

Wildflower Hikes in Western North Carolina

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Hiking directions are intended only to provide a general overview. You will need to obtain detailed info before hiking in most of these locations.

Grassy Ridge

Highlights: Panoramic vistas and a profusion of Catawba rhododendron and azaleas

Trail Rating: Difficult

Trail Length: 2.9 miles each way

Location: Pisgah National Forest

Bloom Season: May to October

Peak Bloom: Third week of June

Directions: From downtown Bakersville drive 12.6 miles north on NC 261 to Carvers Gap. A paved parking area is located on the left side of the road. Hike north on the Appalachian Trail about 2 miles and take the spur trail on the right that leads to Grassy Ridge.

Rhododendron Gardens

Highlights: Profuse Catawba rhododendron growing along an easy path

Trail Rating: Easy

Trail Length: 0.7 mile round-trip

Location: Pisgah National Forest

Bloom Season: May to October

Peak Bloom: Third week of June

Directions: From downtown Bakersville drive 12.6 miles north on NC 261 to Carvers Gap and turn left onto the paved road. Reach a fee station in the road at 1.6 miles (\$3 per vehicle) from Carver's Gap. The road forks beyond the fee station, with the paved road swinging right to a parking area and a gravel road turning to the left. Take the gravel road 0.1 mile to the large parking area on the left. The hike begins in front of the information cabin.

Big Yellow Mountain

Highlights: Spectacular views and a variety of wildflower species

Trail Rating: Difficult, with a moderate option

Trail Length: 3.9 miles round-trip, with a 1.6-mile round-trip option

Location: Pisgah National Forest

Bloom Season: Mid-March to October

Peak Bloom: Mid-August

Directions: From the junction of NC 194 and US 19E near Elk Park, drive south on US 19E for 8.1 miles and turn right on Roaring Creek Road. (The road is approximately 17 miles east of Spruce Pine on US 19E.) Proceed 4.7 miles on Roaring Creek Road (it changes to gravel at 3.5 miles) and park in the small cul-de-sac just before the gate. Take the Overmountain Victory Trail north to reach the Appalachian Trail. Turn right on the AT and follow it to Big Yellow Mountain.

Crabtree Falls

Highlights: Picturesque waterfall, four different species of trillium

Trail Rating: Moderate

Trail Length: 2.7 miles round-trip

Location: Crabtree Meadows section of the Blue Ridge Parkway

Bloom Season: Mid-March to September

Peak Bloom: Mid-April to early May

Directions: The trail begins from the Crabtree Meadows Campground on the Blue Ridge Parkway at milepost 339.5, about 8.6 miles south of NC 226 in Little Switzerland and 4.6 miles north of NC 80 at Buck Creek Gap. A paved parking area is on the right, just past the campground check-in station. The trail begins at the far end of the parking area.

Craggy Gardens

Highlights: Spectacular views, abundant Catawba rhododendron

Trail Rating: Moderate

Trail Length: 0.4 mile

Location: Craggy Gardens on the Blue Ridge Parkway

Bloom Season: Late April to October

Peak Bloom: Mid-June

Directions: Craggy Gardens visitor center is located on the Blue Ridge Parkway at milepost 364.6, 17.8 miles north of the US 70 overpass in Asheville. From the visitor center, drive 0.5 mile farther north and turn into the parking area on the left. Craggy Pinnacle Trail begins from the upper section of the parking area.

Douglas Falls

Highlights: Old-growth forest, waterfalls, thousands of wake robin trilliums

Trail Rating: Difficult

Trail Length: 8.6 or 7.9 miles round-trip

Location: Craggy Gardens region of the Blue Ridge Parkway

Bloom Season: April to October

Peak Bloom: Late April to mid-May

Directions: Park at Graybeard Mountain Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway, milepost 363.4. The overlook is 1.2 miles north of Craggy Gardens visitor center, and 19 miles north of the US 70 overpass in Asheville. The Trail begins on the south end of the parking area.

Rattlesnake Lodge

Highlights: Historic ruins and unique wildflowers

Trail Rating: Moderate

Trail Length: 2.7 miles round-trip

Location: Mile 374.6 of the Blue Ridge Parkway

Bloom Season: Mid-March to September

Peak Bloom: Early May

Directions: From the junction of US 70 and the Blue Ridge Parkway in Asheville, drive 7.8 miles north on the Parkway and park off the side of the road just before entering Tanbark Ridge Tunnel. If you plan to leave a second vehicle at the hike's end, turn west off the Parkway at Bull Gap, 1.1 miles south of Tanbark Ridge Tunnel. Go about 0.3 mile, bear to the right at the intersection, and continue to a small parking area on the right at 0.8 mile from the Parkway. (The parking area is the second one on the right that you come to.) From the north side of the Parkway, follow the trail alongside a small stream to reach the Rattlesnake Lodge ruins and junction with Mountains To Sea Trail. Turn left on MST and follow it to Bull Gap.

Max Patch Mountain

Highlights: Spectacular views and mountain slopes carpeted with trillium

Trail Rating: Moderate

Trail Length: 6.25 miles one-way

Location: Pisgah National Forest near Hot Springs

Bloom Season: Mid-March to November

Peak Bloom: Early May

Directions: Take Exit 7 off I-40 onto Cold Springs Creek Road (FR 148) and head north. Follow the unpaved road 6.2 miles to its end at Fines Creek Road, also unpaved. Turn left and drive 1.9 miles to the parking area on the right at the base of Max Patch Mountain. If utilizing a shuttle, continue 3.5 miles from the parking area to Lemon Gap and leave the shuttle vehicle there. From the trailhead, hike north on the Appalachian Trail to Lemon Gap.

Big Creek Trail

Highlights: Waterfalls, cascading stream, diverse spring flora

Trail Rating: Easy

Trail Length: 5.75 miles each way

Location: Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Bloom Season: March to September

Peak Bloom: Mid-March to mid-May

Directions: Take the Waterville exit (Exit 457) off I-40 and cross over Pigeon River. Stay to the left after the crossing and follow the road 2.0 miles to an intersection, passing by the Walters Power Plant along the way. The intersection marks the community of Mount Sterling. Go straight and enter the Big Creek section of the park. Follow the road 0.8 mile to where it ends at the picnic area and campground entrance. From the picnic area, take Big Creek Trail and hike to Walnut Bottom Backcountry Campsite or as far as you like.

Baxter Creek Trail

Highlights: Scenic streams, cultural history, diverse spring flora

Trail Rating: Moderate

Trail Length: 1.3 miles each way

Location: Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Bloom Season: March to September

Peak Bloom: Mid-March to early May

Directions: Take the Waterville exit (Exit 457) off I-40 and cross over Pigeon River. Stay to the left after the crossing and follow the road 2.0 miles to an intersection, passing by the Walters Power Plant on the way. The intersection marks the community of Mount Sterling. Go straight, and enter the Big Creek section of the park. Follow the road 0.8 mile to where it ends at the picnic area and campground entrance. From the picnic area, cross Big Creek on the footbridge and hike Baxter Creek Trail at least 1.3 miles to see the most wildflowers.

Bradley Fork Trail

Highlights: Scenic streamside hike, old-growth forest, exceptional variety of spring flora

Trail Rating: Easy

Trail Length: 4.25 miles each way

Location: Great Smoky Mountains National Park

Bloom Season: Mid-March to September

Peak Bloom: Mid-April to early May

Directions: From Cherokee drive north on Newfound Gap Road (US 441) into Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Pass by Oconaluftee Visitor Center and continue 3.1 miles farther, then turn right at the sign for Smokemont Campground. Turn left after you cross over Oconaluftee River, and drive into the campground. Follow the road through the campground all the way to its farthest point at the end of "D" section and park in one of the spaces around the end of the loop. Bradley Fork Trail begins as the gated gravel road by the parking area. If all the spaces are full, you can

continue around the loop and park at one of the parking areas on the other side of the campground. From the trailhead, take Bradley Fork Trail.

Shining Rock

Highlights: Grand views and extensive meadows carpeted in wildflowers

Trail Rating: Easy, moderate, or difficult, depending on how far you hike and what route you take

Trail Length: 4.75 miles one-way to the summit of Shining Rock, but shorter options exist

Location: Pisgah National Forest

Bloom Season: June to November

Peak Bloom: September

Directions: From mile 420.2 of the Blue Ridge Parkway, turn onto FR 816 (unsigned) and proceed 1.2 miles to where the road ends at a parking area. Mile 420.2 of the Parkway is located 8.3 miles south of US 276 at Wagon Road Gap and 3.0 miles north of US 215 at Beech Gap. Numerous trails and loop options exist from the trailhead. All of them feature impressive wildflower displays.

Pink Beds

Highlights: Meandering trail through mountain bogs featuring swamp pink

Trail Rating: Easy, with a few moderate ascents

Trail Length: 5.1 or 3.5 miles round-trip

Location: Pisgah National Forest

Bloom Season: Mid-March to October

Peak Bloom: Mid-April

Directions: From the junction of US 64 and US 276 in Brevard, drive 11.3 miles north on US 276 and turn right into the Pink Beds picnic area. The picnic area is 3.5 miles south of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Take the Pink Beds Loop Trail from the parking area.

Whitewater Falls

Highlights: Spectacular waterfall and rare trillium species

Trail Rating: Moderate

Trail Length: 1.0 mile round-trip

Location: Nantahala National Forest

Bloom Season: March to September

Peak Bloom: Last half of April

Directions: From the junction of NC 281 and US 64 between Cashiers and Lake Toxaway, drive south on NC 281 for 8.4 miles and turn left at the sign for Whitewater Falls. Follow the trail to the lower viewing deck for Whitewater Falls. Descend a short distance from the deck and turn right on Foothills Trail. Follow the trail back to the parking area.

Slickrock Creek

Highlights: Exceptional wildflower display and wild, cascading stream

Trail Rating: Difficult, with an easy option

Trail Length: 6.6 miles round-trip

Location: Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness of Nantahala National Forest

Bloom Season: March to September

Peak Bloom: Mid-April

Directions: From the junction of NC 143 and US 129 in Robbinsville, drive 15.4 miles west on US 129 and turn left just before the bridge over Calderwood Lake. Try to park somewhere close to US 129. If you pull too far down the dead-end road, you'll have a hard time turning around if other vehicles are already there. Follow Slickrock Creek Trail 3.8 miles to Ike Branch Trail, then follow Ike Branch trail back to Slickrock Creek Trail to complete the loop. You could also hike Slickrock Creek trail for about 1.5 miles and backtrack, which would allow you to see most of the wildflowers.

Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest

Highlights: An inspirational walk through an old-growth forest

Trail Rating: Moderate

Trail Length: 2.0 miles round-trip

Location: Nantahala National Forest, Cheoah Ranger District

Bloom Season: March to September

Peak Bloom: Early to mid-April

Directions: From NC 143 in Robbinsville, drive 1.4 miles north on US 129/NC 143 and turn left on NC 143 (Massey Branch Road). Drive 3.3 miles and turn right, remaining on NC 143. Continue 6.7 miles to Santeetlah Gap and the start of Cherohala Scenic Skyway, which begins as a continuation of NC 143. Don't take the Skyway; bear to the right instead and drive 2.2 miles to a four-way intersection. Turn left and drive 0.5 mile to the parking area at the end of the road where there are restrooms and picnic tables. The parking lot fills quickly on weekends. Hike Joyce Kilmer Memorial Loop Trail from the parking area. Also, take the Poplar Cove Loop spur.

Stratton Bald Trail

Highlights: Variety of wildflower species in old-growth forest

Trail Rating: Moderate

Trail Length: 1.6 miles each way

Location: Nantahala National Forest, Cheoah Ranger District

Bloom Season: March to September

Peak Bloom: Mid-April

Directions: From NC 143 in Robbinsville, drive 1.4 miles north on US 129/NC 143 and turn left on NC 143 (Massey Branch Road). Drive 3.3 miles and turn right, remaining on NC 143. Continue 6.7 miles to Santeetlah Gap and the start of Cherohala Scenic Skyway, which begins as a continuation of NC 143. Don't take the Skyway; bear to the right instead and drive 1.9 miles to the Rattler Ford Campground entrance on the left, just before the road crosses Santeetlah Creek. Turn into the campground and park at the first area on the right. Walk back to the road and turn left to cross Santeetlah Creek. Stratton Bald Trail begins at the end of the guardrail on the left side of the road. Hike the trail for about 1.5 miles to see most of the wildflowers.