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The Swannanoa Valley offers a wide variety of hiking options just a short distance from Asheville. Many of these hikes are not on national forest property and thus a little harder to track down in guide books or online. The YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly in Black Mountain, NC was founded in 1906 by the YMCA as a student conference center and is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

In addition to viewing beautiful historic buildings the Blue Ridge Assembly maintains a network of trails through the Swannanoa Mountains. The Swannanoa Mountains are a small east-west range in the Blue Ridge Mountains that separate the Hickory Nut Mountains from the Swannanoa Valley. While not impressive in elevation, these mountains rise nearly 2,000 feet above the valley providing striking views of the surrounding area. This loop hike takes you to the high points of the Swannanoa Mountains including a spectacular vista of the Great Craggy Mountains and Black Mountains.

To get to the YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly, take exit 64 off I-40 to NC-9 south and go right on Blue Ridge Road at as the road splits. Soon you will see signs pointing a left turn on Blue Ridge Assembly Road. Park at the lower lot above the Blue Ridge Center. There are restrooms and two free paper maps of the grounds and hiking trails inside the Blue Ridge Center, both are useful at helping you navigate the grounds. There is also an upper parking lot above Lee Hall for hikers but the distance is minimal.

Mile 0.0 – From the lower parking lot above Blue Ridge Center, walk up the stairs towards Lee Hall and take the road on the right side. You should have Wolfpit Branch and the gymnasium on the right as you walk up the road.

Mile 0.1 – Pass the upper parking lot behind Lee Hall and stay right on the gravel road hugging Wolfpit Branch.

Mile 0.2 – Steve Frank Memorial Trail begins, take the left side of the loop keeping Wolfpit Branch on your right. Soon you will pass by an amphitheater on your left.

Mile 0.3 – The Nature Trail and High Windy Trail splits off right from a road. Go left on the paved road towards McCarty Lodge.

Mile 0.4 – The paved road ends at a four-way intersection with 3 trails (PP Course Trail goes straight and Burma Bridge Trail goes right). Go left to begin the Wolfpit Circle Trail which is a gravel road.

Mile 0.5 – Take the unmarked forest road that splits left from Wolfpit Circle Trail. Immediately turn on a forest road that heads to the right of a small pump house. There is a brown metal sign indicating a hiking trail. You will know you are on the correct trail when you walk on a large wood bridge over a tiny stream.

Mile 0.6 – Four-way intersection with the High Top Trail (no blazes). The alternate start for this hike comes in from the cottage area on the left but it is unclear where the parking and trail begin. The first stretch of the High Top Trail is a very steep ascent up an eroded path.

**Note** - The High Top Trail has warning signs at both ends and is advertised as difficult and dangerous. The signs do not lie. The trail to the cliffs climbs approximately 1230 feet in 1 mile. The most difficult sections are the beginning (330 feet in 0.25-mi) and the end (425 feet in 0.3-mi). This is broken up by a moderately steep section on a ridge. The final stretch requires less hiking and more rock scrambling up large rock faces. It might be tempting to do this hike in reverse but the descent down the cliffs would be more difficult than climbing up.

Mile 0.9 – The steep grade lessens as you attain a thin ridgeline with winter views in all directions. The path is not as steep here but keeps climbing. You will notice some very trenched portions of trail. This hike is primarily in deciduous forest. You will notice the west face of High Top rising sharply above.

Mile 1.3 – The final 0.3 mile stretch to the cliffs requires rock scrambling. The dirt trail ends and turns into a broken scramble over many steep rock faces. Hands are required.

Mile 1.5 – The trail resumes a dirt path briefly through a small patch of conifers.
Mile 1.6 – Trail reaches the cliffs of High Top (Note – not the true summit). From these cliffs you will have great views of the Blue Ridge Assembly and Swannanoa Valley below. The views of the Great Craggy Mountains and Black Mountains dominating the skyline to the north are arguably some of the best you will find in this region. The North Fork Reservoir shines blue as it sits below these tall mountain ranges. On clear days you can see the Great Smoky Mountains in the far west. The trail resumes above the cliffs towards the mountain summit and no more scrambling is required.

Mile 1.8 – Reach the summit of High Top (4,180 feet). There’s a small clearing in the trees with a fire ring with winter views. The trail descends the mountain on the northeast side.

Mile 2.0 – The High Top Trail ends at a forest road beside a warning sign on the left and a huge rock outcrop on the right. You will have a brief, steep ascent up to a ridgeline.

Mile 2.5 – A small rock outcrop on the right side of the trail has good views of Jesses High Top looming over the Wolfpit Branch basin. You can also spot the communications tower on High Windy.

Mile 2.7 – The forest road meets the High Windy Trail at the summit of High Windy (4,324 feet). Walk on the right side of the communications tower towards a clearing for the view.

Mile 2.8 – There is an old chimney beside the view. From this clearing you get another good view of the mountains rising above Swannanoa Valley but this vista isn’t as good as the High Top cliffs. Return to the trail intersection and take the High Windy Trail going right.

Mile 3.3 – At a T-junction there will be a white sign and brown metal sign directing you to the right to return to the Blue Ridge Assembly. Go straight on the unmarked forest road to reach the open summit of Black Knob. You should walk under power lines briefly.

Mile 3.4 – At another T-junction take a left on an unmarked forest road away from the power lines. This forest road is obviously less-traveled but not overgrown.

Mile 4.0 – After a couple minor drops into gaps reach the open summit of Black Knob (4,219 feet) with views to the west of the Swannanoa Mountains and Great Balsam Mountains in the distance. The trail descends through bushes briefly before emerging with great views north of High Windy and Linville Gorge. Due east you can see the South Mountains and to the southeast and south the Hickory Nut Mountains rise sharply. Turn around and head back towards the T-junction with signs leading to the Blue Ridge Assembly.

Mile 4.6 – T-junction of unmarked forest roads, go right uphill towards High Windy Trail.

Mile 4.7 – T-junction with High Windy Trail, go left towards Blue Ridge Assembly.

Mile 5.1 – T-junction of High Windy Trail and High Ridge Trail. Go straight on High Ridge Trail which becomes a hiker-only path. High Windy Trail is your exit route.

**Note** – The next 1.4 miles is optional and for peakbagging purposes only. There are few significant views on this stretch. Turn right on the High Windy Trail descending towards the Blue Ridge Assembly to skip this for a 7.2-mile hike or you can use some of the lower trails to add mileage.

Mile 5.2 – A small outcrop has an average view of High Top and High Windy.

Mile 5.4 – High Ridge Trail ends at T-junction with Catawba Canopy Trail and Graybeard Connector Trail. Go right on the unsigned Graybeard Connector Trail.

Mile 5.6 – Graybeard Connector Trail ends at a clearing with a wide forest road. Bear right taking this forest road uphill curving around the northwest ridge. Soon you will be hiking through chest-high grasses, this trail is rarely used.

Mile 5.7 – The forest road abruptly ends at a high dirt bank. The summit of Jesses High Top on the right is a short 400-foot bushwhack through open forest.

Mile 5.8 – Reach the wooded summit of Jesses High Top (4,354 feet). There are winter views here but nothing else of note. Return down the mountain keeping a southeast bearing to reach the forest road. When you reach the forest road go left heading back towards the Graybeard Connector Trail.

Mile 6.0 – Turn left on Graybeard Connector Trail.

Mile 6.2 – Turn left on the High Ridge Trail.

Mile 6.5 – Turn left on High Windy Trail which descends Turkey Ridge on a steep forest road grade.

Mile 6.9 – Pass an intersection with an unnamed upper trail that is indicated on the map as trails in gray color. This trail takes you to some views and can be used to connect the Wolfpit Circle or Carolina Loop trails for a longer hike. Stay left on the High Windy Trail.

Mile 7.5 – Intersection with the upper half of the Carolina Loop Trail at the storm shelter. Stay left on the High Windy Trail. The flora changes from rhododendron to mostly large hardwood trees.

Mile 7.8 – Intersection with lower half of the Carolina Loop Trail, stay left.

Mile 8.0 – Intersection with another unnamed trail, stay left.

Mile 8.1 – Intersection with Burma Bridge Trail, stay left.

Mile 8.2 – Soon you will come to an intersection with a gravel road. Stay straight, the road going uphill to the left is private. The Steve Franks Memorial Trail splits left off the gravel road in 100 feet. Either route leads back to the parking lot but go left to avoid more road hiking.

Mile 8.4 – The Steve Franks Memorial Trail goes right on a wooden bridge over Wolfpit Branch. The loop ends here. Go left on the paved road towards the parking lot and admire the historic buildings. The lighting is much better in the evening. You can spot High Top rising above the grounds to the southeast.

Mile 8.6 – Hike ends at the lower parking lot.