

Cold Mountain – Overview

Directions to Saltrock Gap Trailhead: From Cashiers NC: Take US 64 east for 2 miles to Cedar Creek Rd on left. Follow Cedar Creek Rd 2.3 miles to Breedlove Rd. Take Breedlove Rd for 3.5 miles to the parking area where the last 0.2 miles is a gravel road.

Cold Mountain is a great destination in Panthertown because of its relative obscurity, great vistas, challenging trails, and varied terrain. It's a partially exposed granite dome and it provides great views of most of Panthertown and the surrounding Mountains to the west and north. At just a little over 4,600 feet, it's the highest point in Panthertown, unless you count 4,777 foot Toxaway Mountain, which isn't really worth the climb to its summit – but that's a story for another day.

The trail doesn't quite reach the summit of Cold Mountain because it's obscured by thick tree cover. The destination is a bare patch of rock on the west side of the dome that's maybe 50 feet lower in elevation than the summit.

The easiest route that offers the best chance for you to actually reach the overlook is to take the Devil's Elbow Trail to where it's crossed by Little Green Creek, then find the obscure unmarked trail that follows the creek upstream for roughly a mile to another trail that leads to the summit. The route up the creek can be a bit confusing but usually there are bits of red or green flagging tape tied around branches that help you find your way. You see these markers on the unmaintained trails all over Panthertown and whenever we encounter one we feel like one of the intrepid explorers in Jules Verne's "Journey to the Center of the Earth" who just when they became hopelessly lost, would always find a marker left by Arne Saknussemm, who originally blazed the trail.

The most interesting and much more challenging route is to take the Devil's Elbow Trail to its end then locate the very obscure unmaintained and unmarked trail that twists around till it eventually gets you to the summit. For the return trip you backtrack from the summit for about a half mile till you reach the top of the valley of Little Green Creek, then make a 90 degree turn into the valley and follow the trail along and in the creek back to the Devil's Elbow Trail.

It appears that most of the adventurous souls that hike to Cold Mountain go up and back via Little Green Creek because the trail is much more apparent than the other more challenging and obscure trail. Whichever route you choose for your journey to Cold Mountain, you'll have to come into Panthertown from either the Saltrock Gap or Cold Mountain Gap Trailheads, both of which are always crowded on weekends and often during the week in the summer. For a route that offers total solitude, you could come in from the obscure parking area on NC Hwy 281 via the unmaintained West Fork Way but we're not quite sure where the parking area actually is so we've never given it a shot.

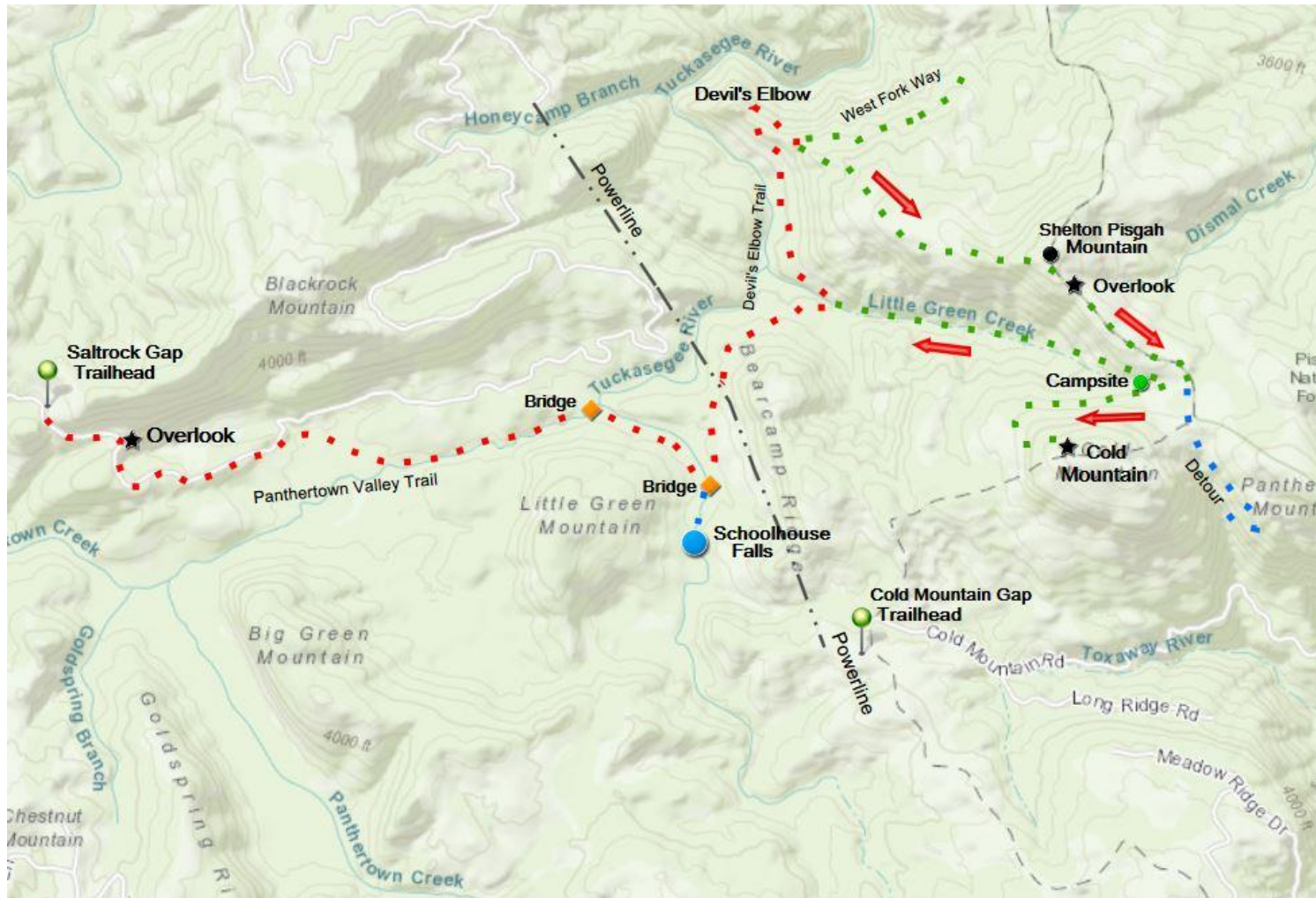
Cold Mountain – Trip Log

Sunday September 3, 2017

Saltrock Gap Trailhead to Cold Mountain and back

10.4 Miles (approximately) not including 1.3 mile detour

Trail Map





Cold Mountain (center distance) behind Little Green Mountain from an Overlook near the Saltrock Gap Trailhead

The Madhatter, Caver Joe, and Doc Livingston began their hike to Cold Mountain at about 10:00 am from the Saltrock Gap Trailhead on the Sunday before Labor Day. They parked the truck at the trailhead and were getting ready when the Hatter commented that Doc had made a good decision in purchasing the brand of hiking socks he was putting on. Doc paused in mid sock pull and asked incredulously “you’re 15 feet away from me and you recognized my sock brand?” “Sure” the Hatter replied nonchalantly, “I’ve used that brand in the past and been pretty happy with it.” Doc shook his head in wonder as he was once again reminded of just what a gear junkie the Hatter was and how he could speak with authority on any backpacking item no matter how obscure from boot laces to tent stakes.

They started off on the Panthertown Valley Trail and after about a quarter mile, reached an overlook where they could see most of the southern half of Panthertown. In the distance was Cold Mountain, sitting up on a ridge like a big lopsided marshmallow. It seemed very far away, especially considering that the route they would take to reach the summit was anything but direct.

They continued on and it soon began to feel like rush hour in downtown Atlanta. Many groups passed them coming out after spending the night and many day hikers were going in to hike trails in Panthertown Valley. After 2.2 miles they took a side trail at the bridge over Greenland Creek that led a



Schoolhouse Falls during a Flood - Caver Joe against the Falls



Schoolhouse Falls – Back to Normal just two Days Later

few hundred yards to School House falls. They had been there two days earlier during torrential rains when the creek and Schoolhouse falls were rushing through the little valley as if blasting out of some giant fire hose. They wanted to see how much conditions had changed. When they arrived they were amazed at how quickly everything had gotten back to normal from the flood conditions of just two days earlier. The falls were no longer roaring like a jet engine and the water level in the pool was down by a few feet.



Bridge over Greenland Creek Downstream of Schoolhouse Falls. Water nearly reached the bottom of the Bridge two Days before

They returned to the Panthertown Valley Trail, took a left on the Devil's Elbow Trail and followed it for about 0.7 miles to where it crossed Little Green Creek. When they returned from Cold Mountain they would follow an obscure trail along the creek back to this spot. They continued on for 0.78 miles to the end of the Devil's Elbow Trail. It's clear that you're nearing the end of this trail when you've ascended steeply for a quarter mile or so then made a 90 degree right turn. It's critical to have the Kornegay map in your hand as you navigate through this area. Without it, you might as well be hiking with your eyes closed. Shortly beyond this point the trail is no longer maintained but it doesn't end. The Kornegay map



Little Green Creek Crossing the Devil's Elbow Trail. The Easiest Route to Cold Mountain is to follow the Obscure Trail Upstream from this Point

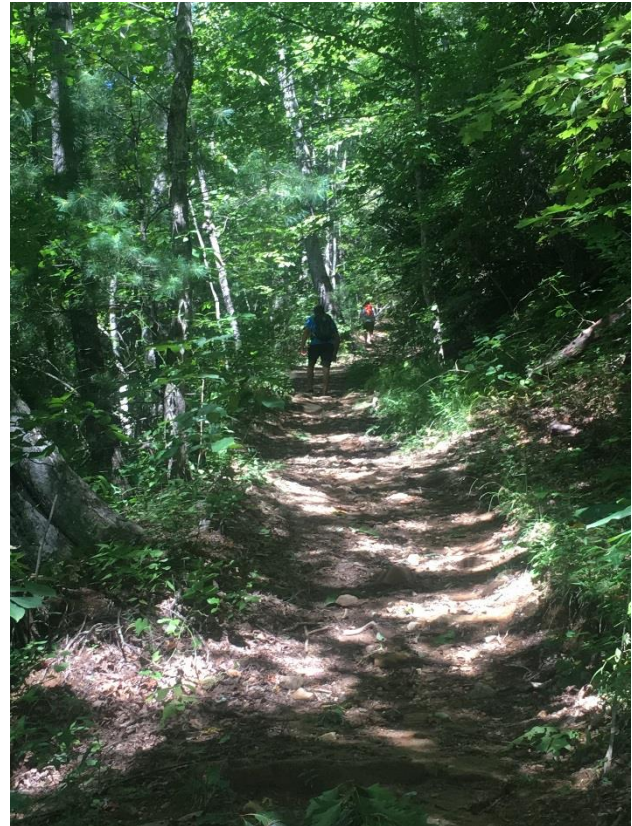
shows two unmaintained trails continuing on; the West Fork Way, which trends slightly northeast and the unnamed trail to Cold Mountain which trends to the southeast. Extreme care is necessary in this area to find the trail to Cold Mountain because it's very obscure. There's no trail sign of course. When you reach a large clearing which is mostly bare dirt, look for a slight opening in a Rhododendron thicket near the top of the clearing on your right. The first time Doc looked for this trail he

missed it completely and travelled a long way on the West Fork Way before realizing he was on the wrong trail. Once the trail is located, it ascends for 0.84 miles to the summit of Shelton Pisgah Mountain. The trail starts off ascending moderately as just a narrow gap between Rhododendron stems. It then opens up into a Rhododendron tunnel then ascends gradually through an open forest. In places the trail is completely overgrown and there's no trace of it at all. Although they were not far from the heavily travelled portions of Panthertown, the further they progressed, the more it felt like they were in a very remote and isolated area.

As they ascended, the Hatter did an excellent job of ferreting out the trail. The summit of Sheldon Pisgah Mountain was obvious but completely overgrown and not particularly noteworthy. Once crossed, they began to descend on a narrow ridge with very dense growths of Rhododendron and Mountain Laurel known as a Heath Bald or a slick. To their right the terrain dropped off precipitously into the valley of Little Green Creek. The trail



Entrance off the Clearing to the Obscure Trail to Cold Mountain – Note the Hatter barely visible in the Center



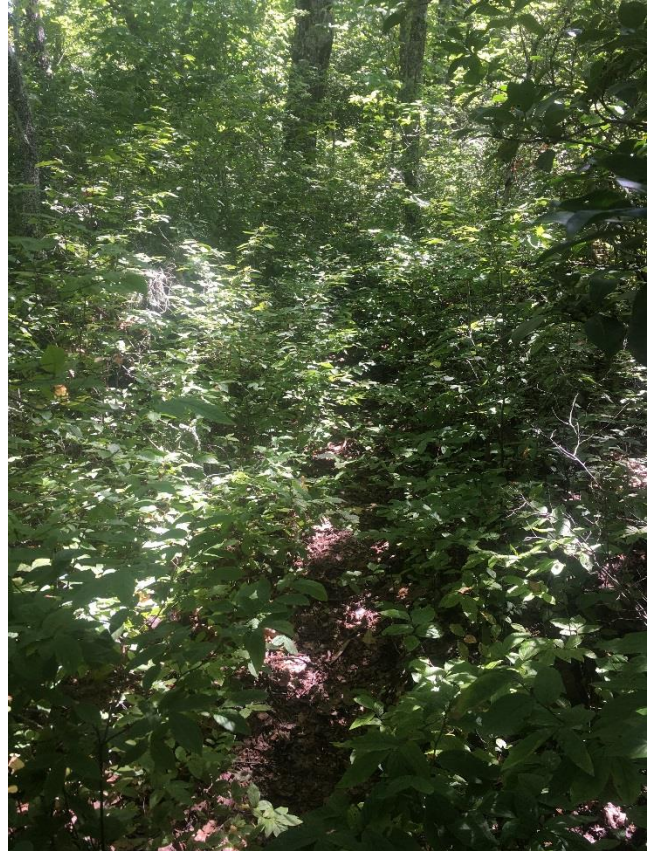
Steep Section of the Devil's Elbow Trail just before it Makes a 90 Degree turn to the Right (East)

soon led out onto a rocky overlook where they had great views of the north side of Cold Mountain directly in front of them across the deep valley of Little Green Creek. Behind Cold Mountain to the southeast, Toxaway Mountain, with its forest of communication towers, was visible in the distance.

They re-entered the forest and continued a gradual descent till they reached a trail intersection. The Kornegay map shows the trail cutting back almost 180 degrees on itself at this point but it isn't that clear when you're actually there. To stay on the trail to Cold Mountain, take the somewhat obscure trail that heads off to the right. The trail that continues more or less to the left looks very well used, which makes you think it's the way to go. Even though Doc and the Hatter had made this hike a few years earlier, they weren't sure which way to go and after consulting the map and logically puzzling through the options, somehow decided to take the wrong trail.



Navigating the Rhododendron Tunnels



The Trail was hard to follow for most of the Trek



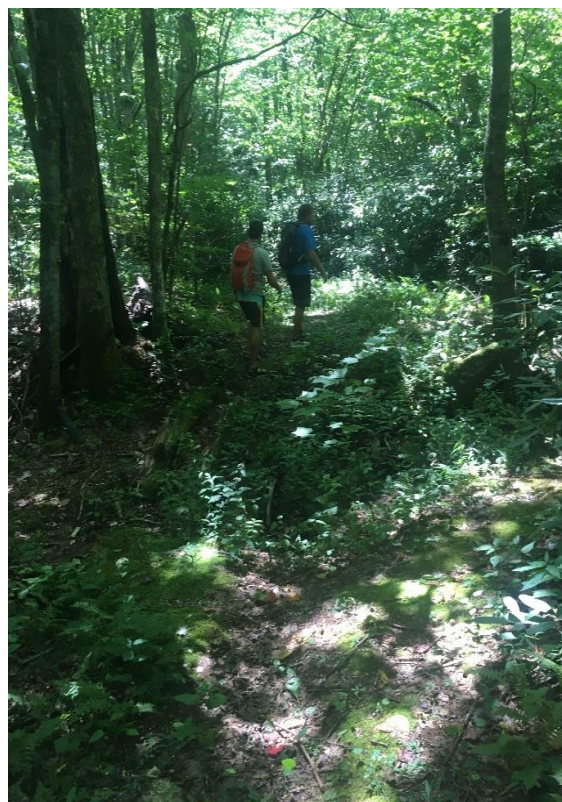
Overlook on the Way to Cold Mountain



Looking Across the Valley of Little Green Creek to the North Side of Cold Mountain with Toxaway Mountain in the Background

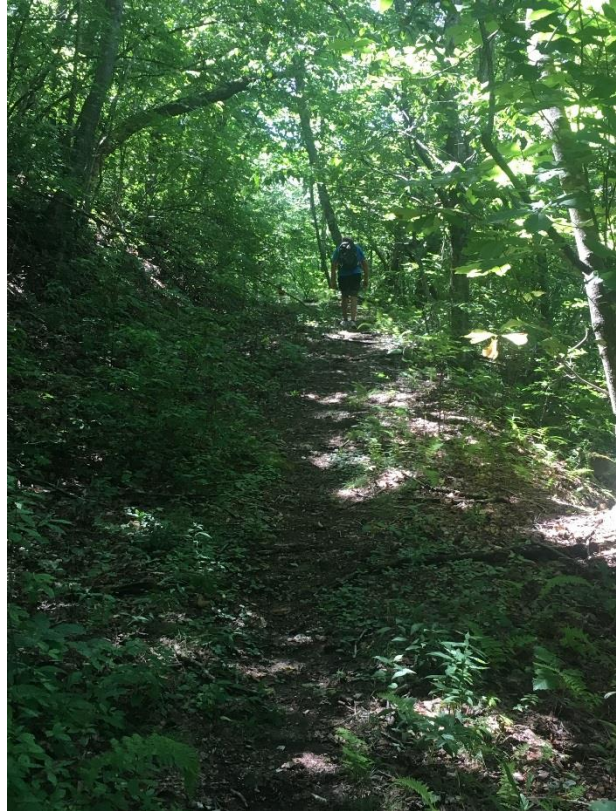


The Intersection after the 180 Degree Turn - Keep Right (Straight Ahead) even though it doesn't look like much



Second Intersection a few Hundred Feet from the First. Right Fork - Down Little Green Creek. Left Fork - to Cold Mt.

To their credit, they realized quickly that something wasn't right but they were in an exploring mood and curious to see where this trail, which wasn't on the map, would lead. It eventually led through a saddle between Cold Mountain and the adjacent Panthertail Mountain to the east. They continued on, thinking the trail might reach Cold Mountain from another direction, but it soon became apparent that this wasn't going to happen, so they retraced their steps. This little detour added about 1.1 miles and 40 minutes to the trip. Once the intersection was reached, they took the other fork and after a few hundred feet, reached another trail intersection, which they immediately recognized. The right fork leads about 1.0 miles down Little Green Creek to the Devil's Elbow trail and the left Fork leads to Cold Mountain. There's a fairly large campsite at the intersection that looks to be used only occasionally. Water can be obtained nearby from the spring that's the beginning of Little Green Creek.



Traversing the North Side of Cold Mountain



Intersection of Gravel Road Coming Up from the Baptist Camp and Final Leg of Trail to Cold Mountain



Last Few Hundred Feet of the Trail before the Overlook

The View from Cold Mountain



The Altar at the Overlook



View to the North



Panthertown Valley with Little Green Mountain in the Foreground

They continued up the left fork and ascended moderately on a badly eroded and overgrown dirt road that traversed the north side of Cold Mountain. After about 0.7 miles from the campsite, they reached the west side of Cold Mountain and emerged into a large clearing where a well-traveled gravel road came up from the other side of the mountain. Doc speculated that it came up from the Baptist Camp Canaan that's near the Cold Mountain Gap Trailhead. They made a 90 degree turn to the left and ascended steeply on a rugged



The Plaque on the Side of the Altar

trail that switch-backed up the side of Cold Mountain for roughly a quarter mile. It then leveled out and after a couple hundred feet, emerged from the forest onto a large rock outcrop, which was their final destination.

The first thing they noticed was that they were not alone. Two fit looking couples in their mid-60s were sitting on the rocks dressed in spandex bike pants and stylish wind breakers. Doc stared at them open mouthed and would not have been more surprised had they been a troop of bears sporting hiking boots and hydration packs. As taxing as the journey had been both from a physical and navigational standpoint, he might have expected a group of navy seals training for mountain warfare but never a bunch of un-mussed tourists looking like they'd just stepped out of their local bistro after sipping a glass of chardonnay. After talking to them he felt a bit better when he learned they had come up the trail along Little Green Creek, which was definitely much shorter and easier than the route he and his companions had taken.

The second interesting thing was an altar in the middle of the rock outcrop with an attached gold plaque onto which was inscribed a poem:

HIGH BETHEL

NEAR THE ENDLESS SKY ABOVE US
UP IN CANAAN LAND
LIES THE BEAUTY OF HIGH BETHEL
MADE BY GOD'S OWN HAND
HERE WE WATCH THE SUNSET
HIS LOVE WE UNDERSTAND
IN THE MAJESTY OF MOUNTAINS
HERE WE JOIN GOD'S HAND

BEGUN 1956 COMPLETED 1974

The Trail in Little Green Creek



Bethel means “House of God” which seemed completely fitting for it would be hard to think of a more appropriate place for God to live than below them in Panthertown Valley and the vast expanse of mountains in the distance.

The two couples soon headed back down the trail and left the summit to the three of them. They lounged around for another half hour taking pictures and dozing in the warm sun. It was about 4:30 pm when it was time to head back so they retraced their steps back down to the intersection with the gravel road and around the side of Cold Mountain to the campsite where they picked up the trail down Little Green Creek. Doc was surprised at how well traveled this trail was, which confirmed his speculation that most visitors to Cold Mountain come up and back this way.

The trail started out acting just like any other well maintained National Forest Trail as it hugged the top of the north side of the ravine that contains the creek. After about a third of a mile though, it gave up all pretense that it was an official trail as it repeatedly plunged into and merged with the creek for roughly two thirds of a mile for a somewhat rugged and very fun scramble over slabs of exposed rock, through Rhododendron tunnels, and across small rapids and gravel bars. After only about 50 minutes from when they left the overlook on Cold Mountain they were surprised to find themselves dumped back onto the Devil’s Elbow Trail. It had taken them nearly 3 hours to reach the summit from this point via their original route, although about 40 minutes of that was spent on the inadvertent detour.

They spent a little over an hour retracing their route on the Devil’s Elbow Trail to the Panthertown Valley Trail and back to the Saltrock Gap Trailhead. Since it was nearing 6:30, the crowds were gone and temperatures were dropping so they had a very relaxed stroll out that was a perfect end to the day.

