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Realizing a Dream: THE GREAT EASTERN TRAIL

American Hiking and the trails community propose a major new trail system connecting more than 10,000 miles of eastern footpaths.

by Ed Talone

LONG-DISTANCE TRAILS often begin as just a dream in the mind of an avid hiker. In 1910 James P. Taylor, a school principal, conceived of a footpath running the length of Vermont, and the 260-mile Long Trail was soon born. Eleven years later, Benton MacKaye, a forester from Massachusetts, looked farther afield and proposed an “Appalachian Trail.” His dream grew into an extraordinary footpath spanning more than 2,100

miles from Georgia to Maine. Others were inspired to build trails atop the Sierras, the Continental Divide, and through countless other wild places.

In the 1960s, the builders of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (AT) became concerned that pressures from population, road projects, and military installations would threaten the continuity of their trail. These concerns spawned two major trails to the west of the AT, the Benton MacKaye

Opposite page: The view from Signal Point at the southern terminus of Tennessee's Cumberland Trail.

Trail linking Georgia with the Great Smoky Mountains, plus the Tuscarora Trail crossing parts of Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Originally conceived as potential replacements for the AT, these trails have now prospered in their own right.

The Benton MacKaye and Tuscarora trails joined a growing number of existing and planned trails through eastern mountains. Last year the trails community, including representatives from American Hiking Society and the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program, gathered to propose a "Great Eastern Trail" (GET) that would connect the Florida National Scenic Trail and the North Country National Scenic Trail (see map). Some have said that the GET will help ease crowding on the AT. Many miles of the proposed route already exist. Let's "take a walk" and see what's there.

Alabama

Nearly 140 miles of the Alabama Pinhoti Trail traverse a very remote section of the Appalachians to the Georgia border. Sections here are much more rugged than you would expect, with numerous deep gaps, and cliff-top vistas. Highlights include 2,407-foot Cheaha Mountain, the state's highest point. The Alabama Pinhoti also passes through a number of beautiful watersheds where backpackers can pitch their tents on earthen dams. In the Conecuh National Forest in southern Alabama, named for the Muskogee phrase "land of cane," the Conecuh Trail follows a gentle, rolling route through a bottomland forest of beech and oak interspersed with the stands of cane that give the forest its name. Between these two segments, a gap of some 220 miles exists, posing a major challenge to trail planners. Trail

development is under way at Flag Mountain, the southernmost 1,000-foot peak in the Appalachian chain. This mountain, the first for northbound hikers, is topped with a magnificent 50-foot stone tower built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1935.

Georgia

The small town of Cave Springs welcomes the hiker into the Peach State. This quaint community has a large spring filled with trout in the middle of town. Just north of Cave Springs the route picks up the Simms Mountain Trail along an old rail bed. After





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The Towers found in Breaks Interstate Park along the Virginia-Kentucky border is one of the more interesting geological formations found along the route of the Great Eastern Trail.

12 enchanting miles, a short jog connects to the Georgia Pinhoti Trail. Here, you will follow old ridgetop logging roads (closed to traffic) through a section of the Chattahoochee National Forest. After turning north, the trail heads towards Tennessee. Several different corridors are being examined to connect the Georgia Pinhoti to the Cumberland Trail.

Tennessee

The historic city of Chattanooga provides the backdrop for the beginning of your journey here. Possibilities abound for the trail, including an extensive national military park and scenic walks along the Tennessee River. Just outside the city, the Cumberland Trail begins. Currently 165 miles are open for hiking. The completed trail will run more than 300 miles to the famous Cumberland Gap on the Virginia/Kentucky/Tennessee border. The sandstone Cumberland Plateau has been referred to as a “biogem,” due to the spectacular bi-

ological diversity found there. From spectacular river gorges where bald eagles can be found soaring, to the Obed Wild and Scenic River trail segment with its amazing 1,000 rock steps, this is perhaps the pinnacle of the Great Eastern Trail experience.

Virginia/Kentucky/West Virginia

At Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, the Pine Mountain Trail be-

comes your host. The completed trail will extend 120 miles to Breaks Interstate Park. Currently 38 miles of trail are open. Ledges, caves, and overlooks invite exploration. A quiet hiker may be fortunate enough to hear the bugling of elk during the fall rut. These large mammals were reintroduced in Kentucky in 1997. When you are on the west side of the ridge, you are often in Kentucky. Trail’s end means turning east where a route must be found across to the AT near Burkes Garden, Virginia. The 60 miles along the AT feature some steep sections, including a 2,000-foot descent to the New River. The New River, despite its name, is the second oldest in the world, and one of the few that flows north.

This section begins with a 60-mile walk along the Allegheny Trail in West Virginia. Soon that trail’s yellow blazes are left behind for a developing route through Virginia’s George Washington National Forest. Farther north, the GET joins the Tuscarora Trail and jogs along Great North and Sleepy Creek mountains. Along the way, the trail passes a number of dramatic overlooks, including Shockey’s Knob, named after Rev. John Shockey, a Methodist circuit rider who established the country



DAVE WOMBLE

The route of the proposed Great Eastern Trail includes the Alabama Pinhoti Trail. Above: Hikers Mark Stanfill and Jeffrey Hunter take a break along the Pinhoti. Right: The Blue Mountain Shelter along the trail.



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church in nearby Shockeysville, Virginia. The trail returns to West Virginia for more than 40 miles to reach the Potomac River at Hancock, Maryland.

Maryland

The trail enters Maryland at the village of Hancock, where the state is barely one mile wide. The highlight here is an eight-mile run along the historic C&O Canal towpath. The 184.5-mile canal, built between 1828 and 1850, was the fifth longest in the United States. It features many historic structures, including 11 stone aqueducts, one of which is on the route. It is perhaps the gentlest segment of the entire trail and is also part of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail, which when complete will link Washington, D.C., and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania/New York

The Tuscarora, Link, and Midstate trails combine to carry the hiker all the way to New York. Expect rugged going, with many rocky sections. A number of ridges are crossed rather than followed, increasing the challenge for the hiker. The rewards are many, though. Highlights include old charcoal flats, logging grades, dark forests of virgin hemlock and the only tunnel on the trail, through Paddy Mountain. Pennsylvania is also a great place to encounter black bears. You will also pass the remains of a still and follow the Great Island Indian path in Ravensburg State Park. The route in Pennsylvania is complete to the North Country Trail except for a few miles on either side of the New York border.

AS LAID OUT, the Great Eastern Trail stretches approx-



High Knob Tower is a feature along the Great Eastern Trail route in northwest Virginia.

imately 1,600 miles. However, it directly connects to some 10,000 miles of other trails, creating possibilities for endless exploration. Imagine being able to walk from Pennsylvania's dense forests of hemlock to primeval cypress swamps, or the vastness of the Great Plains. The connections are coming to make these dreams a reality.

The first step for trail planners is to link existing trail segments together. This will be a slow but very exciting process. Which communities will embrace the trail? Which landowners will step forward and befriend the path? Where will the route be predetermined

by things such as the need to cross a major river or highway? These and many other issues need to be dealt with. A coalition of trail groups is coming together to do just that. Speaking of the trail and its importance, former Midstate Trail President Tom Thwaites said, "Creating the Great Eastern Trail will open up new areas to exploration and give a number of lesser-known trails the recognition they need to thrive into the next century."

Looking ahead to future challenges, American Hiking Society's Southeast Trail Programs Director and GET Coordinator Jeffrey Hunter added, "The vision for a long-distance trail running parallel and west of the Appalachian Trail has existed for a number of years in a variety of forms. American Hiking Society hopes to nurture this dream and shepherd the various trail groups towards our goal of a completed Great Eastern Trail."

For more information about the Great Eastern Trail, contact Jeffrey Hunter at jhunter@AmericanHiking.org or (423) 266-2507.

Great Eastern Trail "Connections"

The Great Eastern Trail cannot be built without the help of volunteers. In 2006, five Volunteer Vacations are planned along the route of this new trail system. Each of these trips offers an opportunity to experience the beautiful Cumberland Plateau along the Pine Mountain and Cumberland trails. So "GET" on board, and be a part of history in the making. Here is a complete listing of the trips.

- Cumberland Trail State Park-Trip #88
May 28 - June 3
- Pine Mountain Trail State Park-Trip #62
June 11-17
- Pine Mountain Trail State Park-Trip #63
September 17-23
- Pine Mountain Trail State Park-Trip #64
October 8-14
- Cumberland Trail State Park-Trip #89
October 15-21

For more information and to sign up for one of these trips, please visit www.AmericanHiking.org.