



**60 Hikes Within 60 Miles:**

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**WASHINGTON, DC**

**Paul Elliot**

**1st Edition**

**Appalachian Trail:  
Weverton to  
Gathland State Park**

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## #4 Appalachian Trail: Weverton to Gathland State Park

### IN BRIEF

This AT outing on South Mountain in western Maryland offers hikers superb views as a reward for a strenuous climb. It also includes an easy ridge-top segment, plus an unusual memorial.

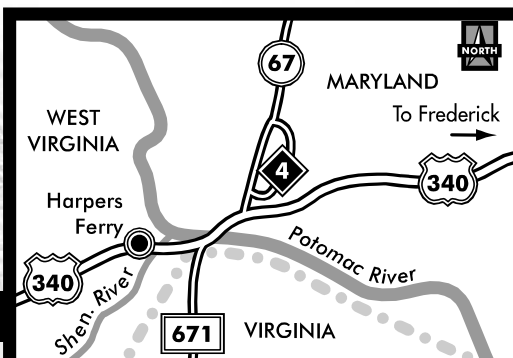
### DIRECTIONS

From junction of Capital Beltway (Interstate 495) and I-270, drive northwest on I-270 for about 32 miles to Frederick, Maryland. Swing onto I-70, proceed west for 1.3 miles, and take US 340 west toward Harpers Ferry for 15.3 miles. Then turn right onto MD 67 at Weverton. Go about 200 yards and take first right, onto Weverton Road. Proceed for about 200 yards to unmarked parking area near guardrail on right. Park there.

### DESCRIPTION

South Mountain forms part of the Blue Ridge portion of Maryland and adjoining Pennsylvania. Logged and fought over in the nineteenth century, much of it is now protected within Maryland state parks known collectively as the South Mountain Recreation Area. Threading through the area is a 40-mile strip of the Appalachian Trail.

This somewhat rigorous one-way, 13.8-mile AT hike features South Mountain's southernmost portion, which rises above the Potomac River in a series of high cliffs. The area, broadly



### KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

**Length:** 13.8 miles

**Configuration:** Out-and-back

**Difficulty:** Difficult

**Scenery:** Mountain woodlands, farmland views

**Exposure:** Mostly shady; less so in winter

**Traffic:** Usually light; heavier, even heavy, in cliffs, state park areas on warm-weather weekends, holidays

**Trail surface:** Mostly dirt, with rooty, rocky, grassy stretches; pavement in park

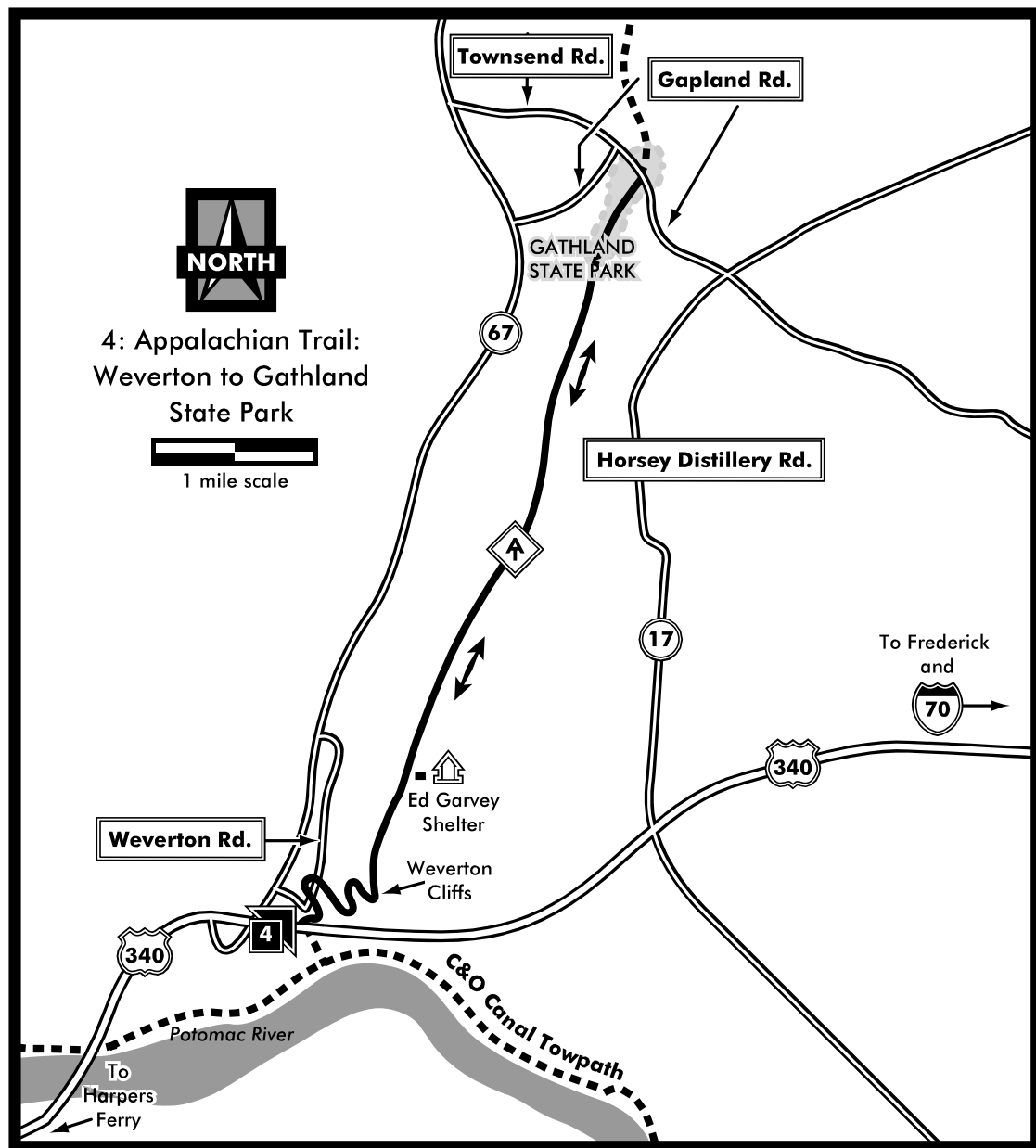
**Hiking time:** 6.5–8 hours (including cliff time)

**Access:** No AT restrictions; Gathland State Park open daily, sunrise to sunset

**Maps:** USGS Keedysville, Harpers Ferry; PATC Map 6

**Facilities:** None at trailhead; toilet at trail shelter; water, phone, warm-season toilets at Gathland

**Special comments:** Be careful or stay away during hunting season (see text)



straddling the line between Washington County and Frederick County, lies roughly 60 miles northwest of Washington. The north-to-south hike accumulates about 3,000 feet of elevation change between the foot of the mountain and Crampton Gap.

The gap was the site of a September 1862 engagement that was one of several known collectively as the battle of South Mountain. Two decades after the Civil War, the Crampton Gap area was bought by a wealthy writer and ex-war correspondent named George Albert

Townsend, who turned it into a mountain retreat of eccentric design. He named it Gathland, based on his pseudonym, “Gath” (his initials plus “h”) and the biblical city of Gath. He later spiraled into poverty and died, as did his estate. Eventually acquired by the state, it became 135-acre Gathland State Park in 1958.

The hike route passes through mostly deciduous woodlands that provide shade and greenery during the growing season, later turn beautifully autumnal, and then open up in leafless winter. Flowers, ferns, and wildlife add to the seasonal variety.

So does, dubiously, poison ivy, so stay on the trail. My preferred fall clothing color is orange; the no-hunting-allowed AT right-of-way is narrow.

To get started at Weverton, go to the eastern end of the parking lot and take the path that leads just a few yards to the white-blazed AT. Turn left onto the trail and follow it to Weverton Road. After crossing the road (carefully), head for the utility pole that marks the spot where the AT plunges into the woods and then starts going uphill. The trail ascends 500 feet as a mile-long series of switchbacks.

En route, detour onto a rocky, blue-blazed side trail on the right. Follow it downhill for about 200 yards to Weverton Cliffs, which has, in the late Ed Garvey's words, "one of the most spectacular views along the entire [AT]." On a clear day, you'll see a panoramic view of the Potomac River Valley and environs, especially if you have binoculars. In the fall, watch for migrating hawks. When a strong northwest wind is blowing, they stream by in great waves, sometimes at eye-to-eye level. Retrace your steps to the AT.

Continue up the trail as it rises steadily for several hundred feet over the next mile to reach and follow South Mountain's narrow crest line. After about a half-mile more, you'll see, to your right, one of the overnight shelters that dot the AT. Stop to take a look and check out its logbook (trail register). Completed in 2001, the Ed Garvey Shelter honors a man who lived, breathed, supported, worked on, thru-hiked, and wrote up the AT for half a century. Volunteers organized by Bowie Frank, who has a passion

for constructing such structures, built the shelter and its matching privy (which qualifies for a write-up in *Outhouse Beautiful*). The Ed Garvey Shelter is his second, and he has plans for a third.

Beyond the shelter, the trail pitches up and down a bit as it threads through the ridge-top woods. Here and there, a fleeting view is to be had, usually in winter, but the basic scenery is of the restful green-tunnel variety. You may see deer and wild turkeys—or evidence of them.





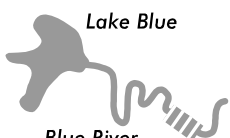


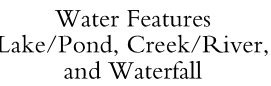





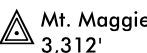

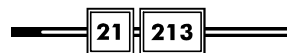
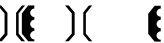


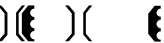





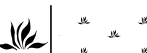















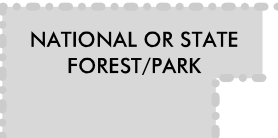
Be sure to stay with the white blazes. Ignore the occasional side trails, as well as what's left of an old unpaved road. Eventually, the trail noses gently downhill into Gathland State Park. There, follow a paved roadway for a few hundred yards to reach a 50-foot-high structure that marks the hike's turn-around spot. Townsend (Gath) erected it as a memorial to his fellow war correspondents. Then return to Weverton. En route, revisit the cliffs to see how the play of sunlight across the landscape has changed.

For more information on the hike route, trail conditions, and AT in general, contact the Appalachian Trail Conference in Harpers Ferry, (304) 535-6331 or [www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org). For more information on Gathland State Park, contact the South Mountain Recreation Area office in Boonsboro, (301) 791-4767.

### **NEARBY/RELATED ACTIVITIES**

During or after the hike, explore Gathland State Park and its collection of Townsend memorabilia. Contact the South Mountain Recreation Area office for details, and to order a free copy of the annual *Adventure Guide*.

## MAP LEGEND

		
Main Trail	Trailhead Locator Map	Trailhead for specific Maps
		
Alternate Trail	Lake Blue Blue River	Ranger Station/ Rest Room Facilities
		
Interstate Highway	Water Features Lake/Pond, Creek/River, and Waterfall	Ranger Station
		
U.S. Highway	CAPITOL CITY TOWN	Rest Room Facilities
		
State Highway	capitol, city, and town	Shelter
		
County Road	Mt. Maggie 3,312'	Structure or Feature
		
Forest Service Road	Footbridge/Dam, Footbridge, and Dam	Monument/ Sculpture
		
Local Road	Tunnel	Parking
		
Unpaved Road	Swamp/Marsh	Recreation Area
		
Direction of Travel	35: Name of Hike	Metro Rail
		
Board Walk	Map Scale	Shuttle Dropoff
		
State Border	Off map or pinpoint indication arrow	Campgrounds
		
County Border	Caution/Warning	Picnic Area
		
Power Line		Gate
		
NATIONAL OR STATE FOREST/PARK		
Park-Forest Boundary and Label		

# Introduction

Welcome to *60 Hikes within 60 Miles: Washington, DC*. If you're new to hiking or even if you're a seasoned trail-smith, take a few minutes to read the following introduction. We explain how this book is organized and how to use it.

## Hike Descriptions

Each hike contains six key items: a locator map, an In Brief description of the trail, an At-a-Glance Information box, directions to the trail, a trail map, and a hike narrative. Combined, the maps and information provide a clear method to assess each trail from the comfort of your favorite chair.

## Locator Map

Use the locator map, along with driving directions given in the profile, to find the trailhead. At the trailhead, park only in designated areas.

## In Brief

This synopsis of the trail offers a snapshot of what to expect along the trail, including mention of any historical sights, beautiful vistas, or other interesting sights you may encounter.

## At-a-Glance Information

The At-a-Glance Information boxes give you a quick idea of the specifics of each hike. There are 13 basic elements covered.

**Length** The length of the trail from

start to finish. There may be options to shorten or extend the hikes, but the mileage corresponds to the described hike. Consult the hike description to help decide how to customize the hike for your ability or time constraints.

**Configuration** A description of what the trail might look like from overhead. Trails can be loops, out-and-backs (that is, along the same route), or figure eights, or any of those in modified form. Sometimes the descriptions might surprise you.

**Difficulty** The degree of effort an “average” hiker should expect on a given hike. In this book, the author has used a standardized range of terms—from “very easy” to “extremely difficult” that are explained in the Preface.

**Scenery** Summarizes the overall environs of the hike and what to expect in terms of terrain and land use

**Exposure** A quick check of how much sun you can expect on your shoulders during the hike. Descriptors used are self-explanatory and include terms such as shady, exposed, and sunny.

**Traffic** Indicates how busy the trail might be on an average day. Trail traffic, of course, will vary from day to day and season to season.

**Trail surface** Indicates whether the trail is paved, rocky, smooth dirt, or a mixture of elements.

**Hiking time** How long it took the author to hike the trail.

**Access** Notes times of day when hike route is open, days on which it is officially closed, and when fees or permits needed to access the trail.

**Maps** Which maps are useful in the author's opinion, for this hike.

**Facilities** Notes any facilities such as rest rooms, phones, and water available at the trailhead or on the trail or nearby.

**Special comments** Provides you with those little extra details that don't fit into any of the above categories. Here you'll find reminders about such matter as park or road gate closings that could trap you or your car, trails that are susceptible to flooding, and hunting seasons that could affect your hiking.

## **Directions**

Check here for directions to the trailhead. Used with the locator map, the directions will help you locate each trailhead.

## **Description**

The trail description is the heart of each hike. Here, the author has provided a summary of the trail's essence as well as highlighted any special traits the hike offers. Ultimately the hike description will help you choose which hikes are best for you.

## **Nearby Activities**

Not every hike will have this listing. For those that do, look here for information on nearby dining, recreational opportunities, or other activities to fill out your day.

## **Weather**

The best time to go hiking in the Washington, DC, area is any time you can. If you make prudent decisions about which of these 60 hikes to try, what to take with you, and what the weather is likely to be, you can count on being able to get out and hike enjoyable and safely on most days of

the year.

The area has a generally temperate climate that favors year-round hiking, although deep freezes occur from time to time in the winter and the often hot and humid summers do take some getting used to. During the winter, morning temperatures are usually in the 30s, and frosts are not uncommon. If that's too cold, wait until the middle of the day and you're more likely to have temperatures warm enough to go hiking. Also, help yourself by selecting hikes in sheltered areas or, if there's no wind, hikes where you'll be out in the sunshine. Make allowances for the occasional winter storms that lash the Washington area.

On the hottest days of summer, from late July to early September, go hiking first thing in the morning and look for hikes that have heavy shade—or for trails in the mountains, where temperatures are somewhat lower. Keep in mind that even if you wait until late in the day, the temperature and humidity won't have dropped enough to be really comfortable. Also be aware of the possibility of thunderstorms; they're the area's worst weather hazard (short of hurricanes), and you need to be careful not to get caught by one when you're out on a trail.

All in all, the best hiking weather in the Washington area occurs in the fall and then again in the spring. Autumn can be glorious, especially from September to early December, during Indian summer, when the light pours down like melted butter and covers everything in a kind of golden glow just before sunset.

Even a mild Washington winter tends to be a gray winter of short days, and so the period from about mid-March to mid-May brings not only balmy weather but also the reawakening of nature as plants start to bloom, migrating songbirds start to appear, and a fresh hiking season gets underway.

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