

Winter Hiking in North Georgia

By Susan Dawsey

Winter is a great time for hiking here in Georgia. Seeing Mother Nature's garden in its dormant state is a treat. Many places to hike are not too far for a day trip from Atlanta.

I recommend the book *The Hiking Trails of North Georgia*, by Tim Homan; it is available in the public library, as well as most bookstores, and is an excellent resource. I have used it to find trails and have found the directions to be detailed and easy to follow. In the book, check out Desoto Falls Scenic Area, Raven Cliffs Scenic Area, and Amicalola Falls State Park. These are easy hikes with a waterfall at some point along the way. Amicalola is especially interesting, as it is the southern end of the famed Appalachian Trail.



In the early spring, thousands of hopeful hikers from all over the country and the world will begin their attempt to hike entire 2000 miles of the Appalachian Trail in @ 6 months, from Amicalola State Park. Just hanging around that park in the late winter, early spring watching and visiting with these hikers could be very entertaining.

My personal favorite place to hike is the Blood Mountain cove area. It is accessible from several different points and walking there can be as long or as short as you have time and weather conditions to make it. Beginning on the AT (Appalachian Trail) at Woody Gap off of GA 60, and going through to Neels Gap on US 19-129, you pass through many different area of the forest, from low areas with lovely creeks to the top of Blood Mountain, with views of the Atlanta Skyline (on clear days). This is an 11.5 mile one way, and there are many ways to shorten the trip with loops and side roads.

One way would be to go north out of Dahlonega to Suches. There take GA 180 and follow the signs to Lake Winfield Scott. Parking at the lake, and using the Holman book, you will be able to choose from 2 trails going from the lake up to the Appalachian Trail and back to the car. Either one is a beautiful hike.

Hiking up the Jarrard Gap trail, along the AT, and back down the Slaughter Creek trail is about a 5.5 mile loop, with the option of hiking to the top of Blood Mountain (that would add several miles to the hike, but has an outstanding view). This trailhead is about 2 hours from the metro area. There are many more possible hikes in these mountains and lots of resources to find them.

The USDA Forest Service, in Gainesville, is a good resource for maps and suggested hikes in the Chattahoochee National Forest. Hiking and outdoor

stores have lots of books on the AT; the local interest section in bookstores often has books about local hiking areas too.

When you go out in the winter, always expect the weather to change!! BE PREPARED FOR MOST ANYTHING! Take water and snacks in a daypack, dress in layers, and wear comfortable shoes. Winter hiking can be special for several reasons. One of the neatest is that you can see the skeleton of the earth as you hike. The leaves are gone and the line of the hills is evident through the trees. The tree bark stands out so much in the winter; identifying trees without their leaves is an interesting challenge. There are no insects, and poison ivy is not rampant. And, the cooler temperatures are so pleasant for walking the hills!

So get out and enjoy our beautiful mountains this winter.
Happy Hiking!

Susan

