



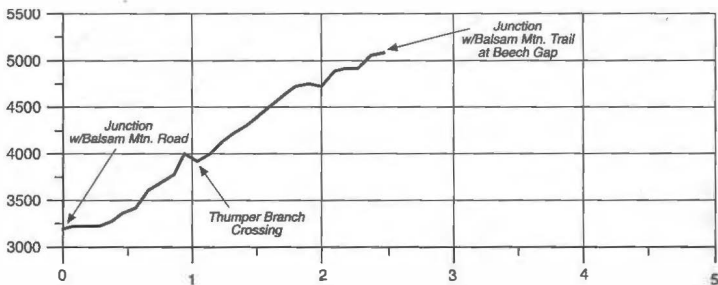
HIKING TRAILS

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OF THE SMOKIES

# BEECH GAP TRAIL I

## ROUND BOTTOM TO BEECH GAP



**LENGTH:** 2.5 miles, from Balsam Mtn. Road to jct. Balsam Mtn. Trail

**HIGHLIGHTS:** Pleasant stream at beginning, mature forest.

**CAUTIONS:** Unbridged stream crossing.

**MAP KEY:** D 10; USGS quad: Lutfee Knob

**USE:** Horse and hiking trail.

**TRAILHEAD:** Round Bottom—Access to the trailhead is via Big Cove and Straight Fork roads which lead into Great Smoky Mountains National Park just beyond the tribal fish hatchery. You can access Big Cove Road from Highway 441, 1 mile south of Oconaluftee Visitor Center. Trailhead parking is 13.9 miles from the visitor center (3.8 miles from park boundary). Alternate trailhead access is 13.2 miles via the one-way Balsam Mountain Road which begins at the end of the Heintooga Ridge Road.

Round Bottom, the trailhead for the Beech Gap Trail—Sections I and II, is a beautiful, secluded spot nestled beside pristine Straight Fork. Despite the remoteness, the area has a rich history. Native Americans penetrated these wilds for eons, followed by pioneers who established small mountain farms.

Ira McGee built a mill on nearby Ledge Creek to grind corn. He also cleared the fields near the trailhead (known as the McGee Fields). In 1915 the railroad reached Cherokee and lines were extended into the Smokies, ushering in the logging era. One line extended from Ravensford to Round Bottom where it forked at McGee Fields. The main line continued up Straight Fork and the other up Ledge Creek through Pin Oak Gap into Haywood County.

The Parsons Pulp operation, which later became the Ravensford Lumber Company, removed about three-fourths of the timber from the Straight Fork watershed in the late 1920s through Round Bottom. Between 1934 and 1941 the Civilian Conservation Corps had a camp where Round Bottom Creek flows into Straight Fork. From this base, young men performed a variety of services including building the trails enjoyed by modern hikers.

Traveling north on Straight Fork Road, trailhead parking for the Beech Gap Trail II is located just before reaching the Round Bottom auto ford; however, limited additional parking for Section I may be reached by continuing through the auto ford 0.1 miles. For purposes of description, both segments of the Beech Gap Trail begin at the trailhead for section II.

An immediate fording of Straight Fork greets the hiker. This ford entails wading approximately 25 feet across the cement auto ford in water that is 4-6 inches deep during times of normal stream flow. Although this crossing is normally safe, it should be avoided during periods of high water. Beautiful stream vistas encourage a pause at this spot, particularly when trout are feeding on top water insects, as betrayed by their splash as they break the surface.

Continuing uphill past the ford, the trail begins on the left side of the road. It bears left and follows an old rail grade for 200'. The trail then turns sharply right and ascends gradually, then steeply through a small cove forested in birch, maple and tuliptree along a sometimes rocky surface. About midway through the cove the trail crosses a small unnamed stream which parallels it first on the right and then on the left.

At about 0.5 mile the trail switches left and ascends more gradually, passing galax and trailing arbutus along the trail margin. As the

trail climbs, it passes through closed oak forest, comprised of several types of oaks, hickories and sourwood as well as other hardwoods. At about 1.0 mile the trail climbs around the headwaters of Thumper Branch, which refers to the "thumping chest," part of the distilling apparatus used to produce white liquor. Originally, this stream was called Stillhouse Branch by natives, but the name was changed as a result of a proposal by the North Carolina Park Commission Nomenclature Committee.

The trail crosses several wet areas at approximately 1.5 miles where springs flow across and in the trail for short distances. These places become quite miry as a result of regular horse use. In summer, these damp areas display especially nice stands of jewelweed or touch-me-not. Also, note areas of lush grass along the trail. In earlier times cattle, which were turned loose to graze along Balsam Mountain, roamed these slopes above Straight Fork.

The trail continues ascending toward Beech Gap, passing through forest with scattered Fraser fir and American beech trees, among others. At 2.5 miles the trail terminates in Beech Gap, a pleasant gap on the crest of Balsam Mountain. This gap, originally known as Big Swag, was once cleared for grazing by cattle and sheep. Later logging trains reached the crest of the Balsams and rail lines were constructed on both sides of the gap to facilitate removal of the rich timber. Evidence of these early rail grades is apparent on both sides of the gap. Laurel Gap is 2.0 miles to the left and Pin Oak Gap is 2.3 miles to the right.

*Narrative by William A. Hart Jr.*