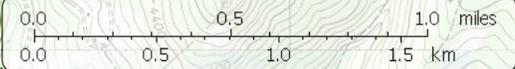


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Haw Orchard Mountain
MLB 1596

Wilburn Ridge/Pine Mountain - Grayson Highlands, Virginia

Length	Difficulty	Streams	Views	Solitude	Camping
14.2 mls	4	1	6	3	5
Hiking Time:	7.0 hours plus a 1 hour for lunch and breaks				
Elev. Gain:	2,225 ft				
Parking:	Park at the Massie Gap parking area				

Consistently mentioned as one of the top sections along the Appalachian Trail and arguably boasting the finest views in the Southeast, the Appalachian Trail through the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area should be on everyone's must-do list. This loop samples the best parts of this region in one fantastic day hike. The prime starting location for entering these mountains is Grayson Highlands State Park, but this hike will avoid most of the crowds while delivering the same views.

From the Massie Gap parking area you will climb up to the Appalachian Trail heading north away from the pony-watching congregation area. After diving through the Wilson Creek basin, the AT climbs through the Little Wilson Creek Wilderness and the flanks of Stone Mountain with top-notch views for miles on open ridges. From the Scales compound the AT crosses through conifer forest before you leave the AT to make your way to Rhododendron Gap.

The Pine Mountain Trail connects to the AT where you have the option of an out-and-back to Mount Rogers or a shorter return to the parking lot. Either way, the sections near Rhododendron Gap offer more top of the world views in all directions. The AT straddles open ridges above 5,000 feet and feels like a trail from another part of the country. On your way back to Massie Gap you're guaranteed to pass the wild ponies that roam this area. They are friendly but make sure to obey the rules and not feed or touch them. There are many ways to shorten or lengthen this hike for a quick day hike or weekend backpack, but this encompasses a majority of the best features in this region.

The park is accessed by taking U.S. 58 west from Mouth of Wilson for 11.6 miles or U.S. 58 east from Damascus Road for 24.9 miles. There is a large state park entrance sign, take VA-362 north from this turn off. At the park gate you will have to pay a \$7 fee, and \$10 fee for April-October weekends. The well-marked Massie Gap parking area is 3.3 miles from U.S. 58. The overnight backpacking lot is directly before Massie Gap parking on the right off the group camping road turnoff.

Horse Trails – There are many horse trails throughout this region that crisscross and parallel many of the hiking trails. This loop is entirely on hiking trails but many horse trails can be used to reduce mileage. It's difficult to get lost using a horse trail, but they're usually very rocky and the views aren't as good.

Camping – There are excellent camping areas around Wise Shelter, Pine Mountain Trail, and from Rhododendron Gap to Thomas Knob Shelter. Water may be difficult to find along the Pine Mountain Trail and close to Rhododendron Gap.

- ▶ **Mile 0.0** – Begin at Massie Gap day parking area. Turn right going down the road past the pit toilets towards the overnight backpackers parking lot.
- ▶ **Mile 0.3** – Turn left at road.
- ▶ **Mile 0.4** – Appalachian Spur Trail (*blue blaze*) begins far left of overnight parking lot.
- ▶ **Mile 0.5** – Junction with Horse Trail, continue straight on AT spur trail which climbs through a forest towards the Appalachian Trail
- ▶ **Mile 1.2** – Spur trail ends at a T-junction with the Appalachian Trail (*white blaze*) in a clearing. Head north on the AT leaving the open ridge and diving down into a forest.
- ▶ **Mile 1.8** – Cross over Quebec Branch of Wilson Creek on a log bridge. Beyond the crossing the trail passes through multiple horse gates following the left side of the branch through an open forest.
- ▶ **Mile 2.6** – Pass by the AT Wise Shelter on your right.
- ▶ **Mile 2.7** – Step over a horse fence ladder then cross over Big Wilson Creek on a bridge. The forest gives way to open fields sitting below gentle peaks.
- ▶ **Mile 3.0** – Junction with Wilson Creek Trail. Continue straight and immediately cross over Wilson Creek on a bridge.
- ▶ **Mile 3.1** – Come to a confusing intersection with the Scales Trail. Turn left at the intersection following Scales Trail then look for the AT splitting off to the right in 200 feet.
- ▶ **Mile 3.2** – Pass through a horse gate entering the Little Wilson Creek Wilderness. For the next 1.2 miles the trail gradually climbs through a forest alternating between deciduous and conifer.
- ▶ **Mile 4.4** – Junction with Bearpen Trail, stay straight on AT. The trail leaves the Little Wilson Creek Wilderness. For the next 1.2 miles the trail dramatically climbs the open fields of Stone Mountain. From here you can see the peaks on Haw Orchard Mountain, Wilburn Ridge, and Pine Mountain rising high above the Wilson Creek drainage to the southwest. To the northeast, Stone Mountain and Third, Second, and First Peak dominate the horizon.
- ▶ **Mile 5.3** – Begin descending towards the Scales area.
- ▶ **Mile 5.6** – Reach the Scales compound tucked between Stone Mountain and Pine Mountain Ridge. There are a lot of trails leading away from this area, make sure to follow the correct path. Immediately on the right the First Peak Trail goes into the Little Wilson Creek Wilderness. Make your way around the left/south side of Scales to continue on the AT.
- ▶ **Mile 5.7** – The Scales Trail and Virginia Highlands Horse Trail head south from the compound.
- ▶ **Mile 5.8** – The Crest Trail and AT go left/west away from the compound. The AT splits off to the right climbing into forest. Avoid the more obvious Crest Trail. For 1.3 miles the AT climbs steadily through thick conifer forest.
- ▶ **Mile 7.1** – Take a left on Pine Mountain Trail (*blue blaze*) heading southwest. This trail leads to the AT at

- Rhododendron Gap in 2.0 miles.
- ▶ **Mile 7.7** – The trail leaves the forest and opens up with great views of Wilburn Ridge and Mount Rogers directly south.
 - ▶ **Mile 8.0** – Junction with the Lewis Fork Trail. The Pine Mountain Trail is directly across and faintly marked. To the left the Lewis Fork Trail ends in 0.1 miles at the Crest Trail. If you accidentally take this route the Crest Trail also leads to Rhododendron Gap. The Pine Mountain Trail begins a steep climb through forest.
 - ▶ **Mile 8.5** – Leaving the forest cover the trail climbs through very thick rhododendron coverage, then weeds and briars. There are giant rock formations along the trail along with more views south.
Option: In the summer this section is very overgrown with briars and weeds, long sleeves recommended. Sometimes you cannot see the ground through the thick bushes. If you want to avoid this section take the Crest Trail from the Lewis Fork Trail intersection.
 - ▶ **Mile 9.3** – Junction with the Appalachian Trail at Rhododendron Gap. Head south on the AT towards Mount Rogers for a short 1.1 miles out-and-back to the Thomas Knob Shelter. Initially the trail is level through forest cover.
Option: Take the AT north back towards Grayson Highlands. This will save 2.2 miles but you will miss the Thomas Knob area.
 - ▶ **Mile 9.5** – From here all the way to the Mount Rogers Spur Trail the trail is wide open with many views to the south and west. There are excellent flat areas for camping all along this stretch.
 - ▶ **Mile 9.9** – Climb around the shoulder of Thomas Knob and get your first glimpse of the sloping hulk of Mount Rogers. Whitetop Mountain dominates to the west.
 - ▶ **Mile 10.4** – Reach the Thomas Knob Shelter. The rock outcrop behind the shelter offers outstanding views of Mount Rogers, Whitetop Mountain, and the Helton Creek drainage. Prominent peaks in western NC such as Grandfather Mountain and Grassy Ridge Bald are visible. Below the shelter there is a short trail to a spring. Turn around and head back to Rhododendron Gap.
Option: You can continue another 0.4 miles to the Mount Rogers Spur Trail, a 0.5 miles summit climb to the highest mountain in Virginia. This trail is an easy climb through fir-spruce forest. The summit is covered in trees offering no views, but you can claim the highest mountain in the state. This adds an additional 1.8 miles round trip.
 - ▶ **Mile 11.6** – Reach Rhododendron Gap and head north on the AT. Avoid taking the Crest Trail on the right and climb up the shoulder of Pine Mountain.
 - ▶ **Mile 11.9** – Begin a spectacular section along the rocky Wilburn Ridge. The AT hovers near the crest with great views in every direction.
 - ▶ **Mile 12.1** – Junction with Wilburn Ridge Trail (*blue blaze*). Stay right on the short but steep trail for 1.0 miles up and over 2 peaks. The trail is mostly over large boulder and rock faces, bright blue blazes are painted directly on rocks.
Option: Stay left on the AT to avoid the rocky climbs over Wilburn Ridge. The AT skirts the north shoulder of the ridge. It is easier and about the same distance but the views aren't nearly as good.
 - ▶ **Mile 12.2** – First summit along Wilburn Ridge offering arguably the best views on this hike. The summit is a large rocky area with a comfortable grassy spot for a break. The views are 360° up here.
 - ▶ **Mile 12.6** – Junction with Rhododendron Gap Trail, continue straight on Wilburn Ridge Trail to ascend the 2nd peak. If you have had enough of the rocky climbs the AT is conveniently a few hundred feet on your left.
 - ▶ **Mile 12.7** – Summit of 2nd peak, smaller than the 1st. Views are almost as good.
 - ▶ **Mile 12.9** – Wilburn Ridge Trail ends at the AT, continue north on AT towards Massie Gap descending over rocky terrain.
 - ▶ **Mile 13.2** – Junction with Crest Trail and Virginia Highlands Horse Trail at the boundary for Grayson Highlands State Park. Continue straight through the horse gate on the AT.
 - ▶ **Mile 13.7** – Reach Massie Gap. Take a right on the Rhododendron Trail (*blue blaze*) heading down towards the parking lot.
 - ▶ **Mile 13.9** – Trail splits. Virginia Highlands Connector Trail goes left, stay right on Rhododendron Trail.
 - ▶ **Mile 14.4** – Hike ends at the Massie Gap parking area.