



Black Mountain Crest Trail Tips **Jennifer Pharr Davis**

My, oh my. Where to begin when discussing the Black Mountain Crest Trail? I suppose since it's a point to point hike, there are technically two places you can start.

But that's not really what we're talking about, is it? What we're talking about is a legendary traverse on an epic trail- a trail that goes over or near 10(!) 6,000 foot peak, that touches the tallest mountain east of the Mississippi, that's full of history, geography and an unmatched diversity of ecosystems, that passes through a UNESCO International Biosphere Reserve, for goodness sake. In short, the Black Mountain Crest Trail is a trail like no other. It's not for the faint of heart, but if you choose to tackle it- or let it tackle you- you'll be rewarded with one of the most spectacular hikes on the East Coast and arguably the planet.

So, what do you need to know about the BMCT and what makes it different from other trails in the Southern Appalachians? First let's get the usual suggestions out of the way. As with all hikes, be sure to take appropriate clothing, wear good (broken in!) walking shoes, bring plenty of food and water, and consider using hiking poles.

But there are a handful of things that make the BMCT unique and need to be considered. The first is that it's not a loop trail. It can be an "out and back" if you're in particularly good shape and want a real challenge. If that's the case for you, I'd suggest starting at Bolens Creek near beautiful Burnsville, North Carolina. That's so you get the climbing out of the way first and let gravity help you on the back end. There are also great places to stay, eat, and shop in Burnsville. Conversely, the summit of Mt. Mitchell doesn't offer much besides a gift shop, bathrooms, and a lot of tourists snapping photos.

If you're a more level-headed type and want to do the BMCT one way, you should consider carefully which way you want to go and you should also arrange a shuttle, which can be done easily enough in Burnsville. Regarding direction, logic would suggest that going downhill is easier, but that's not always the case. Though muscles may prefer descending to ascending, joints do not. Either way, you'll have plenty of ups and downs on the ridge between Mt. Mitchell and Celo where the trail descends in earnest, but that climb (or descent) between Celo and Bolens Creek is

steady and loooong.

Speaking of those ups and downs on the ridge, you'll need to prepare mentally for some rock scrambling. A via ferrata it is not, but there are certainly places where you'll be using your hands to pull yourself up by roots and rocks. I prefer hiking with poles but I definitely tossed them down (gently) or up (also gently) to allow for three points of contact at all time. There are fixed ropes in a handful (no pun intended) of places. They may come in useful but you can certainly get up or down without them if you pick your route thoughtfully and take your time.

And speaking of taking your time, whether you're doing an out and back or a one way with a shuttle, you should plan on taking a lot more time than you would on a normal hike of this distance. In part that's because of the epic views. There are dozens of spots where you can enjoy a one of a kind picnic or nap. But even one way, this trail would be categorized as strenuous and will require some careful steps and methodical maneuvering to navigate safely. It's hard to give an estimate because everyone's pace is different but I'd say this 11.3- mile one way felt more like 18. So however long it would take you to do 18, allocate that. And if you don't want to do 18, you might consider doing an out and back from Mt. Mitchell (for the epic views) or from Bolens Creek to Celo, which has a gorgeous meadow for a picnic and terrific views of the Crest and the surrounding area.

Because this is a ridge walk, water is limited. There's a blue blazed side trail to water near the Deep Gap campground, but besides that water is scarce between Celo and Mt. Mitchell, which has water fountains and is a good place to refill. There are some lesser springs on the climb up from Bolens Creek to Celo, but they may be seasonal. It's always a good idea to err on the side of caution so plan to bring water for the 10 or so miles between Mt. Mitchell and where the trail comes alongside Bolens Creek a mile or so from the terminus near Burnsville.

The last thing I would say about this hike is that you may have perfect weather with bluebird skies, warm temps, and a droopy looking windsock. But you may not. It depends of course on the season and you should check the forecast, but this hike stays above 6000 feet for about 7 of the 11+ miles. There's nothing else like that on the east coast and that's what makes it so special. But when you're hiking in an environment this unique, you always need to prepare for the worst. That includes wind, freezing rain, sudden temperature drops- and don't forget the sunscreen because there's enough exposure that you can get burned on a clear day. So bring a fleece, waterproof shell, several other layers, and maybe even an emergency space blankets, which can be kept in your first aid kit.

To recap, this trail is incredible. The climbs are tough, the scrambles are legit, the views are epic, and the payoff is huge. There's really nothing else like it in the country- maybe the world. Do yourself a favor. Add the Black Mountain Crest Trail to your bucket list and cross it off as soon as possible. Then treat yourself to a post-hike pizza and beer in Burnsville. You'll most certainly have earned it.

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