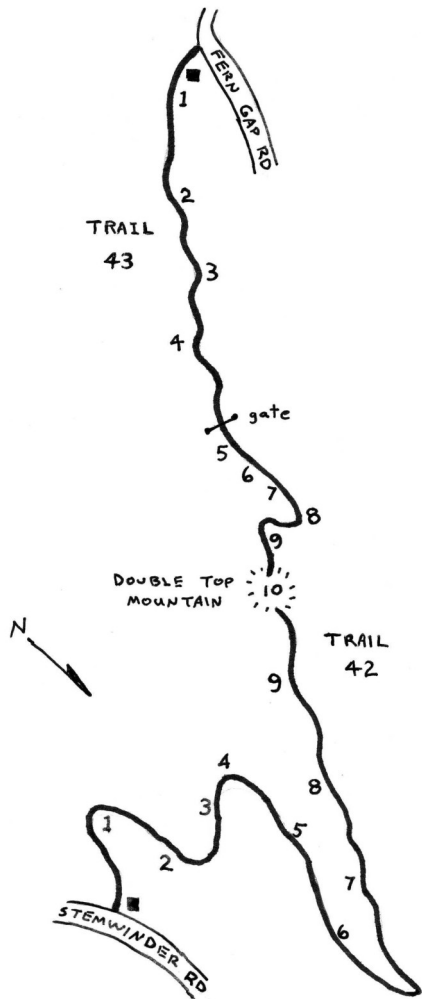


Double Top Mountain Trails 42 & 43

Map not to scale



- | | | | |
|--------------------|--|--------------------|--|
| TRAIL | | ROADS | |
| INTERPRETIVE BOXES | | INTERPRETIVE POSTS | |
| STREAMS | | PARKING AREAS | |

HIKING SAFETY GUIDELINES

- Carry water with you
- Stay on designated trail
- Inform a friend of your hiking plans
- Hike with another person
- Leash your pet
- Carry a cell phone with fully charged and extra battery
- Carry important medication/first aid
- Call Security or the Trust Nature Center if you need help



Balsam Mountain Trust
Phone: (828)631-1060

BMP Security
Phone: (828)631-1011

Interpretive Trail Guide

FOLLOWING NUMBERED POSTS PLACED
ALONG TRAIL



Double Top Mountain Trail 42



Highbush blueberry

Vaccinium corymbosum

Terrain: Moderately steep terrain with stones in trail; old roadbed most of the way.

Trail elevation: Steady climb from trailhead on Stemwinder Rd. (4700') to summit (5481')

Trail length: A one way trip is 1.2 miles.

Trail Difficulty: Bottom to top is strenuous; top 0.3 mile steepest.

Must see: Sweeping view from tower on summit

1) Fertile, moist soils here support a diverse and beautiful forest. The canopy is a mixture of yellow buckeye, black cherry, basswood, sugar maple, white ash, bitternut hickory and birch. The understory is lush in summer with hydrangea, nettle, waterleaf, cohosh and dozens of other herb species. This natural community is termed the northern hardwood forest because some of the member trees are also common in northern states, but this community is not duplicated in the northern US—the plant mixture here is unique to the southern Appalachians.

2) Passing over a small ridge, you are now in a northern red oak forest. The soil is thin, well drained and acidic and the slope aspect more exposed to sun and wind. Oaks succeed here over other species that prefer conditions more sheltered and moist. The



northern red oak (*Quercus rubra*) is the major oak species at this elevation of nearly 4900 ft. If you look carefully on the ground, you may see a parasitic plant on the oak's roots, the bear-corn (*Conopholis canadensis*), looking somewhat like an ear of corn.

3) Notice all the moss-covered rocks above and below the trail? These rock piles define an unusual natural community called a boulderfield, a relict from ancient colder periods when rocks fractured in harsh freeze-thaw cycles and accumulated in the heads of steep coves. Several uncommon plants and animals find this habitat favorable due to its cool microclimate and abundant crevices.

4) Growing above the trail within this boulderfield community is an ancient **yellow birch** (*Betula allegheniensis*). Escaping previous logging because the commercial value of the wood was not high and the terrain difficult to access, trees such as this one are today among our oldest and largest forest specimens. This tree may be 200 to 300 years old, but the trunk is hollow and an exact age would be difficult to determine.

5) There are peculiar organisms growing on the boulders above the trail. These are lichens, combinations of fungi and algae in a symbiotic relationship. Algae cells make energy from sunlight and feed the fungus, and the fungal body houses and protects the algae. These particular lichens are **smooth rock tripe** (*Umbilicaria mammulata*). They can be cooked and eaten, but are usually considered more of a "survival food."

6) The **eastern hawthorns** (*Crataegus macrosperma*) nearby are most noticeable when their white flowers open in spring, the red fruits mature in autumn and the stout thorns become visible on dormant winter branches. During summer, we often overlook these small trees but forest birds seek them out for nesting.



7) Walking along the spine of this ridge, notice the abundance of shrubs in the vicinity. Most are ericads, members of the family *Ericaceae*. These plants prefer acidic soils and include **azaleas** and **rhododendrons** (*Rhododendron* spp.), **mountain laurel** (*Kalmia latifolia*), **blueberries** (*Vaccinium* spp.), **maleberry** (*Lyonia ligustrina*) and **sweetbells** (*Eubotrys recurva*). Acidic soil is the norm for high ridges of this region, and thickets of ericads often follow forest disturbances such as logging/clearing.



8) **Polypody fern** (*Polypodium appalachianum*) creeps on the nearby rocks using horizontal stems called rhizomes, which also store some moisture for the plant. During dry periods, the leaves may curl and appear dead, but they revive with return of rainfall or fog, accounting for another local name of resurrection fern. These ferns most often occur on rocks, but sometimes grow on tree trunks. The round, rust-colored sori, where the spores are produced, appear on the undersides of the leaves, near the tip.



9) Passing through a grove of fairly old **rosebay rhododendron** (*Rhododendron maximum*), you may notice underfoot the reduced amount of light and corresponding lack of plant diversity. Because these plants are evergreen, few plants can survive the year-round shade and highly acidic soils beneath them. The dense foliage does offer some thermal cover for animals such as deer, during very cold weather.

10) The observation tower on the 5481 ft. summit of Double Top Mountain was hand-built in 2002 of local woods, mostly locust, mountain laurel, oak and tuliptree (bark). It affords a grand view from its platform. North is the Plott Balsam range; east are the Great Balsams; south and west are the Cowee Mtns and the Nantahala National Forest. To the north and east, long extending ridges suggest slightly lower "tops" when viewed distantly, hence the name.

