



BY TY PETTY

# PROMOTING THE TRAIL FROM THE GROUND UP

When Unicoi County, Tennessee was named one of only four Appalachian Trail Communities back in 2009, the local 4-H extension agent challenged a group of the most active teenage 4-H members to create a service learning project involving the A.T. that would have a positive effect on the community. Many of the students had participated in hikes organized by 4-H once or twice a year so they had an interest in local trails. However, most of them had never hiked on the Appalachian Trail or on any trail longer than four miles.





Previous page: 4H teens from Unicoi County approach Big Bald, during a section of their 53-mile A.T. hike to collect GPS data for the creation of a local A.T. map and brochure; This page from top: the group enjoys the view along the Trail overlooking the Nolichucky River; Biologists at the Big Bald Banding Station explain their annual bird research to the data collection team.

Unicoi County is a small county located in northeast Tennessee, about 30 miles north of Asheville, North Carolina along I-26. Unicoi is the most mountainous county in Tennessee and more than half of the land is part of the Cherokee National Forest. Natural resources are our most valuable asset for growing the local economy, yet we were lacking the promotional tools needed to attract visitors to our pristine trails. Although everyone in the community has heard of the Appalachian Trail, less than 10 percent of county residents have ever hiked on it. Our vision is to build on the excitement of the A.T. Community designation to make Unicoi County a major destination for outdoor adventure, and to promote active lifestyles among our local residents.

Our goal was to build a poster map highlighting the local sections of the A.T. and create a local Trail brochure. The 4-H'ers had all participated in geocaching activities using GPS units for an electronic scavenger hunt, but that was the extent of our GPS experience. We were suddenly on the verge of becoming avid hikers and GPS experts. There are five sections of the Appalachian Trail located along the state border either in Unicoi County or just across the state line in North Carolina. The 53 miles of the A.T. included in our project begin at Devil Fork Gap and travel north to Iron Mountain Gap. Before we could think about creating the promotional materials, we needed to go hiking, make observations, and record GPS data along the Trail.

We chose the easiest and shortest section for our first hike during spring break, from Indian Grave Gap to Chestoa, along the Nolichucky River. This section began as a mostly level ridge top hike before descending 1,700 feet to the Nolichucky River.

Along the way we stopped and had lunch at Curly Maple Gap Shelter and carefully hiked along a near vertical cliff a few hundred feet above the Nolichucky River.

Our next hike started at Spivey Gap and descended 1,500 feet to the other side of the Nolichucky River. The first couple miles of the Trail included our first challenging uphill section in which one of the fifth graders suddenly sat down in the middle of the Trail with no warning and wasn't sure if she could continue. Her older sister explained that she has asthma, but did not bring her inhaler. After about 10 minutes of calm patience, she was ready to hike again with no ill effects. No Business Knob Shelter was a welcome site since it signaled our lunch break. While all 16 of our hikers were eating, one of them suddenly proclaimed that there was a snake right above our 4-H agent's head. Luckily he enjoys snakes and the whole group had a good laugh once we knew it was just a black rat snake. As we began to descend a quick 2,000 feet over the last two miles of the Trail, we were impressed by the views overlooking the Nolichucky River.

Later in the summer, we hiked from Iron Mountain Gap to Indian Grave Gap. This section of the A.T. is the most well-known to local residents since it crosses Beauty Spot, a popular bald mountain peak with beautiful views, which is accessible by car. Besides basking in the sunshine on Beauty Spot's grassy bald and enjoying a quick siesta, the group loved hiking through the spruce forest that they nicknamed "the black forest." The blueberry bushes along this section of Trail offered a sweet treat and greatly improved morale after climbing to the top of Unaka Mountain. During fall break, we hiked from Sams Gap to Devil Fork Gap. This is where the students encountered their first



After a challenging uphill section, the group takes a much needed lunch break at No Business Knob Shelter.

outdoor privy, although nobody was in a hurry to line up and use it. This section was relatively easy, and ran through mostly dense forest.

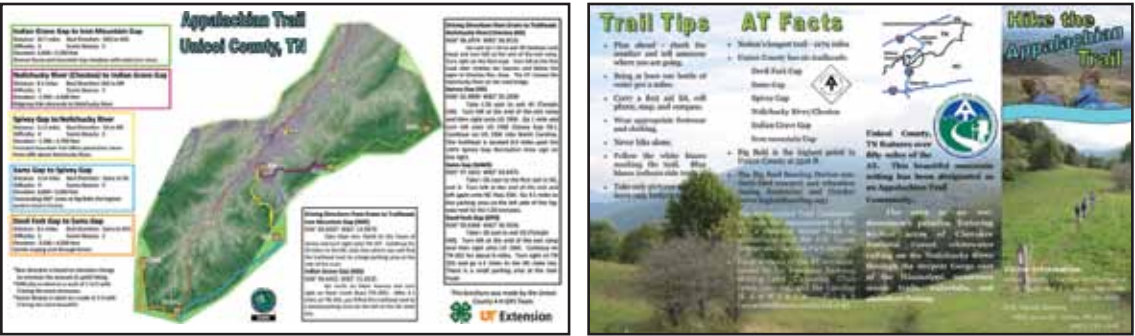
Although we didn't know it at the time, we saved the best for last. During spring break, a year from when we had started hiking, we completed the 53-mile journey with the longest and most challenging hike. The 13.4-mile section beginning at Sams Gap ascended over 1,300 feet to Big Bald before dropping down to Spivey Gap. This hike featured lots of surprises. After the first couple of challenging miles, we had a teenager who was on the verge of quitting. However, as we approached a clearing with a beautiful view of the top of Big Bald, she became inspired and determined to finish the hike. We found the most amazing 360-degree views that we could imagine waiting for us at the top of 5,516 foot Big Bald, which is the highest point in Unicoi County. This was a great place to enjoy lunch and take lots of photos. Just below the peak, we encountered the Big Bald Banding Station, where biologists use netting to catch birds for research before banding their legs with an ID tag and releasing them. Lucky for us, they were just as passionate about educating students about birds as conducting their research. We learned all about their research project, which is conducted annually — almost every day in September and October — and we had the opportunity to release the last few Tennessee warblers from our own hands.

Now that we had finished hiking, taking photos, and collecting GPS data, it was time to build a map. We received an ESRI (Environmental Systems Research Institute) 4-H software grant to install an advanced GIS mapping program called ArcGIS on several computers. GIS stands for Geographic Information System and really just means advanced GPS mapping. A dedicated group of 10 teenagers met weekly after school for two hours to learn GIS mapping skills and build the map. It took months to create the map, but we knew it was worth it when we saw the fruit of our labor. We were privileged to have Julie Judkins, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's community program manager, visit with our 4-H GPS team midway through our project. She inspired us with the history and beauty of the A.T. — stories of real hikers, and even presented us with A.T. volunteer pins.

In addition to the map, we also created a detailed local Appalachian Trail brochure to help day hikers get out and enjoy the Trail. We spent hours and hours going through hundreds of photos to pick the right



Clockwise from far right: A detailed, local A.T. brochure was created to help day hikers get out and enjoy the Trail; The completed map, created with an advanced GIS mapping program called ArcGIS, highlights local sections of the Trail; Saving the best section for last during a hike along the 5,516-foot-high peak of Big Bald with 360-degree views of Unicoi County.



ones for the brochure. The one we debated the most about was at the top of the front tab, which is the first photo visible on the brochure rack. We settled on a photo of a hiker sitting in the grass on top of Big Bald with only his hiking shoes visible and a beautiful view in the distance. The brochure includes some basic Trail facts and hiking tips. There is local information about Unicoi County, a locator map, and contact information for the Chamber of Commerce and U.S. Forest Service. We also give credit to the Tennessee Eastman Hiking and Canoeing Club and the Carolina Mountain Club, which are responsible for the massive job of maintaining the A.T. in Unicoi County. The back of the brochure includes a cutout of our A.T. map, driving directions to the trailheads, and a basic description of each of the five local Trail sections. The Trail descriptions include distance, recommended direction for a day hike, difficulty, scenic beauty, elevation range, and highlights of each section.

Once we had a final product, our challenge was to fund the printing of all these publications. We have received strong support from a variety of sources including local government, local residents, University of Tennessee Extension, Tennessee Geographic Information Council, and private businesses. Our team was recently awarded a Kodak American Greenways Grant through the Conservation Fund to expand our Trail promotion project and create a local greenways guide. Our 4-H GPS Team has also made more than a dozen presentations locally and around the state to promote the A.T. and our 4-H GPS project. The A.T. promotion project has been featured in several local newspaper articles, and we have found overwhelming support everywhere we turn. Whether it is a local civic group or government entity, there are always lots of positive comments. Local residents frequently tell us they are so glad we finally have a tool to promote the beautiful Appalachian Trail in our community — and we have heard many reports of how the brochure and map have inspired people to take a hike. The A.T. brochure and poster map are currently on display at the Chamber of Commerce, U.S. Forest Service Ranger Station, and Unicoi Town Hall.

We are now starting to work on new projects including the Top 10 Trails of Unicoi County, a Nolichucky River Recreation Guide, and a County Recycling Centers Map. This project has been a win-win situation for our youth, our community, and our forests. Young people have gained an understanding of nature and conservation, GPS technology, graphic design, achieving goals, public speaking, and teamwork. They have also developed an interest in hiking and nature that will last a lifetime. 🌲

**THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN A WIN-WIN SITUATION FOR OUR YOUTH, OUR COMMUNITY, AND OUR FORESTS.**

Ty Petty is a 4-H extension agent with the University of Tennessee Extension - Unicoi County. There is a 4-H program in every county along the Trail. If you would like to get more information about how you can partner with youth to promote the A.T., contact [typetty@utk.edu](mailto:typetty@utk.edu) or start a conversation with your local 4-H Agent.

