

# STITCHING TRAIL

WRITTEN BY JOHN MANUEL



The second installment in a three-part series about the Mountains-to-Sea Trail focuses on the Piedmont Region, which unlike its Mountain neighbor, is still taking shape

**THE WESTERN PORTION OF THE MOUNTAINS-TO-SEA TRAIL** (MST), which spans 1,175 miles from Clingman's Dome to Jockey's Ridge, is largely complete thanks to the abundance of older, overlapping trails and the presence of national parks and forests through which the new trail has been constructed. The same cannot be said of the Piedmont Region. Parkland in the Piedmont is scattered far and wide, meaning large expanses of trail must be routed through private property. That takes time, money and endless negotiation. Yet progress is being made thanks to the work of the Division of State Parks, the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (Friends) and enthusiastic communities and property owners. Together, these entities are stitching a trail across the Piedmont.

From the Devil's Garden Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway, the MST drops more than 2,000 feet to Stone Mountain State Park. The park's signature 600-foot-tall granite monolith may seem to be part of the Blue Ridge Mountains, but technically the park resides in the Piedmont. Regardless, hikers will want to climb Stone Mountain to experience its remarkable views and surface features.



The view of Stone Mountain from the Blue Ridge Parkway in Stone Mountain State Park. The mountain is a National Natural Landmark.

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On its path through the Piedmont, the Mountains-to-Sea Trail passes many cultural landmarks. In Hillsborough, the trail runs atop what was once a Great Indian Trading Path and beside a modern reconstruction of an Occaneechee Indian village known to have existed along the Eno River. At Durham's West Point on the Eno Park, the trail passes an operating grist mill. Throughout the Piedmont, the MST crosses prime wildlife habitat. Quiet hikers may catch glimpses of whitetailed deer and wild turkey in hardwood forests and fields. Riverside trail segments give views to all manner of turtles, snakes, fish and the occasional beaver and otter. Along Falls Lake, expect to see eagles, osprey, wading birds and ducks.



Stone Mountain Falls, 200-feet tall, is also worth seeing, as are Middle and Lower Falls. The park's streams hold the easternmost populations of trout (most of them stocked) along the MST, so hikers who want to experience the tug of a 12-inch rainbow should wet a line here.

#### ELKIN: HOME ON THE TRAIL

Leaving Stone Mountain, the MST follows a series of roads and footpaths through forests and fields to the town of Elkin. Many communities across the state have embraced the MST, but none as enthusiastically as this little town.

"Longtime residents say the MST is one of the most exciting things that's happened to Elkin in their lifetime," says Bill Blackley, chairperson of the Elkin Valley Trails Association ([elkinvalleytrail.org](http://elkinvalleytrail.org)). "We have more than 260 people on our volunteer list in a town of 4,000."

The MST enters Elkin along an old railroad bed, crossing a 178-foot-long steel footbridge purchased with \$150,000 of local funds, matched by \$200,000 in Recreational Trails Program (RTP) funds. Benches built by local Eagle Scouts line the trail, along with kiosks and signs depicting

mill buildings and other landmarks that once populated this town. Multiple high school students produced 18 separate videos on trailside historic sites and natural phenomenon, all of which can be accessed by scanning a QR code into the signs.

Elkin has a "trail angel" group that meets hikers coming through town. Lucky hikers may be taken out to dinner or even put up for the night. Either way, hikers will want to walk down Main Street to see the famous "Trail Town Mural" and visit one of two local breweries to sample their signature Tr'ale B'Red. Local vineyards, five of which are near the MST on its approach to town, have produced three wines named after the MST.

Elkin has nearly finished converting a local lumberyard building and grounds to a Trails and Heritage Center, where camping and showers will be available. Currently, camping is available at Byrd's Branch Campground outside Elkin and at a local park that stands astride the Overmountain Victory Trail (OVT), which patriot militia followed in 1780 to confront the British at Kings Mountain. Elkin is the eastern terminus of the OVT, where Maj. Joseph Winston mustered the Surry Militia.

#### MOUNTAINS AWAY FROM THE MOUNTAINS

Unless one embarks by canoe on the Yadkin River, designated a "Blueway" by the state, the 26 miles between Elkin and Pilot Mountain State Park will be on road for the immediate future. Standing alone in a sea of green, Pilot Mountain, a 2,421-foot-tall quartzite monadnock, beckons travelers from all directions. The MST loops around the base of this dome's vertical cliffs and heads northwest across the wooded slopes of the Sauratown Mountains.

Known as "the mountains away from the mountains," the Sauratowns are an isolated segment of the Appalachians. Residents of this idyllic horse country formed the Sauratown Trails Association (STA) in

**No town has embraced the Mountains-to-Sea Trail quite like Elkin, as evidenced by the Trail Town Mural painted by artist Michael Brown on the side of a downtown store wall. The Sauratown Trail accommodates both hikers and equestrians as it passes through private property, including this farm at the base of the Sauratown Mountains.**







the 1980s to build and maintain a 22-mile horse trail between Pilot Mountain State Park and nearby Hanging Rock State Park. Allen de Hart, founder of the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail who passed away last October, had contacted the STA about incorporating the Sauratown Trail into the MST, and it is now designated for both equestrians and hikers.

The Sauratown Trail traverses rolling forests and fields, often following small streams that tumble over unnamed waterfalls. Wildlife is prolific along this trail. Break into a meadow and hikers are likely to see a flock of turkeys or a herd of deer. (Note: the Sauratown Trail is closed during deer hunting season, the first weekend in November until Jan. 3.) This trail is entirely on private land that owners have generously granted

easements. Hikers need to respect their privacy by staying on the trail and not bringing dogs who might harass other pets or livestock.

Crossing the northeastern slope of Sauratown Mountain, hikers get their first view of Moore's Knob, the tallest peak in the Sauratowns at 2,579 feet.

**THE ROCK FOR WHICH THE PARK WAS NAMED IS ANOTHER SPECTACULAR GEOLOGIC FORMATION, A SLAB OF GRANITE THAT HANGS PERILOUSLY OVER THE FORESTED FLATLANDS HUNDREDS OF FEET BELOW.**

The MST switchbacks 1,700 feet up that escarpment, an exhausting climb that is rewarded by the views from the abandoned fire tower at the top. The Blue Ridge Mountains span the horizon to the north and west, with Pilot Mountain also to the

west and (on a clear day) the skyscrapers of Winston-Salem to the south.

Moore's Knob is the signature feature of Hanging Rock State Park, but far from the only one. The park was created in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps and their diligent road, trail and stonework is evident throughout. The park has 73 campsites, a swimming lake and bathhouse, more than 20 miles of hiking trails, and numerous waterfalls. The rock for which the park was named is another spectacular geologic formation, a slab of granite that hangs perilously over the forested flatlands hundreds of feet below.

#### **WALK ON**

Leaving Hanging Rock State Park, the MST follows roads through the towns of Danbury, Walnut Cove, Oak Ridge and

Summerfield. These towns have no trail under construction, but Danbury, Oak Ridge and Summerfield all have plans for their first MST miles. Danbury has negotiated with a landowner for a trailhead that will allow the state park to build a trail directly to the town limits; Oak Ridge has acquired a trail easement which will allow the trail to be routed through a local nature preserve; Summerfield is working with the N.C. Department of Transportation on an extension of the Atlantic & Yadkin Greenway.

The MST picks up again where the Atlantic & Yadkin Greenway enters Greensboro from the north. This paved greenway crosses Lake Brandt, then intersects a series of dirt trails that follow the southern shorelines of Lake Brandt and Lake Townsend. Shared with bikers, walkers and runners, these lovely trails course beneath old hardwood stands along bluffs, almost always within sight of the lakes.

The routing of the MST through eastern Guilford County is currently on roads but may be largely on footpaths within the next few years. The county and Friends have been building trails through Guilford County Farm, a bucolic 700-acre preserve that is full of wildlife. Their hope is to route the MST through there and into Alamance County.

Capitalizing on the presence of the Haw River, Alamance County has embraced the idea of foot and water trails for recreation. The Haw traverses the length of the county from northwest to southeast and has long been popular for canoeing. The county wants to add hiking as an option and is in the process of building a 40-mile Haw River Trail, 17 miles of which are complete. Currently, the MST overlaps 8 miles of this trail, the highlight of which is the Glencoe Mill Village.

Glencoe Mill was built in 1880, drawing power from the Haw to weave cotton into

**Opposite page, clockwise: White-tailed deer are a common sight when hiking the trail. The view from Hanging Rock State Park near Danbury. Glencoe Mill Village is a highpoint of a trip on the Haw River Trail. Above: Leaves swirl in a pool at the bottom of Lower Cascade Falls in Hanging Rock State Park.**



## A MAN AND HIS WATERFALL

The ability to run the Mountains-to-Sea Trail across the state will depend largely on private landowners and their willingness to allow trail easements across their property. Dan Park of Elkin has done that and more. Park owns 52 acres of land outside of Elkin, including Carter Falls, one of the prettiest waterfalls in the Piedmont. He has decided to sell those falls and the surrounding 41 acres to the state and donate an easement for the MST on another 11 acres.

For years, Park declined Bill Blackley's requests when the president of the Elkin Valley Trails Association (EVTA) asked him to open his land to the MST. Finally, convinced of the merits of the trail and public enjoyment of the falls, he changed his mind. "I said 'no' over and over again to Blackley, until I understood what it would mean to our community," Park said. "I can think of no better people to look over this property than the EVTA, MST and our citizen volunteers."



KEITH HALL

fabric. As with most Piedmont mill towns of the day, the mill owners, James and William Holt, built housing and stores for their workers. These were occupied for the better part of a century, at which point the mill closed down and many of the houses abandoned. Starting in 2002, a member of the Holt family initiated the restoration of the site, and it now stands as the best-preserved mill village in the state.

Alamance County's long-range plan is for the Haw River Trail and the MST to run some 40 miles south to the town of Saxapahaw, a revitalized community with a popular music hall, brewery and general store/restaurant. At present, the MST leaves the trail at the town of Haw River and heads east over roads to the town of Hillsborough. Here, the MST joins Hillsborough's famed Riverwalk, a paved trail that follows the Eno River for 3 miles beneath a shady canopy of river birch, poplar and oak. Midway along, a staircase leads up to the historic downtown, home of the state legislature during the Revolutionary War and numerous restaurants and bars today.

Prior to the settling of Hillsborough by white men, the Occoneechee band of the Saponi Indian tribe built a village beside the Eno, astride what was once the Great Trading Path from Virginia through the Carolinas. Archaeologists located the remains of that village beside the Riverwalk, and the town and tribe have constructed a re-creation of the wooden palisade that surrounded the village.

A few hundred yards downstream, the MST crosses the Eno and climbs past the former Occoneechee Speedway, an early NASCAR dirt track that hosted the likes of Fireball Roberts, Richard Petty, Ned Barrett and Junior Johnson. Access to this 44-acre site was made possible by a



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gift from the Classical American Homes Preservation Trust and Preservation North Carolina. East of Hillsborough, the MST joins the trail system of the Eno River State Park, one of the more delightful natural areas in the Piedmont.

Hikers enter a small gorge along steep banks of mountain laurel, the river below tumbling over mossy boulders reminiscent of mountain streams. Turtles sun on logs and largemouth and Roanoke bass linger in the shadows. The entire park has about 25 miles of river frontage, and the river is wadeable in most areas. The trail passes the stone foundations of several old grist mills, and a working grist mill opens for tours on weekends at West Point on the Eno Park.

The heavily used Eno section of the MST was built and is maintained entirely by volunteers, a sign of the dedication of local citizenry. "We do over 1,000 volunteer hours per year on trail maintenance," said Fred Dietrich, trail crew leader for the Eno section of the MST.

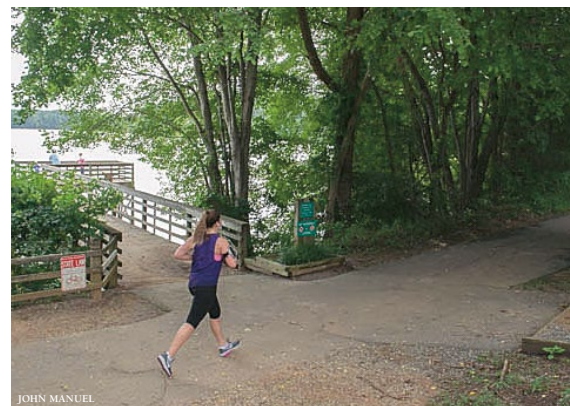
At the eastern end of the Eno River, the MST merges onto 66 miles of new trail built along the southern edge of Falls Lake, a 15,000-acre reservoir supplying drinking water to the city of Raleigh. This section, too, was built largely by volunteers, including Eagle Scouts, whose excellent wooden bridges traverse many side streams. Falls Lake attracts numerous birds—including herons, ospreys and bald eagles—which can be glimpsed from the trail in various spots.

Falls Lake Dam marks the end of the Piedmont section of the MST. Hikers heading east face long slogs on pavement. Those who have come from the east can delight in the arrival of soil underfoot, shade overhead, the rolling terrain and cultural gems of the Piedmont. ♦

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**Clockwise: An autumn view of Pilot Mountain, located in Pilot Mountain State Park. The historical Moratock Iron Furnace on the banks of the Dan River near Danbury was used to produce iron for the Confederacy during the Civil War. A great blue heron patiently waits for prey. A portion of the MST trail is adjacent to Lake Brandt.**