

Hangover Mountain Loop - Overview

Directions to Big Fat Gap Trailhead. From Robbinsville, N.C.: Take US 129 North out of Robbinsville for 13.5 miles. Turn left and Cross Cheoah River on National Forest Rd/Slickrock Road (unpaved gravel). After 0.1 mile, turn right to stay on Slickrock Road and drive 9.4 miles to Big Fat Gap Parking Area.

If you're looking for an isolated trail that will challenge your navigation skills, take you through incredibly varied, rugged, and beautiful terrain, and push you to the limits of your physical endurance as you gain and lose thousands of feet of elevation, this is definitely it.

The journey begins at Big Fat Gap (3,050 feet) where you hike down 1.4 miles and 1,000 feet to



View from the Trail Leading to Naked Ground

Slickrock Creek. You turn upstream along the creek and begin the first stage of a 3,000 foot ascent to the Slickrock/Santeetlah watershed divide. After 1.7 miles through increasingly wild and isolated terrain, you leave the creek and ascend for 2.3 miles up a series of steep switchbacks, which are covered with mazes of downed trees at their upper end. If you bull your way through two thirds of a mile of tangled masses of trees, you reach an unnamed ridge that leads up through tunnel like heath balds for 1.1 miles. The trail levels out as it runs into Naked Ground at about 4,800 feet on the watershed divide. You hike for 1.2 miles along the narrow, more or less level divide through stunted forests and grassy meadows to 5,160 foot Hangover Mountain where you're afforded a spectacular 360 degree panorama of the high country of North Carolina and Tennessee. The last leg of the journey is a continuous steep descent down Hangover Lead for 2,000 feet and 2.6 miles back to Big Fat Gap for a total distance of about 10.4 miles.

The 3.4 mile segment of the trail from Slickrock Creek to Naked ground has no trail signs, is lightly traveled, extremely steep and rugged, very poorly maintained, and blocked by dozens of downed trees. But it's an incredible piece of trail that you won't soon forget!

The Slickrock Wilderness as a whole is remote and isolated and it wasn't surprising that I didn't see a soul on the entire two-day journey. However, the fact that it was late October and a violent cold front brought high winds, driving rain, and low temperatures, might have had something to do with it. During the summer, the trail along the watershed divide to Hangover Mountain is popular and can be accessed by several trails so it's likely you'll see at least a few people up there.

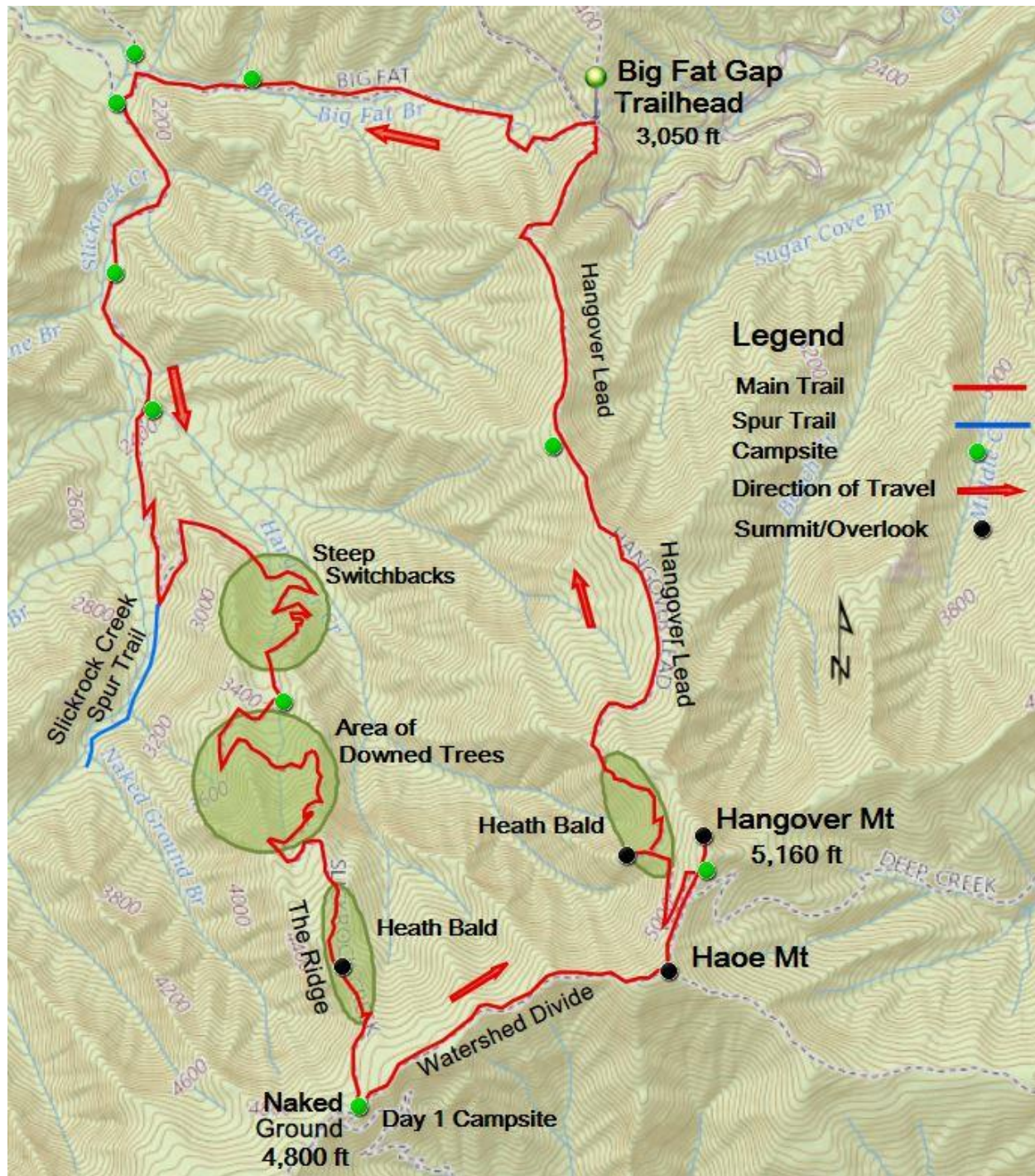
Hangover Mountain Loop - Trip Log

Day 1 - Friday, October 20, 2017

Big Fat Gap to Naked Ground

7.9 miles (including 1.4 mile Side Trail to End of Slickrock Creek Trail and Back

Trail Map



I (Doc Livingston) began hiking about 11:00 am on a beautiful autumn morning at the Big Fat Gap trailhead. I took the Big Fat Trail that's marked by a sign just to the right of the Kiosk in the parking area (the hike ends on the Hangover Lead Trail that comes down the stairs to the left of the Kiosk). The trail descended steeply at first and went through what I would call a sloppy forest; lots of downed branches and vines, sort of like what I look like when I wake up in the morning – needing to shave, wash my face, and comb my hair. The equivalent action for a forest would be a good low-temperature fire to burn up all that debris.



Start of Big Fat Trail to the Right of the Kiosk

The trail was covered with blocky boulders and continued to descend steeply until it reached Big Fat Branch at about mile 0.3. Here the gradient lessened and the trail turned left (west) and began to parallel the branch. I passed a good campsite at a creek crossing at about mile 1.0.

As the descent continued, I began to notice that a great many trees were down across the creek. What was left of hurricane Irma, the hurricane that had battered Florida in September, came through this area as a tropical storm and slapped trees down in massive tangles. I eyed these tangles of trees apprehensively as I hiked down along the creek because I suspected my trek could become exponentially more difficult if I ran into this problem at higher elevations.



Recent Blowdowns on Big Fat Branch

At mile 1.4 (elevation approximately 2000 feet) I reached a large, relatively flat area that was near the junction of Big Fat Branch and Slickrock Creek. There was a sign pointing out

the Nichols Cove Trail, which led off to the north. I took it for a short distance, crossed Big Fat Branch and came out onto a large campsite that I've often used as a basecamp for doing day trips throughout the area. The site is on a bluff about 25 feet high and affords great views of Slickrock Creek. I noticed the creek was running high because of recent heavy rains that were uncharacteristic for this time of year. I checked the map and was relieved when I saw that my route today wasn't going to cross any creeks that were as big as Slickrock.

I headed upstream along the east side of Slickrock Creek and after a few hundred feet, reached the intersection with the trail that headed west and downstream along the creek. There was a large open campsite at this junction. I couldn't find the trail that continued upstream because a large tangle of downed trees had obliterated it. I finally puzzled it out and continued on my way. The trail was well worn and relatively free of



Slickrock Creek from the Campsite on the Bluff

downed trees and I passed another good campsite at approximately mile 2.0. In several places I noticed remnants of the bed of the narrow gauge railroad that had been part of the effort to log this area 100 years before.

At mile 2.3, the trail became indistinct as it neared Hangover Creek, a rushing tributary to Slickrock Creek. I spotted a rock cairn on the side of the creek and an arrow carved in the tree above it and was grateful that a considerate individual had just shown me that I needed to cross the creek there. Fortunately there were enough large rocks that I was able to hop across without having to take my boots off and wade.

My problems began at about mile 2.6 when I reached a trail intersection. A very faint trail continued straight ahead along the river and I convinced myself this was a spur trail that the map showed going another 0.7 miles along Slickrock Creek before it dead ended. The other trail, which was well worn, switched back up the side of a ravine away from the creek. This



Hiking up the Bed of an Abandoned Narrow-Gauge Logging Railroad

switchback was clearly visible on my map and I assumed it was the turnoff for the trail I would follow for several miles up to the watershed divide. I took this trail but I hadn't gone far before I realized that something didn't seem right. The map showed I was supposed to be experiencing a series of switchbacks that resulted in considerable elevation gain, but the trail continued to parallel Slickrock Creek, which I could just barely hear in the distance. I crossed a small creek on two parallel logs at about mile 2.9 and beyond that the trail got progressively more indistinct to the point where I lost it altogether. As I circled around trying to pick it back up I stumbled across three large metal wheels that were nearly obscured by grass. I speculated that these were the wheels of a flatcar or engine of a narrow gauge logging train. As I looked around at the dense wilderness I tried without much success to imagine that a hundred years before, a railroad crossed this spot and the entire valley was open and bare after all its massive old-growth trees were clear cut and hauled away. This was proof beyond a doubt



Wheel from a Logging Train



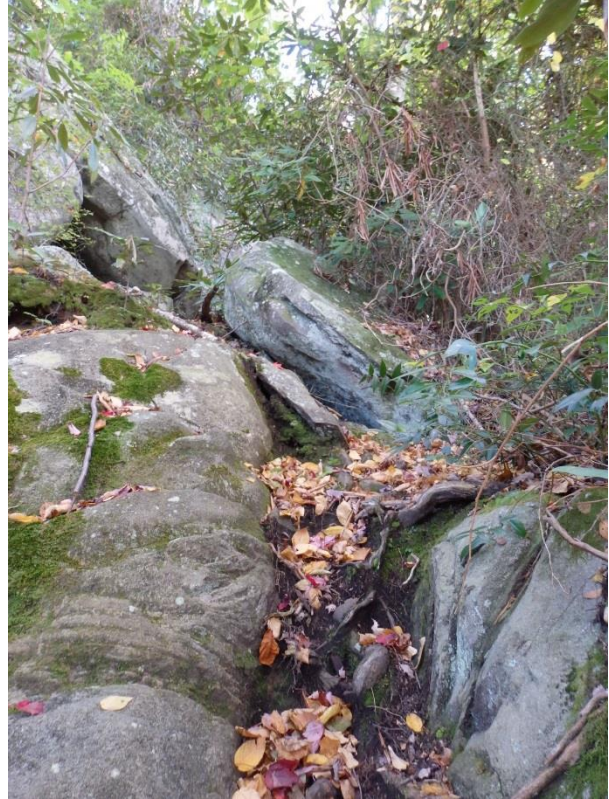
Rock Cairn and Carved Arrow Showing where to Cross Hangover Creek

for anyone who questioned the ability of nature to heal itself no matter how severe the human-inflicted damage.

I finally located a faint path forward but knew I was on the trail that paralleled Slickrock Creek and had somehow missed the route to the high country. Still, I continued on because the forest became increasingly more wild and beautiful, especially when I reached a point where the trail dead ended next to a tributary stream that flowed into Slickrock Creek. Maybe the loggers never made it up this far or if they did, maybe they didn't clear cut but only took the largest trees. I wondered who besides me came up this far to keep the trail open and decided it was probably some adventurous fishermen who were as much interested in the pristine beauty of the place as they were in catching fish.

Reluctantly I turned around and started back the way I had come. I was disappointed because I figured the trail I was looking for was probably grown over and no longer passable. I

The Steep and Rugged Trail up the Switchbacks



thought I'd have to go with plan B, which was just to camp at one of the stream-side campsites and hike back the way I had come to my car the next morning. Just as I neared the two logs that bridged the small stream I noticed what looked like an erosion channel coming straight down the hillside on my right. Might this be the trail? Of course there was no trail sign and I had not seen it on the way in probably because I was looking in the other direction toward Slickrock Creek.



Good Campsite High Up Among the Switchbacks

I scrambled my way up the steep slope and sure enough, when I reached a ledge about 15 feet up, a trail went off in the opposite direction to the creek, which made me certain this was the switchback shown on the map, not the one I had encountered earlier. I was back to plan A.



The Trail above the Steep Switchbacks was Blocked by Downed Trees

I headed up the trail with renewed vigor, confident in the knowledge that this trail would lead me from my current elevation of 2,600 feet, 3.4 miles to Naked Ground at 4,800 feet, the summit of the ridge that divided the Slickrock Creek and Little Santeetlah Creek watersheds. Right away I encountered the switchbacks shown on the map as they very steeply ushered me up out of the valley. The steep switchbacks ended after I'd gained about 900 feet and I crossed a small stream where there was a good campsite at about mile 4.2. It turned out this was the last campsite before the divide, still over 2 miles away. I was tempted to camp there but the weather report showed that a powerful cold front was expected to start moving in during the early evening with rain, high winds, and plummeting temperatures. I figured it was best to get as much of the loop done today so if the weather turned really nasty I wouldn't have far to go to get back to my car.

I left the campsite and almost immediately began to encounter numerous downed trees across the trail that presented formidable obstacles. The difficulty of getting through was amplified because the steep, densely vegetated terrain made going up or down slope to go around the fallen trees very difficult. I found myself getting past the trees in every way imaginable; crawling under, climbing over, struggling up or down the steep slope to go around thick trunks



One of the many Places where an Uprooted Tree had taken the Trail with it

and bullying my way through tangled branches. My backpack, trekking poles, clothing, and boot laces became hindrances that were constantly grabbed by tangles of trees and branches that had no intention of letting them go. Several times I found that large trees had fallen right along the trail and I was able to climb up and walk the lengths of their trunks then jump back down onto the trail. In many areas, large trees had toppled over taking their root masses with them, which left huge gouges in the trail that resembled bomb craters. I carefully slid down into these, stumbled across their uneven bottoms, then pulled myself out on the other side.



Climbing the Rugged Trail up the Ridge

I would painstakingly navigate through big sections of this devastation then stumble out exhausted on the other side only to see another equally formidable tangle just 20 feet up the trail. At one point after crawling through a particularly nasty tangle and running into a limb that punctured the skin of my head and left a deep splinter, I collapsed down in the middle of the trail and took stock of my

situation. Both my arms from elbow to palm were covered with a mixture of blood, sweat, and plant material where brambles had ripped jagged cuts across my skin. I was soaked in sweat, panting like an exhausted dog, and blood was running down my face from pulling the splinter from my forehead.

I began to see trees as sinister and full of malicious intent, like the ugly, angry trees in the Wizard of Oz that threw apples at Dorothy. Even now they were warning their brethren up ahead that there was an intruder in their realm and they should lay down across the trail to block his passage.

I pushed these irrational thoughts from my head then looked at the time and realized it had taken me 45 minutes to go about a half mile. I was becoming very concerned that I might have to turn back if this continued much further. Still I couldn't help but marvel at the level of violence that was released when the storm had torn through here.



The Trail Clinging Precariously to the Side of the Ridge

Fortunately, after a couple more obstacles, the tangles of trees began to thin out as I neared the ridge I would follow all the way up to the divide. The ridge was an interesting feature that I encountered at approximately mile 5.4 and an elevation of around 4,000 feet. It was a narrow finger that led down perpendicularly from the

divide. It was steep, rocky, narrow in places, and as I worked my way up, it seemed I was doing more climbing than hiking but I didn't care because there were almost no downed trees!



The Shrubby Tunnels of the Heath Bald

About a half mile from the summit I crossed a small stream which was the last water I was to find before reaching the divide. As I climbed higher, what few trees there were thinned out altogether and I found myself walking through a heath bald, which is a

tangled thicket of low-growing woody shrubs such as Rhododendron and Mountain Laurel. I reached an opening in the thickets where I was able to climb up on rocks and get above the vegetation. All day my field of view had been limited to a few dozen feet by the dense forest and now in an instant I was suddenly clear of it, surrounded by spectacular views of mountains extending endlessly out to distant horizons. To the northwest I could see the Little Tennessee River heading north out of the mountains to its junction with the Tennessee River. Directly in front of me was the deeply incised valley of Slickrock Creek that I had hiked out of over the last few hours. To the northeast was the spine of mountains through the center of Great Smokey Mountains National Park, dominated by 6,600 foot Clingman's Dome, the second highest mountain east of the Rockies. I could even see Hangover Mountain, still a couple of miles away by trail. I was grateful to have found this overlook because it was looking more and more likely that I wouldn't make Hangover Mountain before dark and the front that was to come through during the night would probably reduce visibility to zero when I reached it the next morning.



A Steep Portion of the Trail through the Heath Bald



Hangover Mountain from the Heath Bald Overlook

Behind me to the north I could see the watershed divide still hundreds of feet above and a half mile distant. I continued up the trail through the heath balds and came to a place where the sides of the trail were lined with what I think was a moss that was so dense and white that it almost looked like snow. The trail began to level out as I neared the divide and I began walking through grassy areas with many low-growing hardwoods covered

View from the Heath Bald Overlook



with golden fall foliage. This area had probably once been one of the famous grassy balds that dot the region but through the process of succession, it was turning back into a forest. Bob Stratton Bald, which was quite large and still very open, was less than a half mile to the south.

Just as the sun set behind a range of mountains, I broke out of the trees and walked into the open area known as Naked Ground at mile 6.5. I was immediately assaulted by a cold rushing wind coming up from the Santeetlah side that chilled me to the bone because of my sweaty clothes. I dropped my pack, put on a down jacket, and began to scout around for a place to pitch my tent. I passed the Naked Ground Trail that led east 5.6 miles down to the entrance to the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. The light was fading fast but most of the area was too open and afforded no protection from the wind. I finally found a place that was at least a little sheltered, quickly set up my tent, and pulled everything inside. I was a bit deflated because I was about an hour too late to have made it another mile to Hangover Mountain and its spectacular views.



White Moss Growing Along the Trail through the Heath Bald



Nearing the Watershed Divide

As I contemplated making dinner, I saw I had only about a liter of water. Apparently, springs existed a few hundred yards down a side trail but it was nearly dark and I was far too tired to go hunting for them. Also, I seemed to have lost my appetite, which happens when I push my body too hard. So I was content to eat an energy bar and drink water while listening to the wind.

In my mind's eye I zoomed out and saw

myself as a tiny little oasis of warmth and light on an exposed ridge in the midst of a brewing storm surrounded by a sea of dark windswept mountains. I felt I was of this landscape, not an intruder but a welcome part of the whole who had been granted the privilege this night of bearing witness to the magnificence of the eternal dance of wind, water, mountain and forest. As I drifted off to sleep I felt a deep sense of gratitude that I still had the strength and desire to endure the hardships that were necessary to reach this place.



Hiking through a Meadow Transitioning to Forest near Naked Ground



View of Lake Santeetlah from the "Front Porch" of My Campsite at Sunset

Day 2 - Saturday, October 21, 2017
Naked Ground via Hangover Mountain to Big Fat Gap
3.9 miles

All night the wind seemed to increase in velocity and it became so loud in the trees it was like camping next to a waterfall. Somewhere around 4:00 am the rain started but I soon drifted back to sleep because there's nothing so sleep inducing as rain on a tent when you're inside and warm and dry. When I woke again around 8:00 am it was still raining and the temperature was in the high 30s. I began to think about how I would stay dry while breaking camp in the rain. With



Morning at My Campsite at Naked Ground

this combination of cold wind and rain, hypothermia was a real possibility if I was careless and got soaked. I fired up my stove inside the vestibule, boiled water for coffee and ate another



Morning Hike along the Narrow Crest of the Watershed Divide

energy bar. I was very comfortable and it was tempting to just stay in the tent

It took a while but the rain finally slowed down so I put my boots on and exited the tent. The second I stood up it was like having a bucket of cold water tossed on me as I was immediately assaulted by the full force of the rushing cold wind. The wind got under my poncho and whipped it up around my

shoulders and I felt for a moment like I was trapped in a zip lock baggie with no way out. No sooner would I start to collapse the tent than the wind would again grab the poncho and tent and make them dance around me like living things. I finally calmed them down, got the tent stuffed in its sack and placed in my backpack, and got back on the trail.

I hiked along the crest of the divide, which was narrow enough in places that I could jump from one watershed to the



The Summit of Haoe Mountain (5,249 feet)

next. The rain started again and the wind flattened the grasses and bent small trees. A dense fog had rolled in and visibility was limited to a few tens of feet. The trail along the divide was mostly level and after nearly a mile I reached Haoe Mountain at 5,249 feet. This summit is completely overgrown and is where the Jenkins Meadows Trail leads east down into the Santeetlah Watershed. After 0.2 miles I reached another intersection where the Deep Creek Trail leads down into the Santeetlah Watershed. There was also a 0.1 mile spur trail that led through a heath bald past a couple of campsites before dead ending at the exposed summit of Hangover Mountain at about 5,160 feet. This would have been the highlight of my hike were it not for the fog and the driving wind and rain, which eliminated any possibility of experiencing the



Starting the Long, Steep Descent Down Hangover Lead

incredible panorama. I didn't linger because I was very exposed and getting pummeled by the elements so I began the long descent to Big Fat Gap that would cover 2.6 miles and over 2,000 feet of elevation loss. As mentioned in the introduction to Slickrock, a buddy of mine and I did a multi-day backpacking trip through the area in the late 1980s. We came up from Big Fat Gap to Hangover Mountain via Hangover Lead. We were in our early 30s and in peak condition but I still

The Stormy Descent down Hangover Lead



have vivid memories of our exclamations of amazement at the ruggedness of the last part of the trail as we crawled our way up to Hangover Mountain. I read somewhere that the trail had been rerouted since then to bypass that section and as I descended it was clear it was true. Although the initial descent was steep and rugged, it was nothing like the rocky climb that had been so indelibly imprinted on my memory that after 30 years I could still remember the burn in my muscles.



A Rare Level Spot Used for a Campsite Halfway Down Hangover Lead

After carefully navigating many steep descents down wet slippery rocks and roots the trail entered a heath bald and the going got easier. As I walked through shrubby tunnels the vegetation fell away in a couple places and I had excellent views of thick cloud masses being rushed across the peaks by the wind like herded cattle. At one point there was a side trail that led a short distance to an observation point that would have provided great views if the skies had been clear.

After leaving the heath bald the vegetation transitioned into an open hardwood forest. My descent slackened in places and I passed a couple of good campsites but I didn't see any water sources for the entire length of the trail. The trail continued to descend moderately steeply till I reached a series of steep switchbacks that eventually dropped me back to Big Fat Gap and my waiting car.



The Trail Disappearing into the Mist on Hangover Lead

As I stripped off my wet gear and changed into dry clothes, I mused that the memories of backpacking trips that I most cherish are those that occurred during stormy weather. I remembered my first night on the Appalachian Trail in Great Smokey Mountains National Park

with my dad and brother when I was 11 years old. It rained like the end of the world and fortunately for us we were in a trail shelter. It was the first night I had ever camped out and I was cozy and warm in my sleeping bag listening to the rain and thunder. I remember my range of feelings like it was yesterday; excitement, awe, joy, and the certainty that this was where I was meant to be.

Last night up on the ridge during the storm, I reconnected with my much younger self and experienced some of his child-like wonder.

