even adjacent areas pick up unusual characteristics. Red hickories grow in a nearly pure stand in one area, and the abundance of dogwoods puts on a dazzling display for Pinhoti hikers each spring.

Access: From Villanow, take GA Highway 136 east for 0.3 miles and turn right onto Pocket Rd. Continue 4.9 miles and then turn right onto Forest Service Rd 702 and follow to the Keown Falls Recreation Area. N34.6134 W85.0883

Dogwoods bloom along the Pinhoti Trail.
Rocky Face

Approximate size: 6,533 acres
Old-growth known: 0 acres

The eastern edge of this Mountain Treasure forms part of the green backdrop to I-75 as it enters Dalton from the south. Switching perspectives, the view from Rocky Face Mountain encompasses not only Dalton, but also extends across the Great Valley to the higher peaks of the Cohutta Mountains. Behind Rocky Face Mountain, shielded from the sights and sounds of the industrialized world, lies an unusual convergence of ridges. Hurricane Mountain ties together Rocky Face Mountain, Mill Creek Mountain, and the aptly named Middle Mountain.

Instead of broad valleys, creeks of startling clarity separate the ridges. The streams owe their clarity to draining completely undeveloped basins. This area contains the largest unfragmented forest remaining in the Armuchee Ridges. Most of that forest is a mature mix of native oaks and pines.

Fifteen miles of the popular Pinhoti Trail provides easy access to this area. Used by mountain bikers, equestrians, and hikers, the trail zig-zags along the spines of all the mountains. Some sections are remarkably level for a trail in the mountains and suitable for beginning hikers. Other rocky sections of the path are famous in the mountain biking community and have earned colorful names such as “The Wall” and “Vomit Hill.”

Earlier travelers on these mountains had more to worry about than rocks. Civil War fortifications still line the crest of Rocky Face Mountain. Sherman’s March to the Sea passed along the western foot of the area.

Access: From Dalton, take GA Highway 52 west for two miles. Continue onto Dug Gap Rd and follow it to Dug Gap and the Pinhoti Trail. N34.7404 W85.0160

Mountain bikers enjoy the Pinhoti Trail.
Looking east from Chatsworth, the Cohutta Mountains rise abruptly and dramatically out of the Great Valley. Forming the southern end of the Unaka Range, which also includes the Great Smoky Mountains, the Cohuttas contain the westernmost 4,000-foot elevation peaks in the Appalachians. Less intensely metamorphosed than mountains to the east, different kinds of rocks underlie the Cohuttas, and those geologic differences change the nutrients that are available to plants and animals in the area.

The Cohuttas remain the most remote part of north Georgia. Seeing the interior up close usually requires a long drive up a winding dirt road. At the core sits the Cohutta Wilderness, the largest Wilderness area in the Southern Appalachians. Two of the largest roadless areas flank the Wilderness on the south side. Combined with the Big Frog Wilderness in Tennessee, these areas form a 75,000-acre block of natural habitat with no paved roads.

As might be expected of such a remote area, industrial logging reached it relatively late and with heavy equipment. As a result, very little old-growth survived the railroad-based logging of the area that is now Wilderness. However, this area also contains the single largest surviving old-growth stand known in north Georgia (see Grassy Mountain). The few other fragments of original forest left in the area contain not only the twisted little oaks that typify north Georgia old-growth, but also cathedral stands of big trees.
Overall, the hardwoods stands of the Cohuttas are loftier than stands elsewhere in north Georgia. The rich soils allow faster growth and taller trees for many species. The soils also allow some species that are scarce on the rest of the national forest, like sugar maple and Indian pink, to thrive in the Cohuttas. The extent and unfragmented nature of the forests provide some of the best remaining habitat in the southeast for black bears. However, the biodiversity the area is best-known for is in the streams. The undammed Conasauga River starts as high quality water coursing over the crystalline rocks of the Cohuttas then slows as the gradient drops on areas underlain by carbonate rocks in the Ridge and Valley. This combination of factors allows the watershed to support more fish species than the Columbia River watershed and Colorado River watershed combined.

The Conasauga watershed provides habitat for three fishes and six mussels listed under the Endangered Species Act.

In the Cohuttas, these large, clean streams offer some of the finest trout fishing in the state. The Cohuttas also provide most of the opportunities in north Georgia for someone without waders to take a long hike along a stream. Except for the Chattooga River Trail, other trails in north Georgia either follow ridges or are only a few miles long. The campground at Lake Conasauga, Georgia’s highest pond, is a great place to stargaze, and the adjacent trails specifically focused on songbirds offer an unusual recreation opportunity. Mountain bike, horse, and ATV trails are scattered throughout the area, and the Pinhoti and Benton MacKaye Trails allow long-distance hikes to connect to other areas.

Indian pink is a common sight along Cohutta roads and trails, but the wildflower is scarce or absent in most of the Georgia Mountains. Photo by Larry Winslett – www.larrywinslettphotography.com

Top: Beaver meadows, a once common but now rare habitat in the mountains, line the South Fork of the Jacks River in the Cohutta Wilderness Extensions. Bottom: A coral fungus fruits in the Cohuttas. Photos by Jess Riddle
Cohutta Wilderness Extensions

Approximate size: 5,402 acres
Old-growth known: 0 acres

The Cohutta Wilderness is the largest wilderness area in the Southern Appalachians (37,030 acres), and was the first designated in Georgia (1975). From Blue Ridge, Chatsworth, or Ellijay most of the trailheads are still a 45-minute drive, much of that time spent on winding, gravel roads through the forest. Almost the entire upper Conasauga River watershed lies within the wilderness area, as does the main stem of the Jacks River and its major tributaries. The resulting high water quality helps maintain nationally significant levels of aquatic biodiversity in the Conasauga River watershed, which includes the Jacks River.

The eastern Cohutta Wilderness Extension would protect the rest of the Jacks River watershed, including many headwater streams, except for small areas in the Mountaintown Mountain Treasure and on private land. The South and West Forks of the Jacks River in the area support rare beaver-created meadows. Historically, beavers created essential open habitat in moist areas. Unlike openings created by logging, beaver-created openings did not immediately return to forest – the meadows in the extension have been above water and open for at least 25 years. The fur trade crashed beaver populations, and agriculture and development have left beavers unwelcome in much of their former habitat. The beaver meadows in the extension are unusually extensive for the mountains and high elevation.

The Jacks River Fields campground sits on the edge of the eastern extension and serves as the trailhead for the South Fork Trail. The trail passes by a waterfall, offers glimpses of the beaver meadows, and connects to both the Pinhoti and Benton MacKaye Trails. The 338-mile Pinhoti Trail reaches its eastern terminus within the area where it joins the Benton MacKaye Trail.

The hotter, drier, western extension presents a sharp contrast. The Horseshoe Bend Trail runs through the area and provides access to the wilderness trail system. The area’s low elevations and gentle topography are scarce within the Cohutta Wilderness and rare in the National Wilderness System in general. A broad band of phyllite, a fine-textured slate-like rock, also runs under the area, which is rare in existing Georgia Wilderness and other Mountain Treasures.

Access: From Blue Ridge, take Highway 5 north 3.7 miles and turn left onto Old Highway 2. Follow it 10.0 miles to Watson Gap and turn left onto Forest Service Rd 64. Continue 3.9 miles to the South Fork Trail. The Mountain Treasure is on the right. N34.8647 W84.5191
Grassy Mountain

Approximate size: 15,569 acres
Old-growth known: 1,966 acres

Grassy Mountain juts up abruptly from the Great Valley forming a dramatic and scenic backdrop to Chatsworth. Its location on the extreme western edge of the Blue Ridge and 2,800 feet range of elevation allow for an unusual mixing of species and great range of habitats that contribute to high overall biodiversity. A botanical inventory of the mountain documented 548 plant species, 20 of them rare (Moore 2002). The rare species include such, as starflower and yellowwood, that are not known from the adjacent Cohutta Wilderness Area. Northern species that reach unusually low elevations on the mountain include yellow birch and mountain maple, and southern species rarely found in the mountains include swamp chestnut oak and oak-leaf hydrangea. Nine species of trilliums live on the mountain, the most known from any mountain on earth.

These species inhabit some of the most pristine forests in Georgia. The largest known tract of old-growth in north Georgia spreads across Grassy Mountain’s rocky upper slopes. The tract includes not only dry, non-commercial oak forests typical of north Georgia’s remaining old-growth, but also cove forests with towering trees. Both tuliptree and northern red oak reach 4.5 feet in diameter on the mountain. Another old-growth stand with picturesque white oaks stunted by harsh growing conditions and fern-covered forest floor is among the most easily visited old-growth stands in Georgia thanks to the Emery Creek Trail, which passes through the stand. The trail provides easy access to the heart of the roadless area and the stream for trout fishing. The trail’s main destination is the waterfall formed where the stream plunges over an erosion-resistant ledge of rock. The same band of erosion-resistant rock cuts across the area creating scenic cascades on a tributary and some of the only rock outcrops in the Cohuttas on Rocky Face Mountain.

Emery Creek traverses one of the greatest elevation gradients in Georgia. It begins on Big Bald, the westernmost 4,000-foot peak in the Appalachians, and empties into Holly Creek just below 1,000 feet elevation. Except for the very top in the Cohutta Wilderness Area and one tributary at the bottom, the entire watershed lies within this Mountain Treasure. This intact watershed represents one of the best opportunities in Georgia for species to migrate upslope in response to warming temperatures.

The falls on Emery Creek are the best known in this area, but Mill Creek, Milma Branch, and other streams also tumble down in picturesque waterfalls and cascades. Emery Creek and Dill Creek, which are entirely within this area, provide
about half of the water to The Nature Conservancy’s preserve on Holly Creek, which was established to protect several rare aquatic animals. The entire Mountain Treasure drains into the Conasauga River, which harbors globally significant aquatic animal diversity, including several threatened or endangered species.

Lake Conasauga, the highest lake in Georgia, sits just outside the Mountain Treasure on the shoulder of Grassy Mountain. The lakeside campground and nearby trailheads make a great base for exploring the Mountain Treasure and Cohutta Wilderness. Grassy Mountain also boarders the Mountaintown Mountain Treasure. The Wilderness and two Mountain Treasures combine to form the least roaded area in north Georgia, and one of the most intact expanses of natural habitat anywhere in the Southern Appalachians.

Access: From Chatsworth, go east of Highway 52 for 0.9 miles. Turn left and follow Holly Creek Cool Springs Rd for 5.7 miles. Turn right and follow Old CCC Camp Rd 3.0 miles to the Emery Creek trailhead. N34.8122 W84.6519

A trio of ancient white oaks stands watch along the Emery Creek Trail.

Fungi recycle nutrients in Grassy Mountain’s old-growth forest.

Old-growth cover forest flourishes on Grassy Mountain.

Photos by Jess Riddle
Mountaintown

Approximate size: 17,163 acres
Old-growth known: 323 acres

After the Conasauga River, Mountaintown Creek has the largest unroaded watershed in north Georgia. The stream begins on the crest of the Cohutta Mountains and flows south towards Ellijay. Along the way, it passes through the Pink Knob Inventoried Roadless Area, the largest inventoried roadless area in north Georgia. Trout fishers seek out the clear cool waters of Mountaintown Creek itself, and downstream of the roadless area the creek becomes a popular kayaking and canoeing destination.

The Mountaintown Creek Trail provides excellent access for fishing and to the scenic gorge on its namesake stream. That trail ties in to the popular Bear Creek mountain-bike trail system, which passes by the immense Gennett poplar, one of the largest trees in north Georgia. Long distance trails encourage backpackers to find solitude in this area. In the area’s eastern reaches, 9.8 miles of the Benton MacKay Trail, one of the two longest segments between road crossings in Georgia, runs along the watershed divide and over Flat Top Mountain. The Pinhoti Trail emerges from the Bear Creek Trail system then dives right through the center of the area.

The remote headwaters of Mountaintown Creek are unique in north Georgia in retaining several separate stands of commercially valuable old-growth. Instead of the twisted and stunted oaks that make up most of Georgia’s old-growth, 250 to 300-year-old tulip poplars up to 61 inches diameter dominate these isolated coves. Pockets of forest along the eastern boundary are younger, but exceptionally fertile and diverse. These stands contain several rare species.

Access: from Ellijay, take Highway 52 west 5.1 miles. Turn right onto Gates Chapel Rd and follow it 5.0 miles. Turn right onto Bear Creek Camp Rd and drive it 2.0 miles to the end and the Bear Creek Trail. N84.6519 W84.5854

Mountaintown Creek rushes through its gorge.

Photo by Jess Riddle
This cluster stretches from Highway 515 and the geologic feature known as the Murphy Syncline on the northwest to the Appalachian Trail and the primary Blue Ridge on the southeast. The Toccoa River drains most of the area. The upper watershed is isolated from major travel corridors, and the little town of Suches is the only population center. The area has the feel of a quieter time when life was less hurried.

The upper watershed also occupies a broad plateau framed by major spur ridges off of the Blue Ridge, of which Duncan Ridge is the largest and best known. The relatively low relief allows the area to support one of the largest remaining concentrations of mountain bogs in Georgia, a rare ecosystem that has been made even rarer by draining for agriculture and other development. High elevations also mean more large, cool streams that are excellent for trout, such as Cooper Creek. In particular, this cluster contains relatively large streams still occupied by native brook trout. The streams draw people not only for fishing, but also for paddling the Toccoa River. Trails criss-cross the surrounding slopes through mixed hardwood and conifer forests, and allow many opportunities for loop trips. The Aska Trail system in the isolated Rich Mountains is the most popular mountain biking network in the area. That system connects to the Benton MacKaye Trail, which has about half of its Georgia length within this cluster. The Benton MacKaye combines with the 30-mile-long Duncan Ridge Trail and the Appalachian Trail to form Georgia’s premier backpacking loop hike, the Georgia Loop.
Hellbenders, the largest aquatic salamander in North America, rely on clean water and rocky streambeds. They have declined severely, but remain in the Toccoa River watershed.

Cooper Creek, a major tributary of the Toccoa River, shapes and is shaped by the surrounding forest.
Bearden Mountain

Approximate size: 6,952 acres  
Old-growth known: 0 acres

The Appalachian Trail (AT) runs north from Springer Mountain and dives right through this Mountain Treasure. The trail emerges at Three Forks, where Chester, Long, and Stover Creeks combine to form Noontootla Creek. People go there to hike a loop through this Mountain Treasure on the AT and Benton MacKaye Trails, to head out of the area to Long Creek Falls, or to just stay and enjoy the picturesque spot. Word of the fabulous trout fishing in Noontootla Creek has spread far enough that on a summer weekend finding an unoccupied reach of stream may be more difficult than finding trout. The area also contains the southernmost brook trout streams. These exceptional recreational values led to much of the area being included in the Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area (NRA).

Around 1908, this area was part of the first tract of land in the east offered for sale to the Forest Service. The tract became the core of efforts to restore depleted game species, such as white-tailed deer, to the mountains. That history may explain why ancient trees still persist along many of the streams, especially Noontootla Creek. Pederson and others (2010) used those trees to help reconstruct the drought history of the Atlanta area over the last 400 years, which can help inform current water use policies. One rich cove forest, though not old-growth, has a mix of basswood, silverbell, and buckeye typical of old-growth forest. The towering white pine forests along Noontootla Creek stand out more for their density and exceptional height.

The NRA protects many of these special features, but important areas also lie outside of the protected zone. For instance, only half of the Lovinggood Creek watershed is within the NRA.

Access: From Suches, take Highway 60 north 15.5 miles. Turn left onto Doublehead Gap Rd. After 5.7 miles, turn left onto Forest Service Rd 58. Follow this road 5.0 miles to Three Forks and the Mountain Treasure is on the right. N34.6637 W84.1843

Three Forks
Duncan Ridge

Approximate size: 7,119 acres
Old-growth known: 15 acres

Duncan Ridge is a major fork off of the main Blue Ridge. Suches and Cooper Creek, one of Georgia’s premier trout streams, lie in the angle between the two ridges. The Duncan Ridge Trail follows the spine of its namesake, offering winter views to the north of Blairsville and the opportunity to connect with the Appalachian and Benton MacKaye Trails to form a 55-mile backpacking loop (the “Georgia Loop”).

The real treasures, however, are off the ridge’s north slope. Here, unusually rich soils foster breathtaking and diverse forests of towering trees and abundant wildflowers. This area supports 160-feet-tall tulip poplars, the state champion Fraser magnolia, and many coves with rare yellowwood trees. Underneath these arboreal giants grow rare wildflowers such as spotted mandarin, and one short section of the ridge harbors 14 species of ferns.

While some of this area is protected by the Coosa Bald National Scenic Area, part of this diverse and fragile forest was recently included in a controversial timber project. The worst of the proposed logging was withdrawn after public outcry, but some trees may be cut even as you read this.

These events highlight the need for greater protection of this and other Georgia Mountain Treasures.

Access: From Suches, go east on GA Highway 180 7.8 miles to Wolf Pen Gap and the Duncan Ridge Trail. The Treasure can also be accessed from either Suches or Blairsville off of Forest Service Rd 4 (Mulky Gap). N34.7639 W83.9523

Spotted mandarin is one of the rare wildflowers that grows along the north side of Duncan Ridge.
Licklog Mountain

Approximate size: 11,763 acres
Old-growth known: 26 acres

Adventure racers and endurance enthusiasts have fallen in love with the western half of Duncan Ridge. From near the Toccoa River, 11.4 miles of Duncan Ridge Trail climb through the center of this Mountain Treasure, following the saw-tooth profile of the namesake ridge. Those rapid-fire steep ascents and descents make the trail “the perfect proving ground” in Backpacker magazine’s view.

Erosion and sustainability concerns are forcing the Forest Service to gradually reroute the trail. So hikers will have to fall back on the other charms that the trail provides, of which there are many. Standing 1,000 to 1,500 feet above the surrounding valleys, Duncan Ridge provides outstanding winter views of the Rich Mountains, Blood Mountain, and adjacent valleys. Closer at hand, the trail skirts by small stands of old-growth oak forest, interesting rock formations, and an old mining prospect. At Rhodes Mountain, the Benton MacKaye Trail diverges from the Duncan Ridge Trail, opening up possibilities for many long-distance hikes.

As is often the case, the slopes support more life than the mountain top. Diverse cove forests full of stately hardwoods thrive on the north slope. The south side feeds the trout waters of Coopers Creek. Here, towering stands of white pines line tributaries between dry hardwood ridges. The whole area provides a critical habitat link between the high elevations on the main Blue Ridge and the south side of the Toccoa River watershed, the first area brought into the Chattahoochee National Forest.

Access: From Blue Ridge, take Highway 76 east 3.9 miles and turn right onto Highway 60. Follow it 13.8 miles to a small parking area for the Benton Mackaye/Duncan Ridge Trail on the left. The Mountain Treasure is on the left. N34.7659 W84.1642

Pink lady’s slippers bloom in mass on Duncan Ridge. Photo by Bruce Roberts
Rich Mountain Wilderness Extension

Approximate size: 4,987 acres
Old-growth known: 37 acres

The steep slopes of Cold Mountain rise up outside the little mountain town of Cherry Log and form a verdant backdrop to the pastoral scenes along Rock Creek Road. This Mountain Treasure connects the Rich Mountain Wilderness Area to the Rock Mountain Inventoried Roadless Area to form a large block of unfragmented habitat. The Rich Mountains as a whole are an island lying between Ellijay, Blue Ridge, and Suches, and separated from both the main Blue Ridge and the Cohutta Mountains.

Once experienced, the physical difficulty of hiking on Cold Mountain ensures one will never confuse it with any other mountain in Georgia. Freeze-thaw action in the last ice age covered the mountain in a vast jumble of boulders, the most extensive boulderfield in Georgia. Thanks to these boulders, loggers have not revisited the area since the first wave of industrial logging. The unique habitat also allows normally scarce species like zig-zag goldenrod and yellowwood trees to literally cover the mountainside. Even rarer species, such as the state endangered starflower, cling to smaller patches of less rocky forest.

Other slopes in the area contain more typical oak forests and an abundance of rich cove forests. Exceptional features occur in these areas too, like a nearly pure stand of black cherries that is home to the state champion. Hunting is very popular across much of the area. The area is temporarily protected as a natural area.

Access: From Blue Ridge, take Highway 515 south 11.3 miles and turn right onto Bates Rd. Take an immediate right onto Cherry Log St and 0.1 miles take the first right onto Rock Creek Rd. Follow it 4.2 miles to the game check station. Forest Service Rd 295 (seasonally open) starts opposite the station. The Mountain Treasure is above Forest Service Rd 295. N34.7803 W84.3281

A five-foot diameter yellow buckeye flourishes in a boulderfield on Cold Mountain.
Rocky Mountain

Approximate size: 4,618 acres
Old-growth known: 93 acres

Rocky Mountain sits between Ellijay and Blue Ridge and forms the backdrop to pastoral valleys in Cherry Log and Snake Nation. The Rocky Mountain Inventoried Roadless Area covers almost all of the Mountain Treasure. The compact form of this roadless area gives it a high ratio of core interior habitat to edge, which is important for forest interior species.

Both hikers and mountain bikers cherish this area. Five miles of the Benton MacKaye Trail pass right through the heart of it. Along the way, the Benton MacKaye ties into the Aska Trail system, which provides good access to the eastern part of the area. The pretty little cascade on Falls Branch is another highlight of this section of trail.

While many Southern Appalachian coves put on a wildflower show in the spring, the forests of this area hit their scenic peak in the summer. Acres of continuous fern cover create beautiful scenes in the north-facing hardwood coves. Other coves have an exceptional abundance of oxeye sunflower that transforms them from green to gold. Earlier in the year, pink lady-slippers add occasional splashes of color to the drier forests.

Access: From Blue Ridge, take Highway 515 south 11.3 miles and turn right onto Bates Rd. Take an immediate right onto Cherry Log St and in 0.1 miles take the first right onto Rock Creek Rd. Follow it 5.2 miles to a parking area for the Benton MacKaye Trail. Take the trail north into the Mountain Treasure. N34.7814 W84.3125

New York fern and turkey tail fungus are common in this Mountain Treasure.
To many people, the Southern Blue Ridge Cluster is the north Georgia Mountains. This cluster is the most easily accessible from the northern suburbs of Atlanta, and contains several of the most popular recreation destinations on the entire forest. Visitors come to see not only the start of the Appalachian Trail, but also the tremendously popular Jake and Bull Mountain horse/mountain bike trail system and the unique Raven Cliff Falls. The area also serves as the backdrop to recreational attractions outside the Forest, such as winery tours around Dahlonega, and is the portal to more northern parts of the Forest.

The recreational attractions, though, do not outshine the biological importance. The large, steep, south-facing slopes below the Appalachian Trail harbor some of the largest remaining stands of old-growth in Georgia. Many primarily northern species reach the southern end of their ranges in this stretch of mountains. As the climate warms, this area is likely to become increasingly important. These southern mountains will be one of the first areas where species migrating north will encounter higher elevations and cooler climates. Protecting this area will also be critical for ensuring species have a contiguous corridor of intact habitat to migrate north through.
Anderson Creek

Approximate size: 5,833 acres
Old-growth known: 387 acres

Far removed from any town, this area sits just west of Springer Mountain. Standing in the middle of the area, unnamed ridges cut off the view of the outside world, and a stream with a forgotten name provides the background music. All most people see, though, is the eastern edge of the area, where the Appalachian Trail Approach Trail leads hikers to Springer Mountain.

The eastern end is also where the most extensive old-growth forest lies. Commercial logging operations never penetrated the headwaters of Anderson Creek. The only development that ever occurred in the area was a small church and a few hardscrabble farms. A mixture of various species of oak, typically found on drier sites, dominates the nutrient-poor forest right down to the small streams. The remaining old-growth occupies unusually gentle terrain and contains the oldest known oak tree in the national forest, a 375-year-old chestnut oak.

This area is also the southern end of the chain of contiguous public land in the Appalachians. Animals and plants migrating north in response to climate change will need to reach at least this far to find a corridor of suitable natural habitats.

Access: In Amicalola Falls State Park, turn left at the main office to take the road up and around the falls. Continue through the cabin area and out of the park. Follow the signs towards High Shoals Church and take the first left after leaving the park. The Mountain Treasure is on both sides of the road. N34.5902 W 84.2422

Black bears thrive in the area’s mature forests

Photo by Lynn Satterfield – forestlightphoto.com
Black Mountain

Approximate size: 5,368 acres
Old-growth known: 177 acres

Any spring, summer, or fall weekend, the parking lot at Woody Gap on the eastern edge of this treasure is always full. This section of the Appalachian Trail is one of the most popular, either as a day hike for the views from Ramrock and other peaks or as the endpoint of a short backpacking trip from Springer Mountain. As hikers traverse the ridge, the rich soils support an abundance of wildflowers, including the uncommon columbo with its six-foot-tall flower stalks. The top of Black Mountain, the highest point in the area, still retains its fire tower built in 1949 and offers a quieter spot for taking in equally impressive views. From the trail or the mountaintop, the whole area around Dahlonega unfolds below you, and on a clear day Atlanta is visible. Black Mountain also supports the southernmost boulderfield community in the eastern United States.

Long before the Appalachian Trail, an important Native American trail went through this area and over the Blue Ridge at Grassy Gap. Early European settlers followed a similar route from Yahoola Creek valley through Grassy Gap to Gaddistown. The southern part of this historic road remains quite evident and distinctive. Adding further historical interest, gold miners schemed to take water from Canada Creek through the Blue Ridge to Yahoola Creek for mining in that valley and Dahlonega. The collapsed outlet is still visible in Tunnel Cove.

Other parts of the area remain virtually untouched. Cliffs and rock overhangs provide unique habitat for wildlife and uncommon plants. The old-growth chestnut oak stand on Lee Creek supports a rare species and the former state champion chestnut oak.

Access: From Dahlonega, take Highway 19 north 8.0 miles and bear left at Stone Pile Gap. Continue 5.4 miles on Highway 60 north to the Appalachian Trail parking area at Woody Gap. The Mountain Treasure is on the left. N34.6776 W84.0000

A hiker pauses to enjoy the scenery on Black Mountain.
Blackwell Creek

Approximate size: 5,183 acres
Old-growth known: 18 acres

This area lies southwest of Suches and occupies part of the same plateau. The clear streams in this area drain the north side of the Blue Ridge Divide, and form the headwaters of the Toccoa River. Canada Creek, designated an “outstanding remarkable stream” in the forest plan, also flows through the area. The unusual combination of remoteness and low stream gradient allows Canada Creek to support beaver wetlands, a rare habitat on Georgia National Forests.

Despite the unusually gentle terrain, the area supports scenic features normally associated with much more rugged topography. West Canada Creek features a beautiful waterfall. The rock outcrops on Little Cedar Mountain provide sweeping views over the rest of the roadless area. Unlike most views in north Georgia, this view contains no towns, houses, or fields, just natural forest-blanketed mountains.

One of the most scenic sections of the Appalachian Trail in Georgia runs through the southern end of the area. Each spring, a profusion of colorful wildflowers bursts forth along the trail including little sweet Betsy trillium and columbine. The trail also runs through a small patch of old-growth oak forest on Phyllis Spur.

Only Forest Service Road 42 separates this area from the Long Mountain Georgia Mountain Treasure, and other areas with few or no roads lie just to the west. The area was also studied in RARE II, but was threatened by logging. Public involvement and discoveries of rare plant populations protected most of the area.

Access: From Suches, take Highway 60 south for 0.5 miles and turn right onto Cooper Gap Rd. Follow it 2.7 miles to the Appalachian Trail. The Mountain Treasure is on the right.

N34.6521 W84.0321

The Blackwell Creek area provides a rare development-free vista.
Blood Mountain Wilderness Extensions

Approximate size: 2,955 acres
Old-growth known: 461 acres

Congress designated the Blood Mountain Wilderness Area in 1991 to protect the area around Georgia’s sixth highest peak and the highest peak on the Appalachian Trail in Georgia. The 7,800-acre Wilderness borders the Raven Cliff Wilderness to the east and the Coosa Bald National Scenic Area to the north. Several northern plant species like mountain ash and three-toothed cinquefoil have their southernmost populations on Blood Mountain.

The extension to the northwest would strengthen the connection with the Coosa Bald Scenic Area and help ensure that animal and plant populations on the main Blue Ridge are connected with populations on Duncan Ridge, one of the primary spur ridges in Georgia. The southern extension would help protect water quality in Waters Creek, an excellent trout stream. Each year, thousands of visitors and tourists see the northern and eastern extensions as they travel US 129 and GA 180 through the mountains. The eastern extension is one of the least disturbed and most natural areas in north Georgia. A series of waterfalls, including DeSoto Falls, blocked access and allowed an extensive old-growth oak stand to survive. Even the areas that were logged lack old road beds or other clear signs of human use.

Most of the southern and eastern extensions are inventoried roadless areas. Scenic area designations currently offer some protection to most of the area in these extensions, and part of the eastern extension is protected as a Wilderness Study Area.

Access: From Cleveland, take Highway 129 north 14.6 and turn left into the DeSoto Falls parking area. N34.7063 W83.9152

Michaux’s saxifrage grows in a cushion of moss on a rock outcrop south of Blood Mountain.
Etowah River Headwaters

Approximate size: 5,702 acres
Old-growth known: 547 acres

One of the largest remaining tracts of old-growth forest in Georgia stretches along the northwestern rim of this Mountain Treasure. Steep slopes deterred early logging efforts. The southern exposure and relatively nutrient-poor geology also favor dry forests of chestnut oak and mountain laurel that lack the tall straight trees favored by loggers. However, a few of the narrow coves and hidden benches on the mountainsides have deeper soils and still support giant tuliptrees, northern red oaks, and other hardwoods.

Contrast those forests with what grows on the richer geology in the northeastern part of the area. Old-growth in the northeastern area is limited to one small track, but towering northern red oaks are common, even on steep slopes. This area also supports several rare species like the globally vulnerable broad-leaf tickseed. The waters flowing out of these forests eventually go on to nourish many rare aquatic animals in the famously diverse Coosa River.

Despite lying only 10 miles northwest of Dahlonega, this rugged and roadless area remains one of the most remote in Georgia. Other roadless areas border three sides, and except for three small inholdings, national forest lands surround the entire area. Although no trail provides access to the large old-growth stand, 3.5 miles of Appalachian Trail traverse the northeastern portions of this Mountain Treasure.

Access: From Dahlonega, take Highway 19 Business north 2.2 miles and turn left on Camp Wasega Rd. Follow Camp Wasega Rd 8.4 miles to the barriers at Camp Frank D. Merrill and turn right onto Cooper Gap Rd. Proceed 2.8 miles to Cooper Gap and the Appalachian Trail. The Mountain Treasure is on the left. N34.6528 W84.0847
Long Mountain

Approximate size: 5,493 acres  
Old-growth known: 210 acres

This area is among the most easily overlooked and underappreciated of the mountain treasures. Overlooking Dahlonega from the south slope of the Blue Ridge Divide, the steep slopes barely exceed 3,000 feet elevation and seem rather ordinary. However, pockets of old-growth and complex geology lead to surprising diversity.

It is not surprising that prospectors once dug trenches for mica in the slopes since boot-sized mica books still occasionally lie on the surface. A band of rock is packed with the blue, blade-like crystals of kyanite. Other areas have sparkly black amphibolite, a rock high in iron and magnesium and low in silicon that gives rise to distinctive mafic soils. All of these unusual rocks and minerals are embedded in larger masses of common schist and gneiss. The rocks occasionally poke through the surface to give sweeping views of the foothills.

Nutrients from amphibolite probably account for the abundance of large trees on dry southern exposures in this area. In areas that escaped logging, tulip poplar reaches 59 inches diameter and northern red oak 55 inches. These trees are slightly larger than a former state champion chestnut oak that grows here. Some of these large trees are associated with impressive displays of spring wildflowers and rare species.

Not to be left out, uncommon species of harsh sites, like Table Mountain pine, add to the diversity of this area.

Long Mountain is among the least protected of the Mountain Treasures. It provides an important connection to the wildlife corridor along the Blue Ridge by linking the Etowah Headwaters, Blackwell Creek, and Black Mountain Treasures.

Access: From Dahlonega, take Highway 19 Business north 2.2 miles and turn left on Camp Wasega Rd. Follow Camp Wasega Rd 6.3 miles to Forest Service Rd 243 (closed seasonally). If open, turn right and follow it about a mile to a gap. The Mountain Treasure is on both sides of the road. N34.6200 W84.0578
Raven Cliff Wilderness Extensions

Approximate size: 7,340 acres
Old-growth known: 103 acres

First set aside in 1986, the Raven Cliff Wilderness Area encompasses 6.8 miles of the Appalachian Trail as well as a handful of other highly scenic trails. The best known and most popular of those trails leads to the dramatic waterfall that lends its name to the area. The other trails lead to rocky summits that offer stunning views of the surrounding mountains and lowlands.

Both extensions will protect and enhance the existing Wilderness, but they bring different strengths. Horse Range Mountain dominates the southern extension. A major spur off the main AT ridge, bedrock bulges through the thin soil on the higher elevations, and dense oak forests spread over the steep slopes. Those slopes loom large from the bypass around Helen and greatly enhance the scenic drive. The eastern end borders the popular Dukes Creek Falls Recreation Area. Much of this extension is an Inventoried Roadless Area.

The northern extension would move the boundary from arbitrary straight lines that cut across moist slopes and small streams down to the Helton Creek Road. The land on one side of the current boundary is no wilder than the land on the other side. Helton Creek Road is a quiet dirt path used to access a number of small inholdings and the impressive Helton Creek Falls, which lies inside the extension. The extension would help keep Helton Creek clean for trout, and strengthen the wildlife corridor connecting Blood Mountain Wilderness and Mark Trail Wilderness. The Helton Creek Inventoried Roadless Area covers most of this extension.

Access: From Blairsville, take Highway 19/129 south 11.3 miles and turn left onto Helton Creek Rd. Continue 2.2 miles to the parking area for Helton Creek Falls. The Mountain Treasure is on the stream side of the road. N34.7532 W83.8943

A red maple transforms in the fall. The tallest known red maple in Georgia once grew in the northern extension. Photo by Larry Winslett – www.larrywinslettphotography.com
Springer Mountain

Approximate size: 12,659 acres
Old-growth known: 712 acres

This area is best known for Springer Mountain and the start of America’s most iconic trail, the Appalachian Trail (AT). In addition to the first mile of the AT, this area also contains the start of AT’s sister trail, the Benton MacKaye, and about half of the AT Approach Trail. These trails led to the central part of the area being included in the Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area. Other attractions include: the Jake and Bull Mountain Trail Complex, which is one of the most popular draws for mountain biking and horseback riding in the region; and Jones Creek, which provides excellent camping and fishing opportunities.

Recreational users experience a largely natural landscape. Lance Creek is the second largest inventoried roadless area in Georgia, and it makes up much of the view from the scenic vista on the Benton MacKaye Trail. Large tracts of old-growth, mostly mixed oak, still remain in the upper reaches of this area. Adjacent areas were logged, but more lightly than most of north Georgia. They still contain many old trees (including the oldest known Virginia pine), providing habitat that is scarce in younger forests.

While most of this area is well protected, unprotected extensions remain on both the east and west sides. These additions are needed for watershed health and protecting the integrity of the roadless area.

Access: From Dahlonega, take Highway 52 west/Highway 9 south 4.3 miles and turn right to stay on 52 West. After 4.6 miles, turn right onto Nimblewill Church Rd. Follow it 2.3 miles and turn right onto Forest Service Rd 28-1. At 2.0 miles, bear left at the fork onto Forest Service Rd 77. Follow it 4.9 miles, and turn left onto Forest Service Rd 42 at Winding Stair Gap. Continue 2.6 miles to the Appalachian Trail parking area. The Mountain Treasure is opposite the parking. N34.6375  W84.1951

An old American chestnut branch persists on the slopes near Springer Mountain.

Photo by Jess Riddle
Andrews Cove
Brasstown Bald Wilderness Extensions
Buzzard Knob
Chattahoochee Headwaters
High Shoals
Kelly Ridge
Mark Trail Wilderness Extensions
Patterson Gap
Southern Nantahala Wilderness Extensions
Tray Mountain Wilderness Extensions
This cluster spreads along the core of the Blue Ridge and the Appalachian Trail from Hogpen Gap and Richard B. Russell Scenic Highway to the North Carolina state line. Four of Georgia’s five highest peaks reside in this area. Rain falling on the high ridges drains into six different rivers: the Tallulah, Little Tennessee, Nottely, Soquee, Hiawassee, and Chattahoochee. Water quality protection is especially important in headwaters, and these rivers contribute to the water supply for millions of people.

The high elevations and generally rugged terrain give rise to a broad breadth of recreational opportunities. Lake Burton and Unicoi State Park, home to Anna Ruby Falls, provide developed recreation opportunities for all skill levels. More rugged recreation can be found along the Appalachian Trail or on the trail to one of the many other waterfalls in the area, like Hemlock Falls or High Shoals. The Tallulah River and Wildcat Creek offer some of the most picturesque fishing and camping opportunities anywhere in the southeast. Real opportunities for solitude can be found hunting in the Swallow Creek Wildlife Management Area or exploring the Tray Mountain, Mark Trail, Brasstown Bald, or Southern Nantahala Wilderness areas.

These high, rugged peaks harbor one of the greatest concentrations of old-growth remaining in north Georgia. The high elevations also allow many rare northern species to survive in a landscape that is otherwise too hot or dry. The Northern Blue Ridge cluster has the greatest concentration of high-elevation rock outcrop communities and their associated species in the state. Rare species survive in this area not only on high elevations, but also on rare ultramafic bedrock. Soils from that bedrock can have extreme concentrations of magnesium and heavy metals that give specially adapted species a competitive advantage against more sensitive widespread species. This area is an important corridor for these species and many others linking the southern mountains to the Nantahala Mountains in North Carolina and beyond.
Andrews Cove

Approximate size: 4,883 acres
Old-growth known: 746 acres

Georgia Highway 17/75 runs north from Helen along the west side of the Andrews Cove Mountain Treasure making this one of the most easily accessed Mountain Treasures areas. The Civilian Conservation Core built a campground on the western edge at the base of Andrews Cove, and it serves as an excellent base for exploring the area. An impressive wildflower display of little sweet Betsy trillium and violets fills the campground each spring, and the clear trout waters of Andrews Creek flow right through it.

The Appalachian Trail (AT) and Andrews Cove Trail provide access to the heart of the area. The AT climbs steeply to pass over the Treasure’s high point, Rocky Mountain (4,020 feet). Rock outcrops near the mountain’s summit overlook the Treasure and afford good views of Mount Yonah 11 miles to the south. The AT also combines with the Rocky Mountain Trail to form a loop and pleasant day hike. The Andrews Cove Trail provides more solitude as it follows a great, rocky rift through the mountains to the AT. From there, a hiker looking for some exercise can take the AT out of the Mountain Treasure and up to Tray Mountain, Georgia’s eighth highest peak. With roughly 2,400 feet of elevation gain, this route has the fourth greatest climb of any single hike in Georgia.

Between the trails and on adjacent slopes lies one of the greatest concentrations of old-growth left in north Georgia. A 652-acre mixed-oak forest provides one of the best glimpses of what Georgia used to look like. Out of that forest flow Andrews Creek and the headwaters of the Hiawassee River.

Access: From Helen, take GA 17/75 north six miles to the Andrews Cove Campground or nine miles to the Appalachian Trail.
N34.7780 W83.7374

Brasstown Wilderness Extensions

Approximate size: 5,056 acres
Old-growth known: 187 acres

The tower on top of Brasstown Bald, Georgia’s highest peak, is probably the best landmark in north Georgia. The mountain stands remote and separated from the main Blue Ridge that the Appalachian Trail follows, but ridges run from the peak all the way to the town of Young Harris. The 12,949-acre wilderness area designated in 1986 protects most of the higher elevations and the major spur ridges. However, the current boundaries stop short of full protection, both literally and figuratively, on several of the ridges.

These areas contain several significant features including rock outcrops and old-growth chestnut oak forests. Particularly noteworthy are the extensions on the north side. A band of unusual bedrock with exceptionally high concentrations of iron and magnesium runs under this area. Elsewhere around Brasstown Bald this band of rock is associated with showy rare species like fringed gentian and large-leaved grass-of-Parnassus. This area is outside the existing wilderness study area and is designated for dispersed recreation management.

Including these areas in the Brasstown Bald Wilderness would protect habitats associated with a fuller range of elevations and protect the integrity of the existing wilderness area. Protecting a full range of elevations will likely become increasingly important as climate change continues.

Access: From Blairsville, take US 19/129 south 7.5 miles and turn left onto GA Highway 180. Follow it 5.1 miles to Forest Service Rd 292 on the left. N34.8240 W83.8191

Turk’s-cap lilies are common in high elevation deciduous forests, such as those found on Brasstown Bald.

Photo by Randy Lewis
Buzzard Knob

Approximate size: 9,789 acres
Old-growth known: 250 acres

The high ridge that the Appalachian Trail follows provides the best chance for Georgia’s mountain species to migrate in response to climate change. But they will have that opportunity only if the ridge continues to support high quality habitat. A few Wilderness areas protect the ridge in Georgia, but they don’t connect to the Nantahala Mountains in North Carolina. The Buzzard Roost and Kelly Ridge Mountain Treasures provide that vital link. The Buzzard Roost area is also unusual in providing an unbroken connection between a major mountain river, the Tallulah, and a high ridge line.

This Mountain Treasure contains a great diversity of habitats from rich cove forests to sun-baked rock outcrops to clear trout streams. These habitats are in good condition because this area has seen no logging or other human development in recent decades. Two large tracts of old-growth chestnut oak forest are nearly pristine. Even generally ubiquitous human intrusions are minimal because this area is isolated from towns and industrial developments.

People mainly interact with this area by hiking on the over five miles of Appalachian Trail that pass through it or by fishing the Tallulah River on the eastern border. Aside from the protected Appalachian Trail corridor, the current forest plan designates this area for mid to late-successional forest emphasis.

Access: From Hiawassee, take US Highway 76 east for 11 miles to the Appalachian Trail parking at Dicks Creek Gap. N34.9122 W83.6189

![Showy orchis, an uncommon wildflower, growing in the coves around Buzzard Knob](Photo by Jess Riddle)
Chattahoochee Headwaters

Approximate size: 1,765 acres
Old-growth known: 0 acres

Before it provides an essential of life for millions of people, before it waters fields, before it carries tubing tourists through Helen, the Chattahoochee River flows through its eponymous National Forest. The current bounces off little cliffs, divides around rocks, and saturates fallen logs, but it never languishes behind a dam. The headwaters of the Chattahoochee are wild.

The river gathers strength as it pours down through the Mark Trail Wilderness and slides past Upper Chattahoochee River Campground. Then it starts a 5.3-mile segment between Forest Service roads where the river cuts its way through a twisting mountain gorge. Rock cribbing and an occasional lost rail testify to the railroad that snaked its way through the gorge sometime between 1912 and the late 1920s to extract timber along the river. Since then, anglers have turned the railroad grade into an unofficial trail that makes easy work of the rugged terrain. Otherwise, few people see this section of river. The area’s forests have remained untouched since that initial cut and grown back in white pines, tulip poplar, black birch and a wealth of other hardwoods. Dark rhododendrons overhang the clear trout pools.

The gorge provides the best opportunity for another Wild and Scenic River designation in north Georgia. Currently the Chattooga River is the only river in Georgia with that permanent protection. The headwaters of the Chattahoochee certainly live up to the name and spirit of the designation, and the namesake of the National Forest deserves that protection.

Access: From Helen, take Highway 17/75 north and turn left onto Highway 75A. Take an immediate right onto Poplar Stamp Rd and follow it 2.4 miles. The Mountain Treasure is upstream on both sides of the river. N34.7360 W83.7654

A hiker takes in the solitude on the headwaters of the Chattahoochee River.
High Shoals

Approximate size: 4,906 acres
Old-growth known: 411 acres

High Shoals spreads across the remote and rugged north side of Tray Mountain, Georgia’s seventh highest peak. Roughly half way between Helen and Hiawassee, high mountain ridges cut off the sights and sounds of civilization. This area has outsized importance for flora and fauna as a migration corridor. Along with the Andrews Cove Mountain Treasure, this area bridges the gap between the Tray Mountain and Mark Trail Wilderness areas, which in turn connect with the Raven Cliff and Blood Mountain Wilderness areas.

Brier Creek Bald dominates the area at 4,163 feet elevation. Most of the mountain’s western slope escaped the industrial logging in the early 1900s. However, a road and wildlife openings were constructed into the area in the 1970s (excluded from Mountain Treasure area), and the richest forests along the road were logged. Drier portions retain their old-growth mixed-oak forests though, some on unusually gentle slopes, and should be protected from further loss.

The Appalachian Trail slips through a corner of the area on its way up Tray Mountain, and the 148-acre High Shoals Scenic Area provides a popular day trip. Here, a family-friendly trail provides access to two classic mountain waterfalls. Lesser known waterfalls tumble down the tributaries of High Shoals Creek.

Access: From Helen, take GA Highway 17/75 11 miles north, and take a hard right onto Indian Grave Gap Rd. Continue 1.3 miles to the High Shoals Falls trailhead. N34.8162 W 83.7271

Photo by Larry Winslett – www.larrywinslettphotography.com

Downy woodpeckers are common in natural forests throughout Georgia.
Kelly Ridge

Approximate size: 15,273 acres
Old-growth known: 662 acres

Kelly Ridge has everything people love about the mountains. This area offers visitors grand vistas, wildflower coves, dramatic boulderfields, delightful cascades, game species, and clean trout streams in abundance. No spot epitomizes this more than Ramp Cove. The unmaintained (but well-worn) trail takes visitors up around a cascade and into one of the richest wildflower coves in Georgia. The cove is also famous for the grove of giant buckeyes that were passed over by early loggers and the fields of its namesake, wild leeks.

Due to the generally nutrient-rich geology that underlies the area, similar rich coves and impressive wildflower displays occur throughout the area. Those soils and lack of recent logging have allowed several species of trees to reach record dimensions. They also allow many rare species to thrive in the area, including showy ones such as three-birds orchid. Other rare species cling to the cold climate found on the north side of 4,280-foot Double Springs Knob.

The lower elevations and streams are popular hunting and fishing destinations. 5.3 miles of Appalachian Trail provide access to the higher elevations. This section of trail weaves in and out of the old-growth white oak stands that dot the area’s high ridges. These intact forests provide clean water for the Moccasin Creek Fish Hatchery. This Mountain Treasure is also important to wildlife and plants beyond its boundaries as an essential link in the migration corridor connecting the Georgia Blue Ridge to the mountains of North Carolina.

Much of Kelly Ridge has partial protection as an Inventoried Roadless Area, but some of the lower elevations extend beyond the roadless boundary.

Access: From Hiawassee, take US Highway 76 east 5.2 miles and turn right on Swallows Creek Rd. Continue 1.6 miles to the edge of the area (end of pavement). N34.9088 W83.6705

Kelly Ridge includes several unnamed cascades in scenic settings.
Mark Trail Wilderness Extensions

Approximate size: 4,828 acres  
Old-growth known: 18 acres

Designated in 1991, Mark Trail and Blood Mountain are the two newest Wilderness areas in Georgia. Mark Trail Wilderness closely hugs the Appalachian Trail as it stretches for 14 miles between Hogpen Gap and Unicoi Gap, the longest stretch between road crossings in Georgia. Mark Trail also contains the Horsetrouth Falls Trail and part of the Jacks Knob Trail. The area is also famous for Chattahoochee Spring, the start of the Chattahoochee River.

The two southern extensions would expand the narrow waist of the Wilderness area where the Appalachian Trail runs within 800 feet of the boundary. Strengthening the Wilderness would also strengthen the corridor for plant and animal migration. The southwestern extension contains the only two old-growth stands known in the extensions, both small pockets of white oak and scarlet oak. An abandoned mine shaft in that extension may serve as habitat for rare species. The southwestern extension also rises prominently in the stunning views from the Richard B Russell Scenic Highway.

The northwestern extension would complete protection of the Jacks Knob Trail.

Low Gap Creek courses through a gorge in the southeastern extension. One of the wildest streams in north Georgia, it alternates between cascades and rock slides on its way to Low Gap Campground and eventually the Chattahoochee River. The highest of the cascades is the equal of many other cascades that have trails leading to them. Protecting this area would benefit the many people that trout fish and tube a short ways downstream and the millions that depend on the Chattahoochee River much farther downstream.

Access: From Helen, take Chattahoochee River Rd 4.3 miles to Low Gap Campground and drive through the campground.  
N34.7562 W83.7892

Photo by Jess Riddle
Patterson Gap

Approximate size: 5,681 acres
Old-growth known: 647 acres

Patterson Gap is a microcosm of north Georgia. The area has plateaus and cliffs, wildflower coves and rock outcrops, ridges and waterfalls, and everything in between. A steep and rugged landscape packs all of this diversity close together, and many of these ecosystems remain in nearly pristine conditions. Old-growth oak forest covers many of the high ridges, and no timber operations have occurred in the area in the last 40 years. Human intervention in the area has declined in recent decades as dead-end roads and wildlife openings have been abandoned. Over 5,000 acres are Inventoried Roadless.

This area goes beyond natural examples of common ecosystems. Rare ecosystems, like high elevation rock outcrops, occur in several places. They support rare species like Diana’s fritillary, but rare species also live scattered in more common habitats throughout the area. Common species also become exceptional, such as the state champion red hickory and cucumbertree magnolia. Bears, while not of exceptional size, are especially abundant in this area.

Most of this natural beauty is enjoyed from afar. An unmaintained trail leads past waterfalls on Keener Creek, but no official trails traverse the area. However, numerous people see this area as the backdrop to scenic Betty Creek and Wolf Fork valleys. The area is even visible from Highway 441 between Mountain City and Dillard. The waters on that side form the headwaters of the Little Tennessee River. Out of view, the other side supplies water for trout in Persimmon Creek.

Access: From Dillard, go west of Betlys Creek Rd 3.4 miles, and turn left onto Patterson Gap Rd. Follow it 1.5 miles to Forest Service property. The Mountain Treasure is on the left. N34.9716 W83.4587
Southern Nantahala Wilderness Extensions

Approximate size (acres): GA 7,894; NC 14,811
Old-growth known (acres): GA 558; NC 1,523

Georgia shares the 23,365-acre Southern Nantahala Wilderness with North Carolina almost evenly. The southern side of the Wilderness area contains significant high elevation areas like Dicks Knob (over 4,600 feet elevation, Georgia’s third highest peak) and Hightower Bald (4,588 feet, fourth highest). One of the most remote and least explored areas in north Georgia, the ridge between Hightower Bald and Eagle Mountain does not drop below 3,600 feet over its five-mile-long arc. Access to much of the Georgia side is poor except along the Appalachian Trail.

Indeed, some of these extensions receive much more visitation. One of the most impressive botanical displays in north Georgia, a cove filled with seemingly endless ranks of large flowered trilliums, draws clubs into the Grassy Ridge extension along unmaintained trails. The western extension lures other outdoor groups with its 180-degree vista encompassing Brasstown Bald and parts of Chatuge Lake. The western extension and Eagle Mountain specifically also provide scenery from Chatuge Lake.

Less frequently visited areas include a series of potentially ancient rock piles of unknown origin, and a handful of small waterfalls. The streams draining these extensions flow into three river systems: the Hiawassee, the Little Tennessee, and the Tallulah.

Despite the relatively easy access, these extensions contain some of the most pristine forests in the area. Both the Tate Branch extension on the south side and the Eagle Mountain extension have individual old-growth oak stands of over 100 acres. In fact, these stands may be larger than the remaining old-growth in the current wilderness area. The Eagle Mountain old-growth is associated with some of the best examples of high elevation rock outcrop communities in Georgia. These outcrops are little disturbed, extensive, and harbor several rare species, including several species not known from the Wilderness. In 2016, a wildflower new to the Chattahoochee National Forest, Miami mist, was found in this area.

Rare species and communities are not restricted to the rock outcrops. One of the smaller southern extensions contains the southernmost and only Georgia population of sweetfern. Eagle Mountain supports an anomalous forest with shagbark hickory (uncommon in the Blue Ridge), hoptree (rare in the Blue Ridge) and abundant jewel-weed. The extensions also contain exceptionally productive forests. Black cherry reaches 130 feet tall in the Tate Branch and
Grassy Ridge extensions and tulip poplar even taller. The Eagle Mountain extension has areas of similarly rich soils, but the most productive forests were clear-cut from the 1970s to 1990s.

Several of these extensions are Inventoried Roadless in the current plan (listed as Ben Gap, Patterson Gap, Shoal Branch, and Tate Branch). Forest Service Road 829 in the Eagle Mountain extension has been closed for several years, so that roadless area has expanded.

Access: From Dillard, go west on Betty Creek Rd 3.4 miles, and turn left onto Patterson Gap Rd. Follow it about 3.5 miles to Patterson Gap. The Mountain Treasure is on the right.

N34.9700 W83.4772

Towns County, including Brasstown Bald and Chatuge Lake, spreads out below the western extension. Photo by Bruce Roberts.

An unnamed falls splashes through the Grassy Ridge extension. Photo by Bruce Roberts.

In the Grassy Ridge extension, large white trilliums fill Till Ridge Cove. Photo by Peter McIntosh – www.mcintoshmountains.com.
Tray Mountain Wilderness Extensions

Approximate size: 2,699 acres
Old-growth known: 0 acres

When the RARE II roadless assessment was completed in 1979, the Tray Mountain Roadless Area was the largest in north Georgia, encompassing 36,300 acres between Helen and Hiawassee. By 1986, when the Tray Mountain Wilderness was created, new roads had sliced apart the area, and only 9,702 acres made it into the wilderness.

The Wilderness also excluded the Tripp Branch watershed, even though no road or other barrier ran between watershed and the Wilderness. Most likely, two large clear-cuts completed just 11 years before the Wilderness designation were seen as disqualifying features. The clear-cuts themselves though likely reflect the exceptional nature of the watershed. Rich and fertile soils run all along the northeast-facing side of the watershed, and foster diverse forests and rapid tree growth. Even the slopes in between the coves are capable of supporting large trees, making an unusually extensive and unbroken block of high quality timber. Areas not logged in the 1970s support several rare plant species. Rapid tree growth has allowed areas that were logged then to regain much of the feeling of a healthy forest and wilderness, even if not all of the biodiversity has returned yet. Tripp Branch has recovered enough that it would make a valuable addition to the Tray Mountain Wilderness.

Access: From Hiawassee, take US Highway 76 east 3 miles and turn right onto GA 17/75. Continue 3.6 miles and turn left onto Mill Creek Rd. Continue 1.6 miles to the Mountain Treasure. N34.8642 W83.6871

A woodthrush tends to its young. Being able to harmonize with itself gives the song of this forest interior species an enchanting, flute-like quality.
The Chattooga River forms the state line with South Carolina and now becomes the Savannah River on its way to the Atlantic. However, the Chattooga used to be the headwaters of the Chattahoochee and flowed to the Gulf of Mexico. In an episode of stream piracy or stream capture, the headwaters of the Savannah River drainage eroded upstream until they intercepted or “captured” the Chattooga River. That ancient event dramatically altered the landscape and still influences today’s roadless areas.

The stream capture caused the streams in the watershed to cut down and form the gorges that draw tens of thousands of visitors each year. The Chattooga’s rapids provide rafters an adrenaline rush while the calmer tributaries beckon anglers with some of the finest trout fishing in the state.
The humid microclimate of the gorges combines with the watershed’s famously wet macroclimate to produce habitat for a multitude of delicate ferns, mosses, and liverworts, many of which are rare. Of those species, perhaps most striking are the filmy ferns with leaves one cell thick that would dry out almost anywhere else in the temperate world.

The most impressive conifer stands in north Georgia grow along these streams. Conifers grow exceptionally fast around the Chattooga, and include the tallest trees in the state (see the Five Falls description). Beyond the size of individual trees, conifers are unusually abundant in the watershed, though hardwoods still dominate the landscape. Today, the conifers are almost all pines since hemlock woolly adelgid has ravaged the area’s hemlocks, especially in the upper watershed.

The greatest elevation range found in any of the Mountain Treasures clusters adds to this area’s biodiversity. The cluster descends from 4,696 feet elevation at the top of Rabun Bald on the Blue Ridge Escarpment to 897 feet at Lake Tugaloo. The entire Georgia portion of the Blue Ridge Escarpment ecoregion lies within the cluster. Replete with granitic domes, gorges, and waterfalls, several species live only in this ecoregion.

Rugged topography along streams kept most roads around the Chattooga away from the streams and instead higher on the slopes and ridges. Unlike unfragmented habitat in the rest of north Georgia, most roadless areas near the Chattooga are centered on the streams rather than high points, and most of the large streams in Georgia Mountain Treasures lie in this cluster. The lands along the Chattooga River constitute the only opportunity to create a low-elevation contiguous corridor of protected habitat for plant and animal migration. A narrow corridor along the river was protected by Wild and Scenic designation in 1974, but the watershed needs to be protected and corridor broadened on both sides of the river to ensure species can move freely through this area.
Big Shoals

Approximate size (acres): GA 6,069; SC 2,896
Old-growth known (acres): GA 46; SC 36

Big Shoals is an island of mountains. The Chattooga River, West Fork of the Chattooga, Warwoman Creek, and the Warwoman Shear form natural boundaries, and box in a rugged mountain ridge. The roadless area itself extends across the river into South Carolina.

Named for a class III rapid, the Mountain Treasure contains Section II of the river. The alluvial bottoms that flank the river here, which are the largest anywhere on the Georgia side, contrast with the gorge topography found elsewhere along the Chattooga. Native Americans almost certainly farmed these alluvial bottoms since they lie across the river from the village site known as Cherokee Old Town. In the 1770s, shortly after the village was abandoned, William Bartram passed through the area recording observations and collecting plants. Later European settlers formed isolated communities farming those alluvial bottoms and the lower sections of the West Fork and Warwoman Creek. Multiple small cemeteries remain from that era.

Today, the area calls out to a broad spectrum of recreationists. Horseback riders call the Willis Knob trails their favorite on the Chattooga River Ranger District, and Bartram’s route is now a long-distance hiking trail. Section II provides opportunities for casual boaters while all of the large streams draw anglers. Dick’s Creek Falls, more descriptively known as Five Fingers Falls, provides a highlight along the river. Despite the long history of human use, the area’s steepest slopes and highest elevations still support a large concentration of old-growth, the farthest downstream of any such concentrations in the Chattooga Watershed.

Access: From Clayton, take Warwoman Rd east 11.3 miles. Turn right onto Forest Service Rd 157, and follow it 2.2 miles to the Willis Knob horse camp. N34.9004 W83.2230
Ellicott Rock Wilderness Extension

Approximate size (acres): GA 3,945; NC 827; SC 1,932
Old-growth known (acres): GA 14; NC 0; SC 276

Unique among United States Wilderness areas, the Ellicott Rock Wilderness includes portions of three states – Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The Wilderness takes its name from a stone at the convergence of those states where in 1811 surveyor Andrew Ellicott chiseled “N-G” (North Carolina-Georgia). Starting from that point on the eastern bank of the Chattooga River, he surveyed the boundary between those two states to resolve a border dispute.

The extension runs southwest from the Wilderness along Burrells Ford Road, a route noted for its bird diversity that also provides primary access to the upper Chattooga River. Laurel Creek runs straight through the western portion of the extension. The straightness comes from the Warwoman Shear, a massive crease in the earth that extends all the way to the Helen area. However, Laurel Creek is better known for its eponymous corundum mine. From 1873 to 1893, the mine was one of the world’s two leading producers of corundum, a mineral used in bulk as an industrial abrasive but better known for its gem forms, ruby and sapphire.

Today, other streams in the area are popular for camping and fishing. A 181-foot-tall white pine growing on the banks of Laurel Creek was the tallest known tree in Georgia. The tree has since lost that title (see Five Falls), but with continued growth may soon regain the crown.

Access: From Clayton, take Warwoman Rd 14.0 miles east. Turn right onto Highway 28. After 1.8 miles, turn left on Burrells Ford Rd (Forest Service Rd 646). The Mountain Treasure is on the left. N34.9229 W83.1746

A cardinal keeps his energy up on a cold day. Often associated with suburban yards, cardinals also nest in forest thickets. Photo by Larry Winslett – www.larrywinslettphotography.com
Five Falls

Approximate size (acres): GA 7,615; SC 4,041
Old-growth known (acres): GA 62; SC 5

The last free flowing section of the Chattooga River before it hits Tugaloo Lake is among the wildest. The river crashes through a gorge, and drops 75 feet in a quarter mile. Tributaries in both Georgia and South Carolina plunge even more precipitously as they enter that gorge. Cliff Creek, Opossum Creek, and Long Creek all sport impressive cascades.

Between the falls and the river, the streams flow through secluded moist ravines. Steep slopes and the murmuring streams block out sights and sounds from the outside world. The moist microclimate in the ravines allows liverworts to thrive along with a host of mountain species like hemlocks and dog-hobble. Conversely, the surrounding dry ridge-tops support species common farther south in Georgia, like post and southern red oaks. Floristically, the mountains are literally below the Piedmont.

The unusual combination of warmth, sheltering slopes, and moisture has contributed to trees reaching greater heights than known from anywhere else in Georgia. Georgia’s tallest known tree is a white pine here that soars to 185 feet. Several other tree species reach or approach record heights in the area, and rare species like large-fruited snakeroot and three-bird orchid also grow here. Beavers swim, but do not dam, Cliff Creek, one of five trout streams in the area.

The Raven Rock and Watergauge Trails in Georgia and the Opossum Creek Falls Trail in South Carolina provide access to this area of outstanding recreation opportunities and exceptional forest.

Access: From Clayton, take Highway 441/23 south 8.3 miles to Camp Creek Rd. Turn left and go 1.5 miles to Water Gauge Rd. Follow the road 4.0 miles to the trailhead at the end. N34.7678 W83.3256

“Five Falls” refers to rapids on the Chattooga River, but tributary streams in the area also contain impressive cascades.
Rabun Bald

Approximate size: 17,694 acres
Old-growth known: 1,270 acres

Rabun Bald, Georgia’s second highest peak, sits at the western end of the Blue Ridge Escarpment and on the edge of the Highlands Plateau. This region of ancient and dramatic granitic domes and abundant rainfall is home to several endemic species, plants and animals found nowhere else in the world. If you want to see Hartweg’s locust or granite dome goldenrod, you have to visit the area where Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina converge.

Rabun Bald itself has attracted the attention of naturalists for centuries. William Bartram is believed to have traversed the mountain in 1775. Fungi and moss societies were visiting the mountain as early as 1947. More recently, scientists have used Rabun Bald to study salamanders, insects, small mammals, mosses, wildflowers, and trees. A remarkable 67 rare species tracked by the state of Georgia are known from the USGS Rabun Bald quadrangle. One species first described in 2005 is even named after the mountain, Rabun Bald feather-moss (*Pohlia rabunbaldensis*).

More casual visitors can access this Mountain Treasure via either the Bartram Trail or the Rabun Bald Trail. Both lead to the stone tower at the top of Rabun Bald, which provides some of the most commanding views anywhere in Georgia. Natural rock exposures on Pinnacle Knob offer similarly spectacular views and make that peak a popular destination from Clayton. Leaving the summit of Rabun Bald, the Bartram Trail slides through exceptional tunnels of mountain laurel and rhododendron, and runs along the eastern continental divide. Despite a lack of roads, nearly half of this area was left out of the last roadless area inventory.

Access: From Dillard, go north on Highway 441/23 0.9 miles. Turn right onto GA 246, which becomes North Carolina 106. Continue 4.2 miles and turn right onto Old Mud Creek Rd/Bald Mountain Rd. After 3.0 miles, turn hard right onto Kelsey Mountain Rd. Follow it 0.3 miles to a wide spot in the road and the trailhead.

N34.9790  W83.3029

On top of Rabun Bald, an adult locust borer eats goldenrod pollen.

Photo by Jess Riddle
Rock Gorge

Approximate size (acres): GA 3,877; SC 6,802
Old-growth known (acres): GA 516; SC 425

Bordered by other Mountain Treasures, this section of the Chattooga River is the most remote along the Georgia-South Carolina border. The Rand Mountain Inventoried Roadless Area encompasses most of the Georgia side, and swaths of inventoried roadless area also lie in South Carolina. Few trails even penetrate this area – there are none on the Georgia side. In South Carolina, the Foothills Trail, the longest trail in the South Carolina mountains, descends to the river then angles away again where the terrain becomes just too rugged. This section of trail feels as isolated as any in the southeast.

The ruggedness reaches a peak in Rock Gorge itself, but not by much. Big Bend, where the river completes a hairpin turn and goes over its largest single drop, offers a similar dramatic landscape. Reed Creek, a large Georgia tributary, enters through its own gorge. In South Carolina, King Creek plunges over an 80-foot cascade to reach the river.

Between Rock Gorge and Reed Creek, Big Mountain falls away steeply on all sides. Those slopes support hundreds of acres of old-growth oak and pine forest, the largest concentration in the area. However, old-growth oak-pine also persists in the gorges (some right along the Foothills Trail), and even on some of the more accessible ridges. Recent logging has also largely bypassed the area. Three stands in the Mose Branch area are the only ones cut in the last 40 years on the Georgia side. The lack of logging and road building has kept the large, cool streams in the area clean for trout.

Access: From Clayton, take Warwoman Rd 14.0 miles east. Turn right onto Highway 28. After 1.8 miles, turn left on Burrells Ford Rd (Forest Service Rd 646). The Mountain Treasure is on the right. N34.9229 W83.1746

Photo by Butch Clay
Three Forks

Approximate size (acres): GA 5,426; NC 3,776
Old-growth known (acres): GA 213; NC 232

This area lies in the heart of the wild lands between Clayton and South Carolina. Within it, Overflow, Big, and Holcomb Creeks converge at a common point to form the namesake feature and the West Fork of the Chattooga River. Continuous with the Overflow Creek Wilderness Study area in North Carolina, the watersheds of all three streams are almost entirely forest. That condition helps ensure natural flow patterns and good water quality in this area and downstream in the Chattooga River.

Anglers drawn to these streams for some of the finest trout fishing in Georgia also find solitude and spectacular scenery. The streams have cut down into the landscape and out of the modern world. The steep slopes and rush of the flowing water cut off intrusions from outside. Swirling water and rock have bored deep circular shafts creating striking and unusual rock formations. The streams rush over at least eight cascades on their way to Three Forks, often with dark banks of rhododendron framing them. The rhododendron occasionally breaks to reveal some of the largest overhanging cliffs in the Georgia Blue Ridge.

Hikers on the Three Forks Trail pass through only natural ecosystems on their way to the core of the area. The area has been almost untouched by logging for the last 40 years. That lack of disturbance has allowed some extraordinary forest to develop, like a shortleaf pine stand with the four tallest known shortleaf pines in Georgia and the tallest pitch pine ever documented (146 feet). The Wild and Scenic River designation protects a corridor downstream of Three Forks and part of Overflow Creek, but other streams and the surrounding area are largely unprotected.

Access: From Clayton, take Warwoman Rd 13.8 miles east and turn left onto Overflow Creek Rd. Follow it 4 miles to John Teague Gap. The trailhead is on the right. N34.9621 W83.2285

Potheoles created by swirling rocks shape Overflow Creek’s streambed.
Thrifting Ferry

Approximate size (acres): GA 7,466; SC 5,471
Old-growth known (acres): GA 17; SC 29

Thrifting Ferry is unusual among Mountain Treasures areas in its relatively gentle terrain. Moderate slopes lead down to low gradient streams, though there are steep slopes especially along the Chattooga River. This area embraces several miles of Section 3. For all of that length, whitewater rafters parallel hikers on the Chattooga River Trail, “one of the ten best river trails in America” according to Backpacker magazine. The Chattooga River Trail ties into the Bartram Trail, which provides connections to Rainy Mountain, Rabun Bald, and eventually North Carolina.

The area provides even better connections for wildlife as an integral link in the chain of wild areas along the Chattooga River. The South Carolina side of the area, particularly around John Mountain, provides the best wildlife connection between the Chattooga and the extensive wildlands around the Chauga River.

This area was logged hard around the turn of the 20th century, but retains much of its natural character. Licklog Creek, the largest tributary on the Georgia side, and many of the smaller tributaries have entirely forested watersheds. That condition protects natural flow patterns and high water quality. Shortleaf pine has declined throughout its range, but remains common in this area. Here, they grow at exceptional rates not found in other parts of north Georgia. One small white oak stand also escaped the logging. Both the stand’s low elevation and deep, moist soils make it remarkable for north Georgia old-growth.

Access: From Clayton, take Highway 76 east 8.1 miles. Immediately after crossing the Chattooga River (SC state line), turn left into a parking area. Walk back across the bridge and take the Chattooga River Trail upstream.

Photo by Randy Lewis

Rue anemone is one of the most common spring wildflowers in the region, including along the Chattooga.
The southeastern Piedmont is one of the most altered and abused landscapes in the eastern United States. Lacking the steep slopes of the mountains and the swamps of the coastal plain, there were few barriers to development. As a consequence, forests were cleared and crops were planted. Poor agricultural practices led to massive erosion, and crops, especially cotton, pulled nutrients from the soil. The blocks of national forest land provide an opportunity for recovery. They will increasingly become oases of natural habitat as roads continue to fragment the landscape, native forests are converted to largely sterile pine plantations, and urban sprawl continues to consume the region.

The history of exploitation of the Piedmont has left the region without roadless areas of size and scale comparable to those found in the mountains. However, some treasures of the Piedmont remain, including broad swaths of native ecosystems with only occasional roads and power lines interrupting them. Others are united not by physical continuity, but by a common biological legacy. They all represent some of the most diverse and intact natural areas remaining in the region.
Hidden within this used landscape are pockets of unique habitat. Areas of unusual soil conditions produce some of the most diverse communities anywhere on the national forest. Surprisingly dramatic rock outcrops support a variety of other rare plants and animals, and the surrounding bottomlands and uplands support species found nowhere else on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests.

The overall gentler landscape draws a different group of recreationists than the more rugged mountains. Lake Russell invites family outings and the surrounding network of mountain bike trails offers enjoyable rides for new and experienced users alike. Horse and OHV trails on the Oconee pass through contrasting hardwood and pine stands.
Panther Creek

Approximate size: 13,036 acres
Old-growth known: 0 acres

North of Toccoa, Georgia, where the mountains meet the Piedmont, Panther Creek and its tributaries have carved rugged gorges. Among the largest streams in the Mountain Treasures, Panther Creek plunges over an impressive cascade and into a large swimming hole that makes the Panther Creek Trail one of the most popular hiking trails on the entire Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. Below the falls, a lesser used portion of the trail continues down the gorge, and offers excellent opportunities for solitude and wildflower viewing. Both Favorite Wildflower Walks in Georgia by Hugh O. and Carol Nourse and Waterfalls and Wildflowers in the Southern Appalachians: Thirty Great Hikes by Timothy P. Spira profile the trail.

As Panther Creek exits its gorge, the stream turns abruptly to follow the Brevard Fault, as does its tributary Davidson Creek. Bedrock along the fault includes not only crystalline rocks, typical of the Piedmont and Blue Ridge, but also carbonate rocks. Soils with relatively high pH, calcium, magnesium and other nutrients foster uniquely lush coves along lower Panther Creek. Those coves support record height trees for Georgia, such as a 132-foot-tall black walnut, and an exceptional concentration of rare wildflowers.

South of Panther Creek, many contrasting communities and rare species pack into a small area. Dry ridges supporting Table Mountain pine, the rarest pine in Georgia, sit above moist ravines with the lowest-elevation populations of hemlock, white pine, and rosebay rhododendron in Georgia. Soils with unusually high concentrations of iron and magnesium allow another whole suite of species to thrive here. Seeps, rock outcrops, and the adjacent Tugaloo River add still more species.

The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests includes the only extensive public lands along the Brevard Fault in Georgia, and Panther Creek includes the least fragmented part of the national forest. Growing in a relatively warm climate, the low elevation populations of primarily mountain species may be important for adapting to climate change. This area includes three federally endangered or threatened species, a multitude of state rare species, and great diversity of many groups, such as the six species of trillium and 16 species of orchids. An entire new salamander genus was discovered here in 2008, the first new amphibian genus described in the United States in nearly 50 years.

Access: From the Tallulah Gorge, take US 441/23 south 2.2 miles and turn right onto historic US 441. Continue 1.5 miles. Parking is on the right, and the Panther Creek Trail begins on the left. N34.6992° W83.4200°
Middle Fork Broad River

Approximate size: 4,423 acres
Old-growth known: 0 acres

Europeans first began settling the area between Toccoa and Cornelia in the 1780s. Mount Airy, now just beyond the Mountain Treasure area, began as a resort town around the highest station on Richmond and Danville Railroad between New Orleans and New York. Ironically, this area is now one of the most pristine sections of the Piedmont in Georgia.

The Middle Fork of the Broad River glides over scenic rocky shoals and through the center of this Mountain Treasure. Unlike nearly all other Piedmont streams, the headwaters of the Middle Fork lie largely on public land. If water quality cannot be restored in the Middle Fork of the Broad River, it probably cannot be restored anywhere in the Georgia Piedmont.

This area also provides one of the best opportunities for solitude in the Piedmont. Steep slopes shield hikers on the four-mile Broad River Trail from sounds of the outside world. The trail traverses forests dominated by native oaks and shortleaf pine – the Mountain Treasure contains only a few plantations of loblolly pine, which while not natural are common in the surrounding landscape. The remains of stills, probably for fruit brandy rather than corn whiskey, remind hikers of the local landscape’s agrarian past.

The future will bring more southerly species to this area as they migrate north along the river corridor to higher elevations and cooler climate. Some typically southern species already call the area home such as Adam’s needle, a species of yucca. The southern range margin populations of typically mountain species like hemlock, Fraser magnolia, and white pine spring from steep, north-facing slopes along the Middle Fork.

Access: From Toccoa, take US 123/GA 184 south 3.2 miles. Continue on GA 184 another 4.5 miles and turn right onto Cannon Rd. Go 0.4 miles, veering right at the fork, to reach Forest Service Rd 92 (Middle Broad River Rd). Proceed 1.8 miles then turn right to stay on FSR 92. Follow the road 0.8 miles and continue straight at the intersection onto FSR 87(Sellers Rd). The Broad River Trailhead will be on the left, just past the intersection.
N34.5012 W83.4315
Oconee Mafic Communities

Approximate size: 7,404 acres
Old-growth known: 0 acres

Felsic rocks high in silicon, such as granite-gneiss, dominate the geology of the Oconee National Forest (ONF). However, mafic rocks high in iron and magnesium, such as gabbro, underlie a significant fraction of the ONF. They weather into nutrient rich and relatively high pH soils that support a distinct suite of plant species. These areas often stand out as islands of hardwood forests in a sea of pines. Many of the showiest spring wildflower reach their greatest abundance on mafic soils, including spring beauty, trilliums, and atamasco lily.

Different combinations of bedrock, topography, and weathering result in at least three distinct mafic communities: mafic knobs, bottomlands, and Monticello glades. Small rocky mafic knobs or outcrops of one to several acres are shaded by not only calcium-demanding species such as Shumard oak and southern shagbark hickory, but also dry-site and fire-adapted species such as blackjack oak and post oak. Burgess Mountain in Putnam County is a particularly large, topographically distinct example of a mafic knob.

Extensive mafic bottomlands and adjacent slopes are also found on the ONF along Rock Creek in Putnam County, portions of the Ocmulgee River in Jasper County, and steep slopes along Lake Oconee in Greene County. In these stands, Shumard oak and slippery elm mix with more typical bottomland species such as sweetgum and sugarberry.

Monticello Glades south of Monticello include “globally imperiled” upland gabbro depression forests. Resting on impermeable hardpans formed by mafic Iredell soils, the Glades are paradoxically upland wetlands. Their perched

A large population of federally-endangered relict trillium was recently discovered on the Oconee National forest.
water tables support a mix of bottomland species such as willow oak, dwarf palmetto, supplejack, and the rare Oglethorpe oak.

Some mafic soils are very fertile, which has led to them being disproportionately in private ownership and in agriculture. Of the fraction on the ONF, only a small portion are currently in management categories that recognize their uniqueness and need for special management consideration. Yet nearly all the populations of rare plant species known from the Oconee Bottomlands and Slopes

Approximate size: 13,473 acres
Old-growth known: 0 acres

Fields, roads, and other man-made features fragment the forests of Georgia’s Piedmont, and even the Oconee National Forest (ONF) is a Swiss-cheese of fractured parcels. Bottomland forests provide critical links between patches of habitat. Even in natural landscapes, the cover and resources that bottomland forests offer make them important paths for many traveling wildlife. Additionally, most of the largest blocks of unfragmented habitat on the ONF are associated with large streams. In general, those streams are free-flowing (undammed). Aquatic wildlife depend on natural stream flow in a number of ways, and natural flooding and channel meandering are also essential for healthy floodplains.

The hardwood forests of floodplains are directly important to invertebrates, amphibians, birds, and mammals. The large trees that grow in the moist and fertile soils in ONF bottomlands lead to structurally complex forests with many different wildlife resources. Hollows in trees and standing dead provide denning and roosting sites. Along with adjacent slopes, a single site can support as many as 11 oak species which produce acorns, and acorns are among the most widely consumed wildlife foods. In addition to providing critical wildlife habitat, these bottomlands provide many hiking and horse trails associated with bottomlands. Current management designations commendably recognize several streams on the ONF as Scenic and Outstanding Streams, but the Appalachee River and Rock Creek corridors should be added as Scenic and Outstanding Streams and managed accordingly.

Steep slopes, often associated with river corridors but widespread on the ONF, support forests dominated by a diverse mix of oaks and other hardwoods. The botanical diversity on the ONF is greatest on steep slopes that were generally, though not always, spared from row-crop agriculture in the 19th and early 20th centuries. While hardwood slopes have been admirably maintained as such by ONF management historically, upper slopes are typically planted or maintained in loblolly pine, the most common tree on ONF uplands.

Access: From Eatonton, head west on Highway 16 for 4.2 miles. Turn left onto Hillboro Rd. After 3.0 miles, turn right onto McMillan Rd. After 0.6 miles, turn left onto Beaverdam Rd (Forest Service Rd 1068). Park at about 0.7 miles and head 250 yards downhill to Murder Creek and the Murder Creek Research Natural Area, which continues upstream. N33.2762 W83.5022

A mallard stretches her wings. Mallards occupy a wide variety of wetlands, including bottomlands.
Early in the 19th century, north Georgia was Cherokee country and their capital was in New Echota, not far from modern day Calhoun. The Cherokees at this point had a constitution, an alphabet and newspaper, had adopted many American methods of agriculture, and were largely Christian in faith. Despite constitutional rulings upholding their sovereignty, President Andrew Jackson refused to abide by court decisions, and began systematic removal of them. The infamous 1838 “Trail of Tears” removed the remaining 16,000 Cherokee people from their homelands, with an estimated 4,000 of them dying on their forced march to Oklahoma. Settlers had begun pouring into north Georgia since the discovery of gold near Dahlonega, and the Georgia land lotteries of 1820 and 1832 had already carved Georgia into 40-acre land lots in gold country, and 640-acre lands lots elsewhere. Cherokee farms, orchards, and dwellings went to those settlers who merely moved in and reinhabitated the land.

However, after the Civil War and decades of poor farming practices, economic hardship, and poverty, many mountain people were more than ready to sell this land when outside timber interests swept in, offering much needed cash for land or timber rights. Land was often purchased at rock bottom prices, and the self-sufficient mountaineer soon left for opportunities elsewhere, with many north Georgia counties suffering population loss. Past practices of selective logging with crosscut saws and oxen were replaced with the new industrial logging techniques of clear-cutting, splash dams, heavy equipment, and low wage labor.

In the early 20th century, lands that now make up the Chattahoochee National Forest had been largely cutover by large timber companies and were in relatively poor condition. Unlike the American west, the east had no National Forest system, as it lacked a large public land base to draw from to create such a system. National Forests in the West were created from lands that the U.S. government had been systematically disposing of for many years to mining interests, speculators, railroad companies, and homesteaders, a system that changed only after the prospect of a “timber famine.” The movement to create National Forests in the east was related, but resulted largely from the problems that cutover timber lands were creating for neighboring communities from wildfires, erosion, and flooding.

In the first decade of the 20th century, the movement for a Southern Appalachian forest reserve grew in popularity and commitment. In 1902, the National Hardwood Lumber and the National Lumber Manufacturers Association passed resolutions calling for the creation of such a reserve. In 1911 a bill introduced by Massachusetts Congressman John Weeks passed the Senate, authorizing the Forest Service to purchase lands in the east for a suite of new National Forests.

The creation of the Cherokee Purchase Unit in 1912 (from which the Chattahoochee National Forest would be birthed in 1936) resulted in one of the first purchases following the legislation. Though the first tract purchased was in western North Carolina, the first tract offered for sale was in north Georgia – a 31,000-acre tract owned by Gennett Land and Lumber in Atlanta. This tract was located in Lumpkin, Gilmer, Fannin and Union Counties, and was reportedly an area that most mountain farmers had abandoned due to overuse. Yet there was enough merchantable timber on the tract for the National Forest Reservation Commission to approve its acquisition at $7.00 an acre. After this successful sale, Andrew Gennett offered 13,000

This photograph with original caption shows the kind of degradation that spurred the creation of national forests in the Southern Appalachians. (Ayers and Ashe 1905).
acres for purchase in Rabun County, Georgia. Almost all of this tract had never been cut, and Oaky Mountain, of which Gennett was president, was paid $8.00 an acre for the land.

Most of the large tracts in north Georgia and elsewhere in the Southern Appalachians were purchased in the first decade following the Weeks Act, but large timber companies still held substantial ownerships and did not sell until they had cut the timber. The Forest Service preferred buying these large tracts, but increasingly turned to the small landowners who were willing to sell, particularly during the Depression era of the 1930s. Many mountain people left the Southern Appalachians in the two decades leading up to the depression, as mountain land eroded from poor farming techniques, timber companies left after denuding landscapes, and the Forest Service bought them out. Yet during the thirties many mountain people returned, having lost jobs and returning to the land they knew and were connected to. As many of them had not sold their land, the Forest Service began appropriating large amounts for buyouts at rock bottom prices, and employing them in work programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps.

North Georgia was also depleted of game and other wildlife, after decades of intense harvesting with no regulation. Deer were almost completely absent in the north Georgia mountains by the early 20th century, and it is rumored that the last deer shot in Union County was shot by the father of the man who would eventually succeed in having them restored to the mountains. Arthur Woody, also known as “Ranger” or “Kingfish,” had joined the Forest Service as an axe man not long after the agency established a presence in north Georgia; by 1915 he had worked his way up to a law enforcement officer. He soon became one of the first rangers on the forest, and became a strong and effective advocate for Forest Service land acquisitions. But he is perhaps most legendary among sportsmen for his efforts at restoring game to the north Georgia mountains. Ranger Woody stocked streams with rainbow trout, and in 1927 began restocking deer he had purchased with his own money from a travelling road show. Whitetail deer, once a rarity, are now one of the most commonly seen animal species in the mountains.

Thousands more acres were bought throughout the thirties and forties, but acquisitions slowed following World War II. The Forest Service became less concerned with acquisitions, and more concerned with providing timber for a rapidly expanding American economy. Not until legislation was passed for the Land and Water Conservation Fund during the Kennedy administration did the Forest Service receive appropriation dollars for National Forest acquisitions.

LAND AND WATER CONSERVATION FUND

When most of us go for a hike in the north Georgia mountains, hunt or fish in the National Forest, or visit any number of state or county parks, we do not normally stop to think about how such opportunities were created or paid for. On Valentine’s Day in 1963, President John F. Kennedy proposed legislation that would give birth to the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which passed in September of that year. There was growing consensus in America at the time that with an expanding population and increasing demand for recreation, a source of revenue was needed to counter the demand. This fund would set aside money collected from offshore oil drilling leases, with no cost to the U.S. taxpayer, and would fund new federal, state, and local land acquisitions. There was strong bi-partisan support for the bill and its passage established a fund that received about $100 million a year during the 1960s, an amount that was quickly realized as inadequate. $900 million per year was the agreed-upon amount, yet it was 1998 before the LWCF ever received full funding. Congress simply used the allocated money for other purposes.

This extremely important source of funding has protected a total of 4.7 million American acres since its inception, including tens of thousands of acres to create and protect the Appalachian Trail. Since the legislation’s inception, Georgia has received $334 million dollars in LWCF dollars, without any cost to the U.S. taxpayer, funding acquisitions for over 50 miles of the Chattahoochee River within the Chattahoochee National Recreation Area, key purchases for inholdings in the Chattahoochee National Forest, and funding for Georgia state, city, and county parks. In the last 15 years, LWCF funding for the Chattahoochee National Forest has protected thousands of acres in the Etowah, Chattahoochee, and Conasauga watersheds, not only adding land to the public land base, but also protecting acreage within three of the most aquatically biodiverse watersheds in North America.

Given growth predictions for the north Georgia mountains, this important source of land acquisition dollars is critical. With the fund’s uncertain future, it is key that Georgia’s congressional members not only support its full funding, but advocate for Georgia’s priorities within the allocation process.
REFERENCES:


ENDORsing ORGANIZATIONS

The following organizations support and endorse the protection of Georgia’s Mountain Treasures:

Georgia Appalachian Trail Club
https://georgia-atclub.org/

Great Old Broads for Wilderness
https://www.greatoldbroads.org/

Clayton Farmers Market
https://www.appalachiangrown.org/listing/show/2981-claytonfarmersmarket

Mountain Beekeepers
http://negabeekeeping.com/

The Bowen Center for the Arts
https://www.bowenarts.org/

GA Chapter of the Sierra Club
https://www.sierraclub.org/georgia

Southern Environmental Law Center
https://www.southernenvironment.org/

The Wilderness Society
https://www.wilderness.org/

North Georgia Mountain Outfitters – Ellijay
http://www.hikenorthgeorgia.com/

Old-Growth Forest Network
www.oldgrowthforest.net

Wander North Georgia
www.wandernorthgeorgia.com

MountainTrue
https://mountaintrue.org

R. Howard Dobbs, Jr. Foundation
http://www.dobbsfoundation.org

Georgia Canoeing Association
https://www.gapaddle.com

Georgia Botanical Society
https://www.gabotsoc.org

Alarka Expeditions
https://www.alarkaexpeditions.com

Chattooga Conservancy
https://chattoogariver.org

Patagonia
patagonia.com/atlanta