

# Helene devastated two iconic hiking trails in Western NC. When will they reopen?

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Among the places that will have to be rebuilt after Hurricane Helene are two long-distance hiking trails that traverse and symbolize the rugged mountains of Western North Carolina.

The Appalachian Trail and the Mountains-to-Sea Trail were both heavily damaged by Helene. Downed trees, landslides and washed out paths and bridges have made the trails impassable in many places, and they will likely remain that way for a while.

"We know it's bad," said Les Love of Weaver-ville, who heads the Carolina Mountain Club, which supports hiking in Western North Carolina. "When you've got both wind and water, it's just catastrophic to the trails."

No natural disaster has affected as much of the Appalachian Trail in its 100-year history as He-lene, according to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the nonprofit that manages and protects the 2,200-mile trail from Georgia to Maine.

The trail is officially closed on U.S. Forest Service land in North Carolina, Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. Many of the roads normally used to access the A.T. are closed as well, and the towns that normally wel-come hikers with a meal and a place to rest are struggling to recover from the storm and not equipped to handle vis-

itors.

Sandi Marra, the con-servancy's president and CEO, said roads, electric-ity and other infrastruc-ture must be restored before the trail's condition can be assessed.

"While we are eager and anxious to tackle the work necessary to restore sections of the A.T. im-pacted by Helene, we ask for patience," Marra said in a message to support-ers. "Once we can safely access the A.T., we will identify the sections and features that need imme-diate attention and put a call out for volunteers to help restore the trail."

Fixing the trails is a low priority compared to the humanitarian crisis still unfolding in Western North Carolina, says Brent Laurenz, executive director of the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. The mountain portion of the trail paral-lels the Blue Ridge Park-way, which was severely damaged and remains closed.

"So we do not have much direct knowledge of the trail's condition," Laurenz wrote in an email. "The very little we have heard would indicate that the trail has suffered significant damage from downed trees and running water, but we are holding off on any active work on the trail while rescue and recovery efforts and critical infrastructure work are underway."

The Mountains-to-Sea Trail covers nearly 1,200 miles across the state from Great Smoky Moun-tains National Park to Jockey's Ridge State Park

in Nags Head. The trail should be considered "closed and highly dan-gerous" from Kuwohi (the peak once known as Clingmans Dome) through Stone Mountain State Park in Wilkes County.

When the time is right, Laurenz said, crews will get out on the trail and get a clearer picture of the needed cleanup and repair work. But the group's website warns hikers "it is likely that sections of the trail will remain closed for a significant length of time."

## 'EVERYBODY'S ITCHING TO GET OUT'

Much of the mainte-nance work on both long-distance trails is done by volunteers. Love said about a third of the more than 1,200 members of the Carolina Mountain Club regularly work on the trails to keep them in shape and well marked.

Love said volunteers have been told to stay away from trails for the time being.

"Everybody's itching to get out and do what they can for the trails," he said. "But right now the word is, 'Concentrate on your neighborhood and help each other.' That's the best thing we can do right now."

Volunteers often adopt sections of the trail and go out every week or two to maintain it, says Franklin Tate, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's asso-ciate regional director based in Asheville.

"It makes them a little anxious to not be about to get out and assess their

section," Tate said. "They love the A.T. They love the work that they do. So to be in a temporary stand-down mode is chal-lenging for a lot of them."

## THRU-HIKERS GET A HELENE DISPENSATION

The Georgia section of the Appalachian Trail has reopened. People are also free to use the trail north of Bland, Virginia, except where it crosses the Blue Ridge Parkway, which remains closed.

Tate said the trail is also in better shape in the Nantahala National Forest in far southwestern North Carolina and in Great

Smoky Mountains National Park, though the National Park Service warns of limited emergen-cy services and closures elsewhere in the park.

The worst damage is north and west of Ashe-ville, in Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina and Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee, Tate said.

Hurricane Helene has thwarted the ambitions of an unknown number of people who attempt to walk the entire length of the Appalachian Trail in a single year. Known as thru-hikers, most begin in Georgia and try to reach Mt. Katahdin in Maine before the snow flies.

But some begin in Maine and head south. The A.T. Conservancy says those who must skip around the closed sections are still eligible for "2,000-miler status" if they later pick up where they left off and finish the trail within 12 months of

when they restart.

As for people planning to hike the entire trail in 2025, the group says it's too soon to say if and when the trail will be ready. Tate said it de-pends on the extent of the damage and other factors, such as the severity of winter weather and the supply of experienced sawyers to cut the tangle of trees blocking the trail.

"If I had to guess, I think that large sections of the trail will be open and there will be multiple detours around some of the most problematic areas and some of the bridges that have washed out," he said. "I hope we have a thru-hiker season in 2025. But I think it's going to be a season where the hikers have to exercise more patience than usual."

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