

**DAY HIKES AND SHORT BACKPACKING TRIPS
IN THE MT. ROGERS NATIONAL RECREATION AREA**

Short hikes:

Loop hike on Appalachian and Iron Mtn. trails (4 mi., moderate):

Beginning in Damascus, walk east on E. 4th St. to reach the Iron Mtn. Trail. Follow yellow blazes for about 2 miles. Trail crosses a few small streams on stepstones, winds uphill, then turns left. At sign, turn right on short blue-blazed connecting trail, then right again onto the Appalachian Trail (white blazes). For the next 2 miles, the AT crosses a ridge overlooking Damascus, descends, turns left, and reaches a set of steps, crossing Rte. 58 to join the VA Creeper Trail and return to Damascus.

Loop hike on the Appalachian and VA Creeper trails (8 mi. easy to moderate):

Beginning in Damascus, walk east on the Appalachian and VA Creeper Trails (white blazes). At the "Appalachian Trail" sign, turn left, cross Rte. 58/91 and ascend a set of steps, following the white blazed A.T. four miles, across ridges with views. Cross a small log bridge and turn right on the Beech Grove Trail (unblazed woods road) to reach Rte. 58 in ¼ mile. Cross and descend to the Straight Branch VA Creeper Trail parking lot. Turn right on the Creeper and walk four miles, with views of the creek, to return to Damascus.

Loop hike on the Iron Mtn. and Feathercamp trails (6 mi., moderate):

Park at the upper Straight Branch parking lot above the VA Creeper Trail, about 5 miles east of Damascus on Rte. 58. Cross 58 and hike north on the Beech Grove Trail (woods road), ascending 1 mile. At the sign at the top, turn right to the Iron Mtn. Trail (which begins as a woods road for about ¼ mile, then turns right on yellow blazes into the woods). After about 2 miles, continue through a signed trail intersection and hike another mile to a hiker trail on the right to Sandy Flats. (Optional side trip: continue on the I.M.T. ¼ mile farther to Sandy Flats Shelter site and back. The shelter was demolished by treefall in Oct. 2015.) Turn right at Sandy Flats onto the blue-blazed Feathercamp Trail. Descend 2 miles to Rte. 58. (The last ½ mile has several crossings of Feathercamp Creek on stepstones.) At 58, turn right and walk ¼ mile to your car.

Appalachian Trail to TN/VA state line and Backbone Rock (7 mi., moderate):

Beginning at the Damascus Town Park, follow white blazes south. Cross Beaverdam Rd. and ascend on the AT between two houses. Trail ascends on switchbacks, reaching a woods road in about ¾ mile. Continue past a campsite with a blue-blazed spring trail at 2 miles; then ascend 1 ½ more miles to the sign at the TN/VA state line. Retrace back to Damascus, or if a car has

been left at the Backbone Rock parking lot on Rte. 133, just under the tunnel on the right, hike just over a mile farther past the state line to the Backbone Rock Trail and descend 2 miles to the parking lot.

Loop hike on Appalachian and VA Creeper trails from Straight Branch (4 mi., easy):

Park at the pull-off at the Appalachian Trail sign at the Straight Branch Bridge about 5 1/4 miles east of Damascus on Rte. 58. Follow the AT north across the bridge and through a rhododendron forest, ascending slightly with views to the right over Whitetop Laurel Creek and the VA Creeper Trail. After 2 miles, go straight on a blue-blazed side trail at a sign where the AT turns left. Reach the VA Creeper Trail on the blue blazed trail in 1/3 mile. Turn right and follow the Creeper along the creek and over several trestles 2 miles to the Straight Branch Creeper Trail parking lot. Ascend the parking lot road, turn right, and walk up Rte. 58 1/4 mile to reach the car at the Straight Branch Bridge.

Longer hikes:

Grayson Highlands State Park is a good base for backpacking and long or short hikes in a beautiful setting. http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/state_parks/gra.shtml

The website gives you all the information you need for camping or hiking the many trails in the Park, with views of waterfalls, roaring streams and wild ponies.

For backpacking, GHSP borders the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area and provides easy access to the Appalachian Trail. The overnight parking area at the Park is a safe place to leave your car, and the spur trail that leaves the parking lot leads directly to the AT. Right (or north on the AT) brings you to the Scales in about 5 miles, and 5 more miles leads to Highway 603 near Troutdale. Left (or south on the AT) takes you past Thomas Knob Shelter to the base of Mt. Rogers, Virginia's tallest mountain, in about 4 miles, and another 4 miles takes you to Elk Garden and Route 603 between Konnarock and Whitetop.

Some backpackers and day hikers enjoy the 11+ mile High Country Loop. From Massie Gap in Grayson Highlands State Park, take Rhododendron Trail up to A.T. (0.5 mile); A.T. northbound to Pine Mountain (6.4 miles); blue-blazed Pine Mountain Trail through scenic Crest Zone to Rhododendron Gap (2.1 miles); A.T. north over Wilburn Ridge to Rhododendron Trail (2.1 miles); that trail back to Massie Gap (0.5 mile). The more scenic and more challenging, blue-blazed Wilburn Ridge Trail can be used in place of the A.T. for 0.8 mile on Wilburn Ridge; it leads over rock outcroppings that the A.T. bypasses. The hiking distance is identical. Also, you can shorten the High Country Loop by using the Crest Trail to connect the two AT sections, instead of the Pine Mountain Trail.

Grindstone/Fox Creek Loop (24.8 miles):

From Grindstone Campground (or Mt. Rogers Trail parking lot on Va. 603), take blue-blazed Mt. Rogers Trail up to A.T. near Deep Gap (4.0 miles); A.T. northbound to Va. 603/Fox Creek (14.8 miles); continue on A.T. north to Chestnut Flats (2.3 miles); IMT west to Cherry Tree Shelter

(2.0 miles); blue-blazed Flat Top Trail back to Va. 603 (1.7 miles) or to Grindstone (2.1 miles). Pass four shelters en route. A side hike to the summit of Mt. Rogers would add 1 mile. (The two Va. 603 crossings are only two miles apart.) This loop could begin at Massie Gap, adding 1.0 mile.

Damascus/Beartree Lake Loop (25.2 miles):

From Damascus, take the A.T. northbound to violet-blazed Beartree Gap Trail (11.7 miles); Beartree Gap Trail to Shaw Gap (3.3 miles); IMT westbound to connector to A.T. on south slope to Feathercamp Ridge (6.7 mile); A.T. southbound back to Damascus (3.5 mile), passing two shelters en route. This loop may also originate from Beartree Lake anglers' parking lot or from U.S. 58/Feathercamp crossing.

Damascus/Feathercamp Branch Loop (15.4 miles):

From Damascus, take A.T. northbound to its junction with the blue-blazed Feathercamp Branch Trail (5.5 miles); follow Feathercamp upstream/north 1.9 miles, crossing the branch several times, to the IMT; take the IMT westbound to connector to A.T. on the south slope of Feathercamp Ridge (6.7 miles) and the A.T. southbound back to Damascus (3.5 miles). A side trip to site of old Sandy Flats Shelter would add 0.6 mile to the hike. (Shelter demolished 2015.)

Beartree Lake/Creek Junction Loop (11.2 miles):

From Beartree Lake anglers' parking lot, take violet-blazed Beartree Gap Trail across a dam and U.S. 58 to A.T. (0.5 mile); A.T. southbound past the two access trails to Saunders Shelter and down the switchbacks (A side hike to the shelter adds .5 mile.) to its junction with short, blue-blazed connector to the Virginia Creeper Trail (4.1 miles); left and follow the Creeper through Taylors Valley hamlet and up Whitetop Laurel Creek gorge to junction with A.T. at Creek Junction (4.2 miles); A.T. southbound to Beartree Gap Trail 1.2 miles); that trail back to the parking lot (0.5 mile). A roundtrip north of the A.T./Creeper from Creek Junction to Hassinger bridge (a high trestle) and the parking lot on Va. 728 adds 0.8 mile.

Recommended map for these and other hikes in this area: National Geographic map #786 of the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area. This map is available for sale at the following outfitters in Damascus, VA: Mt. Rogers Outfitters, Adventure Damascus, and Sundog Outfitters; also at the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area Headquarters on Rte. 16 near Sugar Grove, VA, and at Grayson Highlands State Park, and from National Geographic online.

Also refer to www.appalachiantrail.org/interactivemap.