OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOLITUDE - All Wildernesses on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

BLUE RIDGE AND CHATTOOGA RANGER DISTRICTS

BLOOD MOUNTAIN, RAVEN CLIFFS, BRASSTOWN, MARK TRAIL, TRAY MOUNTAIN AND RICH MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS AREAS

Opportunities for Solitude Element: Survey monitoring areas in all Wilderness areas, using National Minimum Protocol for Solitude Monitoring. The collected data should be used to improve wilderness stewardship by informing managers' understanding of the wilderness they manage, how wilderness character is changing over time, and why changes may have occurred.

WSP Scoring and Deliverables:

WSP Opportunities for Solitude Element: Solitude Quality

Score	Description	Deliverables / Outcomes	Recommended NRM Documentation
2 points	A solitude monitoring plan has been developed for this wilderness along with a solitude monitoring protocol, which, at a minimum, conforms to the national solitude monitoring protocol.	• Solitude monitoring plan • Solitude monitoring protocol	• Upload to WSP Pinyon folder
4 points	A baseline inventory of current conditions for opportunities for solitude has been completed in the selected monitoring areas for this wilderness (per the national minimum protocol) within the past 10 years and data have been entered in an electronic format to support subsequent analysis.	• Baseline inventory of opportunities for solitude completed, within the past 10 years • All data entered into appropriate database or spreadsheet	• Date of survey completion (MM/YYYY) • Upload to WSP Pinyon folder
6 points	If monitoring shows that unacceptable levels of degradation exist, management actions have been taken in targeted areas. If conditions are determined to be stable or improving, no further actions are needed.	• Documentation of the management actions taken to improve opportunities for solitude	• Description of management actions (brief) • Enter "N/A" if no further actions are needed

Figure 1. Solitude monitoring WSP scoring and deliverables

All spatial data was collected using mobile devices. Data was uploaded using Survey123 software. Post-processing and analysis were completed using ArcGIS Desktop 11.0

Narrative: The baseline inventory was established in 2014 by John Campbell, Ryan Farr and SAWS Wilderness Rangers Nathan Mynatt and Charlie Smilie with the adapted National Minimum Protocol for solitude monitoring. The method provides a simple, repeatable process for measuring both the volume and variety of visitor use on wilderness trails for the Blue Ridge and Chattooga River Ranger Districts. In 2016 SAWS Rangers Casey Quarterman and James Lautzenheiser performed solitude monitoring in 12 monitoring areas across the national forests.

In 2022, SAWS partnered with Georgia Forestwatch to lead the pilot year of a volunteer solitude monitoring program in an effort to complete the Wilderness-wide survey for solitude across five years. Andrew Linker, Georgia Forestwatch's Outreach Coordinator, and SAWS Wilderness Rangers Kristy Ealdwine and Lauren King planned and implemented training videos for

volunteers to watch from home before meeting Linker in person at a monitoring area for their first monitoring session. With the help of the district, GAFW coordinated 8 volunteers to collect travel encounters in three monitoring areas in Raven Cliffs and Blood Mountain Wildernesses. These are the first three of eleven total monitoring areas across all wilderness areas on the Chattahoochee-Oconee NF. Over the course of the season, King monitored the collected data from volunteers for quality control and reached out after each session with a thank you message, their monitoring statistics from each session and a way to contact for questions, feedback or support. Monitoring was completed in October with volunteers completing 28 of 30 sessions planned for the season.

Program Statistics

5	8	28	116.5	4,579
Months	Volunteers	Completed Volunteer Monitoring Sessions	Hours of Monitoring	Visitors Counted by Volunteers

Results

Blood Mountain Wilderness: ## individual encounters/period

1) *Appalachian Trail (AT) from Woody Gap to Jarrard Gap.*
   109.72 individual encounters/period. A popular trailhead off of Hwy 60, Woody Gap is the gateway to Blood Mountain Wilderness for backpackers and day hikers alike. Jarrard Gap, about 7 miles to the north, is a junction for a popular loop out of Lake Winfield Scott Campground.

2) AT Blood Mountain from Byron Herbert Reece (originally called AT from Jarrard's Gap to Neel's Gap)
   111.18 individual encounters/period. A five-mile section, one of the most popular places to hike on the Chattahoochee, thanks to the view from the top of Blood Mountain. This monitoring area includes the Byron Herbert Reece Memorial Trail.

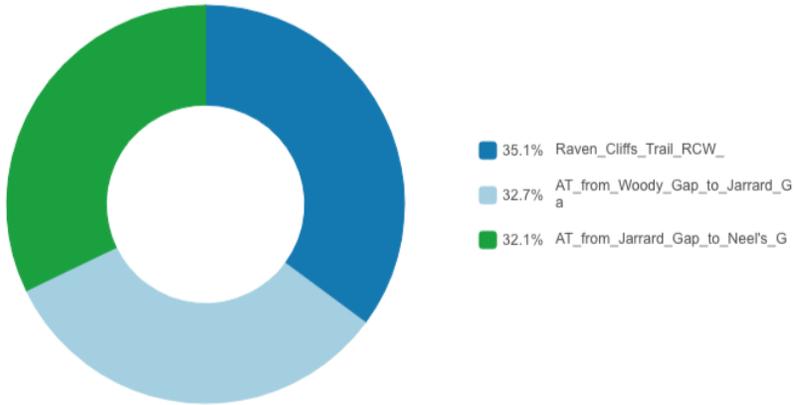Raven Cliffs Wilderness: ## individual encounters/period.

1) Raven Cliffs Trail.
   132 individual encounters/period. This 2.6-mile trail is only a few minutes from Helen, GA, an immensely popular tourist destination, and offers a relatively easy journey up Dodd Creek to Raven Cliffs Falls. The destination, beginner-level hiking opportunity, and proximity to the tourism hub of Helen all contribute to the intensive use seen on this trail.

Table. Individual and Group Encounter Totals for 6 Weekday and 5 Weekend Monitoring Periods.
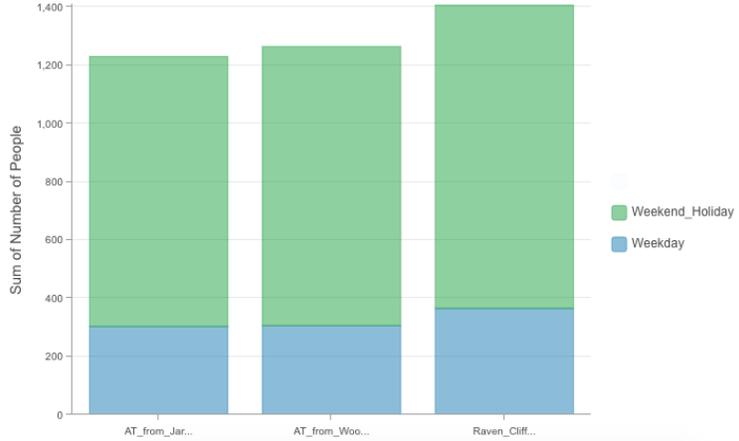
	Individual		Group		
	Weekday	Weekend	Weekday	Weekend	
Woody-Jarrard	324	1236	142	466	1560

Blood Mtn - Byron Reece	307	1260	157	527	1567
Raven Cliffs	400	1052	155	382	1452

Sum of Number of People by Monitoring Location (Wz)

35.1% Raven_Cliffs_Trail_RCW_

32.7% AT_from_Woody_Gap_to_Jarrard_Ga

32.1% AT_from_Jarrard_Gap_to_Neel's_G

Total Individual Encounters in Wilderness by Monitoring Area
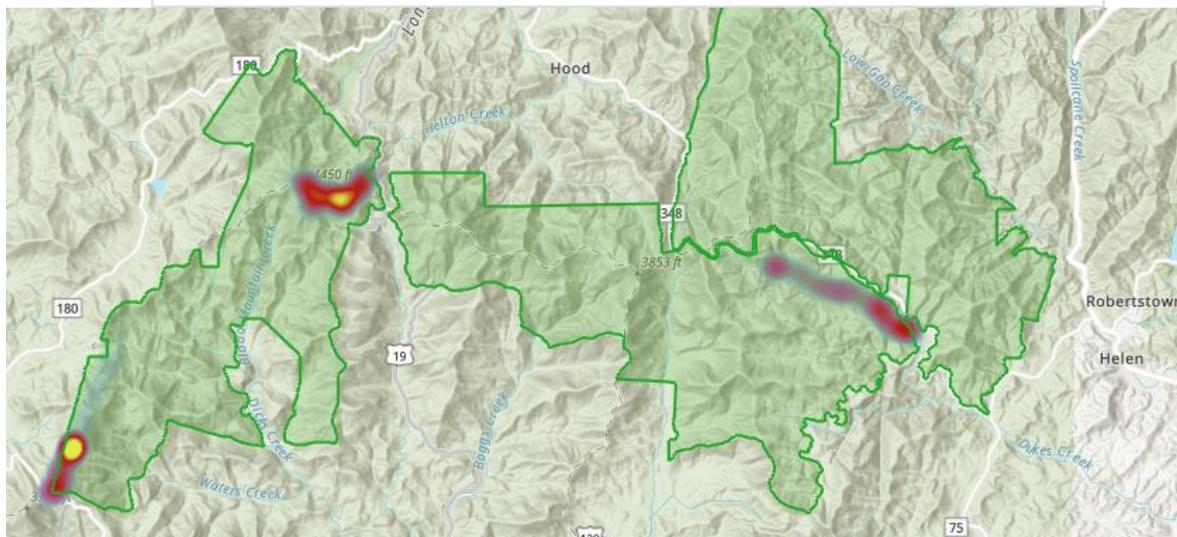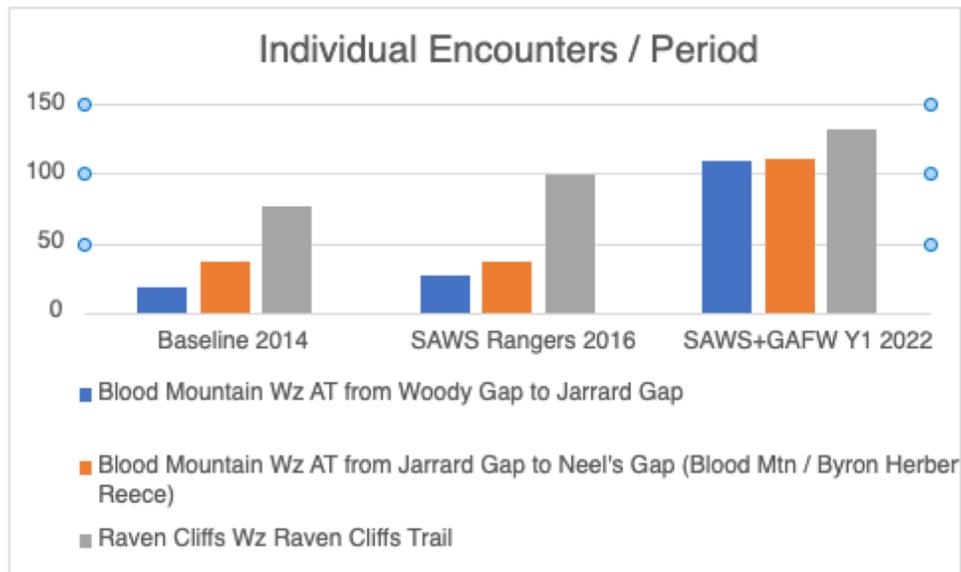
Discussion

The data gathered in 2022 is primarily useful in continuing to establish trends and assess the quality of "Opportunities for Solitude" in the Wildernesses on the Blue Ridge and Chattooga River Ranger Districts.

Although it is only the first year in the 5-year program, looking back at the same monitoring areas from 2016 and the baseline established in 2014, some elementary conclusions can be drawn from comparing this year's data. First: the number of trail encounters in the Woody Gap and Byron H. Reece areas of Blood Mountain Wilderness are both drastically higher than in previous monitoring surveys. It is possible that the jump in visitors can, at least in part, be due to the phenomenon of huge increases in visitation to public lands since the Covid-19 Pandemic. Second, the number of trail encounters in the Raven Cliffs Trail area continues to be higher than anywhere else monitored (so far). The results reinforce what the agency already acknowledges is happening at Raven Cliffs. Impacts from overuse have led to unacceptable conditions on the ground. Degraded vegetation and metastasizing footprint of bare, compacted earth caused by the crowds.

Next Steps: To accomplish the 6-point level in the Opportunities for Solitude WSP element, documentation of management action to improve opportunities for solitude is required. To gain these points in the Raven Cliffs and Blood Mountain Wildernesses, the following is recommended:

- Set quantitative goals for decreased size and number of campsites, tread repaired or replaced to meet USFS parameters for sustainable wilderness foot trail design, and a decreased overall number of users.
- Indirect management techniques for visitor use include
    o Physical design and alterations (improve, maintain or neglect roads or campsites; make trails more or less difficult.)
    o Information and education programs (information to redistribute use, advertise recreation opportunities in surrounding area, outside wilderness, LNT education programs)
    o Entry & eligibility requirements (charge visitor fee, require proof of wilderness knowledge or group permits)
- Direct management techniques for visitor use include
    o Increased enforcement (impose fines, increase surveillance of area)
    o Zoning (limit camping to setbacks from water or other features)
    o Rationing use (limit usage via access point or limit camping to designated campsites only)
    o Restrictions on activities (prohibit certain types of use or restrict building of campfires)