



The Hangover – Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness, Nantahala National Forest, NC

Length	Difficulty	Streams	Views	Solitude	Camping
18.7 mls	5	N/A	5	3	6
Hiking Time:	2-3 days of backpacking				
Elev. Gain:	6,140 ft				
Parking:	Overnight parking is available at the Jenkins Meadow Trailhead beside the intersection of Santeetlah Rd and Joyce Kilmer Rd. 35.36221, -83.92181				

[Click Here For Detailed Location](#)

By Trail Contributor: Zach Robbins



The Hangover has the best views in Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness, and arguably the finest views in the rugged Unicoi Mountains of southwestern North Carolina and Tennessee. Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness covers 17,410 acres of wild territory along the state border. Combined with the neighboring Citico Creek Wilderness in Tennessee, this contiguous area contains some of the most remote, primitive trails in the Southeast. This hike in the eastern section of the wilderness is a straightforward, simple introduction to the region that can be done as a day or weekend hike. Instead of undertaking a difficult day hike to The Hangover and missing other nearby landmarks, you can use any of the numerous campsites as a base camp for further exploration. A multi-day trip allows you time to explore Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, Bob Bald, and possibly distant waterfalls deep in the Slickrock Creek Gorge. This hike begins with the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, a 3,840-acre tract in the wilderness that is home to one of the largest stands of virgin old-growth hardwood trees in the eastern United States. These giants, notably the yellow-poplars, are more than 400 years old and tower 100 feet above the trail. What comes next is the toughest leg of this hike, the march up the Jenkins Meadow and Haoe Lead Trails to Haoe Bald and The Hangover. The campsites beside The Hangover are outstanding, and the views from the rock pulpit are even better of the Unicoi, Great Smoky, Cheoah, Snowbird, and Nantahala mountain ranges. From here you can decide to spend the night and turn around, or backpack further into the wilderness using the wide variety of primitive trails.

Alternate Hikes and Campsites –This hike took place over 3 days but can easily be done as an overnight backpack. The two best alternative campsite locations are at Naked Ground Gap and Bob Bald. Both have plenty of sites and good access to springs. You can take an alternate return to the parking lot using the Naked Ground Trail. The exploration of this hike was stunted because the author staked out a campsite all weekend for the solar eclipse. You can incorporate the trails that descend the Stratton Bald/Haoe Lead ridges for a longer backpacking trip. Be forewarned, none of these trails are easy and you would be adding a lot of elevation gain/loss. Additionally, you can make a difficult 9.2 mile/3,000+ feet elevation gain day hike to The Hangover using the Jenkins Meadow Trail.

Day 1 – 8.3-mile hike through Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest and to campsites beside The Hangover

- ▶ **Mile 0.0** – Overnight parking is available at the Jenkins Meadow Trailhead beside the intersection of Santeetlah Rd and Joyce Kilmer Rd. The Jenkins Meadow Trail [53A] (*no blaze*) begins on the north side of the road after the wide shoulders end. Follow Joyce Kilmer Rd towards the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest.
- ▶ **Mile 0.6** – Day-use parking lot for Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. The Joyce Kilmer Memorial Loop Trail [43] (*no blaze*) begins at the end of the parking lot and immediately crosses Little Santeetlah Creek. The trail is designated as a National Recreation Trail and provides passage into an ancient world of virgin old-growth hardwood forests. Technically, the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest is within the Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness. But since it is one of the most popular trails in Nantahala National Forest, the wilderness designation is somewhat moot here. You are following the 1.2-mi Lower Loop to connect with the Upper Loop. The short section of the Lower Loop that parallels the creek is closed due to severe erosion and deadfall.
- ▶ **Mile 1.1** – Cross junction with the Lower and Upper Loops. Turn left beginning the 0.8-mi Upper Loop. You will return to this intersection. The giants of the memorial forest are concentrated along the Upper Loop. Along this section you'll encounter old-growth yellow-poplar, hemlock, oak, basswood, sycamore, and beech. The largest and most numerous trees are yellow-poplars. Some of these giants are more than 450 years old, are 7+ feet in diameter and 20+ feet in circumference, and are taller than 120 feet. The only comparable forests in the Southeast can be found in small pockets in the Great Smoky Mountains.
- ▶ **Mile 2.0** – At the cross junction with the Upper and Lower Loops, turn left on the Lower Loop. This section receives little use at the moment since the creek section is closed.
- ▶ **Mile 2.4** – Cross Little Santeetlah Creek on a wooden bridge. On the other side of the bridge the Lower Loop (closed) turns right. Turn left on the Naked Ground Trail [55] (*no blaze*).
- ▶ **Mile 2.7** – T-junction with the Naked Ground Connector Trail (*no blaze*) on the right. You will see a wooden sign indicating this is the path to connect with the Jenkins Meadow Trail. There is confusion on the official name of this trail, you will also see it listed as the Jenkins Meadow Trail [53A], notably by the forest service signs. However, the trail may be decommissioned which would explain its condition. This connector trail receives little use and is littered with deadfall. The hiking will be slow on this section, but fortunately this trail is in much worse condition than the rest of the trails on this hike.
- ▶ **Mile 3.8** – Turn left at the T-junction with the Jenkins Meadow Trail [53A] (*no blaze*) in a flat area. The trail steeply climbs 2,000 feet over the next 2.8 miles along the dry, dusty shoulder of Haoe Lead. You will get winter views west of the Little Santeetlah Creek drainage.

- ▶ **Mile 4.2** – The trail makes a right turn beside a campsite with an old trail heading down the ridge on the left.
- ▶ **Mile 5.9** – Below the trail to the left is a small spring and a campsite. This is the last accessible water source before you reach the overnight campsites near The Hangover.
- ▶ **Mile 6.6** – The Jenkins Meadow Trail ends at a Y-junction with the Haeo Lead Trail [53] (*no blaze*). Turn left following the Haeo Lead ridgeline towards Jenkins Meadow. In this region of the mountains long ridges were commonly called leads.
- ▶ **Mile 6.7** – The Haeo Lead Trail levels out through Jenkins Meadow. This wide, level area on Haeo Lead was former land for cattle grazing, but the trees have since grown back and there are no longer views.
- ▶ **Mile 7.3** – Campsite on the left side of the trail at the top of a small knob. From here the trail makes its final push to the summit of Haeo Bald.
- ▶ **Mile 7.8** – Haeo Lead Trail turns left at a T-junction with the Hangover Lead Trail and the Benton MacKaye Trail at the summit of Haeo Bald (5,249 feet). Once the site of a lookout tower, this small, rocky summit is now covered in trees. Turn right following the Hangover Lead Trail [56] (*no blaze*) and Benton MacKaye Trail [2] north.
- ▶ **Mile 7.9** – Pass through Saddle Tree Gap and continue north on the Hangover Lead Alternate Trail [56A] (*no blaze*). The Hangover Lead Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail turn left dropping off the ridge.
- ▶ **Mile 7.95** – T-junction with the Deep Creek Trail [46] (*no blaze*) on the right.
- ▶ **Mile 8.0** – The stretch from Deep Creek Trail to The Hangover is full of great campsites. Immediately after the trail junction are a few campsites, then a section of trail passes through thick undergrowth for a few hundred feet. The campsites closest to The Hangover are the best campsites on this hike.

Day 2 – 5.8-mile day hike to Bob Bald with overnight stay at The Hangover

- ▶ **Mile 8.3** – Follow the Hangover Lead Alternate Trail south and then follow the Hangover Lead Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail south over Haeo Bald.
- ▶ **Mile 8.6** – On Haeo Bald, continue southwest on the Haeo Lead Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail. After the steep descent from Haeo Bald, you'll follow a beautiful 5,000-foot ridgeline towards Naked Ground.
- ▶ **Mile 9.5** – Pass through Naked Ground Gap, an important landmark at the junction of three wilderness trails with multiple campsites. On the left side of the gap the Naked Ground Trail descends to Little Santeetlah Creek and eventually Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. The Slickrock Creek Trail begins on the right. Follow this trail and immediately look for a trail splitting left for access to a reliable spring.
- ▶ **Mile 9.6** – Spring beside the manway is reliable year-round.
- ▶ **Mile 9.8** – Back at Naked Ground Gap, continue southwest on the Haeo Lead Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail.
- ▶ **Mile 10.4** – Haeo Lead Trail ends at a T-junction with the Stratton Bald Trail. Turn right following the Stratton Bald Trail and Benton MacKaye beside the forested summit of Stratton Bald.
- ▶ **Mile 11.0** – Pass through many excellent campsites protected by a pine and spruce forest.
- ▶ **Mile 11.1** – The Stratton Bald Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail veer right along the north side of Bob Bald. Follow the obvious usage paths to the left to explore the bald. Bob Bald (5,269 feet) is a western subpeak of Stratton Bald and has great camping opportunities along the gentle grassy slopes. Due to the shallow gradient of Bob Bald, the trees around the summit's edge obscure open views. Looking south you can see the tallest Unicoi Mountains around the Cherohala Skyway rising above the tree line. Once you've explored Bob Bald, turn around and follow the Stratton Bald Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail east.
- ▶ **Mile 12.7** – This track returns to the spring below Naked Ground Gap. The spring is easier to fill up than the spring on the Hangover Lead Trail, so it might be worthwhile to stop here and haul water back to your campsite.
- ▶ **Mile 13.9** – At the summit of Haeo Bald, continue north on the Hangover Lead Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail.
- ▶ **Mile 14.1** – Campsites for night 2 near The Hangover.

Day 3 – 4.6-mile hike to parking area

- ▶ **Mile 14.1** – Follow the Hangover Lead Alternate Trail and Hangover Lead Trail to Haeo Bald.
- ▶ **Mile 14.4** – Turn left on the Haeo Lead Trail.
- ▶ **Mile 15.6** – Turn right on the Jenkins Meadow Trail descending Haeo Lead.
- ▶ **Mile 17.9** – Turn left on the Jenkins Meadow Trail at the T-junction with the Naked Ground Connector Trail.
- ▶ **Mile 18.7** – Hike ends at Joyce Kilmer Rd.