

15 Hiking Trails of Cattail Creek

By Worth and Susan Weller

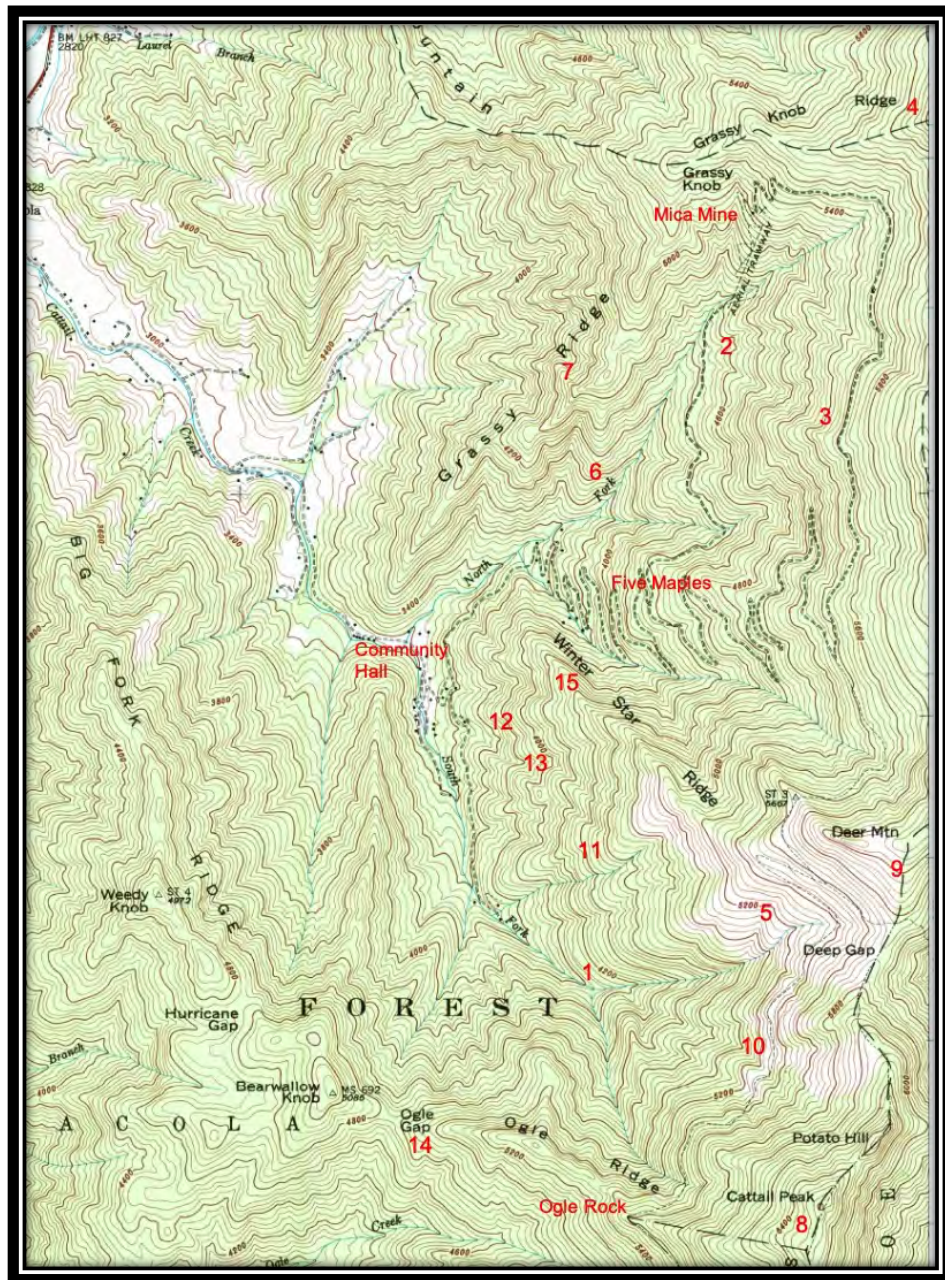


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Introduction

Cattail is a hiker's paradise. From any cabin or house here you can walk from your front door to Mt. Mitchell to the south or to Celo and Bolens Creek to the north in a day (getting back though is another story!). In between there are a dozen or more really interesting trails for all levels of hikers. The most popular of these are the Mica Mine, Deep Gap, and Twin Falls trails, all of which will be discussed in detail in the following pages. Lesser known trails and new trails include the very historic and difficult Pipeline Trail, the Famous Switchback Nine Loop, and the spectacularly beautiful Bobcat Alley Trail, not to mention the fairly easy ones such as Karen's Landing Loop, the Blair House Loop, and the Bear Pen/Blair House Connector Trail. Then of course there is the lengthy High Grade Loop, which is topped by the granddaddy of all trails here, the (literally) world-renowned Crest Trail.

We'll also discuss how to get to Mt. Mitchell from here, or better yet, how to get from Mt. Mitchell to Cattail. And we'll also describe how to get to the top of Celo, which is not easy!



Pipeline Trail in 1968. That's Susan with our friend Aden Field, who first showed us this "shortcut" to the Mica Mine. Ford Hensley, Cattail's long-time caretaker, showed this trail to Aden. He used to hike it to collect scrap mica at the mine to sell for much-needed cash back in the 1950s.

A few notes on terminology

All trails here follow old railroad grades, old logging roads, or are "single track" trails (narrow footpaths that often follow game trails). This area was heavily logged in the first two decades of the 1900s, with the help of pioneering railroads. You can still see many places, particularly on

the “high grade,” where there are still railroad ties. And of course it is a popular pastime to collect railroad spikes, most of which now are over 100 years old.

A “switchback” is the term used to describe the sharp turn with an extension off either to the right or left where the train would pull into and then back up to the next switch back. The train “switch backed” to the next switch back. Trains, you see, could not make sharp turns otherwise, and without switchbacks the grade up the mountain would have been too steep. Many of the trail descriptions here count switchbacks. Not all switchbacks, however, have extensions. In later years bulldozers and trucks were used for the logging and simply zig-zagged up the mountain.

If you look at the map on page 1, for example, you can see the switchbacks that lead to the “high grade,” which is the term for the really cool level stretch of the old railroad that follows along for many miles just under the Crest Trail.

A few warnings

All trails here start well over one-half mile high and can go as high as 6500 feet. The Mica Mine is over one mile high, as is Deep Gap. If you have just come up from Florida, you can feel this!

Water is also an issue. Any hike over two hours really requires that you bring water – it is unsafe to drink from streams due to a common parasite called giardia, which can cause severe intestinal distress. There is just about no water along the whole extent of the Crest Trail, for example. However, you can drink from a “seep” – places where the water drips out of the road bank without being exposed to air first.

Temperature is also an issue – it gets cold here at night particularly at the higher elevations, and it can rain just about any time, doubling down on the cold. Lightning is also a serious issue – do not hike high if thunderstorms are in the forecast. On the Crest Trail Susan and I have been close to amazing lightning blasts in clear weather on the more exposed, rocky parts – truly a frightening experience.

On getting lost

It’s nearly impossible to get lost here as Cattail is one vast watershed from Celo to Cattail Peak, with all streams leading right back to Cattail Creek Road. All the roads do the same. That said, some old logging roads do dead end, and bushwhacking or crossing difficult creeks in deep ravines is not advised, as there is no guarantee that there is a trail on the other side.

Bushwhacking (hiking off trail) is particularly dangerous as the rhododendron thickets often hide rocky bluffs and dropoffs, such as the one that killed Elisha Mitchell not far from here as he was trying to get down from Mt. Mitchell in the dark.

Wildlife

There are bears, bobcats, coyotes and snakes here – Cattail is, after all, in the middle of the Pisgah National Forest, which means the wildlife has the same right to be here as you do. Susan and I have been hiking here together since 1967, and we have never had a bad encounter.

Please do not kill snakes. This really irritates me and is cruel and unnecessary. Most snakes here are harmless King Snakes or Northern Water Snakes, and they eat the mice! The occasional copperheads or rattlesnakes are easily avoidable – if they are sunning in the middle of the road or trail they are in a stupor, so just avoid them. Obviously if you are climbing over fallen trees or rocks, look first where you plan on putting your hands – this is not rocket science.

Bears here are not aggressive (unless you are camping overnight in Deep Gap, where they might want any food you have in your tent!!) as long as you do not get between a momma and her cubs. If you see a bear, stand tall, wave your hiking sticks or hands above your head, and back off slowly. Keep your dogs on leashes.

Hunting Season

Do not hike to the Isom Mine after Oct. 15. The route is leased to a private hunting club. That said, it is safe to hike here during the week of Thanksgiving and for two weeks after that. The last day of hunting season is Jan. 1. Google “NC Hunting Season” for details.

Trail Descriptions

In no particular order....



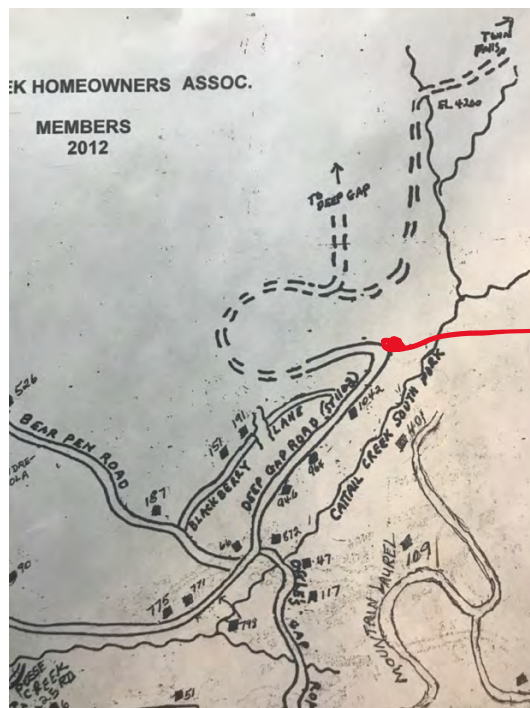
*Twin Falls in the Winter, with
Dennis and Nancy Smith*

1. Twin Falls

Twin Falls is a short, easy and popular hike because the rewards are great. The payoff is actually two waterfalls that come together in a very pretty display of Mother Nature at her finest. We've been there in the winter when the falls are frozen, which is quite cool too.

Drive up Deep Gap Road and turn onto Bear Pen Road – you can park in a grassy area on the left, just at the turn off to Blackberry Lane. Follow Blackberry Lane (on foot) until you can see an old red cabin (Bob Andre's family cabin). Switchback here to the left and go to the next switchback. Follow the road until you see a Y intersection – there is a sign (courtesy Jim Kiltie) pointing to the right (the road to the left goes to Deep Gap – described later). Go about 1/4 of a mile (stick to the left at another small Y intersection) until you come to an old bridge and an easy creek crossing. Cross this creek and walk along the old road maybe 25 yards until you are almost to another creek and old bridge. Just before you get to this creek, look up to your left and you will see a steep, muddy trail (it's marked with orange blazes courtesy Irina Nunez). Follow this trail up maybe 25 yards or so until you walk under a large overhanging rock – turn right here (it's marked but obscured a bit by rhododendron) and follow a narrow trail 20 feet to the creek bank and descend to the creek. From here you can see the falls. Some people may rock hop up to the falls, but I prefer to cross and follow another marked trail up to the base of the falls. This marked trail is up the creek a bit and just off the first fallen log you see – it's a tricky step across the creek at this point but very doable. Follow a short trail up to the base of the falls.

The whole hike from Bear Pen Road is about three miles roundtrip. Here is a primitive map:



Bob Andre Cabin

2. The Mica Mine (also known as the Isom Mine or the Threadgill Mine)



View from the upper mine dump – Cattail Peak looms large, and you can also see Mitchell.

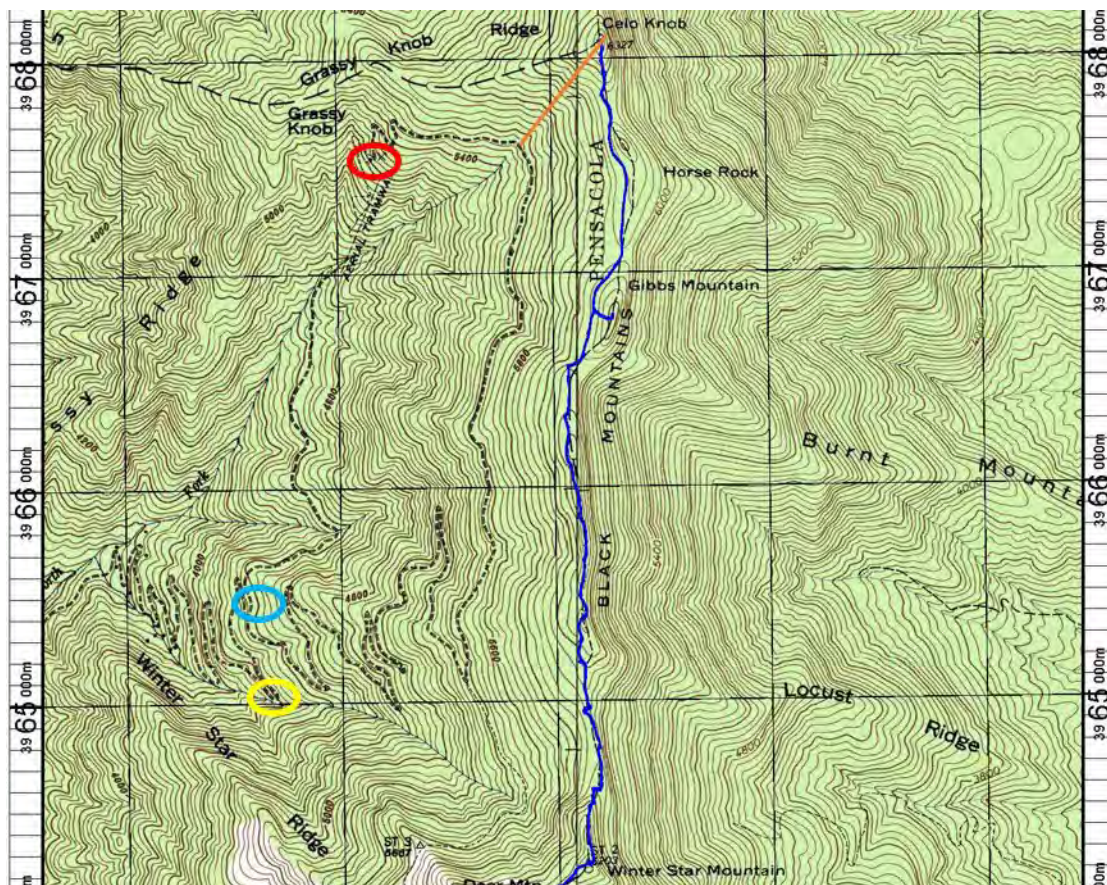
This is a popular four hour roundtrip hike that varies a bit in severity. The last eight switchbacks are fairly steep and rugged, but much of it is a “walk in the park” – through the lovely Grassy Woods. I recommend hiking boots or very good walking shoes. All of it is along railbed and old logging roads. At two points in the last eight switchbacks you can see the smaller pipe from the old Pipeline Trail (described later) crossing the road.



These 8 switchbacks replaced the old aerial tramway, which helped bring mica down from the mine in the 1940s.

There are actually two mines – a horizontal shaft at Switchback 4 and the very dangerous open pit at Switchback 8. The top mine, which drops straight down to intersect the Switchback 4 mine, features a spectacular view of the Blacks, dominated by Cattail Peak, with Mt. Mitchell

discernable way off in the background. You can sit at the top of the mine dump and enjoy a picnic with a great view!



RED = equals the top mine (pit), which is at what I call **Switchback 8**. Just below that mark you see "Aerial Tramway" (I'm old enough to have seen this in action when I was a kid, bringing mica down to the trucks at what was then the end of the rail line in this direction), but it is long gone now. This area now is the **8 steep switchbacks** that start just after the last (and big) water crossing.

Switchback 4 is where the horizontal shaft is. **Switchback 3**, at a big rock in the road, is now marked with a sign provided by Jim Kiltie, with directions to the two mines.

YELLOW = the purple hunters gate that is ten switchbacks from the one lane bridge on **Winter Star Road** a bit past where the paved Cattail Creek Road ends. **Important:** do *not* go here after mid October when hunting season begins; there are open dates around Thanksgiving and Christmas when it is safe to hike - google "NC Bear Hunting Season". I *slowly* drive my trail rated Jeep Grand Cherokee (which has under armor and super low 4wheel drive) from the hunter's gate up to the Five Maples, which are marked in **BLUE**. Parking is limited at the bear gate - do not block the homeowner's driveway there, but there is room for three or four cars just beyond the hunters gate. It's about two hours from the Five Maples to the top mine (pit), with a terrific view.

Be sure to go left at the 5 Maples, but after that always stick to the right.

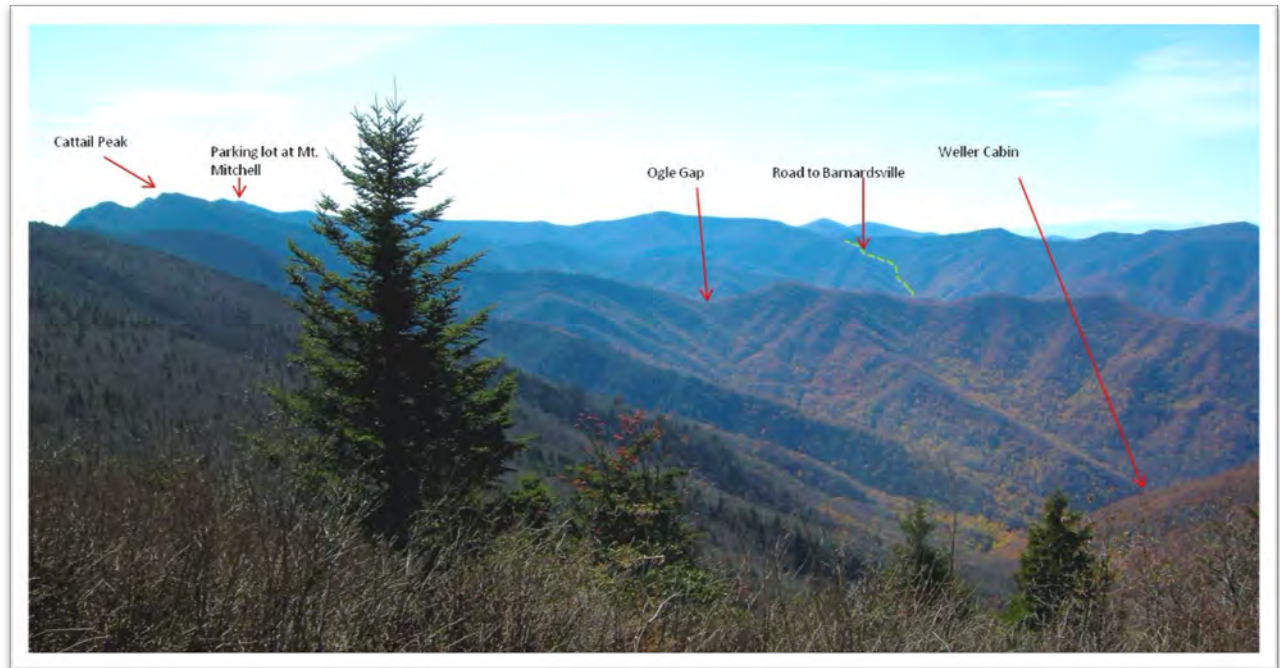


Switchback 4 mine in 1952

Bonus Hike: ORANGE is what I call Percy's Path - Percy Threadgill bulldozed this road from the "High Grade" to Celo Knob in about 1952 and took me and my mom up to the top. Susan and I refound it in 1969 (grown over and in terrible shape) when we camped on Celo Knob on New Year's Eve that year (frost bite!!). The path is in pretty good shape now, thanks mostly to the Monday Crew of NC High Peaks. It is sometimes also referred to as "Grace's Ladder," in honor of Grace Tyner who edited the lovely Cattail Cookbooks. The trail is described in more detail on the next page.

3. High Grade Loop

This is a very cool, eight to nine-hour hike, with a lot of rewards in any season. Follow the above directions to the Five Maples, then go right seven switchbacks to the old level railroad grade and head north (left) towards Celo. Go past the Celo turnoff and finally head down five tight corkscrew switchbacks to the Mica Mine, and then back to Five Maples. Long but not difficult. Have food and water and a rain jacket! The map in the Appendix shows this route quite well.



View from the High Grade

4. Celo/Bolens Creek

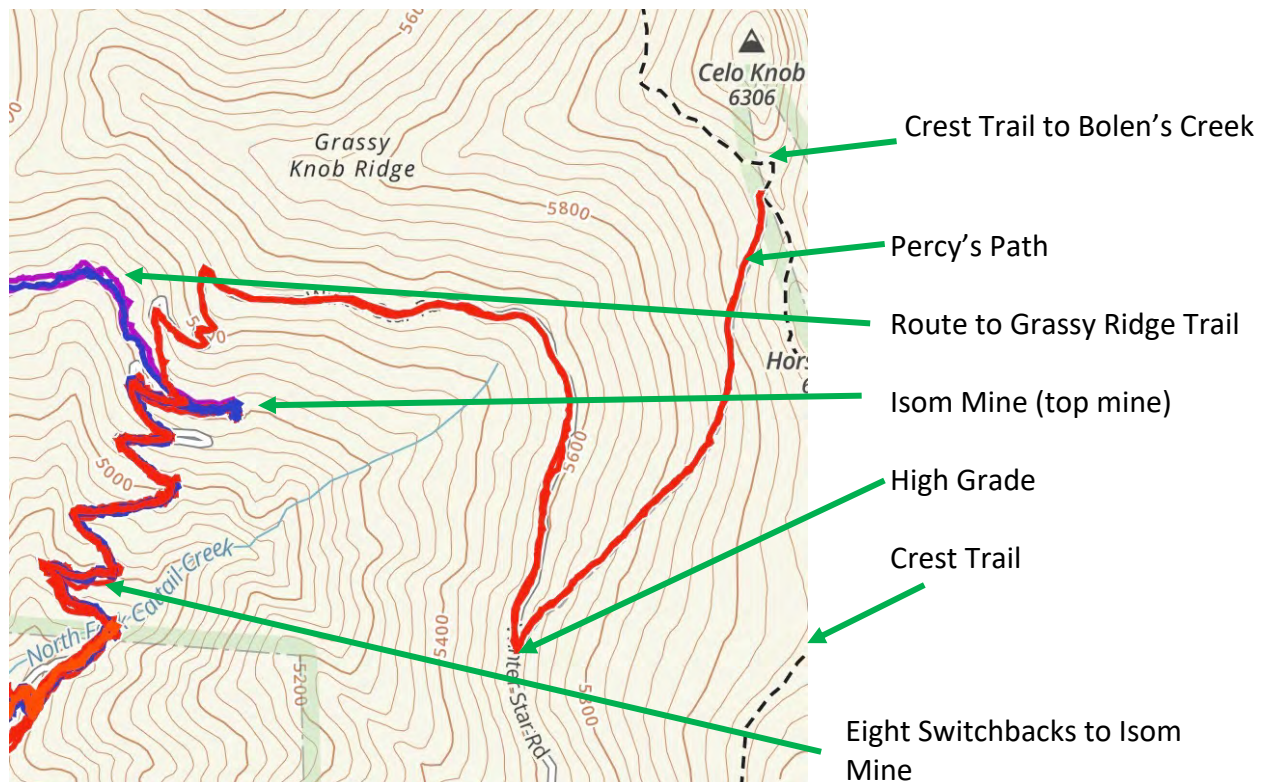
There are several variations of this, depending on stamina and availability of cars.

If you just want to go to the top of Celo, which is very beautiful in deep virgin forest with a spectacular overlook of the Spruce Pine mining district, the easiest way is to go the Mine and follow the above map up the Celo turnoff until you hit the signs at the Crest Trail. Be warned: Percy's Path (my orange mark) is steep and rugged and long. Go just a little bit beyond the signs until the Crest Trail bends left and look for a fainter trail that bears to the right into a rhododendron thicket. This is actually a sheltered camp site. At the back of the site you can see a faint trail, follow this and climb up a muddy cliff ledge, and then the trail gets better and winds through the woods to the very top of Celo Knob – you'll see the overlook when you get to the top.

If you want to hike on to Bolens Creek (Watershed Road), just go back to the Crest Trail and keep north. It's all downhill from here! The problem though with this route is there is no cell phone service when you get to the end and the folks living there do NOT like to be bothered! There is also absolutely no parking – don't even try. It is possible to drive a Jeep Wrangler or high rise SUV up Watershed Road to the small Forest Service parking, but it is not fun.

Your best bet is to do the route in reverse – get someone to drop you off at Watershed Road.

Either way, plan on eight or more hours of fairly arduous hiking.



5. Deep Gap

This is a very popular hike, one that takes you to the Crest Trail. You can make a Celo loop out of this along the Crest Trail and come down at the mine and 5 Maples if you have 11 hours to spare!! You can also go south from here on the Crest Trail to Mt. Mitchell if you have a car stationed there!

But the hike to Deep Gap and back is probably only 6 hours and well worth it. Plus, if you have extra time, food and stamina, it's not a long trek to the top of either Cattail (well marked) or Winter Star (great view but not so well marked).

Here is Susan's description followed by her map:

Starting from the intersection of Deep Gap Road and Ogle's Gap Road (just above the Nyegard's cabin), you'll go up to the first switchback where if you went straight, you'd see an André cabin. You go left at this switchback and you'll pass another André cabin up on the hill to your right.

At the next switchback you go right. In a few minutes you come to a Y intersection. The right fork would take you to Twin Falls. The left fork takes you up towards Deep Gap.

I started numbering the switchbacks on the map after this point. The distance from here to switchback 1 is about 5 minutes and it's about 5 minutes between switchbacks all the way up to switchback number 8.

At switchback 4 there's an inviting trail heading off to the left. It crosses a small stream soon after leaving the main trail. This is actually an alternate route to Deep Gap. After about 7 switchbacks, it rejoins the main trail at point 10 on the map.

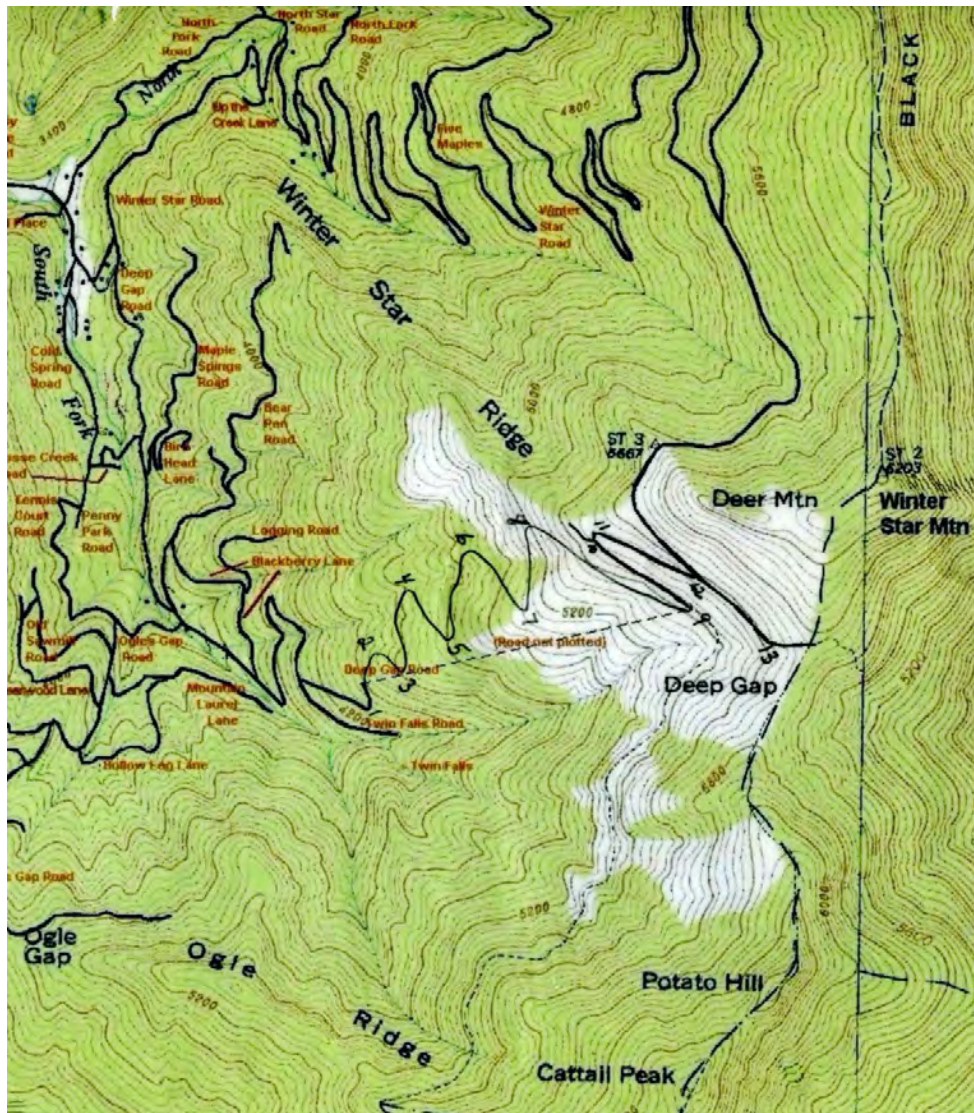
From switchback 8 to switchback 9 takes 20 to 30 minutes. About halfway along you'll see an old wrecked Subaru off to your right on the downhill side.

At switchback 9 you'll see old metal wheels and gears off to your right. Switchback 9 is also an intersection with a trail that heads off to the right over towards Ogle's Ridge. You'll go left.

At point 10 on the map there's a trail heading off to your left. It heads downhill pretty steeply. It is an alternate route back to switchback 4. Skip that trail and continue along to the real Switchback 11—about 15 minutes from 9 to 11.

Head right to Point 12 on the map which is the intersection with what we call the High Grade, the very level trail that goes under the peaks from Deep Gap to Celo and the mica mines. It's about 10 minutes from 11 to 12.

Head right from Point 12 to Point 13 which is a bend in the trail back towards the left. You'll notice a metal pipe about 10" in diameter. Now you're just 5 minutes from the Gap. Enjoy the view!



6. Pipeline Trail

This is an historic trail that provided compressed air to the Mica Mine when Percy Threadgill was mining it. One large pipe came down North Fork creek to provide water pressure to turn a turbine near the Clemons cabin at the top of North Fork Road, and a much smaller (and hard to find now) pipe fed compressed air to run the jackhammers at the mine. The trail is steep and hard to follow; Susan and I, Jim and Connie Sheehan, Jake and Cynthia Blood, and Irina Nunez and her family have spent countless hours cutting and marking the trail in a very difficult effort to restore it as a major hiking trail. Winter winds and rhododendron that grows like weeds provide a constant battle against the elements.

Begin at the top of North Fork Road. While the creek is still to the right of North Fork road, just before the road bends towards the bridge under the Clemons Cabin, look up the bank to your left and you will see a single-track trail. It's marked, and you soon will see the big pipe. Follow the marks and pipe to a lovely pool, with a view of a waterfall of indeterminate height – I think it is big but cannot get close enough to judge the scale without hopping the rocks (which I don't do anymore!).

The trail continues to wind up the mountain, mostly following the pipe, and comes to another pool. After this the trail is still marked but more difficult to find. You'll come across two light poles – which shows there once was commercial electricity at the mine (there's a third pole near the bottom entrance of the mine).

At some point the big pipe disappears into the creek, and after that you are on your own – it's still blazed in places, but harder and harder to keep up. Follow the creek as best you can – if you can look across the creek and see a camp site, cross there and follow the road up to the mine. Or you can continue higher, looking for our orange blazes, and cross the creek where it is getting very narrow as it reaches its headwaters and wind your way up through a marked rhododendron thicket to Switchback 0/1 on the last 8 switchbacks on the main road to the mine.

Ford Hensley used to walk this trail to the mine after it was closed, bringing down 50-pound sacks of scrap mica on his back to sell for cash in the 50s.



The pipe and trail follow the left side of North Fork Creek – fishing is good here. Pictures on the left are from 1969; the one on the right is from 2019.

7. Grassy Ridge Trail (also known as Bobcat Alley)

This is a trail to the Isom Mine entirely created by Susan and me and Big Sadie. I credit Big Sadie (a golden lab mix who was the best hiking dog ever) because she would often sniff out the game trails for us that we followed to cut our way through rhododendron thickets. This is a single track trail with great views in places. In the late spring it is a riot of Laurel and Flame Azaleas. We have seen bears on it, and tons of bear and bobcat scat too.

You can get to the mine and back in about 8 hours (a very tiring 8 hours I might add!).

Simply follow Grassy Ridge Road from the Community Hall parking lot until it ends abruptly. Here you will see orange blazes – look up to your left to find more orange blazes going straight up the side of the mountain – follow these a short ways and you will quickly swing right to the spine of Grassy Ridge. Now you are on the trail itself – it's a straight shot for maybe a mile through beautiful woods. At one point you will come to a rhododendron thicket with a narrow steep path through it that tops out on a cliff face canted at a 45 degree angle. Go to the top of this rock (great view) and follow the trail up through the thicket again. There's a nice camp site at the top of the thicket, with a good view.

Continue 25 yards until you come to a weedy saddle – there's sort of a road here (a recent logging road that winds down to North Fork Road; it's a mess now so don't try to go back that way). Stay level (don't go down); after maybe another 20 yards or less you'll see that the "road" sort of tees – look to the left and go up the "road" maybe 20 feet and then look right – you'll see the trail again. Go another 20 yards or so and look left for a National Forest Boundary sign and more orange blazes – the trail here is difficult and winds through several large rock faces. Once you get to the top of the second rock face, the trail bends slightly to the left and then heads straight up through a broad weedy woods. Keep going up and stay as close to the ridge

line as you can – the trail is blazed but may be hard to see (there is a barbed wire fence in here that I have tripped over and cut myself on – tetanus shot time!!). You'll soon level out, and then start climbing again on a very narrow and rocky spine – it's really pretty in here with lots of great views.

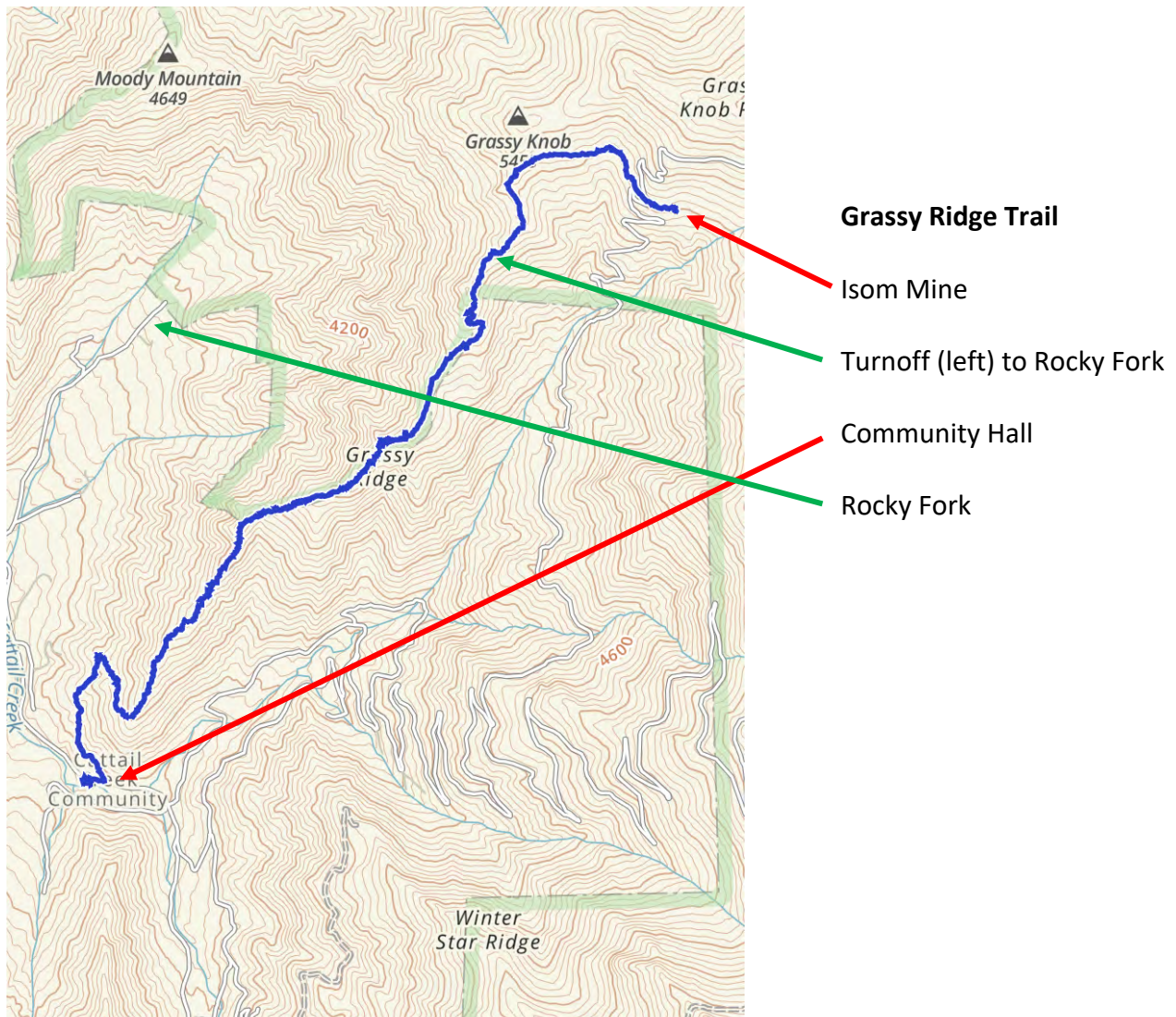
Follow the rocky spine for maybe a quarter of a mile and then you'll climb steeply through another thick woods. Keep patient – finally you'll break out onto a well-travelled logging road; hunters come here on their ATVs via the Mica Mine. You are probably a long mile now from the mine.

At the first Y intersection after two tight switchbacks, go right. If you go left here you can get down to the end of Rocky Fork on a fairly decent old logging road, although the closer you get to Rocky Fork, the worse the road gets.

Head right at this Y, mostly downhill, on good road to the turn off to your left that goes up to the high grade; the mine is just below this turn off. Don't be confused by an earlier left turnoff that is a rutted ATV path going up to a pretty camp site at the top of Grassy Knob. There is water along this final stretch for your dogs; the trickles across the road are the actual headwaters of North Fork of Cattail Creek.

Remember – this is an arduous hike.

You can also make a loop out of this by turning off to Rocky Fork (see map next page).



8. Mt. Mitchell to Deep Gap/Cattail

This is the granddaddy of all hikes here. The best way is to have someone let you off at the picnic area just below the top parking lot at Mt. Mitchell. I say this because it is not really possible to do this hike as a roundtrip from Cattail in one day. It's steep either way you go – that's not the issue: the hike probably takes 8 hours one-way and the up and down nature of the Crest Trail itself can be quite tiring.

If you decide to leave a car overnight in the Mitchell parking lot, be sure to put a sign on the dashboard saying what you are doing, so the Rangers don't come hunting for you (this tends to irritate them!).

Go through the picnic area and you are right on part of the prettiest section of the Crest Trail. Most peaks are marked, and some have great views. Cattail Peak does not have a view, but

after that the trail winds around to a cliff on Potato Hill with a great view down to Rt. 80 and beyond.

Potato Hill is the last steep climb before Deep Gap. As you are going down do not be fooled by the first camping area you come to – keep going until you are clearly in the “gap.” There is a large fire ring here. Camping here is OK, but there are often bear sightings, and often the Park Rangers close it to campers. Water here is very hard to find – you can follow the pipe Susan mentions in her description of the Deep Gap trail and usually there is water at the end of it, but maybe not!!

To get out of the Gap and on to the road down to Cattail, face the fire ring and the continuation of the Crest Trail – look left (west) and you’ll see a “road.” Follow Susan’s directions in reverse – don’t miss the turn off down to Cattail!! Map reading skills and a compass are really useful here if this is your first time.



Weller family and friends and German exchange student camping at the Boy Scout shelter in Deep Gap 25 years ago. The shelter is long gone.

9. Crest Trail

A very pleasant if arduous hike is the Crest Trail from Deep Gap to Celo and down past the Mine to Five Maples and then to Cattail. There are several ways to do this – you can go first to Five Maples and go right to the High Grade and keep right to Deep Gap and then get on the trail there. The Mica Mine map on pg. 9 shows this route quite well. Or of course you can follow Susan’s Deep Gap map on pg. 13 to Deep Gap and access the Crest Trail there.

A third way is to have someone drop you off at the intersection of Bolen’s Creek and Watershed Road – this trail is a straight shot to Celo – once you are near Celo Knob keep a good lookout for the Crest Trail signs – do NOT accidentally go down Percy’s Path (Grace’s Ladder) to the High Grade. When in doubt, stay up!! Either way, allow 11 tiring hours.

If you *really* want to hurt yourself, you can go up the Woody Ridge Trail or the Colbert's Ridge trail from Rt. 80 – maps in the Appendix.

10. Famous Switchback Nine Loop

This is a trail that Jim Sheehan and Susan and I explored and blazed. It starts at Switchback 9 on Susan's Deep Gap map and winds around finally to Ogle Gap and down back into Cattail. It follows the remains of an old railroad grade that apparently went all the way to Mitchell but which has been lost in the "mists of time," not to mention the torrential rains and landslides of 1977.

Go right at Switchback 9 instead of left and follow the terrain contour all the way around a large "bowl." After a while the trail becomes single track and goes up and down some creek beds that seem to contain the remains of old railroad trestles. The single track trail almost disappears in a broad woody meadow – make your way across this "meadow," going down slightly, to an old logging road. Go left on this road (not much of a road) to a creek crossing (we think this is one of the two creeks that make up Twin Falls.) Cross the creek and follow the road through a thick rhododendron thicket. This breaks out pretty quickly on the good Wilson Boundary Road. If you have time and stamina still, go left and up the road maybe 20 yards to Ogle Rock for a spectacular view.

Go down the Boundary Road through a series of three steep corkscrew switchbacks. After the third group of switchbacks, look for the turn off to the right into Ogle Gap. Do NOT miss this turn off, as after that you are seriously trespassing in the Wilson Boundary. The Boundary Road here turns sharply left and down, and Ogle Gap is to the right – it's sort of a flat area, and if you walk over the first logs or so and slightly up you'll see a wire stretched across the gap to keep out ATVers from Cattail. Walk through the Gap and you'll quickly hit the Ogle Gap Road, which leads you back down into Cattail. Go left.

Depending on where you park, this hike is a good 8 hours.

11. Karen's Landing Loop

This loop hike follows really crummy and well-hidden logging roads from Blackberry Lane to Switchback 4 on the Deep Gap Road. It's fun, short, and not too hard. Susan and I and Kerry Meyer and Maha Swede and Dave Swearingen have cleared it and marked it with orange tape recently.

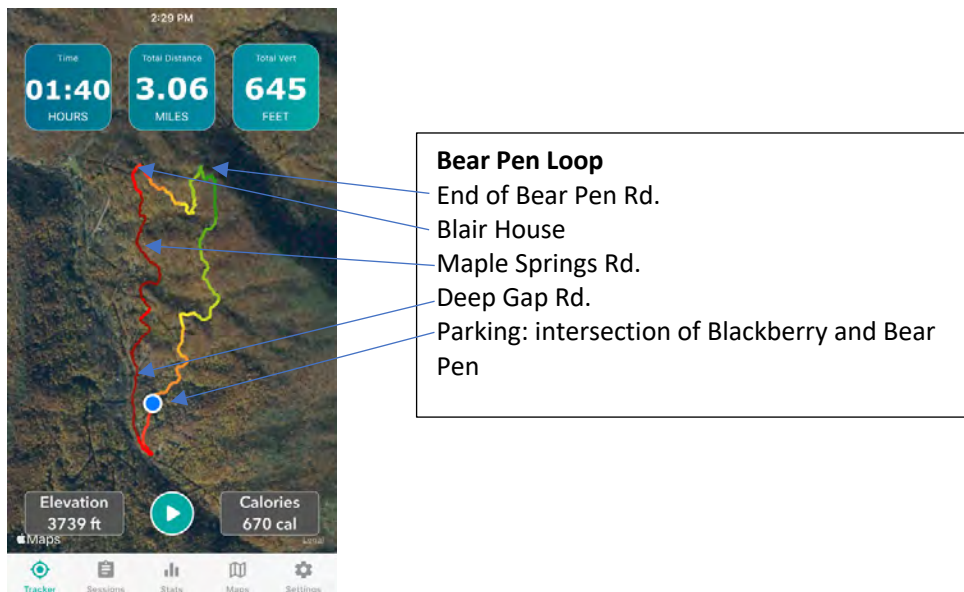
Park at the intersection of Bear Pen and Blackberry and follow Blackberry to the first steep switchback to the left (well before the Andre cabin). The road goes up another switchback (where you get a good view of the landing strip at Mountain Aire) to Karen's Landing. A "landing" is a logging staging area – this is the last area in which Karen Fitzgerald's mom Joannie Hooker (nee Threadgill) allowed logging. Cross the landing and head up a marked trail (road).

You can hear Hooker Falls off to the right as you start up again. If you are adventurous, there is a track to the falls on the right shortly after you start up again – you have to duck under some rhododendron to get started, but the track is fairly obvious – just follow the sounds!

Go to the next landing and take the road/path to the right. Eventually you'll cross a small creek and after another short distance you'll break out of the trees and rhododendron to another creek and on to Switchback 4. Follow the road down past the Twin Falls turnoff and on down to the Andre cabins, etc. It is not a long hike.

12. Blair House Loop

This is a short and very pleasant hike that is not very steep. Scenery is very tranquil, and there are wonderful wild flowers in the spring. Simply walk up Maple Springs Road from Deep Gap Road until you get to the white house at the top – just when the road bears sharp right into the driveway to the Blair house, go straight at the orange blazes and you'll immediately see that the road actually continues to the right and down at this point – it's a road still, but feels like single track. You'll come out just below the one lane bridge on Winter Star Road.



13. Bear Pen Loop

Bear Pen Road is a very pretty walk in itself. It's about 1 and ¼ miles to the end, where you can look across to Jim and Connie Sheehan's house. You can also see the top of Celo. There's always a ton of bobcat and coyote scat here. (Bobcats have more hair in their scat than a coyote, and they like to poop on flat rocks in the middle of a trail – there are pictures in the Appendix.)

Look to the left after admiring the view, and you'll see a blazed (orange) trail going steeply down. This zig zags down the mountain to the back yard of the Blair house. Return to your car

via Maple Springs Rd. and Deep Gap Rd. This is not a long hike, but it is rewarding because it feels very remote.

14. Ogle Rock

This is a terrific three-hour, five mile round-trip hike with a huge payoff. We like to drive our 4-wheeler (but any SUV will do) all the way up Ogle Gap Road to Jeff's Campground, which is just 20 or 40 yards past the turn off to the Fitzgibbon's cabin. You have an excellent view here of the Blacks (and the Crest Trail) from Cattail Peak to Celo Knob.

Go straight up the rugged road to Ogle's Gap – this takes about 45 minutes. You'll recognize the gap; turn right into the gap and cross the wire that keeps unauthorized ATVers and hunters out of the Wilson Boundary. Immediately you will hit the Boundary Road, which goes up and all the way to Stepps Gap, coming out at the Ranger Station on Mt. Mitchell. Do NOT turn right after exiting Ogle Gap, as the road here leaves the boundary line between the private, posted property and the new Mt. Mitchell State Park land and descends directly into a private hunting and fishing preserve.

After another 45 minutes of often steep and often flat walking you'll come to the massive base of Ogle Rock. The road here corkscrews up to the left and around the spine of the mountain, leveling out just past the egress point of the Famous Switchback Nine Loop. As soon as it gets level again you will see an old fire ring and a faded orange-painted rock to the left of the road. To the right you will see the path to the top of Ogle Rock, which provides a spectacular overlook. Here you are looking across to the beautiful Big Butt Trail which connects Cane River Gap to the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Do NOT do this hike during hunting season.

Fun note: if you crawl through the pine and rhododendron thicket immediately to the left of the fire ring you will come upon a marked trail to the top of Cattail Peak. This is a brutal trail as it goes just about straight up, with no switchbacks, and because it is not maintained – it is an old surveyor's trail.

15. Winter Star Mine

This is a trail that requires a lot of respect and care.

The payoff is an old mine and miner's cabin first found in recent times by Ron Nyegard. He discovered this otherwise unknown historic site by going up the rocky spine at the end of Bear Pen Road. Susan and I tried this route several years after he first told us about it, but couldn't get through all the rhododendron that had grown up since Ron's discovery. Mark Huber suggested to us that any mine here would have to have road access, to haul the mica out, so

Susan and I, along with Jake and Cynthia Blood, decided to explore the old switchbacks that go up to the left of Switchback 4 on the way to Deep Gap.

After many false starts and much crawling and cutting our way through the rhododendron behind our two dogs, Big Sadie and Tigger, Jake happened to look up through the thicket, wondering where the dogs were, and saw them nosing around the remains of an old cabin. It did not take long after that to stumble across a deep, water filled pit.

Heavily wooded, this site retains the ghost of the old miner who worked this – one can imagine the isolation and hardship, not to mention the drive and self-reliance of these mountain miners.

Inside the cabin there is still an old, ornate bed frame. Please respect this site and do not take any artifacts. Knowing that the government subsidies that made mica worth mining ran out after the Korean War, the cabin and mine are easily 60 and more years old.

Jim and Connie Sheehan came back with the four of us to further cut and widen the trail, but it is not marked as we hope to keep out souvenir hunters.

That said, if you have good trail instincts, go to the left at Switchback 4 (see Susan's Deep Gap map on p. 13 or Garmin map below) and go to the third switchback. Climb up the hill there through some fallen trees, and shortly you will hit an old, barely distinguishable road. Follow that out to the left. You are likely soon to see our old orange or pink tape. Go through a long rhododendron thicket and look up to the right – you'll see the cabin on the spine. Just past the cabin, going down along the spine, you'll stumble across the pit. Actually it's easier to go back down a few yards to the trail and continue around to the right a bit. Keep your dogs on a leash and your children close – the pit opens up sort of as a surprise, and if you fall in, I don't see how you will get out.

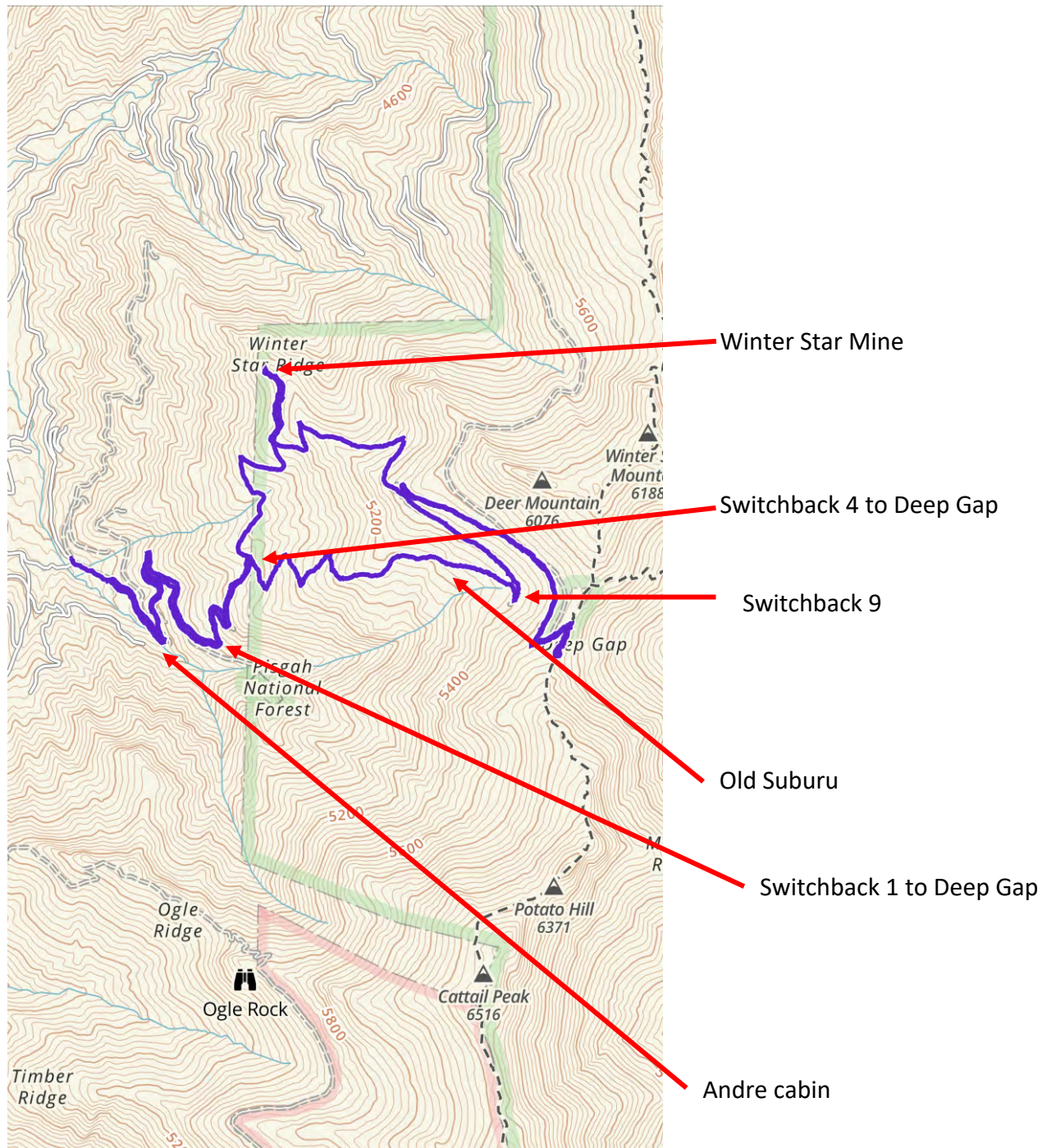
Please consider this a sacred, historic site, in honor of the mountain people who eked out a very hard-scrabble living here.



*Jake and Cynthia Blood at the Winter Star Mine,
February, 2015*

Appendix and References

Garmin hiking map showing Winter Star Mine and Deep Gap trails



NC High Peaks

<https://nchighpeaks.org/>

This website is a terrific resource. The club itself helps maintain the Crest Trail and numerous other Forest Service and State Park trails in Yancey County. It also sponsors monthly hikes.

Interactive Map of the Crest Trail and Connecting trails

<https://nchighpeaks.org/node/26>

This is another service of NC High Peaks

Weather and Web Cams

<https://nchighpeaks.org/Webcams>

Thinking of hiking the Crest Trail or to Deep Gap? Take a look at this site first to check the weather there. (Another service of NC High Peaks.)

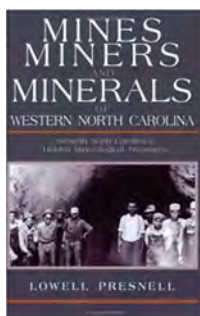
Mining Blog

<http://mcrocks.com/ft07/StreeterJanuary2007.html>

This is a terrific description of the Isom Mine (aka the Mica Mine, the Threadgill Mine): history, route, etc. This blog also contains good information about the Ray Mine on Bolens Creek Road.

Mines, Miners, and Minerals of Western North Carolina

By former native miner Lowell Presnell, this must-have book of local mining lore is available on Amazon.



Bobcat Scat



Disclaimers

- All trails described here are “unofficial” and often rely on memory for times and distances.
- Most trails described here we have cut and marked recently; others, like the top of the Pipeline Trail and the Famous Switchback 9 Loop have not been cut or marked for five or six years. Blazes fade, tape gets blown away, and the rhododendron and saplings grow rapidly.
- No official group maintains the trails – if you want to carry loppers or small cutters to deal with wandering rhododendron and thorny greenbrier, that would be wonderful!
- Hunting bears is an historic activity here. As stated earlier, do not go to the Isom Mine or to Ogle Rock during bear hunting season – hunters have every right to be here as long as they respect the rules. Google “NC Bear Hunting Season” to get the correct year and dates.
- It is illegal to kill bears outside of hunting season and/or without a license. If you have a bear in your yard, bring in your garbage and bird feeders, close your windows while cooking, and leash your pets and keep them in at night.



Percy Threadgill, founder of Cattail Creek Community, back row, right. (From the Mark Huber collection)

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