





Mount Mitchell Trail - Pisgah National Forest, NC

Length	Difficulty	Streams	Views	Solitude	Camping
12.0 mls		N/A			
Hiking Time: 6.0 hrs with 1.5 hrs for breaks Elev. Gain: 3,684 ft Parking: Black Mountain Campground parking area. 35.75129, -82.22026					

By Trail Contributor: Zach Robbins

Mt. Mitchell is the tallest peak in the Appalachian Mountains and the Eastern U.S. which makes it a worthwhile destination for any hiker. Tourists can access the mountain during the warmer months when the Blue Ridge Parkway and state park are open to vehicle traffic. The state park offers many exhibits, amenities, and trails, and the namesake mountain has a paved walkway leading to the observation tower just a few hundred yards from the parking lot. However, the true way to experience the mountain is to hike it, all the way from the bottom.

The classic route is the Mt. Mitchell Trail which starts over 3,000 feet below the summit deep in the South Toe River Valley. For nearly 6 miles the trail climbs steadily through multiple forest ecosystems as you leave the comforts of the valley and enter the southern Appalachian spruce-fir forests only found at the highest elevations in the southeast. Along the way you'll find views, microburst damage, beautiful forests, and ice if it's the winter. Your reward is the incredible 360° view from the Mt. Mitchell observation tower where you can spot seemingly every mountain range in North Carolina.

The trail head is located in the Black Mountain Campground, managed by the Appalachian Ranger District of Pisgah National Forest. From the small community of Busick, turn on the South Toe River Road off highway NC-80. Follow this gravel road for 2.8 miles to the entrance of the Black Mountain Campground. At the entrance is a parking area beside an information board, just before a road bridge over South Toe River. This is the designated hiker's parking lot, parking in the campground is for registered campers.

- ▶ **Mile 0.0** – Hike begins at the hiker's parking area at the Black Mountain Campground. Start your hike crossing the bridge on the right over South Toe River.
- ▶ **Mile 0.2** – Briar Bottom Bike Trail splits left. Go right following the road, either trail takes you to the same destination.
- ▶ **Mile 0.3** – The Mt. Mitchell Trail (blue blaze) begins on the right side of the road. This trail is 5.5 miles one-way to the summit of Mt. Mitchell, the tallest mountain in the Eastern United States. The Mountains-to-Sea Trail (white blaze) follows the Mt. Mitchell trail for the majority of the journey. For 1.6 miles the trail switchbacks through hardwood forest then thick rhododendron and mountain laurel.
- ▶ **Mile 1.9** – Junction with the unmarked spur trail to overlook of South Toe River Valley.
- ▶ **Mile 2.0** – Junction with the Higgins Bald Trail. Unlike what is listed on topographic maps the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (white blaze) follows the Higgins Bald Trail (yellow blaze). Go right on the Mt. Mitchell Trail.
- ▶ **Mile 2.9** – After passing through a power line clearance, rock hop over Setrock Creek and then reach the junction with the Higgins Bald Trail (yellow and white blaze). The MST rejoins the Mt. Mitchell Trail at this junction.
- ▶ **Mile 3.1** – Pass through an area with campsites below large pine and spruce. In this area you'll pass extensive damage beside the trail as a result of a microburst.
- ▶ **Mile 3.5** – End of serious microburst damage.
- ▶ **Mile 3.7** – The trail reaches the power line clearing again and begins switchbacking up the clearance area. In the winter this is usually the start of ice on trail.
- ▶ **Mile 4.2** – Junction with Buncombe Horse Range Trail. The Mt. Mitchell Trail turns left following the horse trail briefly.
- ▶ **Mile 4.3** – Mt. Mitchell Trail turns right leaving horse trail at Commissary Hill (great campsites). From here the Mt. Mitchell Trail leaves the national forest entering the Mt. Mitchell State Park boundary. For the next 1.6 miles the trail follows a narrow, heavily eroded path over roots and rocks. As you near 6,000 feet you will enter southern Appalachian spruce-fir forest that is unique to the Southeast. The forest is dominated by red spruce and Fraser fir. During the winter this section has long sections of ice.
- ▶ **Mile 5.6** – Junction with Balsam Nature Trail. Stay left on the Mt. Mitchell Trail-Balsam Nature Trail. The right fork of the Balsam Nature Trail is a short loop and also ends at the summit.
- ▶ **Mile 5.8** – Mt. Mitchell Trail ends at walkway to observation tower. Turn left following the paved walkway to the observation tower.

- ▶ **Mile 5.9** – Reach the summit of Mt. Mitchell, the highest mountain in the east at 6,684 feet. The grave site of Dr. Elisha Mitchell is below the observation tower. The observation tower was remodeled in 2008 and provides 360° views complete with interpretive signs in each direction that help you identify all the mountains and land features in view.

Immediately north Mt. Craig, the 2nd tallest mountain in the east, is the closest peak. The northern Black Mountains dominate the skyline as they undulate for miles ending at the conical Celo Knob.

Farther north you can see the tall, gently sloped mountains of the Roan Highlands. In the northeast Grandfather Mountain sticks out as the tallest peak in its immediate area. Linville Gorge and the iconic Table Rock Mountain and Hawksbill Mountain are visible in the east. Due south you can spot Highway 128 curving along the southern Black Mountains, with the radio towers of Clingmans Peak rising beside Mt. Gibbs. Pinnacle is the conical peak to the left of Clingmans Peak. Graybeard Mountain is in between Pinnacle and Clingmans Peak but smaller and more rounded. The Black Mountains are shaped like a J and this is never more readily apparent than atop Mt. Mitchell where you can see the southwestern peaks curve around the Cane River Valley. The southwestern Black Mountains curve around the Cane River Valley. Immediately to the west Point Misery, Little Butt, and Big Butt are the closest peaks. Towards the southwest Blackstock Knob is the highest peak with a small, rounded summit. Immediately behind and to the left is the distinctive summit of Craggy Dome, the tallest peak in the Great Craggy Mountains. Most of the Great Craggy Mountains are obscured from view by the Black Mountains. If you summit on a clear day, you will be able to see tall ridgelines of the Great Balsam Mountains and Great Smoky Mountains running southwest to west.

- ▶ **Mile 8.9** – Junction with the Higgins Bald Trail. If you decide to continue down the Mt. Mitchell Trail you will reduce the total distance by 0.4-mi.
- ▶ **Mile 9.4** – Campsites on the right side of the Higgins Bald Trail.
- ▶ **Mile 9.5** – Higgins Bald Trail crosses over Setrock Creek. There is a waterfall below this crossing but no side trails were visible.
- ▶ **Mile 10.2** – Higgins Bald Trail ends at the Mt. Mitchell Trail. Continue following the Mt. Mitchell Trail down to the parking area.
- ▶ **Mile 12.0** – Hike ends at Black Mountain Campground.