



Ken Jones, Art Kolberg and David Blount work to remove downed trees on a section of the Benton MacKaye Trail in Tennessee.

PHOTO BY RALPH VAN PELT

BMTA attends to damage caused by May storm

BENTON MACKEYE TRAIL ASSOCIATION

A May storm wreaked havoc on the Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) in Georgia and Tennessee. Tennessee sections 12a-b were "obliterated."

The majority of this 6.7 miles of trail is in wilderness where no mechanized equipment (including chain saws) is allowed. Volunteers rely on crosscut saws and, if the trunk of the tree is on the ground, they must use handsaws to make the final cuts to ground level.

The rest of the trail fared better, but blowdowns and tread damage were prevalent. Crews were able to move quickly to take out

a slew of scattered blowdowns blocking Georgia Section 1a (Springer Mountain-Big Stamp Gap).

The main damage was in Tennessee, but the majority of the 36 trail workers on the main work trip, as well as those who went out individually to make the trees accessible to the sawyers to take out, were from Gilmer and Fannin County.

Fortunately the 20 trees down on Springer Mountain did not present the removal problems the section in Tennessee did.

Safety is a high priority when a major storm hits. Hikers should not attempt to navigate a trail that has sustained significant damage — getting lost or injured is a very real possibility.

Still, there always are a few intrepid hikers who refuse to be deterred. The initial prep work for clearing the trail does help these hikers find their way over, under, around or through the blockages, but it is far from a guarantee of a safe or successful trek.

Nevertheless, those hikers can be an asset for developing plans for reopening the trail. By providing GPS coordinates with pictures of what they encounter, they help Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) volunteers determine the extent and complexity of the damage.

The treetops were so numerous and so massive the trunks weren't visible, let alone accessible. Crews had to open pathways to the trunks before the sawyers could begin the work to clear the trail.

The first crew's foray to do maintenance was anything but encouraging. Removing blowdowns and large limbs as they went, they made it only 100 yards, not a positive preview of what was to come.

Thirty-six volunteers, including 21 certified sawyers, were on hand for the final push to clear the trail on the June work trip. The pace was agonizingly slow. In some areas, the distance between trees was only a step or two.

As soon as the trail workers removed one blowdown, they would take a step or two and they were at the next tree to take out. Many of the large limbs blocking the trail were up to 30" in circumference, as large as a blowdown.

The final count was 48 trees on Sections 12a-b. Other obstacles included huge root balls (a tree's roots come out of the ground leaving a large, gaping hole where the trail once was), and 20" to 48" blowdowns had fallen on top of up to 15' high root balls!

The all-volunteer crews put in 362.5 hours to make Sections 12a-b once again safe and open for all to enjoy.

During the month since the storm, BMTA volunteers have removed more than 200 blowdowns from the BMT. The average number of trees removed from the trail per month is 23-25.

If you would like to learn more about the Benton MacKaye Trail and/or trail maintenance, contact Joy Forehand at jforehand@bmta.org.