

**FIVE-STAR TRAILS**

# ASHEVILLE

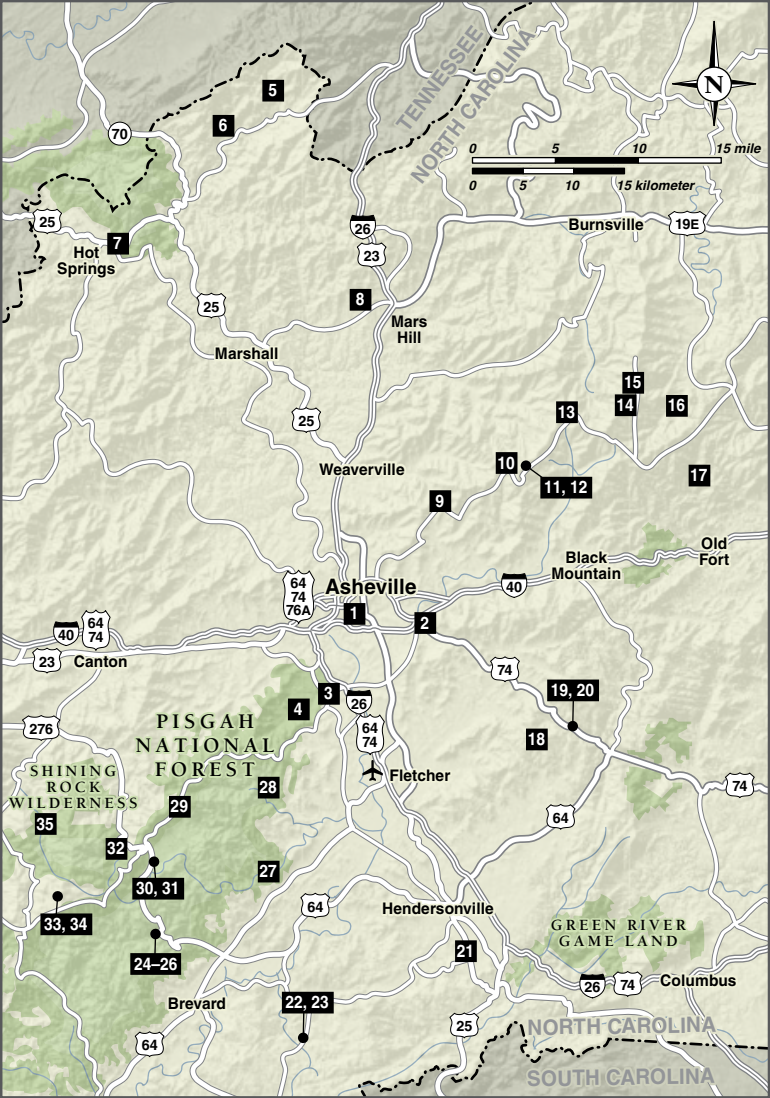
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**35 SPECTACULAR HIKES**  
in the Land of the Sky

**JENNIFER PHARR DAVIS**



Five-Star Trails: Asheville





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# Introduction

## About This Book

THE 35 HIKING ROUTES IN *Five-Star Trails: Asheville* are organized with the area's geography in mind. From 5 trails in the central area, the guidebook moves north for 8 trails, east for 5 trails, south for 7 trails, and west for 10 trails. Following is a description of each of these breakouts.

### Central

Hooray for so many trails close to the city of Asheville! Numerous folks who work and live in the area make use of these trails on a daily basis, primarily in the Bent Creek Experimental Forest and along Asheville's expanding greenway system. And the forest bordering the city's eastern and western flanks is widely accessible via the Mountains-to-Sea Trail.

### North

The Blue Ridge Parkway north of Asheville includes the 6,000-foot peaks along the Craggy Ridgeline and the historic ruins at Rattlesnake Lodge. Most of the hikes in this area take place on or near the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, but a day trip to Hot Springs, North Carolina, will also allow you to take the Appalachian Trail to a gorgeous vista at Lovers Leap, as well as newer Bailey Mountain Preserve. The trek atop Big Firescald Knob delivers another Appalachian Trail experience. Solitude seekers will enjoy remote Hickey Fork.

### East

East of Asheville, the hikes in this guidebook typically are not as heavily traveled as their counterparts to the west. Mount Mitchell is an exception, although you can find relative peace and quiet on its trails until you get very close to the summit. Bearwallow Mountain, Florence Nature Preserve, and Wildcat Rock are privately owned hiking destinations open to the public, with views, waterfalls, and biodiversity. Snooks Nose is a very steep, unsung hike with a whopper of a view, while Big Butt Little Butt Hike presents panoramas of the Mount Mitchell

OPPOSITE: **MOORE COVE FALLS EXECUTES ITS CURTAIN DIVE** (Hike 26, page 149).



# Central



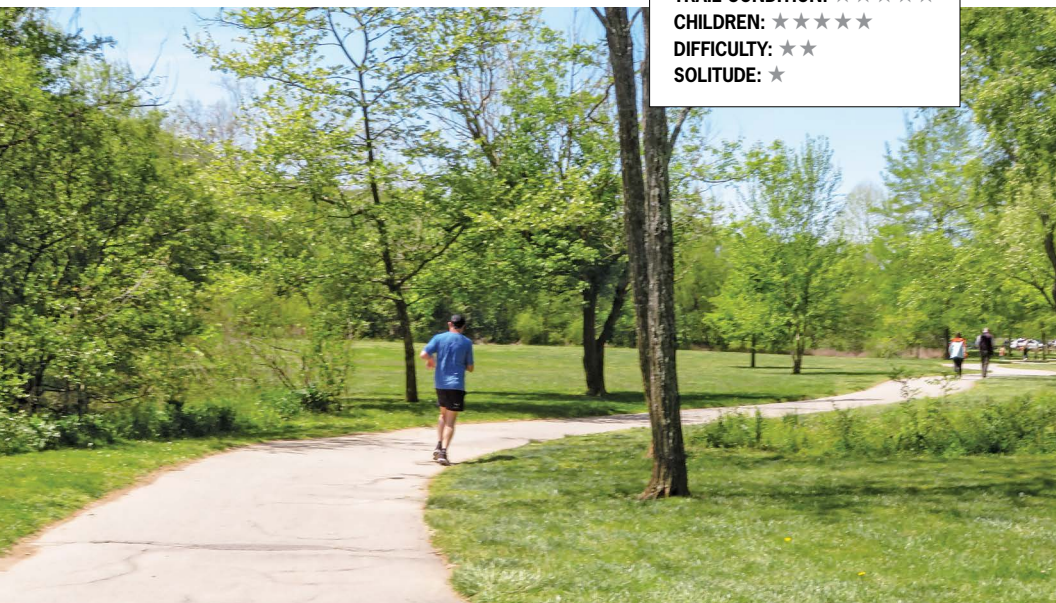
**DUCKS REST ON A FALLEN TREE AT LAKE POWHATAN** (*Hike 4, see page 33*).

- 1 FRENCH BROAD RIVER GREENWAY** (p. 20)
- 2 DESTINATION CENTER TRACK TRAIL** (p. 24)
- 3 ROCKY COVE** (p. 28)
- 4 LAKE POWHATAN** (p. 33)



# French Broad River Greenway

SCENERY: ★★ ★  
TRAIL CONDITION: ★★ ★★ ★  
CHILDREN: ★★ ★★ ★  
DIFFICULTY: ★ ★  
SOLITUDE: ★



**JOGGERS, WALKERS, AND HIKERS LIKE US ENJOY THE FRENCH BROAD RIVER GREENWAY.**

**TRAILHEAD GPS COORDINATES:** 35.569719, -82.564931

**DISTANCE & CONFIGURATION:** 2.9-mile balloon loop

**HIKING TIME:** 1.7 hours

**HIGHLIGHTS:** Four parks, French Broad River views, people-watching

**ELEVATION:** Around 1,980 feet throughout trek

**ACCESS:** No fees or permits required

**MAPS:** French Broad River Greenway West; USGS Asheville

**FACILITIES:** Restrooms, picnic tables, benches at trailhead and other points of hike

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** Yes, entire route

**CONTACTS:** City of Asheville Transportation Department, 828-259-5805, [ashevillenc.gov/departments/transportation/greenways](https://ashevillenc.gov/departments/transportation/greenways)

## Overview

Enjoy this fine urban trek in the heart of Asheville, where the French Broad River Greenway links four city parks. Start with a warm-up circuit at big and

busy French Broad River Park, then make your way to Amboy Riverfront Park to pass through newer Karen Cragolin Park before reaching Carrier Park, where you loop your way back to the trailhead. Additional segments of greenway on either end make extending this wheelchair-accessible adventure a breeze.

## Route Details

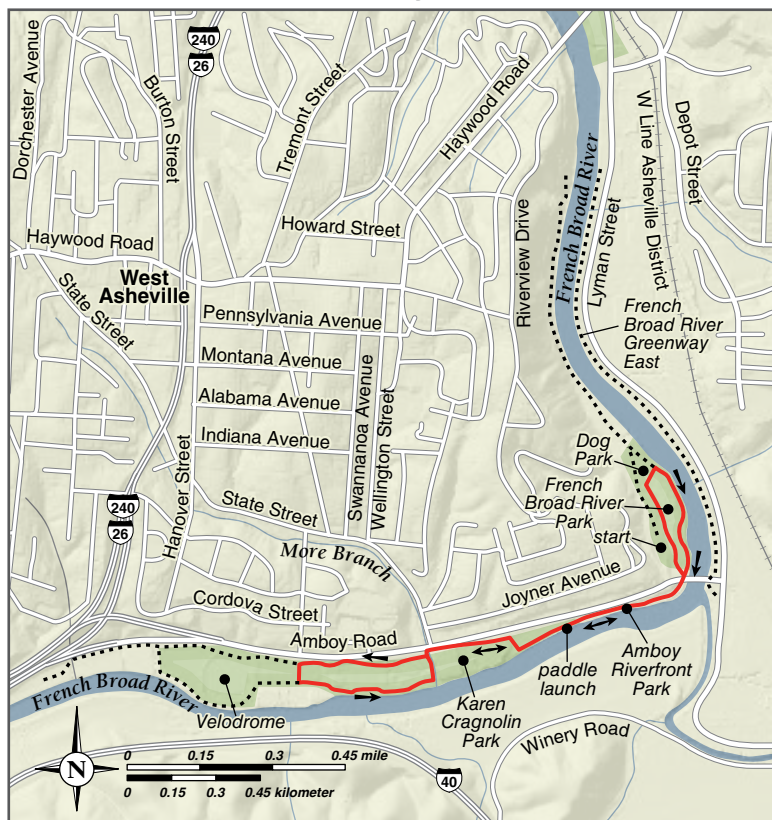
Sometimes life gets in the way of doing wilderness hikes among the far-flung mountains around Asheville. When this happens to me, rather than shirking the trail altogether, I gather up the family (if possible) and head to one of Asheville's expanding networks of greenways. The French Broad River Greenway is a good choice, as it travels along the river and links several parks together. The starting point, French Broad River Park, is often full of fellow parkgoers and great for people-watching. Of course, upon arriving, you will be one of the people being watched!

A kiosk will help orient you to the park, the French Broad River, and the greenways all about. Facing the river, you will head left (north) just past where the French Broad River has made a big bend after accepting the waters of the Swannanoa River. Trees shade the asphalt path. All manner of activity happens here, from fishing to frolicking, from picnicking to yoga, from in-line skating to reading. You will soon come near the enclosed dog park. Talk about frolicking! You next come to the river and will turn south at a connector, linking to the north portion of the French Broad River Greenway West. The roiling, fun-to-paddle French Broad is to your left, and the French Broad River Greenway East runs along the far bank. Asheville is just chock-full of urban greenways.

Your hike soon passes under Amboy Road, then turns west with the curve of the water to enter Amboy Riverfront Park. Enjoy close-up river views before reaching a paddle launch and alternative parking area at 0.8 mile. You soon leave Amboy Riverfront Park to reach 5-acre Karen Cragolin Park. Why so many parks next to one another? The answer is the parks were developed at different times, each one coming into existence independently. Karen Cragolin Park opened in 2023 and was named after the local advocate for such things as riverside parks and greenways. Note that the riverside seating at this preserve was formerly a junkyard. After the property purchase in 2006, it took years of remediation to get the land into shape to become a park. Over 100,000 tons of concrete were removed from the site, as well as smashed cars, etc.!



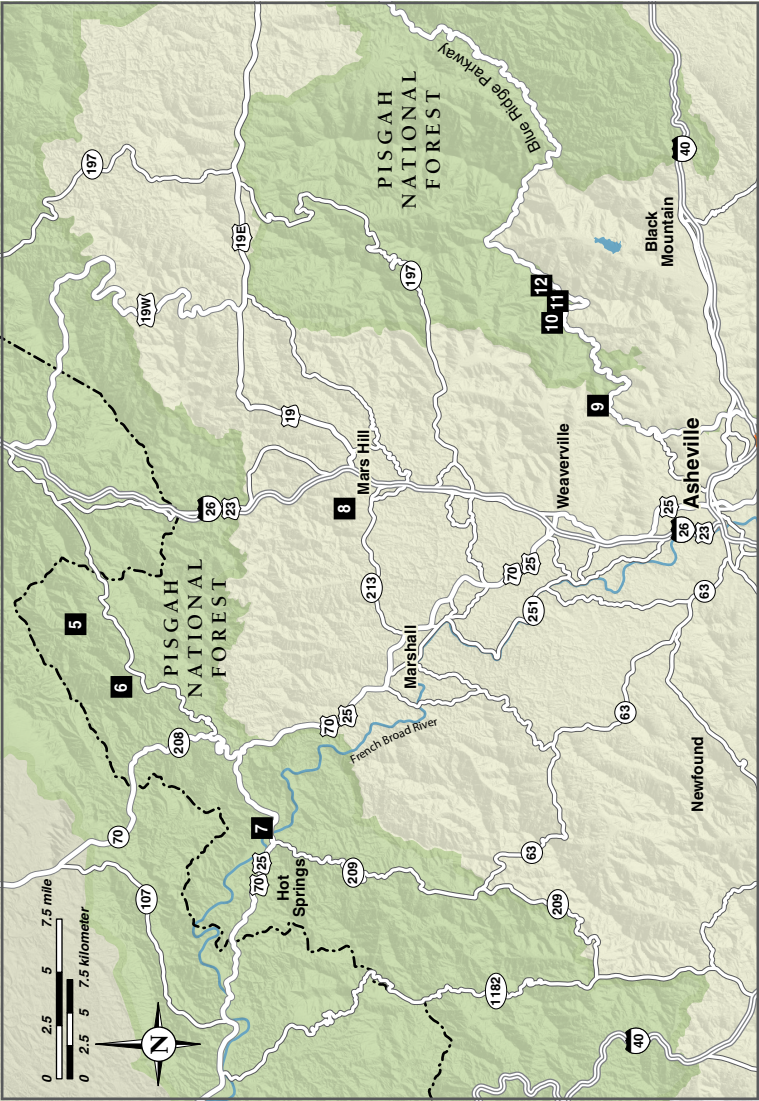
## French Broad River Greenway



The greenway twists through Karen Cragolin Park amid a mix of meadows and trees; at 1.1 miles the trail bridges Moore Branch near where it flows into the French Broad. This waterway's drainage, West Asheville, is in an entirely urban area, contributing its flow for better or worse into the French Broad. Then you are in Carrier Park, with multiple developed facilities, highlighted by a Velodrome, where bicyclers circle and circle a banked track, testing their speed. The French Broad River Greenway continues a westerly flat course, linking to spur nature trails. At 1.4 miles, you come to the Michigan Avenue entrance to the park, with a large parking area. This is a good place to begin looping back toward French Broad River Park, though you could easily continue on the French Broad River West Greenway to Hominy Creek River Park or simply loop back at the far end of Carrier Park.



North





# North



**HICKEY FORK FALLS IS A SELDOM-SEEN SPILLER** (*Hike 6, page 45*).

- 5 BIG FIRESKALD KNOB** (p. 40)
- 6 HICKEY FORK LOOP** (p. 45)
- 7 LOVERS LEAP** (p. 50)
- 8 BAILEY MOUNTAIN PRESERVE** (p. 55)
- 9 RATTLESNAKE LODGE** (p. 60)
- 10 HAWKBILL ROCK** (p. 65)
- 11 DOUGLAS FALLS** (p. 70)
- 12 CRAGGY GARDENS AND CRAGGY PINNACLE** (p. 75)



# Big Firescald Knob



**SCENERY:** ★★★★★  
**TRAIL CONDITION:** ★★★  
**CHILDREN:** ★  
**DIFFICULTY:** ★★★★★  
**SOLITUDE:** ★★★

## LOOKING OUT FROM BIG FIRESKALD KNOB

**TRAILHEAD GPS COORDINATES:** 36.023434, -82.652887

**DISTANCE & CONFIGURATION:** 10.2-mile loop

**HIKING TIME:** 6.5–7.5 hours

**HIGHLIGHTS:** Cascade, 360-degree rocky views

**ELEVATION:** 2,400' at trailhead, 4,530' at highest point

**ACCESS:** No fees or permits required

**MAPS:** National Geographic #782 *French Broad and Nolichucky Rivers* (Cherokee and Pisgah National Forests); USGS Greystone

**FACILITIES:** None

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** None

**CONTACTS:** Pisgah National Forest; Appalachian Ranger District, 828-689-9694, [fs.usda.gov/nfsnc](https://fs.usda.gov/nfsnc)



## Overview

This loop takes place in the Shelton Laurel Backcountry of the Pisgah National Forest. The Jerry Miller Trail takes you to a 100-foot waterslide before opening onto Whiteoak Flats, a closing meadow. Ascend to the Appalachian Trail (AT). Walk the stony knife-edge delineating North Carolina and Tennessee. Incredible 360-degree views unveil atop Big Firescald Knob, a half mile of continuous outcrops opening into the Tar Heel State and the Volunteer State. A steep trip down Fork Ridge takes you back to the trailhead.

## Route Details

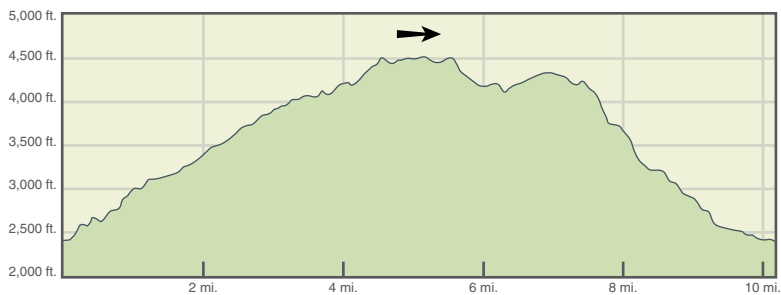
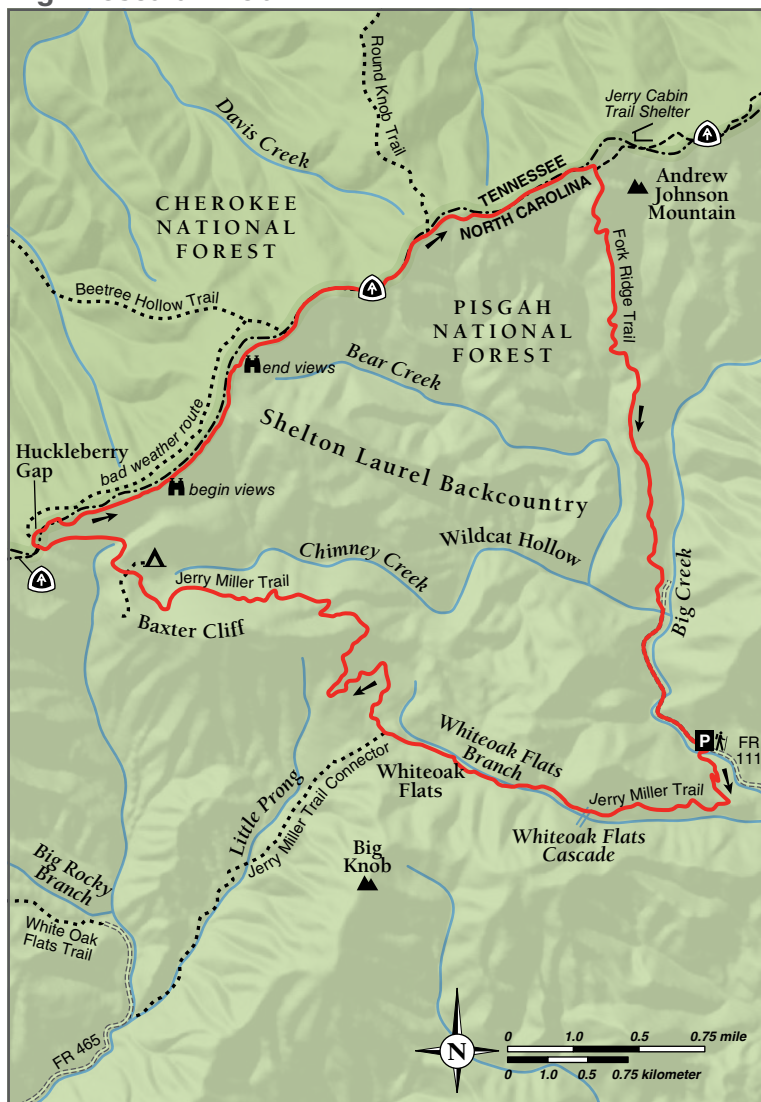
Note the trailhead memorial to Jerry Miller, a Carolinian and advocate of national forests. Bridge Big Creek on the Jerry Miller Trail, heading downstream. This flat will fill with wildflowers in spring. Scale a ridge dividing Big Creek from Whiteoak Flats Branch, avoiding an old route that crosses private property. Look for white trilliums here by the score. Turn into Whiteoak Flats Branch watershed at 0.3 mile. Head up the steep-sided valley among rhododendrons, sourwoods, pines, and magnolias.

The valley of Whiteoak Flats Branch closes in at 0.9 mile. Keep an eye out for a noteworthy cascade to your left. Here, a long slide pours down the hollow, then drops in stages before slowing. Winter's barren trees reveal the full 100-foot fall. The valley shuts, and you take a short log bridge over now-gentle Whiteoak Flats Branch at 1.2 miles. Hop a tributary at 1.3 miles, then open onto what remains of Whiteoak Flats meadow. The former homestead is growing over with briars, pines, and tulip trees, yet the surrounding ridges are still visible.

Whiteoak Flats meadow ends at 1.6 miles, and you'll open onto a second, smaller clearing at 1.7 miles. Stay with the blazed trail, careful to avoid old roadbeds spurring from the primary trail. Take a sharp left at 2.1 miles. An old road goes straight here. The proper path is blazed with paint; old roads fade and/or become overgrown. Rise to a dry ridge with black gum, pine, and mountain laurel. The Jerry Miller Trail then turns into upper Chimney Creek valley shaded by rhododendron arbors.

Tributaries of upper Chimney Creek sporadically spill over the trail. Rise to grassy Huckleberry Gap and a four-way intersection at 4 miles. To your right is a short path to a campsite. To your left, a signed trail leads atop a knob, then

## Big Firescald Knob







# East



**A HIKE TO SNOOKS NOSE DELIVERS VIEWS LIKE THIS** *(Hike 17, page 102).*

- 13 BIG BUTT LITTLE BUTT (p. 82)**
- 14 MOUNT MITCHELL HIGH LOOP (p. 87)**
- 15 MOUNT MITCHELL CIRCUIT (p. 92)**
- 16 SETROCK CREEK FALLS (p. 97)**
- 17 SNOOKS NOSE AND HICKORY BRANCH FALLS (p. 102)**
- 18 BEARWALLOW MOUNTAIN (p. 107)**
- 19 FLORENCE NATURE PRESERVE (p. 112)**
- 20 WILDCAT ROCK (p. 117)**

# Big Butt Little Butt



SCENERY: ★★★★★  
TRAIL CONDITION: ★★★★★  
CHILDREN: ★★  
DIFFICULTY: ★★★  
SOLITUDE: ★★★

## MOUNT MITCHELL AND THE BLACK MOUNTAINS AS SEEN FROM THE BIG BUTT TRAIL

**TRAILHEAD GPS COORDINATES:** 35.748508, -82.333910

**DISTANCE & CONFIGURATION:** 6.4-mile out-and-back

**HIKING TIME:** 3.2 hours

**HIGHLIGHTS:** Views from Little Butt and Big Butt, spruce forest, entire hike stays above a mile high

**ELEVATION:** 5,310' at trailhead, 5,948' atop Big Butt

**ACCESS:** No fees or permits required

**MAPS:** National Geographic #779 Pisgah National Forest: Linville Gorge Mount Mitchell; USGS Mount Mitchell

**FACILITIES:** None

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** None

**CONTACTS:** Pisgah National Forest, 828-689-9694, [fs.usda.gov/nfsnc](https://fs.usda.gov/nfsnc)

## Overview

This hike starts and stays over a mile high, wandering out Brush Fence Ridge over Point Misery to Little Butt and an open outcrop presenting a first-rate view of Mount Mitchell and the Black Mountain Range. From there, continue toward Big Butt, capping your hike off with a peak bag of Big Butt and a distant view to the north and west.

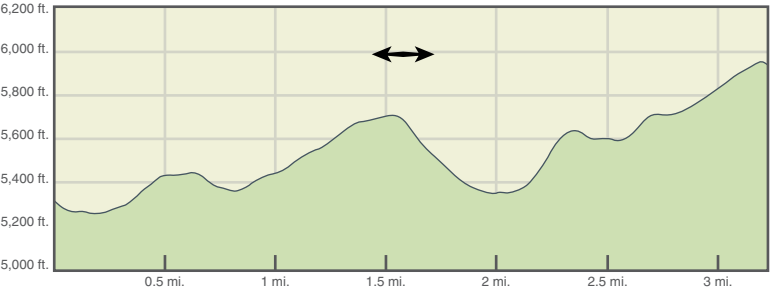
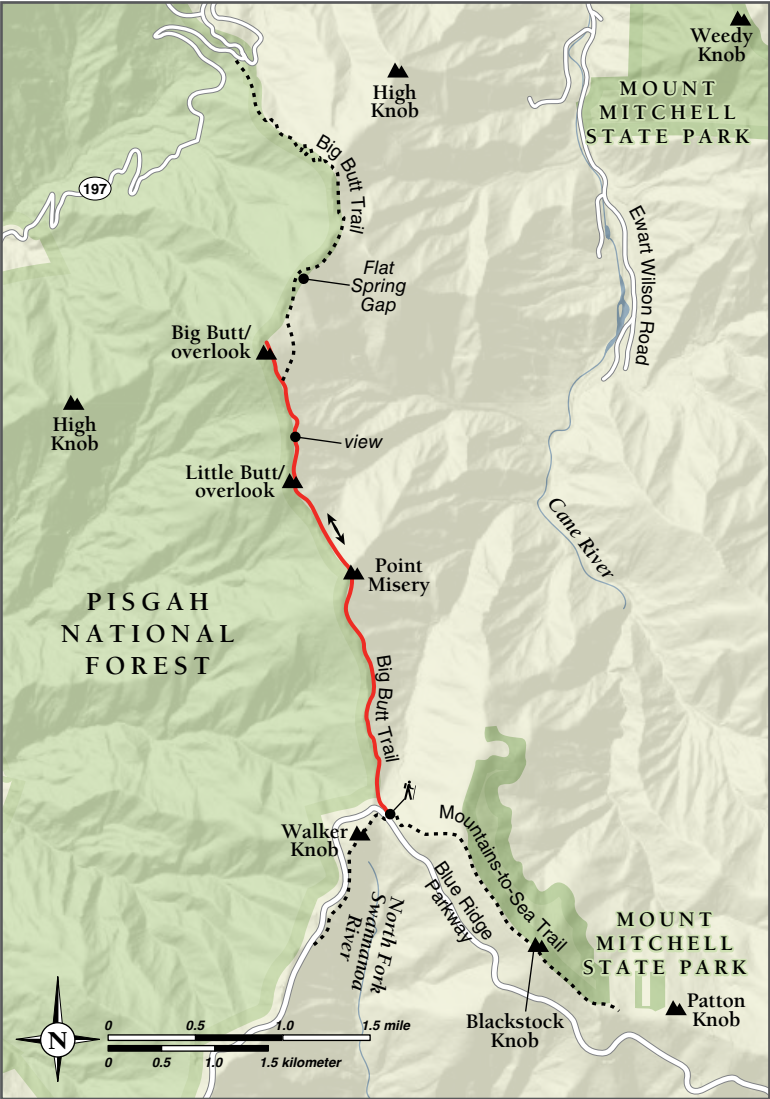
## Route Details

When you are literally one ridge over from North Carolina's fabled Black Mountains, where Mount Mitchell soars higher than every other peak east of the Mississippi River, you tend to be forgotten, a second fiddle mountain. However, Brush Fence Ridge, running parallel to the Black Mountains, offers a fine hike over three peaks, one of which presents a grandstand viewing platform of the mountains—where those majestic highlands stand out in brash relief. The trail to this grandstand is the Big Butt Trail, named for the highest of the three peaks you will visit, standing a shade under 6,000 feet. The path is in fine shape and exudes the high-country aura found where fragrant spruce spread their resinous perfume among gnarled yellow birch and beech, where a grassy understory waves in a cool breeze. It's a place where scattered outcrops rise as gray battlements in the forest, where the highland drops away to Ivy Creek and the Cane River, and where you can find repose in sterling natural splendor.

The hike starts at the Walker Knob Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway, at Balsam Gap. Locate and join the Big Butt Trail, heading northwest to briefly run along the parkway. Avoid the Mountains-to-Sea Trail that crosses the parkway here, as well as the old Wilson Boundary jeep road (not shown on the map). Once you're on the singletrack Big Butt Trail, scamper under yellow birch and spruce with a surprising number of red trilliums, also known as wake robins, as well as scads of lily-of-the-valley. At 0.1 mile, join Brush Fence Ridge, turning northbound with national forest property to your left and private property to the right, though the scenery is the same. Roll along the ridge; then, at 0.5 mile, the first set of wooden stairs eases you up a steep, narrow, craggy section, wreathed in rhododendrons. Shortly top out on a knob, then dip to a gap before making the steady but moderate ascent to 5,715-foot Point Misery, which you reach by a short spur at 1.5 miles. The wooded peak with no views is



# Big Butt Little Butt





# West



**SPECTACULAR VIEWS ARE YOUR REWARD FOR THIS DIFFICULT HIKE** (*Hike 32, page 181*).

**29 MOUNT PISGAH VIA BUCK SPRING LODGE** (p. 166)

**30 PINK BEDS LOOP** (p. 171)

**31 CRADLE OF FORESTRY** (p. 176)

**32 SHINING ROCK** (p. 181)

**33 BLACK BALSAM KNOB HIGH LOOP** (p. 186)


**34 SAM KNOB** (p. 191)

**35 COLD MOUNTAIN** (p. 196)



# Mount Pisgah Buck Spring Lodge

via



**SCENERY:** ★★★★★  
**TRAIL CONDITION:** ★★★★★  
**CHILDREN:** ★★  
**DIFFICULTY:** ★★★★★  
**SOLITUDE:** ★★

## MOUNT PISGAH RISES IN ALL ITS GLORY.

**TRAILHEAD GPS COORDINATES:** 35.403701, -82.753320

**DISTANCE & CONFIGURATION:** 5.2-mile out-and-back

**HIKING TIME:** 3 hours

**HIGHLIGHTS:** The remains of Buck Spring Lodge, George W. Vanderbilt's hunting cabin, and Mount Pisgah's summit and tower

**ELEVATION:** 4,923' at trailhead, 5,713' at Mount Pisgah's summit

**ACCESS:** Free and always open, but vehicle access to this hike is unavailable when the Blue Ridge Parkway is closed. Check [nps.gov/blri](https://nps.gov/blri) for real-time road closures.

**MAPS:** National Geographic #780 *Pisgah Ranger District*; USGS *Cruso*

**FACILITIES:** Restrooms and food located at the Pisgah Inn near the trailhead

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** None

**COMMENTS:** Do not let children (or adults) play near the TV tower on the top of Mount Pisgah.

**CONTACTS:** Blue Ridge Parkway: 828-298-0398, [nps.gov/blri](https://nps.gov/blri); Pisgah National Forest, 828-257-4200, [fs.usda.gov/nfsnc](https://fs.usda.gov/nfsnc)

## Overview

This hike leads to the top of Mount Pisgah after you have passed the remnants of Buck Spring Lodge—George W. Vanderbilt’s hunting cabin. Mount Pisgah is the most identifiable peak in Western North Carolina. On a clear day, the 339-foot television tower that crowns the mountain can be seen from seven surrounding counties. A hike to the base of the tower will reveal great views of Shining Rock Wilderness to the west and the French Broad River Basin to the east.

## Route Details

Begin your hike to Mount Pisgah via Buck Spring Lodge at the Pisgah Inn off the Blue Ridge Parkway. Feel free to visit the snack bar and gift shop before you locate the trailhead at the north end of the parking lot. For a weather preview, check out their live webcam at [pisgahinn.com](http://pisgahinn.com).

Follow Buck Spring Trail uphill and into the woods. During late summer, several wildflowers, including joe-pye weed, pale blue asters, and field thistle, grow alongside one another.

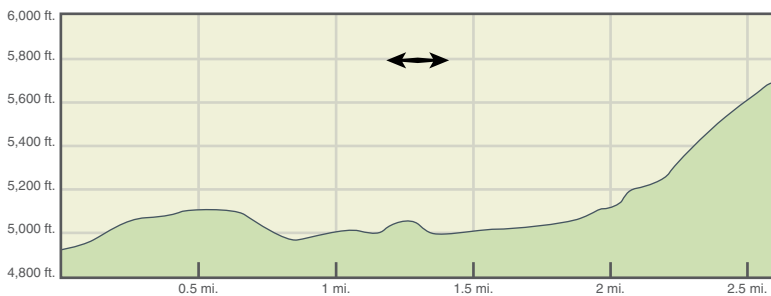
At 0.7 mile into your hike, a trail junction leads to Little Bald summit. Continue straight on Buck Spring Trail to reach another nearby intersection with Laurel Mountain Trail. After bypassing Laurel Mountain Trail, stay vigilant and start looking to the right of the trail to spot the historic and often-hidden remains of Buck Spring Lodge.

George W. Vanderbilt (1862–1914) is arguably the most well-known, influential, and extravagant former resident of Western North Carolina. His Biltmore House, fashioned after a French chateau, has 250 rooms and is still recognized as the largest home in America. However, when Vanderbilt longed for a simpler resting place, he would travel 22 miles by horseback on the Shut-In Ridge Trail to his hunting cabin.

Though small compared with the Biltmore House, Buck Spring Lodge was hardly a rustic retreat. Built in 1895 by the same architects who designed the Biltmore House, Buck Spring Lodge featured hot and cold running water and electricity. The Biltmore Estate Archives suggest that there was a year-round caretaker and seasonal staff stationed at the lodge to serve the Vanderbilts and maintain the facilities. Along with the main lodge, the site also boasted a separate honeymoon cottage, garage, stable, kitchen/dining area, and playhouse for Vanderbilt’s daughter, Cornelia.

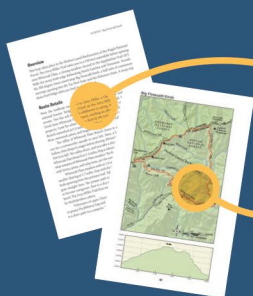
This map of Pisgah National Forest illustrates a network of trails and roads. Key features include:

- Mount Pisgah:** Located at the top left, featuring the WLOS tower and the Mount Pisgah Trail.
- Blue Ridge Parkway:** A major road running vertically through the center of the forest.
- Blue Ridge Parkway Trail:** A red line trail that follows the Blue Ridge Parkway, with arrows indicating a one-way direction.
- Other Trails:**
  - Little Pisgah Mountain
  - Buck Spring Gap
  - Buck Spring Lodge and Overlook
  - Buck Spring
  - Laurel Mountain Trail
  - Little Bald Trail
  - Little Bald Mountain
  - Mount Pisgah Picnic Area
  - Mount Pisgah Campground
  - Pisgah Inn
  - Mount Pisgah Trailhead
- Geographical Features:**
  - Pisgah Creek
  - Big Creek
  - tunnel
- Infrastructure:**
  - Two parking areas marked with 'P' in black squares.
  - A north arrow and a scale bar (0 to 0.3 mile and 0 to 0.3 kilometer) are located in the bottom right corner.



# LACE UP, GRAB YOUR PACK, AND HIT THE TRAIL!

ASHEVILLE LIES NEAR AN ENDLESS ARRAY of hiking opportunities: peaceful waterfalls, dramatic mountain vistas, and bountiful nature preserves. It is bordered by the Blue Ridge Parkway and is within striking distance of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Make the most of your hiking adventures with *Five-Star Trails: Asheville* and experience the best of the area's breathtaking scenery, varied terrain, and amazing wildlife.

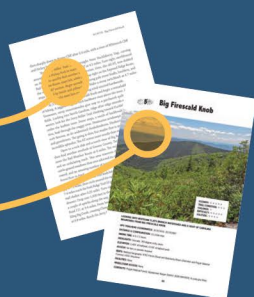


Descriptions of 35 five-star hiking trails for all levels and interests

GPS-based trail maps, elevation profiles, and directions to the trailheads

Insight into the history, flora, and fauna of each route

Ratings for scenery, difficulty, trail condition, solitude, and accessibility for children



3<sup>rd</sup> Edition  
TRAVEL/HIKING/ASHEVILLE



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