



North Carolina

## Birding Trail

mountains • piedmont • coast

### Southwest Mountains

#### 1 Stecoah Gap

**Owner:** Nantahala National Forest

NC 143, east of Robbinsville, NC  
828-479-6431

Graham County

[www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc](http://www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc)

**Site Description:** Stecoah Gap is one of the most popular birding destinations in western North Carolina in late April and early May. Spend some time birding at the gap before walking up the trail from the parking area. The gap itself is often an excellent location for Golden-winged, Cerulean and Chestnut-sided Warblers. The Golden-winged Warbler at the gap sometimes sing an alternative song that is somewhat similar to Worm-eating Warbler, so be sure to investigate unusual songs. While at the gap, listen for Kentucky Warbler in the valley. The old logging road leading straight out from the parking lot is relatively wide and level and rich in a wide variety of songbirds, including Blackburnian, Cerulean, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Black-and-white and Hooded Warblers, American Redstart, Ovenbird, Northern Parula, Scarlet Tanager and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. The Appalachian Trail also crosses the road at this location and the same species can be found along the trail.

**Species of Interest:** Cerulean Warbler, Golden-winged Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Blue-headed Vireo, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak

**Habitats:** northern hardwood/cove forest

**Special Concerns:** Hunting is allowed on Nantahala National Forest during certain times of the year. Birders should be aware of current hunting regulations and seasons, and take adequate safety precautions during those times. For more on hunting precautions, see the hunting season information at the beginning of this guide.

**Access & Parking:** Stecoah Gap can be accessed daily during daylight hours. For more information, contact the Cheoah Ranger Station at the number above.

**Directions:** From Robbinsville, travel 7.5 miles east on NC 143 until you reach the top of Stecoah Gap. There is a small parking area with a picnic table overlooking Stecoah Valley. Park here and follow the Appalachian Trail (AT) signs on the same side of the road as the parking area. The AT immediately ascends log steps out of the parking area.

Coordinates: N 35° 21' 28" W 83° 43' 07"

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### 2 Fontana Village

**Owner:** Fontana Village

NC 28, Fontana Dam, NC 28733  
828-498-2211

Graham County

[www.fontanavillage.com](http://www.fontanavillage.com)

**Site Description:** Fontana Village sits in the Nantahala National Forest, near Fontana Dam, which creates Fontana Lake out of the dammed Little Tennessee River. With over 400 acres of land and 20 miles of hiking trails near the Village, there is ample opportunity to explore the birds that frequent the Great Smoky Mountains. The Gunter Loop provides a nice place to start. This loop, made out of several trails (Upper and Lower Lewellyn, Old Fontana Road, and Gold Branch Loop), meanders through the mixed hardwood forest. The elevation begins at 1,800 feet and climbs to 3,200 feet. From this loop, you can catch glimpses of Fontana Dam. Be on the lookout for a variety of woodpeckers and other woodland songbirds. About half-way through the loop, a 60-foot bridge over a running creek allows for a nice resting point and an opportunity in the evening to hear Whip-poor-will. A wildlife food plot can be found on the road across from the Administration Building, off NC 28. This maintained, early successional area attracts a lot of local wildlife and can be a great early morning birding stop.

**Species of Interest:** Bald Eagle, Belted Kingfisher, Pileated Woodpecker Indigo Bunting, Ovenbird

**Habitats:** northern hardwood/cove forest, oak forest & mixed hardwoods pine, lake

**Access & Parking:** Parking is available throughout Fontana Village, 24 hours a day. Numerous trails leave from the Village and enter the surrounding Nantahala National Forest. For a map of the trails, go to the Web site, or visit Hazel Creek Outfitter once you arrive in Fontana Village.

**Directions:** From Robbinsville, take NC 143 north to NC 28. At NC 28, turn north and follow it for 15 miles to an intersection. Turn right to reach Fontana Marina or the top of Fontana Dam. Turn left and travel for 2 miles into Fontana Village. A good landmark to know where to turn into the Village is the Hellbender Gas Station.

Coordinates: N 35° 25' 58" W 83° 49' 19" (Lodge) DeLorme (NC Gazetteer) Page: 28, 50





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#### 3 Snowbird Mountain Lodge

**Owner:** Robert Rankin

4633 Santeetlah Road, Robbinsville, NC 28771  
828-479-3433

Graham County

[www.snowbirdmountainlodge.com](http://www.snowbirdmountainlodge.com)

**Site Description:** Snowbird Mountain Lodge sits high in the Snowbird Mountain Range, with views of Lake Santeetlah and the valley below. Numerous trails cross the property, affording birders ample opportunities to explore the mountain forest. Many people stay at the Lodge to enjoy the spring migration of tanagers, grosbeaks and warblers. During a visit, watch for soaring Broad-winged Hawk overhead, Ruffed Grouse along the roads and open areas, and listen for Barred Owl. A full bird list is available at Snowbird Lodge. Visitors may also want to inquire about special birding events hosted at the Lodge. Nearby, Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, Stecoah Gap and the Cherohala Skyway increase the birding opportunities in the area.

**Species of Interest:** Broad-winged Hawk, White-breasted Nuthatch, Wood Thrush, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Magnolia Warbler

**Habitats:** northern hardwood/cove forest, oak forest & mixed hardwoods/pine, rocky outcrop

**Access & Parking:** Snowbird Mountain Lodge can be accessed daily during daylight hours. Visiting birders should call ahead, or visit the Website, to plan a visit.

**Directions:** From Robbinsville, take NC 143 (Santeetlah Road) west for 10.5 miles. Turn left and continue to follow signs to the Lodge.

Coordinates: N 35° 19' 09"

W 83° 51' 44"

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#### 4 Cherohala Skyway

**Owner:** Nantahala National Forest

NC 143, 12 miles west of Robbinsville, NC  
828-479-6431

Graham County

[www.cs.unca.edu/nfsrc](http://www.cs.unca.edu/nfsrc)

**Site Description:** The 40+ mile long Cherohala Skyway traverses the highest crest of the Unicoi Mountain range, where the headwaters of Santeetlah Creek form. The Skyway connects the Nantahala National Forest and Robbinsville, NC, with the Cherokee National Forest and Tellico Plains in east Tennessee. The site is just up-mountain from Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. The Skyway provides a glimpse at vegetation communities and wildlife along a range of elevations, from Santeetlah Gap (2,660 feet) to the highest point on the road, Santeetlah Overlook (5,390 feet). The Unicoi Mountains support high-elevation species such as the endangered Carolina northern flying squirrel, Northern Saw-whet Owl and Veery. Stop at the many overlooks along the Skyway. Big Junction Overlook (near NC Milepost 6) is an especially good birding spot during fall migration. Watch for Common Raven, Merlin, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, White-breasted and Red-breasted Nuthatches, Cooper's Hawk, and numerous warbler species. Listen for Least Flycatcher at the Whigg Cove picnic site and at the Huckleberry Knob parking area. While you're there, hike to Huckleberry Knob, the highest point in the Unicoi Mountains (5,564 feet), from Milepost 8.5 (2.4 miles roundtrip). The Hooper Bald parking area (Milepost 7.5) is another good stop with a short hiking trail, interpretive signs and restrooms.

**Species of Interest:** Common Raven, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Least Flycatcher, Veery, Canada Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler

**Habitats:** northern hardwood/cove forest, oak forest & mixed hardwoods/pine, dry coniferous woodlands, early successional

**Special Concern:** Hunting is allowed on Nantahala National Forest lands during certain times of the year. Birders should be aware of current hunting regulations and seasons, and take adequate safety precautions during those times. For more on hunting precautions, see the hunting season information at the beginning of this guide.

**Access & Parking:** Parking is available at multiple overlooks along the Skyway. The Skyway is very popular with motorcyclists, especially on summer holiday weekends and during peak autumn leaf color. Weekdays and early mornings usually provide a quieter experience.

**Directions:** From Robbinsville, take NC 143 west for approximately 12 miles to the beginning of the east end of the Cherohala Skyway, at Santeetlah Gap.

Coordinates: N 35° 20' 42" W 83° 53' 36"

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#### 5 Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest

**Owner:** Nantahala National Forest

Joyce Kilmer Road, west of Robbinsville, NC  
828-479-6431

Graham County

[www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc](http://www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc)

**Site Description:** Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, part of the larger 17,000-acre Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness Area, is a US Forest Service property that contains some of the last virgin timber in North Carolina. The “figure-eight” Joyce Kilmer National Recreation Trail covers 2 miles through the forest. The 1.25-mile lower loop passed the Joyce Kilmer Memorial plaque; the upper 0.75-mile loop passes through Poplar cove, a stand of tulip poplar that are over 100 feet tall and up to 20 feet in circumference. The Forest supports many bird species typical of a northern hardwood/cove forest, but since the tree canopy is so tall, birding by sight can be a little challenging. Watch and listen for Wood Thrush, Ovenbird, Black-throated Green, Black-throated Blue and Hooded Warblers, Winter Wren and Acadian Flycatcher.

**Species of Interest:** Winter Wren, Acadian Flycatcher, Wood Thrush, Ovenbird, Black-throated Green Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler

**Habitats:** northern hardwood/cove forest, river/stream

**Special Concern:** Hunting is allowed on Nantahala National Forest lands during certain times of the year. Birders should be aware of current hunting regulations and seasons, and take adequate safety precautions during those times. For more on hunting precautions, see the hunting season information at the beginning of this guide.

**Access & Parking:** Turn left into the entrance and travel 0.5 miles to the parking area. The Memorial Forest can be accessed daily during daylight hours. For more information, contact the Cheoah Ranger Station at the number above. Since the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest is within a Congressionally-designated Wilderness, please limit group sizes to ten or less.

**Directions:** Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest is approximately 15 miles west of Robbinsville. From Robbinsville, take US 129 North for 1.5 miles to the junction with NC 143 (Massey Branch Road). Turn left and travel west on NC 143 for approximately 5 miles. Turn right to continue on NC 143. Drive for 7.3 miles, to the top of Santeetlah Gap and the junction with the Cherohala Skyway. Bear right on Joyce Kilmer Road and continue on for another 2.5 miles to the entrance of the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest.

Coordinates: N 35° 21' 33" W 83° 51' 44"

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### 6 Fires Creek Picnic Area

**Owner:** Nantahala National Forest

Fires Creek Wildlife Road, near Hayesville, NC  
828-837-5152

Clay County

[www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc](http://www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc)

**Site Description:** Fires Creek Picnic Area is an easy place to see Louisiana Waterthrush and Acadian Flycatcher during the breeding season, from mid-April through June. There are also miles of forest roads and trails for the more common woodland species, plus elusive Ruffed Grouse year round. The easiest spot to find Louisiana Waterthrush is in front of the small falls at the parking lot, whether singing loudly from a tree branch right overhead or giving its loud chip along the creek. Across the footbridge, in the picnic area upstream, there are often more than one singing Acadian Flycatcher, with their explosive call from the mid-story. Approximately 0.5 miles before the picnic area is an under-used rustic camping area, also with Louisiana Waterthrush singing along the creek. Ruffed Grouse are easy to stumble onto along the hollows in the winter, herding their chicks in June, or when they drum in October.

**Species of Interest:** Ruffed Grouse, Louisiana Waterthrush, Acadian Flycatcher

**Habitats:** northern hardwood/cove forest, river/stream

**Special Concern:** Hunting is allowed on Nantahala National Forest lands during certain times of the year. Birders should be aware of current hunting regulations and seasons, and take adequate safety precautions during those times. For more on hunting precautions, see the hunting season information at the beginning of this guide.

**Access & Parking:** The picnic area can be accessed daily during daylight hours. Camping opportunities are nearby, affording 24-hour access. For more information, contact the Tusquitee Ranger District at the number above.

**Directions:** Follow US 64 for 4 miles west of Hayesville. Turn north on Fires Creek Road. Follow this road about 4 miles, turning left at the sign to Fires Creek Picnic Area, on Fires Creek Wildlife Road. Follow this road for another 1.75 miles to the picnic area.

Coordinates: N 35° 05' 45" W 83° 51' 31"

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### 7 John C. Campbell Folk School

**Owner:** John C. Campbell Folk School, Inc.

NC 28, Fontana Dam, NC 28733  
828-837-2775 or 800-365-5724

Cherokee County

[www.folkschool.org](http://www.folkschool.org)

**Site Description:** The John C. Campbell Folk School's 300-acre campus offers diverse habitats and easily accessed trails. A prime birding location is the Rivercane Walk and Blackberry Loop Trail, which starts at the gravel parking lot by the Little Brasstown Creek. Also check the loop trail on the opposite side of the Brasstown Road, across from the driveway to the gravel lot. During the breeding season, expect Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-breasted Chat, Willow Flycatcher, White-eyed Vireo, Indigo Bunting, Blue Grosbeak and Orchard Oriole, along with other more common edge and riparian species. Blue-winged Warbler also irregularly nest here. During the winter, good cover and abundant seeds attract Song, Field, Swamp, White-throated, Fox Sparrows and Dark-eyed Junco. Bobolink regularly pass through the fields during the first week of May. Savannah Sparrow are also present and Grasshopper Sparrow are occasionally seen. Kentucky Warbler can easily be heard on the wooded trails behind the Mill House and along the ridge top south of the fields. Ovenbird, Hooded and Black-and-white Warblers and Wood Thrush are also common. Around the Keith House and the Folk School Studios, watch for Pine Warbler, Northern Parula and Yellow-throated Warbler. Both Chuck-will's-widow and Whip-poor-will are heard in the spring and summer; the former in the low-lying areas and the latter on the ridges. Numerous woodpecker species are regularly found on-site. Visitors should also scan the skies overhead for an occasional glimpse at a soaring hawk.

**Species of Interest:** Willow Flycatcher, Wood Thrush, Blue-winged Warbler, Kentucky Warbler, Orchard Oriole

**Habitats:** oak forest & mixed hardwoods/pine, floodplain forest, stream, bog/wetlands

**Access & Parking:** The trails can be accessed daily, during daylight hours. Stay on the designated paths. A trail map and bird checklist can be obtained from the main office in the Keith House, across from the main parking lot. Office hours are 8am to 5pm, Monday – Friday. The Folk School offers a weeklong birding class in the spring each year. Call for current tuition fees to participate in Folk School classes.

**Directions:** From Murphy, take US 64 east for 4.9 miles through the first stoplight at the NC 141 intersection. At the second stoplight (just after Tri-County Community College), continue straight on Old US 64 for 1.6 miles (look for the brown Folk School signs). Turn right on Brasstown Road. The John C. Campbell Folk School entrance is 0.4 miles down the road, on the left.

Coordinates: N 35° 02' 21" W 83° 57' 49" DeLorme (NC Gazetteer) Page: 50

