

Conasauga River Hiking Trail

A brief introduction to the Cohutta Wilderness, the location of Conasauga River Trail: Officially designated on January 3, 1975, the Cohutta Wilderness now encompasses 36,977 acres - 35,268 acres within Georgia and the remainder in Tennessee. The Georgia portion of the wilderness is located northeast of Chatsworth, primarily in Fannin and Murray counties.

The Georgia Wilderness Bill of 1986 added 2,940 acres, all within the Chattahoochee National Forest, to the Cohutta Wilderness. This new designation extended the Cohutta to the northeast, from Dally Gap along FS 22 to the Tennessee line.

Although much of this wilderness was logged earlier in the century, the forest has returned, healing the scarred land and obliterating all but the smallest traces of man's past exploitation. With continued wilderness designation and the passage of time, the forest will slowly regain much of its former magnificence.

[A network](#) of fifteen trails totaling 87 miles penetrates this rugged wilderness, where elevations range from 950 to 4,200 feet. All but three of these trails lead to or follow the scenic Jacks and Conasauga Rivers, whose headwaters are protected by National Forest land in and around the wilderness. These two rivers are among the few larger streams in North Georgia that still offer quality wild-trout fishing.

Tennessee's 8,082-acre Big Frog Wilderness in the Cherokee National Forest is contiguous with the Cohutta Wilderness along the Cohutta's northern border.

Note: Trails in the Cohutta Wilderness are organized east to west down-stream along the Jacks River and Conasauga River watersheds. East Cowpen Trail cuts through the center of the wilderness and runs along the Cohutta Mountain ridge that divides the two watersheds.

TRAIL SUMMARY Location: Western Blue Ridge, Cohutta Mountains, Cohutta Wilderness; **Features:** Wilderness, bluffs, boulders, cascades and pools along Conasauga River; **Distance:** 13.1 miles; **Difficulty Rating:** From Betty Gap downstream to northwestern trailhead at FS 17-B: easy to moderate; from FS 17-B upstream to southeastern trailhead at Betty Gap: moderate; **County:** Gilmer, Fannin and Murray; **Nearest City:** Ellijay (SE), Chatsworth (SW); **Maps:** Dyer Gap Quad (GA); Hemp Top Quad (GA-TN); Cohutta Wilderness map; **Blazes:** Yellow; **Water Sources:** Conasauga River and its tributaries; **Ranger District:** Cohutta

Arising from the southwestern corner of the Cohutta Wilderness, the Conasauga is without doubt ODe of Georgia's most beautiful rivers. The origin of its name, however, is ambiguous. Conasauga is settler-spelling for the Cherokee word for strong horse, and kahnasaugh is the Cherokee word for grass. A flooded mountain river is definitely a strong horse, but the Cherokee didn't see their first horse until well after they moved to the Southern Appalachians.

The origin of the southeastern trailhead's name is less mysterious. During the logging days, a widow named Betty sold meals and lodging to travelers. Her home was in a gap halfway across the Cohutta Mountains.

Starting at Betty Gap (3,040 feet), the initial 0.2 mile descends very sharply, the first of only two difficult grades on this predominantly level trail. A small spring-fed stream--the first of many--emerges beneath a stand of large eastern white pine near the top of the descent. For the first 1.3 miles } until it reaches the river, much of the trail wanders through a maze of gathering rivulets, headwaters of the Conasauga. Especially after a rain, this upper section of the trail is part water, closely following, crossing, and rock-hopping down the middle of the many shallow, intertwining streams.

To the left along this same segment stands the thickest eastern hemlock in Georgia--8 feet 8 inches in circumference measured 4 feet 6 inches from the ground. A former state record holder, this tree was dethroned by a very close neighbor, which has since died. The current Georgia champion is one of two large eastern hemlocks towering together along the Jacks River Trail. (The state record blackgum--10 feet 4 inches in circumference and 124 feet tall--is located to the left of the trail near the surviving hemlock.)

The eastern hemlock is a slow-growing, long-living tree. The record age, rings actually counted, is nearly 1,000 years. The Conasauga River giant is at least four or five centuries old.

Once it reaches the river, the trail fords the Conasauga thirty-eight times--eighteen to Bray Field, and twenty beyond. Most of the fords are shallow and present no danger other than slipping and getting wet. But in winter and early spring before the leaves bud out, when the river normally has its strongest flow, the current can reach mid-thigh depth and become surprisingly powerful. Do not plan to hike the Conasauga River Trail immediately after heavy rains or when heavy rains are predicted. Steep-sided mountain rivers, like the Conasauga and Jacks in the Cohuttas, rise rapidly following a substantial rainfall and quickly become too dangerous to ford, leaving hikers stranded between crossings.

Usually a blaze marks the trail's return to dry land across the river from each ford. These guiding blazes, however, are not always easily found. You must often angle downstream while fording the river to locate the blaze and worn spot on the opposite bank. And occasionally, at an apparent ford, you have to walk 20 or 30 yards downstream along the bank before spotting the trail across the river. Just remember that the trail, even on islands, always heads downriver.

At mile 1.9 Chestnut Lead Trail meets the Conasauga River Trail. A large, worn campsite helps mark the junction. Beginning here you may notice evidence of the railroad ties that were part of a narrow gauge rail-road constructed along the river when the area was logged. The earliest extensive logging occurred along this trail in 1912, and continued in the area through most of the 1930s. You may still occasionally find a hand-forged spike.

The generally level trail closely follows the scenic Conasauga River between fords. This crystalline mountain stream, dropping over 100 feet per mile to Bray Field, is a rocky succession of white shoals and green pools. By midmorning the fast-flowing riffles beside the shaded path are sparkling silver.

As soon as the air above the Conasauga warms in the spring, tiger swallowtails begin their daily flutterings up and down the river corridor. Below these colorful yellow and black butterflies, rainbow trout face upstream to feed, holding steady in the slowed currents of the pools.

After its eighteenth ford at mile 4.9, the trail climbs up and over a hill, descends to and crosses Tearbitches Creek, then enters Bray Field (1,920 feet). A former cabin site and now a grassy, often congested camping area, it is the most important trail junction in the western half of the wilderness. Tearbitches Trail ends here; two trails, Conasauga and Hickory Creek, pass through the small clearing, and the lower access point of a fourth trail, Panther Creek, is nearby. Possibilities for extended hikes from Bray Field are numerous. .

From Bray Field at mile 5.4 the trail continues downstream another 7.7 miles and another twenty fords. In the middle of the field the trail, turning to the left away from the river on an old jeep road, becomes contiguous with the white-blazed Hickory Creek Trail. Follow the road as it winds around a beaver pond, then returns to the river. The trails split 1.3 miles from Bray Field; Hickory Creek Trail turns left with the road, Conasauga River Trail continues straight ahead on the path. Here the river fords begin again.

Watch carefully for the trail blazes on the second crossing below Bray Field. As you ford the river from right to left, look for a gap in the rocks a few feet in from the bank. The trail cuts through the gap at a right angle away from the river.

A short climb to the top of the bluff on the west bank of the Conasauga gives you a beautiful view of the cascades. From this vantage point you can also see a long, straight vein of quartz running through the last third of the long pool just below the falls.

The path continues its pattern of crossing, then paralleling the river until the thirty-eighth ford at mile 11.9. Here, at approximately 1,260 feet, the trail leaves the Conasauga River. Twenty-five yards beyond this last ford, the trail turns 90 degrees to the left and begins to climb. The remaining 1.2 miles are predominantly level or uphill, with several moderate grades and one short, steep pitch near the end. After it levels out, the trail turns left onto an old road, then ends in the gravel parking lot (1,640 feet) on FS 17-B.

The Conasauga has the cleanest, clearest water of any river its size in Georgia. Its clarity-like wilderness rivers out west-gives it the illusion of being shallower than it is. Below Bray Field the sluices, slides, shoals, boulders, bluffs, and pools are continuous along the lower Conasauga.

Starting from its southeastern trailhead at Betty Gap, the distances to Conasauga River Trail's junctions are as follows: Chestnut Lead, 1.9 miles; Panther Creek, 4.9 miles; Tearbitches, 5.4 miles; Hickory Creek, 5.4 miles; Hickory Creek, 6.7 miles.

Highlights

Throughout: Bluffs, huge boulders, cascades, and pools.

Mile 7.0: Long, sliding cascade just below the confluence of Rough Creek and the Conasauga. A bluff on the west side of the river provides a good view.

Directions

To the southeastern trailhead at Betty Gap: From the Ellijay square travel GA 52 West for 9.5 miles to the Lake Conasauga Recreation Area sign. Turn right onto FS 18 and continue 3.5 miles on that road before turning right onto FS 68. Once on FS 68, continue straight ahead, uphill. After traveling approximately 6.0 miles on FS 68, you will reach the three-way FS 68-FS 64 junction near Potato patch Mountain. Turn right onto FS 64 and proceed 1.4 miles to the Conasauga River Trail sign and parking area.

To the northwestern trailhead at FS 17-B: From the GA 52-US 411 intersection in Chatsworth, travel US 411 North approximately 13.4 miles, past Eton toward Tennega, to the community of Cisco. In Cisco, turn right onto the paved road immediately before the Cisco Baptist Church, which is also on the right. This road was once part of GA 2 and is now known

as Old Highway 2. This road is also called FS 16. Continue on FS 16 (the pavement ends; stay to the right at the fork) for approximately 3.2 miles, then turn right onto FS 17 at the Lake Conasauga sign. Proceed straight ahead (17-A turns right) on FS 17 for approximately 3.6 miles before turning left onto FS 17-B at the Conasauga River Trail sign. After 0.2 mile FS 17-B ends at the Conasauga River parking area and trailhead.

To arrange a shuttle, leave a vehicle at the northwestern trailhead, then follow FS 17 southward 7.8 miles to its junction with FS 68. Turn left onto FS 68 and continue straight ahead on FS 68, then FS 64, 5.5 miles to the trailhead at Betty Gap.