

High Peaks Tackles Rehab of Mt. Mitchell Trail

One of the driving forces behind the creation of NC High Peaks in 2010 was the deteriorating condition of the trails of the Black Mountains. The budget for the U.S. Forest Service was shrinking over the years and trail maintenance was delayed to cut costs. On top of that, the region's premier trail club, the Carolina Mountain Club of Asheville, viewed the Black Mountains as too far afield and too difficult to access and declined to offer its volunteers to work its trails. For these reasons, High Peaks' founders decided a Burnsville-based hiking and trail maintenance club was needed and its focus would be the Black Mountains.



For lovers of the outdoors, the Black Mountains are an absolute gem, with 18 named peaks over 6,000-feet and the highest trails in the eastern United States. Many of these trails have existed for generations, providing access from the river valleys below to the high peaks above. But early settlers knew nothing of “sustainable trail construction” and typically ran these tracks straight up the ridge lines. “Where are the

switchbacks?” more than one visitor has asked after hiking the Woody Ridge Trail, which climbs an astounding 3,000 feet in only 2.2 miles. While not quite this steep, most of the other trails of the Blacks - Colbert Ridge, the Mt. Mitchell Trail, Green Knob – are extreme. [Above: Moon setting over the Black Mountains.]

The result isn't hard to grasp: all of these trails are in terrible condition because they all channel water straight downhill. Over the decades, torrential downpours have left rutted gullies, in places hip-deep! The typical strategy to counter such incessant erosion is the construction of water-bars and check-dams to trap silt and divert water off the trail. But these structures require a lot of time to install and maintain; water-bars typically need to be cleaned out twice a year, or they become blocked and ineffective. Add in all the other necessary trail work in the Blacks – lopping back heavy undergrowth and clearing downed trees – and the schedule can become overwhelmed, allowing the trails to degrade even further.

These problems are compounded on the Mt. Mitchell Trail. As the primary route to climb the tallest mountain in the Eastern U.S., it receives tremendous use – 35 to 40 hikers a day in summer. High Peaks has tried to focus on this trail, but the backlog of work and the need to spend time on other popular trails has been more than our small club can handle. After researching available options, in 2016 the club applied for grant money to hire a contractor to renovate the Mt. Mitchell Trail.

Applying for grants is a lot more work than many might realize, but dedicated High Peaks volunteers slogged through the process, obtaining four grants over multiple years totaling \$240,000 from the Recreational Trails Program that is administered by the North Carolina State Parks. With this money, the club hired young AmeriCorps volunteers who work for a trail-building outfit with offices in Asheville, the American Conservation Experience. These crews of a dozen or more camped out for 10-day stints, building steps, water-bars, cribs and other structures that have dramatically improved the track.

Although successful, the effort hasn't been without challenges. First, High Peaks learned that the grant money isn't doled out BEFORE the work is done, only afterwards. Essentially, the club was required to

pay the contractor and then wait several months to be reimbursed. With the typical contract costing about \$50,000, this was a big challenge for a small club with only 150 members. But the High Peaks leadership plowed ahead, starting a dedicated Trail Fund in 2016. One very generous member donated \$10,000 to kick off the effort, and the fund has since grown to \$28,000. . [Right: Photo of ACE's work.]



But another issue the club has come to realize is that building water-bars, steps and check dams will only go so far to solve the issues on the Mt. Mitchell Trail. Those structures will eventually fail and have to be rebuilt, yet again. The longer-term solution is to re-route the trail so that it goes on long side-hill switchbacks on a gentle grade, with dips that allow the water to flow off the trail instead of running down its length and gouging out new ruts. But re-routing a trail is not as simple as it might sound. You don't just head out with some orange flagging tape and start digging new tread. A re-route these days requires a host of approvals, most from the U.S. Forest Service. These approvals require professional studies and evaluations, including overall environmental impact, archeological impacts and the impact on endangered plant and animal specie



[Left: ACE crew setting a crib log on a steep rock face.]

This will be a tremendous amount of work, but High Peaks is committing itself to get this job done because it will offer a permanent solution to the persistent problems besetting the Mt. Mitchell Trail. The trail has now been divided into 12 sections, with each section requiring either renovation or a re-route based upon its grade and sustainability. Working closely with the Forest Service's Appalachian Ranger District in Mars Hill, NC High Peaks is actively completing the required studies and paperwork to approve this long-range project. Approval has been received and work commenced on the first of these reroutes.

But doing the job right is not going to be cheap. Although we're extremely grateful to our members and donors who have helped us get this far, we're now asking for more support. To make a donation click on the "Donate" button under the nchPta tab. Thank you for your continuing support.

Also, we are always looking for volunteers for our weekly trail maintenance crew. If interested send an e-mail to trails@nchighpeaks.org