



Devils Courthouse, Black Balsam Knob and Sam Knob – Pisgah National Forest, NC

Length	Difficulty	Streams	Views	Solitude	Camping
12.1 mls	1	2	6	3	6
Hiking Time: 7 hours and 30 minutes with 2 hours and 15 minutes of breaks Elev. Gain: 2,205 ft Parking: Two pullouts on N.C. 215 near the Mountains-to-Sea Trail crossing. 35.30374, -82.90872					

[Click Here For Detailed Location](#)



By Trail Contributor: Zach Robbins

This loop hike in Pisgah National Forest, tucked between the Shining Rock and Middle Prong Wilderness Areas, is one of the most scenic hikes in North Carolina. The nearly mile-high plateau around the Flat Laurel Creek watershed offers views upon views from many prominent peaks. You'll begin your hike on the Mountains-to-Sea Trail heading east from N.C. 215 and hover between 5,000 and 6,000 feet for the most of the hike. Devils Courthouse is the first notable summit you'll visit just above the Blue Ridge Parkway. The tall cliffs offer 270° views of surrounding mountains in three states. Next you'll pass by sheer cliffs below Chestnut and Silvermine Balds with in-your-face views of Pilot Mountain and Looking Glass Rock. The highlight of this hike, and the region, is the grassy expanse of Black Balsam Knob. At 6,214 feet this is the 2nd tallest peak in the Great Balsam Mountains and is comparable to the Roan Highlands.

The double-humped Sam Knob is the third noteworthy peak on this hike. Both north and south knobs have grand views of the region. During the final leg of the hike you'll drop into the high-elevation Flat Laurel Creek bowl following the creek beside campsites and waterfalls while Little Sam Knob and Sam Knob tower above. Before the hike ends you'll get a last-second treat passing below Wildcat Falls. This loop is perfect for a full-day or a weekend backpacking trip and truly one of the most stunning hikes in the state.

Parking – There are two pullouts on N.C. 215 near the Mountains-to-Sea Trail crossing. The larger parking area is 100 feet south of the trail crossing. In order to complete this loop you'll have to walk 0.4 mi on N.C. 215 between the Mountains-to-Sea and Flat Laurel Creek Trails. You can also park at the Flat Laurel Creek Trail, but the parking entrance is steep and is tough for small cars.

Backcountry Camping – There are many great campsites to choose from along this hike. Most of them are not beside water sources, so packing in water or a hiking to a water source will be necessary. **Bear canisters are required** in this area.

- ▶ **Mile 0.0** – Follow the Mountains-to-Sea Trail [440] (*white blaze*) east from N.C. 215 trailhead.
- ▶ **Mile 0.5** – The trail turns right at a small stream then crosses the stream on a log bridge beside campsites.
- ▶ **Mile 0.8** – Pass below cliffs that offer scrambling opportunities with views then the trail turns left with open views west of N.C. 215 and south of Devils Courthouse.
- ▶ **Mile 1.6** – A large patch of conifers offers abundant comfortable campsites.
- ▶ **Mile 2.0** – T-junction with the Devil's Courthouse Connector Trail (*blue blaze*), turn right following the trail over Devil's Courthouse Tunnel.
- ▶ **Mile 2.1** – Continue left on the Devil's Courthouse Trail (*blue blaze*) to the summit.
- ▶ **Mile 2.2** – Reach the overlook on Devil's Courthouse (5,720 feet) with outstanding 270° views north, west, and south. Immediately north Little Sam Knob and Sam Knob rise above the Blue Ridge Parkway. To the northwest Mt. Hardy is the tallest peak above Fork Ridge and Rough Butt Bald. The land drops away to the west and south from the height of the Great Balsam Mountains. West and southwest are the distant peaks of the range around Panthertown Valley, with some of the tall peaks in Georgia beyond. Pilot Mountain is the prominent peak to the south, with the Blue Ridge Escarpment and Lake Jocassee visible in South Carolina.
- ▶ **Mile 2.6** – Back at the T-junction with the MST keep right heading northeast.
- ▶ **Mile 2.8** – Stay right on the MST at a Y-junction with the Little Sam Trail [347] (*yellow blaze*). (You can take the Little Sam Trail here to make a shorter loop.)
- ▶ **Mile 3.4** – View from cliffs south and east below Chestnut Bald summit. Pilot Mountain rises tall immediately south and Looking Glass Rock is the massive exposed rock (called a pluton) to the east.
- ▶ **Mile 3.6** – A protected meadow is one of the premier campsites on the hike. Just above is another cliff with views. You have a clearer view of Pilot Mountain here.
- ▶ **Mile 3.8** – Steep, exposed cliff with southern views below Silvermine Bald summit. This spot is narrow and hazardous with a sheer drop of over 200 feet. To the right you can see the cliffs below Chestnut Bald from earlier. Pilot Mountain dominates while Lake Jocassee sparkles in the distance. Immediately beyond the cliff the Art Loeb Trail [146] (*white blaze*) joins the MST from the right. Continue left from this Y-junction on the MST and ALT.
- ▶ **Mile 4.3** – Pass through another conifer grove with many campsites. Beyond this grove the trail passes through a heath bald and then another large grove of conifers.
- ▶ **Mile 4.9** – MST and ALT cross FR 816/Black Balsam Knob Road. Immediately after the crossing the MST turns right. Continue straight on the Art Loeb Trail.
- ▶ **Mile 5.1** – The trail leaves the forest behind ascending grassy balds towards Black Balsam Knob with spectacular views.
- ▶ **Mile 5.3** – At the top of a false summit pass a T-junction with the Art Loeb Spur Trail [108] (*no blaze*) on the left.

- ▶ **Mile 5.5** – Just below the true summit the Art Loeb Trail turns left at a Y-junction bypassing the summit. Continue right towards the top.
- ▶ **Mile 5.6** – Reach the enormous bare summit of Black Balsam Knob (6,214 feet) with phenomenal 360° views of the Great Balsam Mountains. Most of your hike is visible to the southwest, with Mt. Hardy and Sam Knob the two largest peaks in that direction. Due north the grassy balds continue into the heart of the Shining Rock Wilderness. The tallest peak in the distance is Cold Mountain, while the conical peak to the northeast is Mt. Pisgah. The land drops away to the east into pluton country of Pisgah Ranger District, the Hickory Nut Mountains are on the distant horizon. Looking Glass Rock can be seen far below. Further south Pilot Mountain is the most striking peak.

After you are done enjoying the views turn around heading back down the mountain. If you have time feel free to continue north towards Tennent Mountain on the Art Loeb Trail. You can use the Ivestor Gap Trail to make a loop to the Black Balsam Rd parking lot.

- ▶ **Mile 6.1** – Turn right on the Art Loeb Spur Trail [108] (*no blaze*) heading downhill to the parking lot.
- ▶ **Mile 6.5** – The connector trail ends at the Black Balsam Knob Rd parking lot. Begin the Sam Knob Trail [617] (*blue blaze*) on the right near the pit toilets. The trail has seen recent trail maintenance and is a wide gravel path.
- ▶ **Mile 6.9** – Follow a boardwalk over severely eroded trail down to a broad meadow below Sam Knob.
- ▶ **Mile 7.1** – At a T-junction turn right beginning the Sam Knob Summit Trail [617A] (*blue blaze*).
- ▶ **Mile 7.5** – The trail emerges from the forest offering views of the Flat Laurel Creek Valley.
- ▶ **Mile 7.7** – At a saddle between the north and south peaks of Sam Knob turn left. There are multiple usage paths along the ridge to each summit and to many campsites protected by shrubs. You can take your pick which direction to head first, but be sure to check out both summits.
- ▶ **Mile 7.8** – At the north summit of Sam Knob there are two sets of rock outcrops offering excellent views north and west. Due north the rugged ridgeline of the Fork Mountain massif containing Birdstand Mountain and High Top divides the West Fork Pigeon River and Little East Fork Pigeon River watersheds. You can see Stairs and Cold Mountains to the northeast. Green Knob on Fork Ridge in the Middle Prong Wilderness is immediately west. Return to the saddle and keep going to the south summit.
- ▶ **Mile 8.1** – The small grassy knoll atop the south summit has outstanding views east to west. Look back to see the rounded north peak of Sam Knob. Rock outcrops preclude the precipitous dropoff of Flat Laurel Creek to the west, with Mt. Hardy rising high above N.C. 215. Immediately south are the peaks of Little Sam Knob, Chestnut Bald and Devils Courthouse. The beautiful, bare meadows around Black Balsam Knob form the headwaters of Flat Laurel Creek. You can see the Ivestor Gap Trail cut into the mountainside below Black Balsam Knob leading north to Ivestor Gap and Grassy Cove Top. The heart of the Shining Rock Wilderness is to the northeast.
- ▶ **Mile 8.8** – At the T-junction stay right descending south on the Sam Knob Trail [617] (*blue blaze*) into the Flat Laurel Creek Valley.
- ▶ **Mile 9.1** – Abundant campsites before you cross a small stream.
- ▶ **Mile 9.3** – Rock hop Flat Laurel Creek. The creek is impressively large for this elevation. The Sam Knob Trail ends on the opposite side at a T-junction with the Flat Laurel Creek Trail [346] (*orange blaze*). Turn right. The Flat Laurel Creek Trail follows the valley choked by Little Sam Knob and Sam Knob above.
- ▶ **Mile 9.5** – Wooded campsites on the right side of the trail beside Flat Laurel Creek.
- ▶ **Mile 9.6** – The first of many waterfalls on Flat Laurel Creek. Only the top two cascades are accessible from the trail. Flat Laurel Creek drops nearly 800 feet over many waterfalls from this valley, but seeing this requires a serious bushwhacking expedition beyond this point.
- ▶ **Mile 10.9** – Cross a concrete bridge over Silver Mine Branch near the base of Wildcat Falls. This waterfall is over 200 feet high, but from the bridge only 60-70 feet is visible. Do not try to scramble up the side to see the higher drops, this is a dangerous area.
- ▶ **Mile 11.5** – Rock hop a stream below a small waterfall.
- ▶ **Mile 11.6** – Rock hop Bubbling Spring Branch.
- ▶ **Mile 11.7** – Flat Laurel Creek Trail ends at a parking area beside N.C. 215. Turn left on N.C. 215 heading south towards the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. N.C. 215 is narrow and curvy, be wary and stay on the shoulder.
- ▶ **Mile 12.1** – Hike ends at the MST parking area.