

## **Laurel Branch Wilderness \***

(Excerpted from Johnny Molloy's book *Five Star Trails: Tri-Cities*)

### **DISTANCE & CONFIGURATION:**

GPS Trailhead Coordinates: N36° 19.710', W82° 6.700'

9.2-mile there-and-back; Hiking Time: 5.5 hours; Outstanding Features: Laurel Branch Wilderness, Watauga Lake views, trail shelter; Elevation: 2,380 feet at trailhead, 3,610 feet at high point; Access: No fees or permits required; Maps: National Geographic -- Cherokee & Pisgah National Forests – South Holston and Watauga Lakes; USGS Watauga Dam; Facilities: Picnic area, boat launch near trailhead; Wheelchair Access: None; Info: Watauga Ranger District, 4400 Unicoi Drive, Unicoi TN 37692, (423) 735-1500, [www.fs.usda.gov/cherokee](http://www.fs.usda.gov/cherokee)

### **IN BRIEF:**

This hike travels the spine of Iron Mountain, using the Appalachian Trail to reach a trail shelter and fine view. Start near Watauga Dam and work uphill, entering Laurel Branch Wilderness, climbing by switchbacks to the ridge crest. Occasional outcrops provide warm-up views. The richly forested mountain eventually takes you to Vandeventer trail shelter, directly behind which is a rock crag presenting panoramas of Watauga Lake and beyond.

### **HIKE DESCRIPTION:**

This is a great hike when the skies are clear. I recommend doing it from early fall through late spring, especially after fronts have passed through. The trek can be a hot one during summer with the lack of water and potentially hazy skies being pitfalls then. The Appalachian Trail crosses Watauga Dam Road at Iron Mountain Gap. This is where you start this hike. Parking spots are stretched along the road here but if you cannot find one just drive on down toward the observation and picnic area overlooking Watauga Lake. Leave Iron Mountain Gap, northbound on the Appalachian Trail. Immediately reach a sign indicating the Laurel Branch Wilderness, a federally designated wild area encompassing the crest of Iron Mountain and its tributaries running down both sides of the ridge, including all the way down to Watauga Lake on the southeast side of Iron Mountain. Designated by Congress in 1986 the wilderness area encompasses over 6,360 acres. This hike stays within the wilderness for its entire length. Shortly pass a trailside signboard. Make your way uphill in prototype pine-oak-hickory woods, found on south facing and dry slopes of the Cherokee National Forest. Black gum, sassafras, and sourwood add floral variation. The trail soon slips to the Watauga Lake side of the ridge. Make the first of several switchbacks that ease what was formerly a steep ascent up the nose of Iron Mountain. The practiced eye can see the route of the old AT while navigating these switchbacks. Please stay with the rerouted trail – not only does it make the hiking easier it also prevents erosion.

The switchbacks and climbs continue. Note the stone steps in spots. Hats off to the Tennessee Eastman Hiking and Canoe Club for their work maintaining this section of the Appalachian Trail. At times you will look southeast over the lake, and at other times northwest toward Holston Mountain. In winter, your views will be nearly continuous.

Around 1.0 mile, the climbing eases and you enter a copse of Carolina hemlock. This is an often compact, conical evergreen with needles spreading in all directions versus the needles of an

Eastern hemlock, which spread in two rows on either side of the branch. Carolina hemlock occurs – not surprisingly – in western North Carolina, as well as East Tennessee and southwest Virginia. It grows on dry slopes like this, unlike moisture-loving Eastern hemlock. The evergreen also seems to be less susceptible to the hemlock woolly adelgid, which is decimating hemlocks throughout the East. Pockets of rhododendron keep the trailside green, too.

The main climb is over but there are more undulations ahead, and a general upward trend. The ridgecrest is often rocky. At 1.2 miles, come to a grassy flat with the sitting rocks that beckon a stop. The ridgeline is narrow, with the southeast slope being amazingly precipitous. Iron Mountain looks steep when viewed from Watauga Lake. And it is. At 1.5 miles, a short spur trail leads right to an outcrop and a tree-framed view of Watauga Lake and the mountains beyond.

Remain on the ridge, gently undulating. Pass another outcrop and view at 1.8 miles. This view is somewhat limited by the vegetation. At 2.0 miles, come to another outcrop and panorama. Here, you can clearly see the Tennessee 67 bridge spanning Watauga Lake, with the balance of mountains stretching easterly to the horizon. At 2.6 miles, a spur trail leads right to a wooded knob and little campsite.

The white-blazed Appalachian Trail continues tracing Iron Mountain in a nearly arrow straight northeast direction. Black birch, red maple and goosefoot maple increase in number with the increasing elevation. You are now above 3,000 feet. Drop left off the ridge and descend into a hollow. Reach a small spring at 3.0 miles. This upwelling can nearly run dry by late summer and may need to be dug out. Climb from the hollow to rejoin the top of Iron Mountain at 3.3 miles. The ridge narrows, and a rocky spine rises, forcing you to walk just below the stony hogback.

The trail continues to play tag with the crest, going atop where it can, sometimes retreating to a side slope when the rocks are too radical. At 4.5 miles, look left for a blue-blazed spur trail heading to a chilly spring. Stay straight with the Appalachian Trail. Descend a bit then reach the Vandeventer trail shelter at 4.6 miles. The worn down three sided cinder block structure is no match for the splendor of Iron Mountain. Vandeventer shelter was built in 1961 and shows its age. Nevertheless, a rock outcrop rises beyond the shelter, and needs no human augmentation. Climb atop the gray stone and look out. Below, Watauga Lake forms a flat shimmer pocked with islands, peninsulas and coves. Pond Mountain and White Rocks Mountain frame the lake. In the distance Roan Mountain, Grandfather Mountain and myriad peaks of North Carolina's Pisgah National Forest extend to horizon's end. Make sure and sign the trail register in the shelter before backtracking.

**NEARBY ATTRACTIONS:** The TVA Wilbur Dam and Watauga Dam area have picnic areas, boat launches and even a campground. For more information, visit [www.tva.com](http://www.tva.com).

**DIRECTIONS:** From exit 24 on I-26 near Johnson City, follow the signs for Elizabethton, joining US 321 north/TN 67 east. Travel for 8.6 miles to reach US 19E and a traffic light (From Bristol Highway it is 9 miles to this same intersection on US 19E south, except you will keep straight through the traffic light). Turn right here, now joining US 19E south, Veterans Memorial Parkway, toward Roan Mountain, Mountain City, and Boone, N.C. Follow US 19E for .5 miles, then turn left on Siam Road at a traffic light. Follow Siam Road for 4.0 miles to meet Watauga Dam Road at a "T" intersection. The Watauga River is dead ahead. Turn right on Watauga Dam Road. At 2.6 miles, make sure and stay left toward "Overlook" and "Lake Recreation". At 4.2 miles, come to Iron Mountain Gap and the Appalachian Trail. Parking will be on your left.