

I first visited the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests (GWJ) while in college. My girlfriend's family owned a rustic cabin in the mountains and we celebrated the turning of the millennium surrounded by the hardwood forests, rolling hills and amazing views. It was the most peaceful New Year's celebration I can recall.

This incredible network of public lands provides top notch recreation opportunities for residents of the sprawling cities that line the mid-Atlantic. Less than four hours by car from Washington, D.C., the GWJ cover roughly 1.8 million acres, making them among the largest tracts of public lands in the East. From the deepest gorge east of the Mississippi River to the tallest peak in Virginia, the GWJ possess fascinating topography, including 138,000 acres of federally designated wilderness where old-growth forests provide shade and solitude and silence are constant companions.

The forests run along the spine of the Appalachian Mountains, primarily in western Virginia, although small portions of the forests lie in northeastern Kentucky and southern West Virginia. These dense mountains showcase the splendor of the central Appalachians.

A sportsperson's dream, the forests host lumbering black bears, white-tailed deer, wild turkeys and cold-water fish such as rainbow, brook, and brown trout. Bobcats lurk in the shadows, river otters play in local waterways and a small herd of wild ponies roams. Bald eagles soar from rocky promontories and towering old-growth trees in the forests' one million acres of land classified as "remote and undeveloped." This official Forest Service classification covers more than 55 percent of the GWJ's lands and belies their industrial history.

The area was first explored by pioneer legends such as Daniel Boone. Settlers soon followed, clearing the forests for fields and homesteads. By the mid-1800s, much of the landscape's timber was



The Virginia Creeper Trail near Abingdon

George Washington and Jefferson National Forests

Story by Greg M. Peters
Photos Courtesy of National Forest Foundation



Sherando Lake

Waterfalls off Virginia Creeper Trail



completely cleared, cut as fuel for iron furnaces, mining towns and homestead hearths.

Deforestation caused significant problems for downstream communities. Sediment fouled water supplies. Once-abundant fisheries declined. Forest fires ran rampant across the cleared lands, causing

even more sediment to foul waterways and sending choking smoke into hollers and valleys. Flooding followed the fires, exacerbating the problems experienced by downstream communities. Miners, loggers, homesteaders and settlers hunted game populations relentlessly, wiping out the elk and buffalo herds that had sustained the

early pioneers. Turkey, deer and fish populations struggled to survive the dual pressures of hunting and habitat destruction.

For decades, industrial-scale resource extraction continued virtually unabated throughout the region, despite a growing realization that improved forest management was critical to neighboring communities. In 1911, after a decade-long battle, Congress passed the Weeks Act, which allowed the federal government to purchase lands east of the Mississippi for watershed protection. Six years later, the government had purchased the first few units of the Shenandoah National Forest. In 1932, it was renamed the George Washington National Forest in part to avoid confusion with the nearby Shenandoah National Park.

In the decades following the Weeks Act, the government continued to purchase sections of cut-over lands and created several small national forests. In 1936, the Roosevelt administration redrew the boundaries and created the Jefferson National Forest. In 1995, the forests were combined for administrative purposes, although they remain distinct geographically with the James River forming a rough boundary between them. The George Washington sits north of the Jefferson and is bordered to the west by the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia.

The forests' now abundant game populations are a direct result of an historic, first-of-its-kind partnership between the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and the National Forests in Virginia. In 1938, the two agencies agreed to formally collaborate on restoring decimated game populations. This cooperation has succeeded and now, 77 years later, hunters and anglers flock to the folds and hills of the GWJ to stalk healthy populations of black bear, white-tailed deer and ruffed grouse, and fish beautiful trout streams. The forests comprise approximately 80 percent of the publicly owned hunting lands in Virginia.

More than 2,300 miles of perennial streams, including more than 1,000 miles of trout streams, wind their way through the forests' eight major river basins. The forests have 82 reservoirs providing flood control and abundant recreational opportunities. Many of these reservoirs also provide municipal water supplies to 16 communities that border the forests. The forests' aquatic habitats support more than 100 species of freshwater fish and mussels and host more than 350,000 recreational visits each year.

The forests boast more than 200 developed recreation sites, all within a half-day's drive of cities in Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky, and West Virginia. Many of the forests' best recreational facilities also have historic significance. The Civilian Conservation Corps, or CCC, was a New Deal program of the Roosevelt administration that put unemployed men to work building roads, trails, cabins, bridges, lookout towers, dams and other infrastructure still in use today. The first CCC camp in the nation, Camp Roosevelt, was in the George Washington National Forest and ultimately 14 of these camps were opened in the forest. Employing 9,200 Virginians during its nine years of existence, the CCC provided hope and opportunity during a dark period of American history.

Hikers and equestrians can access nearly 2,100 miles of trails that crisscross the forests, including 325 miles of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. Twelve other national recreation trails provide 43 miles of additional trekking opportunities.

The forests host nearly three million recreational visits each year including one million to the 200,000-acre Mount Rogers National Recreation Area in the George Washington National Forest. With four federally designated wilderness areas, 11 campgrounds, three rental cabins, 500 miles of trails including 60 miles of the Appalachian Trail, 67 miles of the Virginia Highlands Horse Trail, and 18 miles of the Virginia Creeper Trail, two lakes and more



Wild ponies at Mt. Rogers

Beach at Cave Mountain Lake



than 50 miles of streams, this spectacular resource is well deserving of a long weekend of exploration. Peak baggers will relish the chance to scale Virginia's highest peak, 5,700-foot Mount Rogers, while trout anglers can catch rainbows, brookies and browns in the cold mountain streams. Those less interested in hiking or fishing can enjoy the Mount Rogers Scenic Byway, a 50-mile drive that provides incredible views of the surrounding countryside.

Looking for a quieter corner of the GWJ? You would do well to explore

Hidden Valley. This secluded section of the forest, bisected by the Jackson River, is dotted with wildflower-filled meadows and colorful butterflies. Visitors wanting to spend a few nights can stay at the 31-site Hidden Valley campground or opt for much fancier accommodations at the Hidden Valley Bed and Breakfast, an historic Civil War-era mansion.

Families and those seeking quiet, non-motorized water sports flock to Sherando Lake Recreation Area in the George Washington. Historic structures and



A view from Buzzard Rock in George Washington National Forest

1930s-era recreational facilities built by the CCC lie between 25-acre Sherando Lake and its smaller sibling, Upper Sherando Lake. Considered a jewel of the Blue Ridge Mountains, this special area offers developed campsites, flush toilets and even bathhouses complete with hot showers – yes, facilities have been updated since they were originally built! Sandy beaches, shaded picnic areas and grassy lawns create the perfect setting for a relaxing afternoon or a weekend of restful immersion in nature.

Cave Mountain Lake Recreation Area is another exceptional spot for those interested in quiet recreation. A CCC project, seven-acre Cave Mountain Lake was created in the 1930s using existing natural rock formations bolstered with additional materials. Easy access from I-81 and close proximity to Virginia's famous Natural Bridge, ensures Cave Mountain Lake's continued popularity. Hiking trails lead to ridge-top views and the area provides access to the Appalachian Trail and the James River Face and Thunder Ridge Wilderness areas, making it the perfect staging ground for backpackers and day hikers.

Lake Moomaw is the area's special treasure. Not far from Warm Springs and The Homestead, Lake Moomaw covers 2,500 acres and offers almost every type of recreational opportunity a visitor could want. The lake boasts four Forest Service campgrounds, three boat launches, more than a dozen trailheads, mountain biking trails and 43 miles of shoreline. Those looking to get away from the crowds should book a site at Greenwood Point Campground. This secluded spot on the western shore of the lake is accessible via a three-mile hike or an easy paddle across the lake. With only five campsites, you're almost guaranteed to have solitude and seclusion during your stay. Thrill-seekers can sign up for a guided whitewater-rafting trip along the Jackson River from a number of area outfitters. In October, releases from the Gathright Dam, which forms Lake Moomaw, turn the Jackson River into a world-class whitewater destination. Class III and even Class IV waters make this one of the most popular whitewater challenges in the East. Because the waters of Lake Moomaw are deep and cold, Jackson River supports an excellent cold water trout fish-

ery as well, luring thousands of anglers to its pools and riffles.

Other campgrounds, trailheads, and historic sites are scattered throughout the GWJ, providing unparalleled recreation opportunities. Few places on the East Coast compare in size, diversity, history or grandeur. Hike trails Daniel Boone once did. Feel the cold spray of whitewater on a guided rafting trip. Put your lawn chair next to a quiet mountain lake. Watch bald eagles soar above fall foliage. Whatever adventure you're seeking, the GWJ delivers.

Learn more about the GWJ and visit the Forest Service's George Washington and Jefferson National Forests website at www.fs.usda.gov/gwj.

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