

THE BEST IN TENT CAMPING:

THE SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN & SMOKY MOUNTAINS

*A Guide for Campers Who Hate RVs, Concrete Slabs, and
Loud Portable Stereo*

JOHNNY MOLLOY

BLACK MOUNTAIN CAMPGROUND

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NORTH CAROLINA

BLACK MOUNTAIN CAMPGROUND

Burnsville, North Carolina

Black Mountain Campground has been around a long time. Over the years it has been taken care of well. Now it is like an antique, treasured by families that have been returning to Black Mountain through the generations. They come here to enjoy the relaxed country atmosphere in a forested setting that offers a sampling of the wild country in the shadow of the Black Mountains.

Cross the South Toe River on a wide bridge and enter Black Mountain Campground. To your right is a gravel road with a turnaround at the end. One of two campground hosts resides in a cottage there. This road parallels the Toe and contains 14 heavily wooded sites. Hemlock and rhododendron shroud these sites from one another. The six riverside sites are the most coveted. Two isolated sites are nestled far in the woods at the back of the turnaround.

Two water spigots are located along the road. A comfort station with flush toilets for each sex is situated midway along the road. A caged garbage disposal area lies next to the comfort station. The garbage areas are now caged because Black Mountain Campground once had a big problem with bears. Keep the Black Mountain bears wild and dispose of your trash properly.

The main campground is on an oval road that loops a large field. There are 29 sites on this loop. The 12 sites on the interior of the loop by the field have more

CAMPGROUND RATINGS

Beauty: ★★★

Site privacy: ★★★★★

Site spaciousness: ★★★★★

Quiet: ★★★

Security: ★★★★★

Cleanliness/upkeep: ★★★★★

The Black River Recreation Area offers a family atmosphere and quality camping in a forested country setting.



NORTH CAROLINA

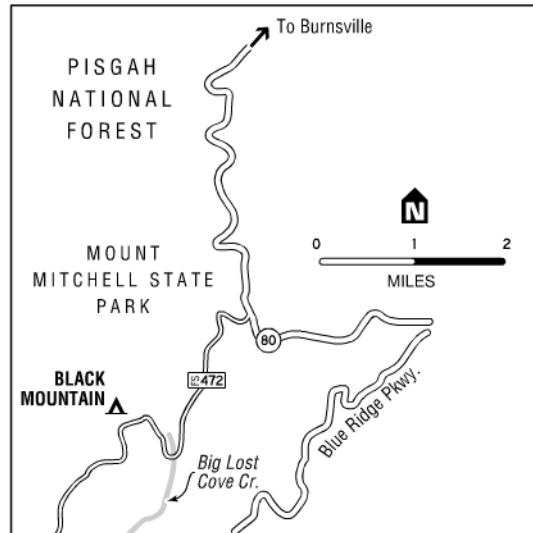
grassy understory beneath tall shade trees. Privacy is sacrificed for the openness of these sites.

The 17 sites on the exterior of the loop have a denser understory and are pressed against a hill, which required some site leveling. The tree canopy is thicker here, especially on the southwest side of the loop, where a small stream meanders through rhododendron thickets. Two comfort stations lie at the farthest ends of the loop. Four water spigots make a cool drink easy to come by.

Three other sites are located along the road to the Briar Bottom Group Camp. They are close across the road from the Toe River and have a water spigot of their own. It is a bit of a walk to one of the three comfort stations, though.

Children often play in the field at the main loop's center. A volleyball net was up on my weekday visit, yet the campground was very quiet. However, expect it to fill on summer weekends. Generally, tent campers constitute over two-thirds of the patrons. Adjacent to the main loop is the campground amphitheater. On weekend nights you can expect anything from local gospel groups to bluegrass pickers to ranger programs. The emphasis here is on old-fashioned family fun.

Bicycling, fishing, and hiking are the three most popular outdoor pursuits at Black Mountain Campground. Bring your bike and pedal the Briar Bottom Bicycle Trail. This trail starts at the Briar Bottom Group Campground, parallels the Toe River, and loops back around, crossing two bridges. It returns to the campground at one mile. From the Briar Bottom Trail, you can take a foot



trail one half-mile to Setrock Creek Falls, a scenic cascade. Another moderate hike is the Devils Den Forest Walk. It begins at the main campground loop and makes a loop of its own during its half-hour woodland stroll.

For the strong-winded, the Green Knob Trail starts across the road from the campground and climbs 3.3 steep miles to a lookout tower at 5,070 feet. This is a strenuous hike. If you really want to check your physical condition, try the Mount Mitchell Trail. It starts near the amphitheater and climbs nearly 3,700 feet to the highest point east of the Mississippi.

The Toe River and its tributaries are well known for their trout fishing. But don't always expect to dip a line right by the campground on summer weekends. At this time, children are often swimming and tubing in the Toe's cool waters as it flows through the campground.

The setting and the activities are among the many reasons families and friends return to Black Mountain Campground again and again. Once you give it a try, you may return again yourself.

To get there, from Burnsville take US 19-E 5 miles, then turn right on NC 80 for 12 miles to FS 472. Turn right on FS 472 for 3 miles. Black Mountain Campground will be on your right.

KEY INFORMATION

Black Mountain Campground

P.O. Box 128

Burnsville, NC 28714

Operated by: Cradle of Forestry Interpretive Association

Information: (828) 682-6146;
www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc

Open: Mid-April through October

Individual sites: 46

Each site has: Tent pad,
fire ring with grill, picnic
table, lantern post

Site assignment: First come,
first served; no reservations

Registration: Self-registration
on site

Facilities: Water, flush toilets,
pay phone

Parking: At campsites only

Fee: \$13 per night

Elevation: 3,200 feet

Restrictions:

Pets—On 6-foot or shorter
leash

Fires—In fire ring only

Alcoholic beverages—At camp-
sites only

Vehicles—23-foot trailer
length limit

Other—14-day stay limit June
1 to September 1

INTRODUCTION

A Word about This Book and Appalachian and Smoky Mountains Camping

The *Southern Appalachians*. The very words give rise to images of misty, tree-topped mountains; clear, white-water streams; lush woodlands; and a biodiversity unmatched in the temperate climes. At the heart of the Southern Appalachians are the Smokies—the 500,000-acre master mountain chain containing the highest, wildest country remaining in the East. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park justifiably attracts millions of people per year. The allure of the Smokies often overshadows special areas adjacent to the park. Literally encircling the park are millions of acres of state park and national forest land that avails Smoky Mountain country to the public. This book covers not only the Smokies, but also the highlands of eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, northern Georgia, and western South Carolina.

This is a region steeped in human and natural history. These mountains played a significant role in the formation and westward expansion of our country. Oftentimes, this expansion was at the expense of the Cherokee, who battled the settler and lost, but eventually managed to hold on to some of their ancestral lands. Aside from a few Civil War skirmishes, this land became a forgotten backwater, the land of “do-without.” That was until logging interests discovered its magnificent forests and began to cut them down. Thankfully, some stands were left intact; the Smokies still contain some 125,000 acres of old-growth woods. After the harvest in the early 1900s, the Forest Service took over the fire-scarred and eroded lands, protecting and managing the area for commercial and recreational purposes: the multiple-use concept. Other special mountain places came under state protection, forming a nucleus of fine state parks.

A trip into the Southern Appalachians is like going from Georgia to Maine without all the driving. The elevation rise from 700 to 6,700 feet creates climate conditions like those ranging from Dixie to New England. Within those climate zones are habitats that foster plant and animal life found from Georgia to Maine. These conditions create the biodiversity that makes the Southern Appalachians special.

Generally speaking, spring takes six weeks to climb the mountains. Conversely, autumn descends the mountains six weeks earlier than in the surrounding lowlands. All of this adds to the biodiversity and makes for varying weather conditions to suit your whims as you seek the wildflowers of spring,

the lushness of summer, the colors of autumn, and the snows of winter. Luckily for us, there are plenty of campgrounds tucked away in Smoky Mountain country.

The rating system

Included in this book is a rating system for the Southern Appalachian's 50 best campgrounds. Certain campground attributes—beauty, site privacy, site spaciousness, quiet, security, and cleanliness/upkeep—are ranked using a star system. Five stars are ideal and one star is acceptable. This system will help you find the campground that has the attributes you desire.

Beauty

In the best campgrounds, the fluid shapes and elements of nature—flora, water, land, and sky—have melded to create locales that seem to have been made for tent camping. The best sites are so attractive you may be tempted not to leave your outdoor home. A little site work is OK to make the scenic area camper-friendly, but too many reminders of civilization eliminated many a campground from inclusion in this book.

Site privacy

A little understory goes a long way in making you feel comfortable once you've picked your site for the night. There is a trend of planting natural borders between campsites if the borders don't exist already. With some trees or brush to define the sites, everyone has their personal space. Then you can go about the pleasures of tent camping without keeping up with the Joneses at the next site over—or them with you.

Site spaciousness

This attribute can be very important depending on how much of a gearhead you are and the size of your group. Campers with family-style tents need a large flat spot on which to pitch their tent and still get to the ice chest to prepare foods, all the while not getting burned near the fire ring. Gearheads need adequate space to show off all their stuff to neighbors strolling by. I just want enough room to keep my bedroom, kitchen, and den separate.

Quiet

The music of the mountains—singing birds, rushing streams, wind rattling leaves, and raindrops pattering the forest floor—includes the kind of noises tent campers associate with being in the Southern Appalachians. In concert, they camouflage the sounds you don't want to hear—autos coming and going, loud neighbors, and the like.
