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George washington jefferson national forest

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The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Stretching along the border of Virginia and West Virginia, the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest blankets the Blue Ridge mountains offering 1.8 million acres of lush woodlands, unique mountain balds, peaceful waterways, and adventures galore. With more wildlife and trails than you can explore in a lifetime, every route on the forest carries visitors to new memories. All four seasons are in abundance here, with the explosion of colors in the spring wildflowers challenged only by the flames of colors of the autumn leaves. Summer brings bears, deer, birds and a multiplicity of pollinators, while winter’s stillness is broken only by the crinkle of cracking ice cascades where frozen waterfalls shine in the sun. Come enjoy and explore the natural beauty at the heart of the Appalachian Trail! The George Washington and Jefferson National Forests span nearly 1.8 million acres across western Virginia, with smaller portions extending into West Virginia and Kentucky. This massive expanse of public land is one of the largest in the eastern United States and offers a diverse range of outdoor recreation opportunities. From epic trails like the Appalachian Trail to scenic waterfalls and panoramic mountain vistas, this forest system is a paradise for hiking enthusiasts.Notable FeaturesTwo National Forests Combined: The forests were established separately but are now managed together. The border between the two forests follows the James River. Historical Significance:George Washington National Forest was established in 1918 as Shenandoah National Forest before being renamed in 1932. Jefferson National Forest was founded in 1936, nearly 20 years later. Mount Rogers National Recreation Area: This 140,000-acre area includes Mount Rogers, Virginia’s highest peak at 5,729 feet. Old-Growth Forests: Over 230,000 acres of old-growth forest provide unique ecosystems and serene hiking environments. Blue Ridge Parkway: Much of the iconic parkway runs through these forests, offering breathtaking drives and easy access to many trailheads. Breaks Interstate Park: Home to the deepest gorge east of the Mississippi River. Lake Moomaw: A recreational hotspot featuring campgrounds, boating, fishing, and scenic hiking trails. Proximity to Shenandoah National Park: Located just east of George Washington National Forest, this nearby park expands your adventure options.StateVirginia, West Virginia, KentuckyNearest Metro AreaRoanoke, VAArea Size1,790,933 acresEstablishedMay 16, 1918Miles of Trails1,925 milesTrailhead Traveler’s Recommended Best Hikes in George Washington and Jefferson National ForestsHere’s a curated list of the best hiking trails in the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, featuring must-see landmarks, rugged ascents, and family-friendly options.(*** = Best hikes in George Washington and Jefferson National Forests) McAfee Knob. Photo by CronkaLength: 7.6 miles (out and back) Elevation Gain: 1,200 feet Trailhead Location: VA-311, near Catawba, VAMcAfee Knob is widely regarded as one of the most iconic viewpoints in the eastern United States and is a highlight of the George Washington National Forest. The trail follows a section of the legendary Appalachian Trail and features a steady incline through lush hardwood forests, offering occasional overlooks along the way. At the summit, you’ll find dramatic rock outcroppings perfect for photos and stunning panoramic views of the Catawba Valley. Known for its breathtaking sunrises and sunsets, McAfee Knob is a must-do for hikers visiting the region. View from Big Scholcs, Photo by US Forest Service – Southern RegionLength: 4.5 miles (out and back) Elevation Gain: 1,200 feet Trailhead Location: Wolf Gap Campground, VAWV borderLocated in the George Washington National Forest, this moderately challenging hike takes you to the summit of Big Schloss, a German word meaning “big castle.” The first section of the trail is steep, gaining elevation quickly, but levels out for an easier walk along the ridge. Along the way, you’ll enjoy breathtaking views of the Shenandoah Valley and Hardy County, West Virginia. The summit offers a large rock outcropping with awe-inspiring 360-degree views, making it a top destination for both day hikers and backpackers. The Great Channels, Photo by AmandaLength: 6.0 miles (out and back) Elevation Gain: 1,200 feet Trailhead Location: Brunley Gap Road, near Abingdon, VAThe Great Channels of Virginia are a unique geological formation located within Jefferson National Forest, consisting of a sandstone maze formed over 400 million years ago. This hike is family-friendly and relatively easy, featuring a gradual climb through peaceful hardwood forests. At the top, hikers can explore the maze-like network of narrow rock corridors, which provide endless opportunities for photos and discovery. This trail is a hidden gem that showcases the geological diversity of the area. Buzzard Rock, Photo by US Forest Service - Southern RegionLength: 7.8 miles (out and back) Elevation Gain: 2,100 feet Trailhead Location: Fort Valley, near Strasburg, VAThe Buzzard Rock Trail is a favorite for its ridgeline views and challenging terrain. Located in the Massanutten Range of the George Washington National Forest, the trail begins with a gradual incline before becoming steeper and more technical. The rocky ridge offers expansive views of Fort Valley and the Shenandoah Valley on either side, making it a rewarding hike for experienced adventurers. The trailhead is small and parking is limited, so arriving early is recommended. Cascades Falls, Photo by US Forest Service – Southern RegionLength: 4.0 miles (loop) Elevation Gain: 700 feet Trailhead Location: Near Pembroke, VAOne of the most popular hikes in the Jefferson National Forest, the Cascades Trail leads to Cascades Falls, a 66-foot waterfall that tumbles into a clear, rocky pool below. The trail is divided into two sections: the lower trail, which runs alongside the scenic Little Stony Creek and features stone walkways and wooden bridges, and the upper trail, which offers a wider and less rocky path through the forest. Many hikers take the lower trail to the falls and return via the upper trail, making this a perfect loop for families and casual hikers. Crabtree Falls, Photo by Patrick MuellerLength: 5.4 miles (out and back) Elevation Gain: 1,500 feet Trailhead Location: Near Montebello, VAThe Crabtree Falls Trail is home to the tallest cascading waterfall east of the Mississippi, with a total drop of 1,200 feet. The trail includes five major cascades, each with designated overlooks that offer stunning views of the rushing water and the valley below. The first viewpoint is wheelchair accessible, making this a great option for hikers of all abilities. As you ascend, the trail becomes steeper, passing through lush forests with opportunities to spot wildlife. The dramatic beauty of the falls and surrounding area make this trail a bucket-list destination for anyone visiting the Blue Ridge Mountains. Dragon’s Tooth, Photo by Rachel ElaineLength: 4.6 miles (out and back) Elevation Gain: 1,220 feet Trailhead Location: VA-311, near Catawba, VALocated in the Jefferson National Forest, the Dragon’s Tooth Trail is a challenging hike that rewards adventurers with a dramatic rock spire known as “The Tooth.” The trail begins with a gradual incline but becomes steep and rugged as it approaches the summit. The final ascent involves sections of rock scrambling, requiring both hands and feet to climb. At the top, hikers are treated to breathtaking views of the Roanoke Valley and the surrounding mountains. This trail is a favorite for those seeking a more adventurous and technical hike.Elliott Knob, Photo by MongolLength: 9.1 miles (out and back) Elevation Gain: 2,500 feet Trailhead Location: VA-688, near Augusta Springs, VAThe hike to Elliott Knob is one of the most challenging in the George Washington National Forest, but it offers incredible rewards for those willing to make the climb. At 4,463 feet, Elliott Knob is one of the tallest peaks in Virginia. The trail ascends via an old jeep road, passing through diverse forest ecosystems and offering occasional views of the Allegheny Mountains. At the summit, hikers are greeted with panoramic vistas and the remnants of a historic fire lookout tower. This trail is especially popular during the fall months when the vibrant foliage transforms the landscape into a sea of color. View from Humpback Rocks, Photo by Karen BlahaLength: 4.0 miles (loop) Elevation Gain: 1,000 feet Trailhead Location: Near Afton, VAThis trail combines a steep climb to the Humpback Rocks with a scenic loop along the Appalachian Trail. The initial 0.8-mile ascent is steep but short, and the reward at the top is a stunning view of the surrounding Blue Ridge Mountains and valleys. After enjoying the views, hikers can continue along the A.T. to create a loop that leads back to the parking lot. The trailhead is located just off the Blue Ridge Parkway, making it easily accessible and popular for day trips.Length: 9.6 miles (loop) Elevation Gain: 1,200 feet Trailhead Location: Taskers Gap Road, near Fort Valley, VAThe Kennedy Peak Loop is a relatively moderate trail in the Massanutten Range of the George Washington National Forest. The highlight of the hike is the fire tower at the summit of Kennedy Peak, which provides spectacular 360-degree views of the Shenandoah Valley, Fort Valley, and the surrounding Blue Ridge and Massanutten Mountains. The trail winds through mixed forests, featuring a gradual incline for much of the way, and is particularly beautiful in the spring when wildflowers bloom along the path. For a more scenic ascent, hikers are encouraged to follow the loop clockwise. The Top of Sharp Top, Photo by Richard MartinLength: 3.1 miles (out and back) Elevation Gain: 1,300 feet Trailhead Location: Peaks of Otter Visitor Center, Blue Ridge Parkway, Bedford, VAThe Sharp Top Trail, located in the Jefferson National Forest, is a short but steep climb to the summit of Sharp Top Mountain, part of the iconic Peaks of Otter. The trail ascends over 1,200 feet in just 1.5 miles, making it a challenging but quick hike. At the top, visitors are rewarded with jaw-dropping 360-degree views of the surrounding mountains, valleys, and even glimpses of the Blue Ridge Parkway. A stone observation platform and picnic area make the summit an excellent spot to rest and take in the scenery. This trail is a must-visit for anyone exploring the Peaks of Otter Recreation Area. View near Spy Rock, Photo by RaincrowLength: 6.2 miles (out and back) Elevation Gain: 1,300 feet Trailhead Location: Montebello Fish Hatchery Road, near Montebello, VASpy Rock is one of the best overlooks in the George Washington National Forest, offering panoramic views of the Religious Range, including notable peaks like The Priest and Mount Pleasant. The trail begins with a moderate incline on a gravel road before joining the Appalachian Trail for a steeper climb through the forest. The final stretch to Spy Rock requires a short scramble, but the effort is worth it. At the summit, the expansive rock face provides plenty of space to explore and enjoy the stunning scenery. This hike is especially popular during sunrise and sunset for photographers looking to capture the magic of the Blue Ridge Mountains.Gear Up: Make sure you’re prepared with the right equipment. Check out our hiking gear recommendations. Timing is Key: Popular trails like McAfee Knob and Dragon’s Tooth can get crowded, especially on weekends. Start early to beat the crowds. Explore More Trails: Looking for additional national park or forest hikes? Discover more here The George Washington and Jefferson National Forests are a haven for hikers, nature lovers, and adventurers. Whether you’re tackling challenging climbs, marveling at cascading waterfalls, or enjoying peaceful forest walks, this expansive wilderness offers something for everyone.Featured Image: Fall Colors in the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, Photo by US Forest Service – Southern RegionDon’t forget to stock up on the essentials before you plan your next hiking or camping trip! We have recommendations on:TENTSHIKING BOOTSAND MORE! Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation . No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. Spend some time in Virginia and you will hear the names George Washington National Forest and Jefferson National Forest. But what are they? Where are they? And what can you do there? Named for two founders of our country, the George Washington National Forest and Jefferson National Forest (GWJNF) were combined in 1995 and are now managed as one unit of the national forest system, with a whopping 1,664,110 acres in Virginia. These massive swaths of land stretch in parcels extending up the spine of the Appalachians roughly from the Tennessee state line following the northwest Virginia boundary with Kentucky and West Virginia. They are also found along the Blue Ridge from Roanoke to Waynesboro, as well a few small parcels in Kentucky and West Virginia. Virginia’s GWJNF has a myriad outdoor recreation opportunities – hiking, paddling, bicycling, camping, wildlife viewing, fishing, scenic driving, and more. GWJNF boasts over 2,300 miles of streams, over 40 species of trees, over 60 species of animals and over 50 endangered plant species. It is a land with around 200 recreation sites such as campgrounds and picnic areas. Over 2,200 miles of trails lace the GWJNF, allowing hikers, bicyclers and equestrians enough pathways for a lifetime. There are 23 federally designated wildernesses within mountainous terrain ranging from 515 feet in elevation near the Shenandoah River all the way up to Virginia’s highest point of 5,729 feet at Mount Rogers. Entering the GWJNF is generally free. There are no entry gates as such, especially with the huge tracts that comprise the forest. However, specific recreation areas such as Cascade Falls near Pembroke and campgrounds such as Elizabeth Furnace near Strasburg will either require an entrance or user fee. Since the GWJNF is so big, it is broken up and managed in districts, with supervision concentrated on higher use areas. Roads course throughout the forest, but are often gravel. However, they do allow access to backwoods areas. Even at that, the vast majority of the forest is untamed game lands left to Virginia’s wild fauna and flora, accessible only by those hitting the trails on foot, bicycle or horse. National Forest maps are essential for exploring throughout the forest. Your smart phone might help you get one place at a time, but to truly discover the GWJNF maps are essential. Try National Geographic Trails Illustrated maps. They have 9 individual maps covering various parcels of Virginia’s GWJNF. Pick your area, then purchase your map. With over 2,200 miles of trails to trek, the GWJNF has enough pathways to keep most of us busy for years. The forest contains 325 miles of America’s most renowned path — the Appalachian Trail — more mileage of the AT than another other national forest in the country. Other hiker trails wind through designated wildernesses and scenic areas. Some of them are specially designated national recreation trails. Here are some sampler hikes to whet your appetite for trail trekking in Virginia’s GWJNF, with one hike in each of the 8 ranger districts. Elizabeth Furnace Nearest Town: Strasburg Distance: 9-mile What You Need to Know: The short walk is long on interpretive information. GPS Coordinates: 38.92899, -78.32694 Two interconnected nature trails present a splendid overview of charcoal and iron making in 1800s Virginia, all in a gorgeous setting along Passage Creek, nestled between Massanutten and Green Mountain near Strasburg. And you get to see the iron furnace remains up close, as well as a cabin from the 1830s. Plan on adding picnicking, trout fishing and car camping to your historic hiking agenda – it is all here at Elizabeth Furnace. Confederate Breastworks Interpretive Trail Nearest Town: Churchville Distance: 5-mile What You Need to Know: The interpretive trail is told through letters of a Georgia Confederate soldier. GPS Coordinates: 38.310833, -79.38361 This half-mile interpretive path traverses the site of Confederate defenses situated atop Shenandoah Mountain. While you are here, have a meal at the nearby Mountain House Picnic Area. Back Creek Gorge Trail Nearest Town: Warm Springs Distance: 1.3-miles each way What You Need to Know: The out and back hike ends at the national forest boundary. GPS Coordinates: 38.069278, -79.883943 This wildflower rich path begins at Blowing Springs Campground and traces an old railroad grade up the Back Creek gorge. Enjoy blue pools divided by shoals on Back Creek. After a half-mile you will reach a low waterfall. Continue upstream on the track in deep woods, passing more cascades and pools before reaching trail’s end and backtracking. Yaccrs Run Trail Nearest Town: Clifton Forge Distance: 3.0-mile loop What You Need to Know: Bring lunch. The hike starts at Longdale Day Use Area, with picnic tables. GPS Coordinates: 37.79028, -79.70389 This well marked but oddly named path is good for families and novice hikers. The track shows off stream valleys and ridgetops with views. The biggest challenge may be crossing Blue Suck Run without getting your feet wet. By the time you return to the recreation area your appetite will be whetted to enjoy a trailhead picnic at the historic CCC-developed area. Crabtree Falls Trail Nearest Town: Vesuvius Distance: 2.7-miles What You Need to Know: The falls can be crowded on nice weekends, especially early summer. GPS Coordinates: 37.843056, -79.075 Crabtree Falls might be the highest waterfall east of the Mississippi, depending on how you qualify a waterfall, but there is no doubt that Crabtree Falls is the highest waterfall in Virginia. Crabtree Falls is really a name given to five major waterfalls (and several smaller ones) on Crabtree Creek, which flows into the Tye River. Within 0.5 mile, the creek drops 1,200 feet. Dragon’s Tooth Trail Nearest Town: Salem Distance: 2.4-miles one-way What You Need to Know: The final climb to the tip of the Dragons Tooth is for nimble hikers only. GPS Coordinates: 37.3787, -80.1563 This deservedly popular hike travels up Cove Mountain to a vertical stone slab providing 360-degree panoramas. Along the way, you will ascend a small stream valley then meet the Appalachian Trail. From there, the AT traverses boulder fields and upturned rock slabs that require some scrambling. Climb the Dragons Tooth for unrivaled Virginia highland vistas. Elk Garden Nearest Town: Konnarock Distance: 3.8-miles round-trip What You Need to Know: Views start from the moment you hit the trail. GPS Coordinates: 36.65859, -81.59455 This high country ramble start at elevated Elk Garden, then joins the AT as it climbs a field with views. Drift in and out of woods, including high elevation spruce-fir forests. Reach Deep Gap. Take a break among the yellow birches. Return via the Virginia Highlands Horse Trail for varied scenery, or backtrack on the AT. Guest River Gorge Nearest Town: Norton Distance: Up to 5.9 miles one-way What You Need to Know: Hike as far or short as you please on this lesser visited rail trail. GPS Coordinates: 36.9238, -82.4517 Hike a railroad grade-turned-trail. First pass through the Swede Tunnel, then cross the Guest River – a Virginia State Scenic River – on a high bridge. Continue down the cliff and bluff rimmed canyon, viewing giant streamside boulders. Side streams form waterfalls during wet weather. Virginia’s George Washington and Jefferson National Forest is dotted with over 50 campgrounds, overlain on the entire length of the forest from Kentucky to Maryland. Amenities range from primitive tent sites to more developed campgrounds with electricity and hot showers. Here’s a sampling of the camping possibilities to be found within the GWJNF. Elizabeth Furnace Elevation 790 feet This small, shady and scenic campground is a favorite of mine. Lots of sites are situated on Passage Creek. The sites offer good privacy, set in the woods, yet convenient to civilization. Hot showers and flush toilets are available during the warm season. There’s lots to do here – water play and fish on Passage Creek, visit historic Elizabeth Furnace, hike or mountain bike trails climbing both sides of the mountains above Passage Creek. Recreation Opportunities: swim, fish, hike, historic study Todd Lake Elevation 1850 feet Todd Lake is fine developed recreation area with not only a quiet campground but also hot showers and nearby activities. A hiking trail circles the 7.5-acre lake, open to paddling or electric motors only. The big drawing card here is the swim beach. The 20 campsites are first come, first served. Recreation Opportunities: swimming, hiking, paddling Blowing Springs Elevation 1,800 feet The 22-site campground is centered on a springs emerging from a cave-like opening that pushes out constant 58 degree air, hence the name. Back Creek flows by, adding another water feature in the out-of-the-way getaway. Back Creek Gorge is just a walk away, and is attractive for fishermen. Recreation Opportunities: hiking, fishing, water play Morris Hill Elevation 1,600 feet The ridgetop campground overlooks gorgeous Lake Moomaw. Has hot showers and flush toilets. Swimming, fishing and boating on Lake Moomaw are just down the hill. Campsites can be reserved. Recreation Opportunities: boating, paddling, swimming, hiking, nature study North Creek Elevation 1,150 feet North Creek Campground is a small, intimate streamside camp with big sites. Its first come, first served, but has water, no showers. Enjoy the creek or head up to the nearby Blue Ridge Parkway for highland fun. Recreation Opportunities: scenic driving, fishing, swimming, hiking The Pines Elevation 2,100 feet Set in the Barbours Creek valley, this secluded but free campsite sits in oaks, hickories and pines under tall ridges. The well space sites are seldom full, and an old-fashioned pump well serves the quiet, camp. Fishing Barbours Creek, and hiking Barbours Creek Wilderness are immediate. The Fenwick Mines wetlands and paddling Craig Creek are close by. Recreation Opportunities: wilderness hiking, fishing, wildlife viewing, paddling Hurricane Elevation 2,800 feet Located in the naturally attractive flat at the confluence of Comers Creek and Hurricane Branch, Hurricane Campground was improved, yet has only 27 campsites and thus cannot get that “campground city” aura so often felt in bigger camping grounds. Yet it does have hot showers and flush toilets. Recreation Opportunities: Bicycling, hiking, fishing High Knob Elevation 3,450 feet Situated in the shadow of its namesake, small, intimate High Knob Recreation Area offers a historic CCC constructed camp area that does includes hot showers. Hike to the restored High Knob observation tower, visit the small lake here to fish or swim or trek along the Chief Benge Trail. Recreation Opportunities: hiking, picnicking, swimming, fishing Virginia’s GWJNF has a myriad outdoor recreation opportunities - hiking, paddling, bicycling, camping, wildlife viewing, fishing, scenic driving, and more. GWJNF boasts over 2,300 miles of streams, over 40 species of trees, over 60 species of animals and over 50 endangered plant species. It is a land with around 200 recreation sites such as campgrounds and picnic areas. Fishing The GWJNF’s 2,200 miles of streams provide a lifetime’s worth of opportunities for trout and smallmouth bass fishing in a variety of situations, including easily accessible roadside streams, wilderness waterways. Additionally, over 20 ponds and lakes on the forests add boat fishing possibilities for mostly warm water species. Mountain Biking Over 1,000 miles of trails are open to mountain bikers. Bicyclers can also ply any forest roads. Mountain bikers have their favorite areas, such as Pandapas Pond trails near Blacksburg and the Iron Mountain trail network near Damascus. The detailed National Geographic Trails Illustrated maps show all paths open to mountain bikers. Casual bicyclists will seek out rail trails such as the Virginia Creeper Trail or paved campground roads at places like Sherando Lake Campground or Beartree Campground. Paddling Most paddling streams on the GWJNF are steep and seasonal or otherwise only partly on national forest land, though the South Fork Shenandoah River is a good destination, as is North Fork Pound River. However, national forest ponds and lakes provide excellent flatwater paddling, namely Lake Moomaw and Bark Camp Lake.