



THE TAR HEEL TRAIL

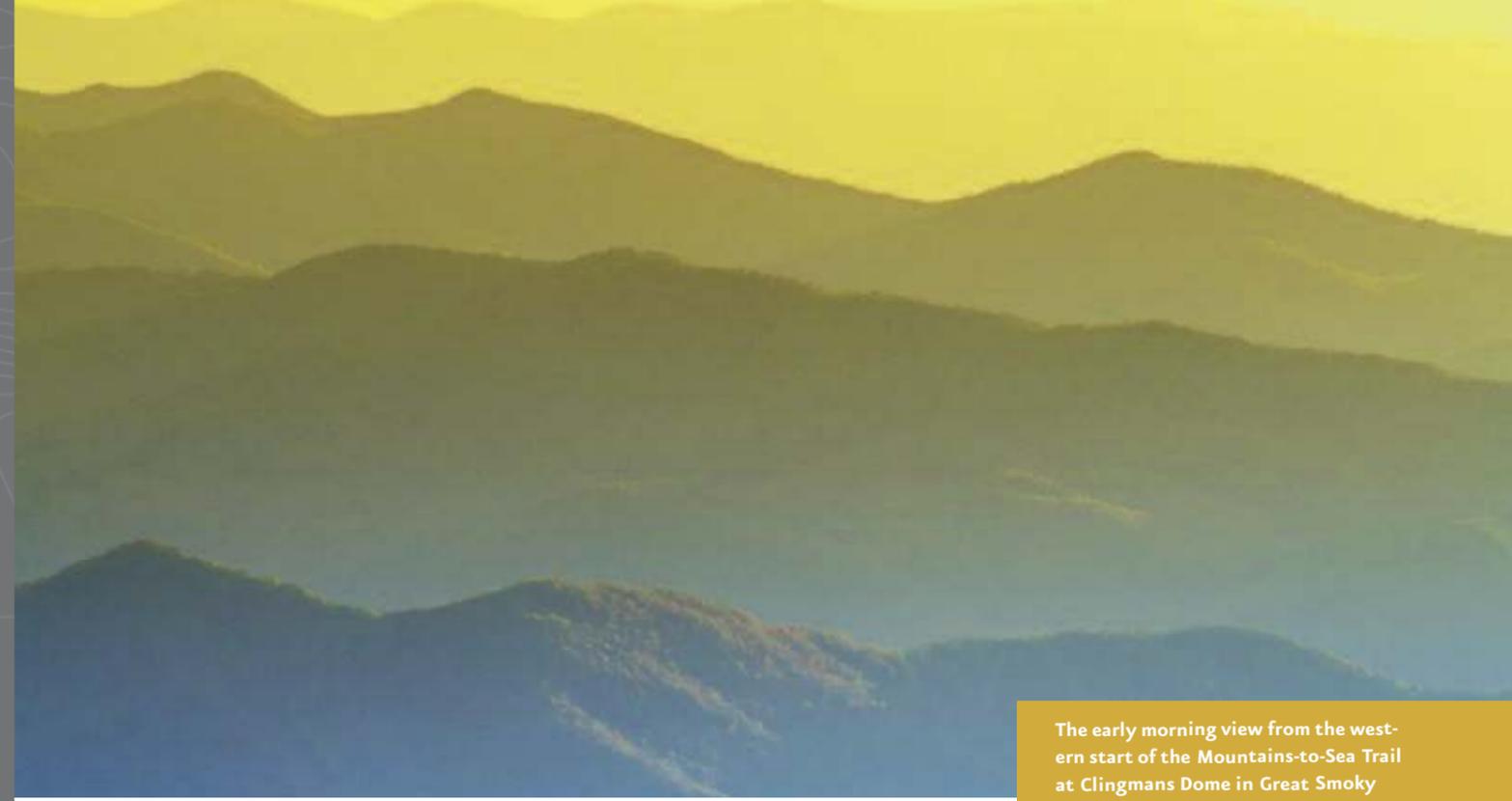
WRITTEN BY JOHN MANUEL



The first installment in a three-part series about the Mountains-to-Sea Trail focuses on the western portion of North Carolina, where nearly 400 miles of trails climb peaks and provide breathtaking views

THE MAN AT THE OVERLOOK ON THE BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY could be forgiven for his bewilderment. “MST. What is that? Mountain Standard Time?” Informed that the letters on the nearby signpost stood for “Mountains-to-Sea Trail,” he replied, “Never heard of it.” Yes, the MST is the new kid on the block with respect to hiking trails in North Carolina. But knowledge of and enthusiasm for the trail is growing, and before long, it may be as popular in our state as the Appalachian Trail.

Once people have learned about the MST’s existence, they frequently ask, “Is it done?” The answer to that is yes and no. There is a designated route, spelled out in various guidebooks and online maps, that one can follow some 1,175 miles from Clingmans Dome on the Tennessee border to Jockey’s Ridge on the Outer Banks. More than half of this distance (680 miles) is on footpaths; the remainder, especially in the eastern part of the state, is on roads. Individual sections of trail bypassing these roads are being secured and built all the time and will continue to be added for the foreseeable future. That is part of the wonder and excitement about the MST—it is a work in progress whose character grows with people’s contributions of time and money, and donations of easements and land.



The early morning view from the western start of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail at Clingmans Dome in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Below: Camping is permitted on select portions of the trail, including Black Balsam Knob.

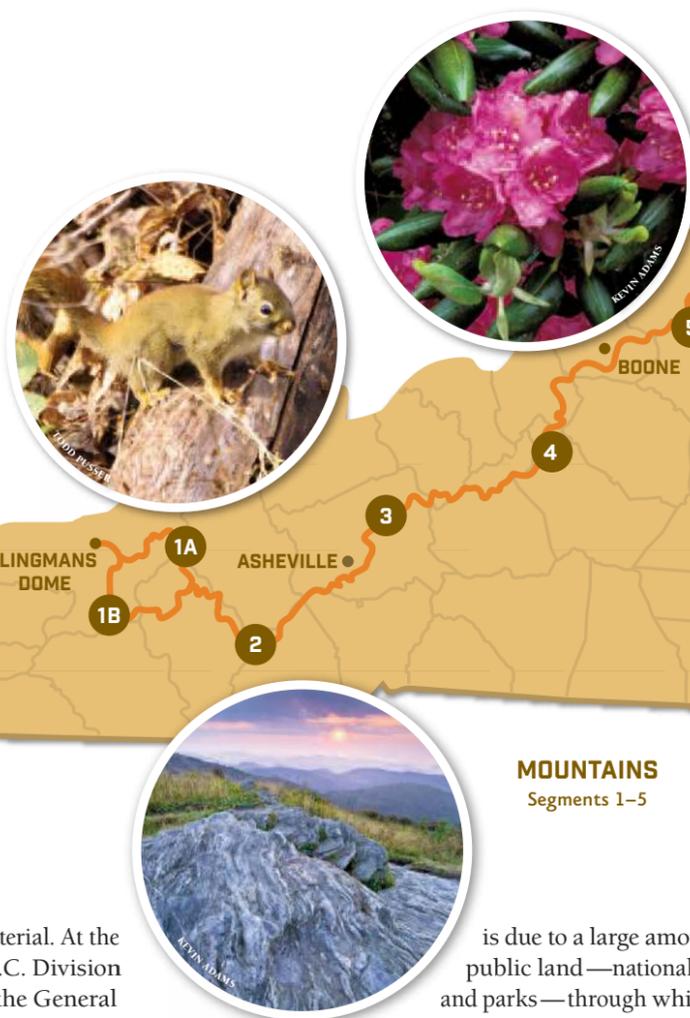
BOTH PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY KEVIN ADAMS





John Manuel guides us through some of his favorite mountain portions of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, but he will be the first to admit that a straight shot along the MST is not the only way to experience the mountains. There are many trails intersecting the main route (shown on this map) that are well worth exploring. Here are three more highlights detailed in the interactive trail map at MountaintoSea-Trail.org:

1. The MST is at its most remote in Segment 2, which goes from Waterrock Knob to the Pisgah Inn and crosses a paved road just seven times over a 52-mile stretch;
2. The Shut-In Trail in Segment 3, which follows the Old Carriage Road from the Biltmore House to George Vanderbilt's hunting lodge on Mount Pisgah;
3. Mount Jefferson Overlook in Segment 5, where one has a panoramic view of Grandfather, Sugar and Beech mountains to the south, as well as Mount Jefferson in front of you.



The origins of the MST date back to 1977, when Howard Lee, then secretary of the N.C. Department of Conservation and Community Development, proposed a “mountains-to-sea trail” that would serve primarily as a hiking trail across the state. While the public was used to thinking of hiking trails as ways to get away from civilization, Lee and others saw the MST as a way of bringing communities together.

The cause of the MST was taken up by the N.C. Trails Association (NCTA), which, starting in 1982, worked with state officials on the initial routing. The state began to designate sections of the trail in the late 1980s, primarily in the mountains and primarily overlapping existing trails. But following the death of its founder, Louise Chatfield, the NCTA disintegrated and support for the trail foundered. That's when outdoor activists, led by Allen de Hart, stormed the barricades, fiercely lobbying state officials to keep pushing for the trail. De Hart believed that the MST needed a parent organization whose focus was entirely on the trail's defense and promotion. The result was the formation of the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail.

The Friends restored the task forces created by the NCTA and added new ones. It secured federal funding for the purchase of construction equipment, trail signage and

promotional material. At the urging of the N.C. Division of State Parks, the General Assembly passed a bill in 2000 authorizing the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to incorporate the MST into the State Parks system. Since then, Friends task forces across the state have taken the initiative of organizing volunteer workers to build and maintain sections of trail in their respective districts. Friends now maintains more than 500 miles of the trail and builds an average of 15 new miles per year. It assists local governments and land managing agencies in their efforts to open new sections of the trail. It raises private dollars, and advocates for and promotes the trail through outreach efforts statewide. Through its website (www.mountaintoseatrail.org) and trail guides, Friends serves as the primary source of information about how to hike the trail.

Armed with this information, 75 people have hiked the length of the MST, and thousands more have tackled individual sections. This article addresses the Mountains portion, while future articles will cover the Piedmont and Coastal Plain portions.

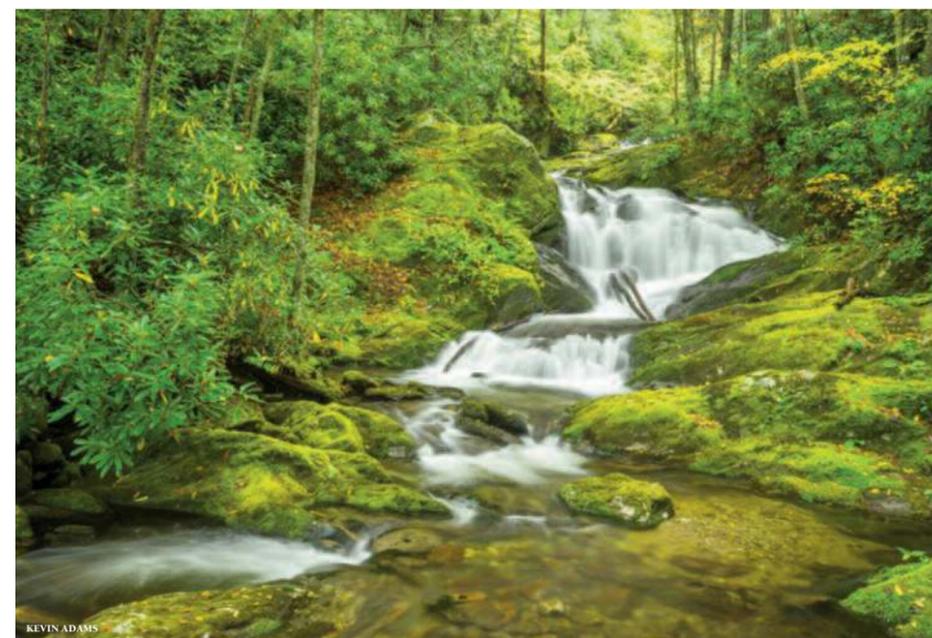
A WALK WITH A VIEW

To date, the most complete section of the MST is through our Mountains region. This

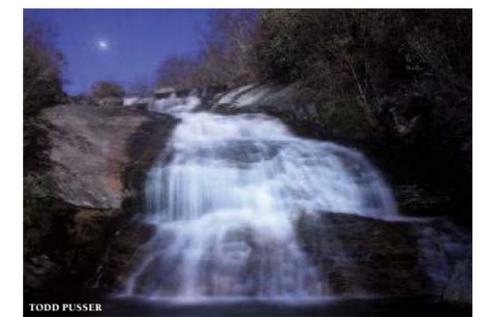
is due to a large amount of public land—national forests and parks—through which the trail runs, and the network of existing trails which have been designated as portions of the MST. Added to this is the participation of volunteers involved with Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, the Carolina Mountain Club and local community groups whose members have invested an incredible amount of time and effort to build and maintain the MST.

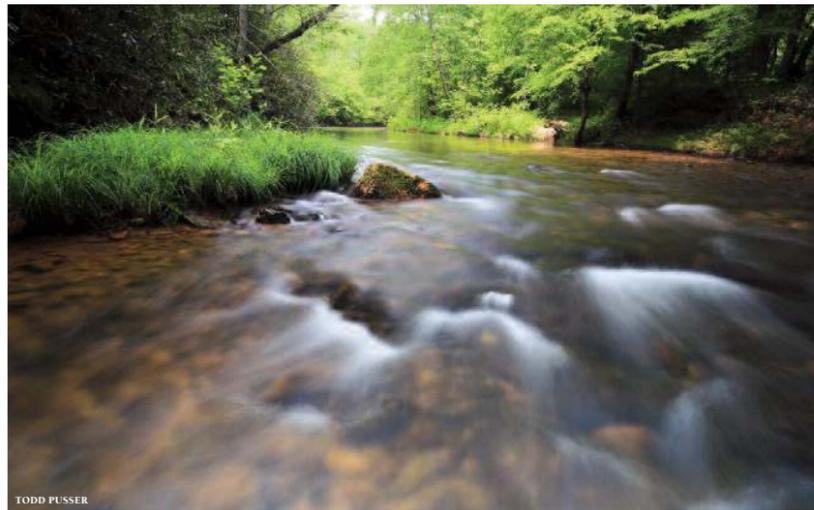
The Mountains portion of the MST runs from Clingmans Dome in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park to Stone Mountain in Wilkes County, a distance of 368 miles divided into five segments in the Friends' trail guide. Within the Smokies (Segment 1), the MST follows existing trails for 28 miles up and down peaks as high as 6,600 feet. Hikers traverse through hemlock and hardwood forest, beside cascading streams and their rhododendron borders. This is black bear country, though encounters on the trail are infrequent. More likely, one will hike to the chatter of squirrels, primarily the red squirrel or “mountain boomer,” which lives among the conifers.

Leaving the Smokies, hikers can choose between one of two routes that circumvent the Cherokee Indian Reservation. Recently,



Opposite: A variety of wildlife can be found along the western portion of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, including Catawba rhododendron (top) and red squirrels (middle). Stunning sunrises are also plentiful, like this one at Black Balsam Knob. Buckeye Falls (left) offers a picturesque view in Middle Prong Wilderness in Pisgah National Forest. The planet Venus shines brightly over this mountain waterfall along the MST.





TODD PUSSEY



KEVIN ADAMS



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TODD PUSSEY

the Cherokee Nation agreed to a route through the reservation following a network of gravel roads. This route will cut many miles off the current alternatives. The National Park Service is conducting an environmental impact assessment on the proposed route, which will connect with the Blue Ridge Parkway at Soco Gap. Friends estimates it will be several years before this alternative is approved and constructed.

The MST largely parallels the Blue Ridge Parkway from Soco Gap north to Doughton Park, with diverging loops into the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. The National Park Service, which manages the Parkway, has been a savior to the MST by allowing the trail to be constructed within its right-of-way. Building a new trail through the often steep, heavily forested terrain required tremendous effort, done largely by volunteers as part of local task forces. Around Waterrock Knob, members of the Carolina Mountain Club wrestled 100-pound rocks into place by hand to build steps. They fashioned stair rails out of locust

trees, cut and debarked on site. They built rock-lined dips instead of wooden water bars to channel water across the trail.

The result is a trail that, while in most places is no more than a few hundred feet from the Parkway, has the look of wilderness, tunneling through dense stands of mountain laurel, fir and hardwood. Scattered rock outcroppings offer views of distant ridges and valleys. In places, the trail breaks out of the forest and runs right along the shoulder of the Parkway, but that is not necessarily a drawback. "As a hiker, I like the variation of going through the woods then out along the road," said Danny Bernstein, author of "The Mountains to Sea Trail Across North Carolina," and the 21st person to hike the entire trail.

There are downsides to the trail paralleling the Parkway, one being that hikers are rarely out of earshot of the rumbling of motorcycles. Bernstein recommends hiking early in the morning or on weekdays to gain a measure of silence. Another downside is that the Park Service does not allow

camping along the Parkway. Friends is lobbying the Park Service to allow a limited number of primitive campgrounds along the Parkway, five of which have been approved. Camping is allowed in the national forests and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Most of the MST in the Mountains does not pass through developed areas. An exception to that is Segment 3, which goes right through the city of Asheville. Here, hikers can dine in a nearby restaurant (finally!), sleep in a motel and visit cultural sites like the Folk Art Center featuring stunning crafts of the Southern Highlands. Meanwhile, local residents flock to the trail to follow their own pursuits.

"Runners, dog walkers and bird watchers all use this portion of the trail," said Becky Smucker, former president of the Carolina Mountain Club and still active in trail maintenance. Smucker's passion is bryophytes—mosses, lichens and liverworts. She strolls the trail studying the myriad species growing on the rock outcroppings and trees.

Hikers each have their opinions about which is the MST's most scenic portion. The 70-mile stretch between N.C. 80 and Beacon Heights (Segment 4) in McDowell, Burke and Avery counties certainly ranks near the top. It is also the most secluded and one of the most strenuous sections to hike. From the intersection of N.C. 80 and the Blue Ridge Parkway, Segment 4 heads east across the rugged ridges and valleys of the Pisgah National Forest's Grandfather Ranger District. The trail crosses U.S. 221 and descends on a spur of Bald Mountain to the Catawba River. After crossing the river on a footbridge, the trail climbs over 2,000 feet to the top of Bald Knob, which features views of Bald Mountain, Graveyard Mountain and the Black Mountain Range, including Mount Mitchell. Another 10-mile descent takes hikers to the banks of the Linville River. This is the only river that needs to be waded on the MST, and it is deep enough to warrant caution.

After wading the river, hikers ascend 1,720 feet to the top of Shortoff Mountain. Here, one has spectacular views of Linville

Gorge, Table Rock and Hawksbill Mountain to the north, and Lake James to the south. The trail heads north along the lip of the gorge, with spur trails up to the Chimneys, a nesting spot for peregrine falcons, and Table Rock, a favorite among climbers.

Heading east from the gorge, the trail begins a 23-mile, up-and-down traverse of the Harpers Creek and Lost Cove Creek watersheds. This is a land of waterfalls, ranging from 200-foot South Harper Creek Falls to the three-tiered Hunt-Fish Falls. It's also trout water, with North Harper Creek being among the most popular trout streams in North Carolina. Finally, there is a 9-mile ascent to Beacon Heights and the Blue Ridge Parkway below Grandfather Mountain.

WHERE THE WILDLIFE LIVES

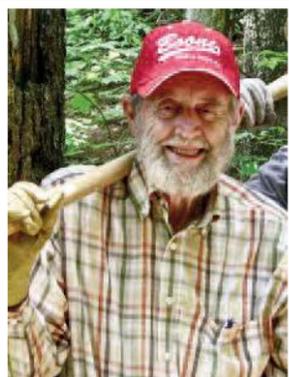
As with any hiking trail in the East, seeing wildlife along the MST is a hit-or-miss affair.

SCATTERED ROCK OUTCROPPINGS OFFER MAGNIFICENT VIEWS OF DISTANT RIDGES AND VALLEYS. IN PLACES, THE TRAIL BREAKS OUT OF THE FOREST AND RUNS RIGHT ALONG THE SHOULDER OF THE PARKWAY, BUT THAT IS NOT NECESSARILY A DRAWBACK.

Opposite, clockwise: Mountain creeks and streams abound along the MST. Galax grows on a hillside. Wild stonecrop grows atop moss at the base of a tree. Hunt-Fish Falls, a two-tiered waterfall, tumbles about 8 feet in the Wilson Creek Watershed. Above: Turk's cap lily adorns a mountainside along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

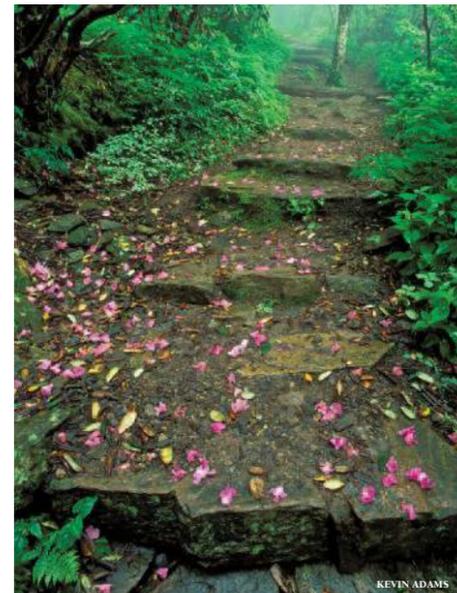
ALLEN DE HART: MST'S TRAIL HEAD

On October 14, 2016, Allen de Hart died in Raleigh at the age of 90. By his own estimate—and no one who knew him doubts it—de Hart had hiked 65,000 miles by the time he was 86. He was a history professor at Louisburg College and the author of 11 guidebooks, including “North Carolina Hiking Trails”—he had been working on the 11th edition of the book at the time of his death.

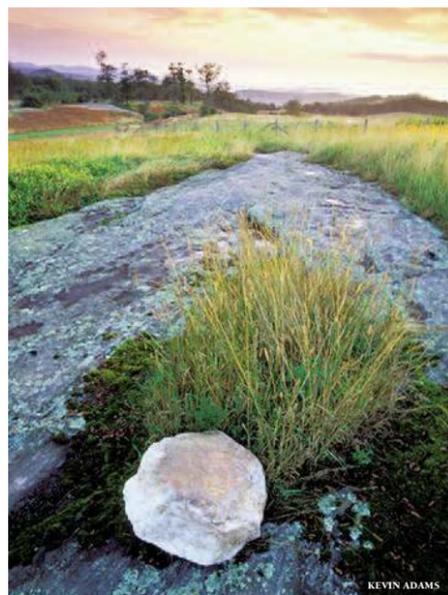


De Hart was not the founder of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, but he was its staunchest supporter. “Without Allen, there would be no Mountains-To-Sea Trail today,” said Kate Dixon, executive director of the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. “Since 1977, when the trail was first proposed, Allen became its fiercest advocate. When progress slowed almost to a standstill in the 1990s, he devised a route for the trail and set off hiking across the state to rebuild enthusiasm and show the dream could be made real.”

De Hart founded the Friends group and recruited and trained many of the trail builders and maintainers. On any given weekend, he could be found building a new section of trail with a cadre of volunteers, each of whom yearned for the chance to get in a word with North Carolina’s trail guru. Those who knew him will miss his impish smile and his positive outlook on life. Everyone who hikes the MST will be following in his footsteps.



Above, clockwise: The MST passes under the Linn Cove Viaduct, a 1,241-foot segmental bridge that winds along Grandfather Mountain. Mountain laurel is common on the trail. The sun rises and cattle graze at Doughton Park. Mickey Shortt (left), a naturalist with the Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation, and Shelton Wilder, crew leader with the Friends of the MST, examine a hobblebush. Opposite: The Tanawha Trail footbridge cuts through the Linn Cove Branch. Rhododendron petals make for a colorful walk on the Craggy Pinnacle Trail.



Mickey Shortt, a naturalist with the Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation, says the segment of the MST running along the side of Grandfather Mountain (Segment 5) is notable because it goes through what is classified as a “World Biosphere Reserve.” This includes a spruce-fir habitat supporting bird species normally found in Canada.

“Magnolia warblers have been consistently seen in the red spruce along the Tanawha Trail,” Shortt said. “You may also see red crossbills, which are characterized by mandibles with crossed tips. In May, you can hear Northern saw whet owls calling at night.”

More than 20 species of salamanders can be found in this area. “Turn over a rock or log and you are likely to find a gray-cheeked or red-backed salamander,” he said.

Flowering plants and shrubs put on a display of color along this section of trail during the spring, summer and fall. Painted trillium bloom beside the trail in May, followed by Catawba rhododendron and mountain laurel in June, rosebay and galax in July, and white-wood aster and black snakeroot in August and September. In October, the many hardwood trees set the mountainsides ablaze in yellow, red and orange.

From Grandfather Mountain north, the MST resumes its course paralleling the Blue Ridge Parkway. Overlapping the Tanawha Trail, the MST runs under the Linn Cove Viaduct and beside several overlooks. On

this section, as in others, there are intersecting trails that one can follow to particular points of interest. The Grandfather Mountain Access Trail, for example, leads to the top of 5,964-foot-tall Calloway Peak, and the Boone Fork Trail to Price Memorial Park and the Moses Cone Manor.

North of Deep Gap, where the trail enters Ashe County, the normally rocky trail surface gives way to a soft loam. White pines dominate the forest and the trail courses through open meadows. At milepost 264 on the Parkway, a grassy hill called “The Lump” offers views all the way to Stone Mountain and the Yadkin Valley, where the trail leaves the Mountains and enters the Piedmont. Anyone who has hiked the full distance from Clingmans Dome to Stone Mountain can rest easy. It’s still 800 miles to the coast, but from here east, the trail runs largely downhill.

MOUNTAIN NEEDS

With the exception of the link through the Cherokee Reservation, construction of the trail through the Mountains is largely complete. But the long-term viability of the MST, as with any trail, cannot be taken for granted. Maintenance is a constant need. If not cut back, blackberry bushes will overtake any given portion of the trail within a few years. Ice storms and wind events, like the mini-tornado that hit the Cascades Overlook in 2016, can bring down branches and trees.

To date, maintenance has been done by local volunteers under the direction of task force leaders. But many of these leaders and volunteers are in their 60s and 70s, and it’s an open question as to who will take their place. The hope lies with the next wave of retirees and a generation of youth more experienced in thumbing joysticks than swinging mattocks.

“There are many creative ways to recruit and engage volunteers so that their interests and abilities are matched with the various maintenance needs of the trail,” said Jim Hallsey, the South Ashe task force leader.

“High school and college outdoor groups have provided valuable service, as have organized trail clubs that have a maintenance function in addition to an ambitious hiking and outing schedule. While it’s true that even hardcore octogenarian volunteers eventually have to slow down or give up their maintenance activities, there seems to be a ready supply of young seniors just reaching retirement.”

Interested persons should get involved by going to the Friends website and contacting any one of the volunteer task force leaders. Volunteer opportunities are available throughout the state. It will be up to us, the citizens of North Carolina, to maintain the trail that people like de Hart, Bernstein, Smucker and Hallsey have built. ♡

John Manuel is a freelance writer and a regular contributor to Wildlife in North Carolina.