

# Great Hikes in Tennessee State Parks:

## Roan Mountain State Park's Hike For Athletes-In-Training

By Fran Wallas

One of the most strenuous hikes in Tennessee State Parks is the Chestnut Ridge Trail, a 4.1-mile linear trail, at Roan Mountain State Park in Roan Mountain.

This is a trail for those who want an aerobic workout or for those strong hikers who love a challenging woodland experience. The trail has many steep climbs and descents with almost no switchbacks. The trail starts to climb steeply at the very beginning of the hike. Do not take the trail leading off to the left that looks level and a lot easier. Instead keep climbing until you believe you have reached the top. There is only a moment to enjoy your accomplishment before starting down to the seep at the very bottom. You soon figure out that this is a pattern that keeps repeating.

When you get to a descent with an arrow on the tree that says "Trail," you will find that a lower trail joins the trail on the left. Continue on the main trail down the mountain to your right. If you slow down enough to savor this trail and also to breathe, you will sense the many differences within the overall pattern. Sometimes you are in a colorful maple/oak/hickory hardwood forest. Sometimes you are enjoying a dark hemlock woods. You will hike through marshes, past ferns, and enter tunnels through rhododendron thickets.

You will come to a sign leading to the cabins, an overlook and the park headquarters. You can quit at this point. If you are still eager to get to the bald, the sign warns "Difficult Terrain-experienced hikers." After another major climb, you will hike up and down along a narrow ridge with views to both sides. Happily, you stop hearing traffic noise as the trail

winds away from the road. This is the prettiest part of the trail. There are rocks covered with rock tripe, an ugly yet edible plant. Washington's troops at Valley Forge ate rock tripe to survive. Naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton warned, "It must be very carefully cooked or it produces cramps." Explorer Samuel Hearne, in *A Journey From Prince of Wales's Fort*, describes rock tripe. "It is so palatable, that all who taste it generally grow fond of it. It is remarkably good and pleasing when used to thicken any kind of broth, but it is generally most esteemed when boiled in fish-liquor," Hearne says.

You will come to another trail split, but keep following the main trail up to your right. There will be many times when you think you have to be at the bald only to find that you mysteriously head all the way down to the bottom.

When you get to Strawberry Bald, there is a beautiful overlook. The interpretive sign names each mountain and gap of the Roan highlands visible from the platform. You have now survived half of the hike. The overlook is one of the best places to rest while deciding whether you want to take the same trail back. Returning on the trail is like taking a new trail. The ups are now downs and the downs are now ups.

Another alternative is to go up the steps to the road and turn left. You will come to the Dave Miller Homestead that was built in 1908 for the great sum of \$350. Mrs. Miller lived on this site until 1962. Check with the visitor center before taking the hike to see if the house is open for tours. In any case, there are picnic tables in the front yard if you prefer to eat lunch here instead of the overlook. You can walk down the road to the bottom, turn left and follow the narrow

### Roan Mountain State Park featured as the Rave Run in May 2007 *Runner's World*

*Runner's World* features a unique, world-class location each month as a distinctive destination for runners. For May 2007 the magazine showcased a trail run across the Roan Highlands that included Roan Mountain State Park. The awe-inspiring photo highlighted the Appalachian Trailhead at Carver's Gap that is 8.5 miles south of Roan Mountain State Park. From there, runners can follow the Appalachian Trail along rolling peaks called "balds," know for their pink rhododendron blooms.

winding road back to the visitor center. Although this way seems shorter and is all downhill, this way is not recommended. The road does not have a shoulder, and you need to be constantly alert to traffic. The safest way is to continue your adventure through the woods on the trail. When you get back to the parking lot, you can cool your feet in the Doe River and pat yourself on your back.

## Directions

**Directions to the Chestnut Ridge Trailhead at Roan Mountain State Park:** Take I-26 through Johnson City and get off at Highway 321/67 Elizabethton/Roan Mountain State Park exit. Take Highway 67 through Elizabethton. Turn right on Highway 19-E south. In Roan, turn right on Highway 143 and follow it to the park visitor center. Leave your car at the visitor center parking lot. The trailhead to Strawberry Bald is located in the small field across the street from the entrance to the parking lot.

### Roan Mountain State Park



One of the more difficult trails in Tennessee State Parks is the Chestnut Ridge Trail at Roan Mountain State Park in Roan Mountain.



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