



Rich Mountain Lookout Tower and Lovers Leap - Pisgah National Forest, NC

Length	Difficulty	Streams	Views	Solitude	Camping
12.8 mls	★	★	★	★	★
Hiking Time:	7 hours with 1 hour and 45 minutes of breaks				
Elev. Gain:	3,584 ft				
Parking:	Parking off Silvermine Rd. 35.89290, -82.82194				

[Click Here For Detailed Location](#)



By Trail Contributor: Zach Robbins

The Appalachian Trail dramatically climbs above Hot Springs, NC along Lovers Leap Ridge, a popular, short day hike with spectacular views of the French Broad River. However, if you want to tackle something a little longer and tougher, you can utilize the Roundtop Ridge Trail to make a large loop around the Bald Mountains above this famous trail town. The trail follows the former route of the Appalachian Trail to the slopes of Rich Mountain (3,670 feet). A short side trail takes you to the summit, which is home to a 30-foot steel lookout tower originally built in 1932. The tower is rehabilitated as of summer 2018 allowing full access to the top.

From the tower catwalk you'll be treated to excellent views of the Bald, Black, Great Craggy, and Newfound mountain ranges. On the return to Hot Springs the Appalachian Trail passes through Tanyard Gap and then Mill Ridge before climbing up Lovers Leap Ridge. The last 1.5 miles of this hike is filled with outstanding views of the gorge, river, and Hot Springs as the trail switchbacks down the steep ridge. The finish is a nice stroll beside the mammoth French Broad River with riverwide rapids to enjoy. Parking is available at the Nantahala Outdoor Center boat take-out beside the U.S. 25/70 bridge. If you only have a couple of hours we recommend taking the 1.6-mi Lovers Leap Loop Trail.

Alternate Hikes - If you only have a couple of hours we recommend taking the 1.6-mi Lovers Leap Loop Trail. The shorter option to see the lookout tower is a 5.2 mile/1,430 feet gain hike from Tanyard Gap.

- ▶ **Mile 0.0** – Walk north on Silvermine Rd under the U.S. 25/70 bridge. At the T-intersection continue north on River Rd which receives more traffic. Stick to the shoulder and be wary of cars.
- ▶ **Mile 0.3** – At a T-intersection turn right onto Reservoir Rd. Be mindful of private residences on both sides of the gravel road.
- ▶ **Mile 0.5** – Continue straight towards the 'Dead End' sign through a T-intersection with Woody's Lane on the left.
- ▶ **Mile 0.75** – Pass the gate on Reservoir Rd. There is no parking allowed at the gate, so do not consider this an alternate starting point.
- ▶ **Mile 0.85** – A reservoir is located on the left side of the road in a large clearing. Although there is no trail sign or blaze, the Roundtrip Ridge Trail [295] (*yellow blaze*) begins here following the forest road to the right.
- ▶ **Mile 1.3** – The trail briefly crosses through private property, so please stay on the trail. You will see the first blazes and signs here. The Roundtop Ridge Trail is the former route of the Appalachian Trail, climbing nearly 1,700 feet over 3.3 miles to connect with the rerouted Appalachian Trail below Rich Mountain. The sparse forest is mostly white pine with blueberry bushes. You should have occasional winter views of Hot Springs and Rich Mountain. Much of this area was severely affected by two forest fires in April 2016 and unfortunately not much work has been done to clear the trail. You will likely encounter a lot of deadfall and encroaching undergrowth as a result of the fire.
- ▶ **Mile 4.2** – The Roundtop Ridge Trail ends at a T-junction with the Appalachian Trail (*white blaze*). Turn left following the AT north.
- ▶ **Mile 4.3** – This GPS track turns left at a Y-junction following the former Appalachian Trail very steeply up the mountain. This trail is the most direct route but is rough and ill-defined, especially near the summit. We recommend continuing north on the AT for 0.5-mi and take the blue-blazed spur trail to the summit, which is the return route on the GPS track.
- ▶ **Mile 4.7** – Reach the forested summit of Rich Mountain (3,670 feet). The 30-foot steel live-in cab lookout tower was originally built in 1932. The tower is now open as of summer 2018. From the catwalk you will have expansive views of the Bald, Unaka, Black, Great Craggy, Elk, Walnut, Newfound, and Great Smoky mountain ranges. The long Meadow Creek Mountain lies northwest and is home to a lookout tower in Tennessee. Camp Creek Bald, home to another lookout tower, is obscured by trees due north-northeast with Gravel Knob and Green Ridge Knob in the distance. On the right the notable U is Devil Fork Gap. Through Devil Fork Gap you can see Unaka Mountain in the distance. Further northeast to the right of the gap is Big Bald. The towering Black and Great Craggy mountain ranges are southeast. The Newfound and Bald mountain ranges rise above the French Broad River Gorge to the south and southwest.
- ▶ **Mile 4.8** – Locate the blue-blazed spur trail heading north from the summit.
- ▶ **Mile 4.9** – The trail turns right beside a nice campsite.
- ▶ **Mile 4.95** – The spur trail ends at a Y-junction with the Appalachian Trail, head south.
- ▶ **Mile 5.5** – Veer left on the Appalachian Trail at the Y-junction with the Roundtop Ridge Trail. The AT gradually descends towards Tanyard Gap.
- ▶ **Mile 6.0** – Piped spring on the left side of the trail.
- ▶ **Mile 7.4** – The AT passes through the parking area at Tanyard Gap and then crosses the Mill Ridge Rd bridge over U.S. 25/70. On the other side of the bridge the AT turns left leaving FR 113/Mill Ridge Rd.
- ▶ **Mile 8.0** – Follow FR 113 for the next 0.3-mi.
- ▶ **Mile 8.1** – T-junction with FR 113A on the left, which leads to the Mill Ridge Trailhead. The cleared fields were formerly used for tobacco and hay farming.
- ▶ **Mile 8.25** – Continue left on FR 113 passing by two old forest roads on the right.
- ▶ **Mile 8.3** – The AT turns right at a double-blazed wood post leaving FR 113. On the left is a Y-junction with the Mill Ridge Trail [280] (*no blaze*).
- ▶ **Mile 8.4** – Circle around a small pond created by an old stone dam.
- ▶ **Mile 8.9** – Turn left at a Y-junction *very briefly* following the Pump Gap Loop Trail [309] (*yellow blaze*), then turn right on the AT.
- ▶ **Mile 9.8** – Pass through a cross junction at Pump Gap with the Pump Gap Loop Trail. The AT gradually climbs up Lovers Leap Ridge.
- ▶ **Mile 11.15** – The trail turns right away from an illegal campsite on the left.
- ▶ **Mile 11.5** – An obvious spur trail on the left leads to the first cliff overlook from Lovers Leap Ridge. This is a narrow rock pinnacle, be mindful of your steps as you make your way out to the opening. The massive French Broad River exits the gorge at this location, with the mountains towering nearly 1,000 feet above the river. You can see the railroad at the base on the other side of the river. Hot Springs is below on the right. The valley ends in the distance, surrounded by peaks of the Bald Mountains.
- ▶ **Mile 11.8** – Y-junction with the Lovers Leap Loop Trail [308] (*orange blaze*) on the right. You'll now be following the Appalachian Trail and Lovers Leap Loop Trail down the ridge. The second overlook is just beyond the trail junction. After this overlook the trail passes below impressive cliffs.
- ▶ **Mile 11.9** – A third cliff overlook is located on the right below the trail. This is the most open view of Hot Springs from Lovers Leap Ridge.
- ▶ **Mile 12.0** – Fourth cliff overlook on the right beside the trail with a narrow view of Deer Park Mountain.
- ▶ **Mile 12.3** – The AT reaches the French Broad River and turns right/north, while an unofficial trail continues following the river on the left. **Mile 12.6** – Riverwide rapids.
- ▶ **Mile 12.8** – Hike ends at the NOC parking lot.