

2026 Appalachian Field Trip, 12-20 June

George McClellan and Don Hyatt started this annual trip many years ago to see native azaleas, other flora, and wonderful sights. There are many places to see these plants in their splendor in the Southern Appalachians. Some hikes are strenuous. Others are like a short walk in the park (e.g., stops along the Blue Ridge Parkway, Whitetop Mountain). We have to pick and choose a limited number to visit. I continue to be amazed at the number and quantity of azaleas on Whitetop Mountain in Virginia, near Grayson Highlands. Last year on Whitetop, the second highest elevation in Virginia, the rain poured, and we were soaked, shortening our trip. Bad weather also canceled our Gregory Bald excursion. As beautiful as the hybrid swarm up on Gregory is, one does not want to be on the open bald in a thunderstorm. The road closure on the Blue Ridge Parkway around Devil's Courthouse appears to have ended, and we plan to explore the section from Asheville to US 74. The Parkway in the area around Mt. Mitchell is still closed. We never know what Mother Nature has in store for us. Our itinerary may change as necessary.

As in the past, the procedures are as follows:

- You may join us on part or all of the itinerary.
- You must let me know what you plan to do so we will be expecting you.
- Provide me your cell phone number so we can communicate if necessary during the trip.
- You are responsible for your own motel reservations (see motel for each base location).
- On each day's event, we may car pool to reduce the number of vehicles.
- Plan to provide for your water, snacks, and lunch needs while we are out each day.
- Be prepared for hiking, photographing, and all weather conditions.
- We usually eat as a group at a restaurant each evening.

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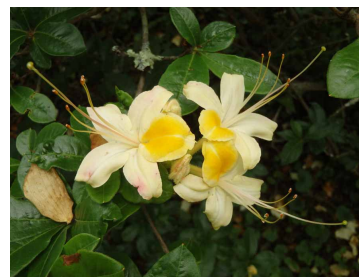
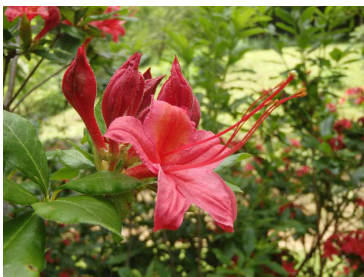
Itinerary

☛ Friday, June 12, 2026

Travel Day. Travel to Boone NC, where our headquarters for two nights will be the Comfort Suites - University area, 1184 Highway 105, Boone NC, 28607. Visit other sites on your route.

☛ Saturday, June 13, 2026

J & Lindy's, Trade TN. J Jackson and Lindy Johnson live in Trade, the oldest unincorporated community in Tennessee, between Mountain City, TN and Boone, NC. It was an 18th century trading outpost. J & Lindy once owned a deciduous native plant nursery, Appalachian Native Plants. They have an outstanding collection of plants in their garden. At this time of year as you stroll among the plants, the delightful fragrance of *R. arborescens* and hybrids wafts through the air. 843 Wallace Rd, Trade TN 37691.



We may eat Saturday evening at Suba's Restaurant in Mountain City or somewhere in Boone, NC. Saturday night continue to stay in Boone at the Comfort Suites - University area, 1184 Highway 105, Boone NC, 28607.

☛ Sunday, June 14, 2026

Whitetop Mountain. Whitetop Mountain is the second highest in Virginia (5,100 ft). The Appalachian Trail crosses at the parking area before the peak (36.637, -81.607). Along the trail for less than a quarter of a mile is where one can see thousands of *R. calendulaceum* plants, more than one finds at the Roan Highlands. You will notice that there are many small seedlings, indicating that azaleas are prospering here. Several years ago, "they" bushhogged all the beautiful and amazing mature plants under the power line where it crosses the AT. The azaleas, however, are coming back. I did not know that native azaleas could ever grow tall enough to threaten power lines. Whitetop is about an hour's drive from Boone.



From Whitetop, we will drive down late Sunday to Asheville for a nice meal and relaxation, where our Sunday night, 14 June, base location will be Country Inn & Suites by Radisson, Asheville - Outlet Mall, 845 Brevard Road, Asheville NC, 28806.

☛ Monday, June 15, 2026

Blue Ridge Parkway. On Monday, we plan to enter the Parkway at NC 191 and travel leisurely to US 74, stopping often along the way. This 50-mile section includes The Mt. Pisgah Trail, the trails at the Pisgah Inn, Frying Pan Gap, Graveyard Fields, Black Balsam Road, and the Devil's Courthouse area. Here are *R. viscosum* var. *montanum*, *R. arborescens*, hybrids between the two, *R. calendulaceum*, *R. catawbiense*, and many other interesting plants.



We will exit the Blue Ridge Parkway onto US 74 and drive to Franklin NC, for a two-nights' stay, 15-16 Jun at the Quality Inn, 313 Cunningham Rd, Franklin NC, 28734.

☛ Tuesday, June 16, 2026

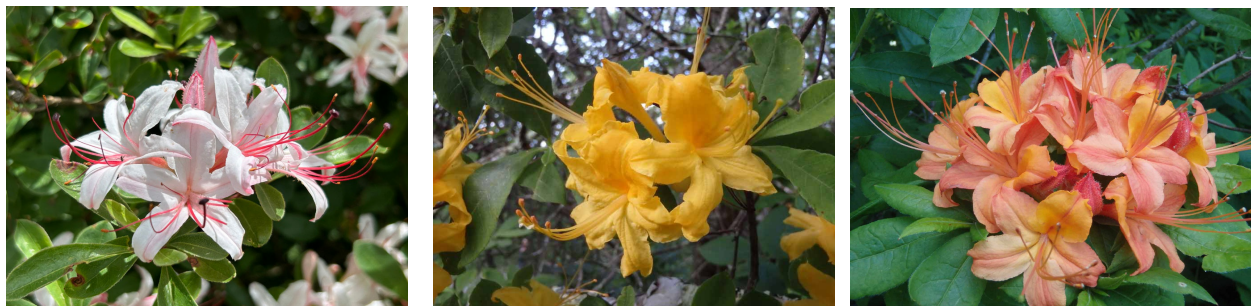
Byron Reece Trail/Appalachian Trail to Blood Mt. GA. The Appalachian Trail (AT) crosses US 19 south of Vogel State Park. The Byron Reece Trail up to the AT, and then right along the AT toward Blood Mountain are locations to see outstanding examples of *R. calendulaceum*, *R. arborescens*, *R. cumberlandense*, and natural hybrids. We will gather at the Byron Reece trail head parking area, a half mile north of Neals Gap on US 19. **There are only 38 parking spaces, so we must get there early and car pool!** It is a rocky, steep trail, about 3/4 mile to the AT. The round trip to the rock shelter (built by the CCC in the 1930s) and back is about 4.5 miles. There are some nice azaleas to see a short distance beyond the shelter. Hiking pole recommended.



We return to Franklin and to the Quality Inn for Tuesday night, 16 June.

☛ Wednesday, June 17, 2026

Wine Spring Bald and Wayah Bald. On Forest Road 69 off Wayah Rd are two locations for *R. arborescens*, *Kalmia latifolia*, and *R. calendulaceum*. Flame azaleas and mountain laurel are usually at peak this time of year, with the sweet azalea at near peak. The top of Wine Spring has a radio tower surrounded by *Kalmia* and azaleas. The road up to the tower is blocked but an easy uphill walk. As you near the top, you will start to see many outstanding azaleas. Beyond the top, down the power line, are open areas, with many azaleas along the periphery. Recently, the power line up to the top, which was a magnificent path of mountain laurel and azaleas, was completely cleared, destroying all the plants. Both the Appalachian Trail and the Bartram Trail cross Wayah Bald. A fire in 2016 severely burned portions of Wayah Bald, but the azaleas are recovering. This hike is not long. Total distance is maybe 2 miles or so.



From Wayah, we travel to Townsend TN, in preparation for our hike up to Gregory Bald. Our headquarters for Wednesday night is the Best Western Cades Cove Inn, 7824 E Lamar Alexander Pkwy, Townsend TN, 37882.

☛ Thursday, June 18, 2026

Gregory Bald, TN/NC. Well known for its hybrid swarm of azaleas, Gregory Bald is on the Tennessee-North Carolina border above Cades Cove. The azaleas appear to be mostly orange to red *R. cumberlandense*, but about 10-15% is an outstanding mixture of what may include *R. arborescens* and *R. viscosum*. Just off the bald at Sheep Pen Gap, where one trail forks off to Parsons Bald, one can find *R. calendulaceum*. **The Gregory Bald hike will depend on the weather.** Walking around on top of a 5,000-ft bald in a thunderstorm is not a smart thing to do.

We plan to use the Parsons Branch Road trail because it is a mile shorter (only 4.5 mile one way) and 1,000 ft less climb in elevation (2,300 ft) than the one up Forge Creek. Confusingly, the authorities call the one from Parsons Branch Road the Gregory Bald Trail and the other, longer trail the Gregory Ridge Trail. I prefer to call this the Parsons Branch Trail and the other the Forge Creek Trail, because the latter initially goes up Forge Creek.

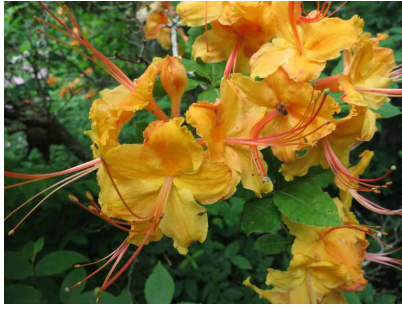
We have to arrive at Cades Cove 30 minutes before dawn. The gate opens at dawn, and if we are behind people stopping to take pictures of deer and bears, we will be significantly delayed getting to the trail head. There is also limited parking at the Parsons Branch trail head. We need to be first in line.



Parsons Branch Road is a dirt road off Forge Creek Road and is a one-way road leading to US 129. We will turn left on US 129 and head toward Robbinsville NC. This drive on US 129 is the famous stretch of road is known as the Tail of the Dragon. Drive carefully but enjoy it. There are not many places to stay in Robbinsville, and it may be full because of the Flame Azalea Festival and motorcyclists, who like to ride the Tail. Recommend you plan to overnight Thursday & Friday, June 18-19, in Andrews NC, which is about 20 miles away, at the Quality Inn, 138 Country Hearth Inn Dr, Andrews NC, 28901. The Tapoco Lodge, 14981 Tapoco Rd, Robbinsville NC 28771, is closer, but more expensive.

☛ Friday, June 19, 2026

Hooper Bald and Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. Hooper Bald is up on the Cherohala Skyway at 5,400 feet. The bald is a quarter-mile easy walk from the parking area off the skyway. Hooper is known for its colorful variety of large-flowered *Rhododendron calendulaceum*. This is the only azalea species on the bald, but they exist in quantity. Most of the azaleas are on the west end, while the east is mostly an open bald with flowering buttermcups, some *Viburnum cassinoides* and *Sorbus americana*, and scenic views. You can see Huckleberry Knob, at 5,560 feet, the highest elevation along the Skyway.

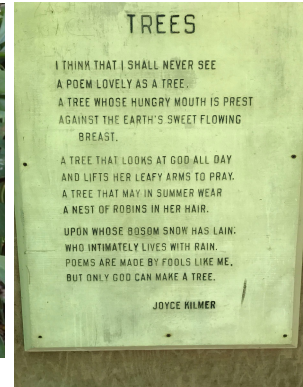


Don Hyatt, Ralf Bauer, & George McLellan

Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest is off the Cherohala Skyway and is in the Nantahala National Forest. Named for WWI soldier and poet Joyce Kilmer, who is best known for his poem "Trees," it is preserved as an example of old-growth cove hardwood forest, unique to the Appalachian Mountains, with large specimens of yellow-poplar, oak, basswood, beech, and sycamore. Some trees are over 400 years old, and the oldest yellow-poplars are more than 6½ feet in diameter and 100 feet tall.



Joe & Jan Nicholson with yellow poplar



☛ Saturday, June 20, 2026

Graham County Flame Azalea Festival. We will have a tent at the festival in Robbinsville NC, promoting azaleas and both the Azalea Society of America and the American Rhododendron Society. The festival runs from 10 am to 6 pm and is full of arts, crafts, glass blowing & other workshops, Cherokee Indian dancers, live music, food, azaleas for sale, and more. Check out the website: <<https://grahamcountytravel.com/flame-azalea-festival/>>. Free admission.

From here we all head home, with many photos and memories, but exhausted. You may want to stop by East Fork Nursery, 2769 Bethel Church Road, Sevierville TN 37876, see Vivian Abney (865) 453-6108 and get some native azaleas before going homeward.

< <https://www.facebook.com/pages/East-Fork-Nursery/594098127396764/> > You could also visit Carolina Native Nursery, 1639 Prices Creek Road, Burnsville NC 28714, (828) 682-1471. < <http://www.carolinanativenursery.com> >

Schedule *

Fri 12 June	Travel day
Sat 13 June	J & Lindy's
Sun 14 June	Whitetop Mountain
Mon 15 June	Blue Ridge Parkway
Tue 16 June	Blood Mountain
Wed 17 June	Wayah & Wine Spring Balds
Thu 18 June	Gregory Bald
Fri 19 June	Hooper Bald & Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest
Sat 20 June	Graham County Flame Azalea Festival

* subject to change, based on weather and unforeseen circumstances.

Lodging Suggestions (our field trip base locations)

Nights of

- 12-13 June: Comfort Suites - University Area, 1184 Highway 105, Boone NC, 28607
- 14 June: Country Inn & Suites by Radisson, Asheville - Outlet Mall, 845 Brevard Road, Asheville NC, 28806
- 15-16 June: Quality Inn, 313 Cunningham Rd, Franklin NC, 28734
- 17 June: Best Western Cades Cove Inn, 7824 E Lamar Alexander Pkwy, Townsend TN, 37882
- 18-20 June: Quality Inn, 138 Country Hearth Inn Dr, Andrews NC, 28901 or Tapoco Lodge, 14981 Tapoco Rd, Robbinsville NC 28771

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