



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2023.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION


County: Roanoke
Program Title: McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle
Program Category: Transportation

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Richard Caywood
Title: County Administrator
Signature: Richard Caywood

 Digitally signed by Richard Caywood
DN: cn=Richard Caywood, o=Roanoke County, ou=County Administration,
email=rcaywood@roanokecountyva.gov, c=US
Date: 2023.07.03 12:04:24 -04'00'

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Roanoke County's McAfee Knob is the most photographed location on the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (AT) and has sparked increased visitation. McAfee Knob is the most popular of the three sites that makes up Virginia's Triple Crown, with photographs frequently taken at the "diving board" bluff viewpoint. The number of visitors substantially increased in the last several years causing parking and the safety of visitors and the community to be a concern. The nationally-recognized McAfee Knob Trailhead shuttle service addresses the increasing parking demands at the trailhead parking lot by shuttling hikers from the Interstate 81 Exit 140 Park and Ride located in Roanoke County to the McAfee Knob trailhead parking lot in Catawba, Virginia.

The Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) awarded Roanoke County Demonstration Program funding in 2022 to operate the McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle. The shuttle service has provided hikers with an easy alternative to finding parking in a crowded National Park Service trailhead parking lot that fills up before 9 a.m. on popular hiking days.

The shuttle launched for service on September 2, 2022 through November 27, 2022. The shuttle resumed services on March 3, 2023 and will remain available through November 26, 2023. Services are offered Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, with occasional Mondays (i.e., Memorial Day and Labor Day) for 10 to 12 hours per day. The round-trip fare is \$10 per rider plus booking fees. Year to date, the shuttle has been in operation for 49 days, making 395 trips and assisting 237 riders.

This type of investment in transit helps offer a sense of excitement for visitors, attracting them to return, and promotes tourism for the region.

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BRIEF OVERVIEW

The McAfee Knob trail in Roanoke County has become a wildly popular destination for hikers wanting to experience the most photographed spot on the Appalachian Trail. Increased parking demands at the trailhead parking lot resulted in unsafe parking issues, ticketing, and towing.

Roanoke County staff leveraged partnerships with community organizations and local, state, and federal agencies to find funding opportunities and creative solutions to address the parking challenges.

Overwhelming support was received for the McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle to transport hikers to the trailhead parking lot from the Interstate 81 Exit 140 Park and Ride in Roanoke County.

In the shuttle's first "season," 37 days of operation, 716 reservations were made. Rider feedback praised the efficient service and convenience of the process, demonstrating the initiative provides hikers an alternative and helps address ongoing parking challenges. This type of investment in transit offers a sense of excitement for visitors, attracting them to return, and promotes tourism for the region.

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FULFILLING AWARDS CRITERIA

PROBLEM/CHALLENGE/SITUATION

Approximately 50,000 visitors hike McAfee Knob, the most photographed location on the Appalachian Trail (AT), annually. In recent years, the National Park Service (NPS) trailhead parking lot on Route 311 that provides access to McAfee Knob has experienced higher demand than it can accommodate.

The NPS has been studying the AT Triple Crown Area (McAfee Knob, Dragon's Tooth, and Tinker Cliffs hikes) since 2017. The U.S. Department of Transportation's Volpe Center completed a Transit Feasibility Study for the NPS in February 2021 which proposed scenarios for providing shuttle service to and from the trailhead parking lots. The baseline scenario from the study is what was used to develop the current shuttle system, offering a creative approach in determining a new travel market for public transportation.

HOW PROGRAM WAS CARRIED OUT/PROGRAM RESULTS

Roanoke County received demonstration grant funding from the Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) for the McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle in the amount of \$97,920 to be utilized by December 31, 2023. Roanoke County had to provide a local match of \$24,480, making the funding an 80/20 split with DRPT.

Roanoke County released a Request for Proposal and received two offers. The County selected Ride Source as this organization is local to the area, thus enhancing the local economy and bringing more jobs to the area. It was also the more cost-efficient option of the two bids.

In the first 37 days of service, Roanoke County spent \$51,834 which included the one-time startup cost and three months of operational cost. The startup cost included cameras and Real Time Tracking on

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both vehicles. This cost is associated with a turnkey operation. Roanoke County pays Ride Source \$112 per hour, and Ride Source provides the drivers, the vehicle, gas, and maintenance and repairs coverage. Roanoke County received \$3,570 in fares from the 716 reservations. This amount goes back to offset the cost of service.

For Fiscal Year 2023, Roanoke County budgeted \$123,065.51 in operational costs, \$97,920 from DRPT funding and \$24,480 from the County's match.

During months where the shuttle is operating for 144 hours (November 2022, August 2023, and November 2023), expenses were and are estimated to be \$14,467.52 with the highest expenses being salaries and wages for the drivers at \$3,323.33, gas and fuel at \$3,091.20, salaries for dispatch at \$2,754.00, and payroll tax expenses at \$1,823.20.

In September 2022, March 2023, May 2023, June 2023, and October 2023, the shuttle ran or will run for 156 hours per month. This makes the salaries and wages for the drivers at \$3,593.33, gas and fuel at \$3,348.80, salaries for dispatch at \$2,983.50, and payroll tax expenses at \$1,973.05.

In October 2022, April 2023, and July 2023, the shuttle ran or will run for 168 hours per month. This increased the salaries and wages for the drivers to \$3,863.33, gas and fuel to \$3,606.40, salaries for dispatch to \$3,213.00, and payroll tax expenses to \$2,754.00.

In September 2023, the shuttle will operate for 24 hours more than it did in September of 2022 making this the largest month. Salaries and wages for the drivers will be at \$3,863.33, gas and fuel at \$3,864.00, salaries for dispatch at \$3,213.00, and payroll tax expenses at \$2,122.90.

Money is also allocated on a consistent basis for advertising and marketing at \$200.00 per month, insurance and general liability at \$188.29 per month, workers comp at \$200.00 per month, auto insurance at \$927.50 per month, job supplies at \$50.00 per month, legal and professional services at

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\$291.67 per month, office supplies and software at \$200.00 per month, other business expenses at \$308.33 per month, repairs and maintenance at \$550.00 per month, taxes and licenses at \$83.33 per month, telephone at \$143.33 per month, utilities at \$83.33 per month, and other vehicle expenses at \$250.00 per month.

Year-to-date, the expenses for the shuttle total \$50,876.89. This number includes three months' worth of invoices for the operational cost.

Innovative Solution

The nationally-recognized McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle service successfully met the objectives of addressing the acute parking demand and congestion challenges at the McAfee Knob Trailhead parking lot. From there, the County worked to get the funding necessary to complete the objective of providing an easy-to-understand and a consistent service design for the public.

Proving the shuttle service was accessible for people of all ages and abilities, a rider review said, "It was great! Easy to sign up for, prompt & personable service. As an older person not great with technology, I appreciated that they just had our name on a list and I didn't have to pull up my confirmation on my cell phone."

These specific goals fell under larger objectives that were achieved, such as collaborating with the National Park Service and Appalachian Trail Conservancy to improve the access and accommodations for hikers.

From September 2, 2022 through the close of the 2022 season, there were 716 reservations and 488 individuals transported within 37 days of service. A weekend of note was October 21-23 which had 161 reservations, 24% of total rides from the 2022 operations.

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Based on the 2022 weekly statistics of the shuttle, October was the most popular month with 446 reservations in comparison to September's 155 reservations and November's 115 reservations.

Providing the shuttle service during "peak leaf season" brought a safe and economical experience for hikers to enjoy all the area has to offer and was critical to October's success.

It is important to note that for an entire weekend in October, the shuttle service did not accept reservations to the trailhead due to the weather risks brought by Hurricane Ian. While October was the most successful month for the shuttle service, this success is still without the potential reservations the first weekend of October may have brought. While the shuttle service did not accept reservations that weekend, it did help rescue two thru hikers bringing them safely to the Park and Ride off I-81 exit 140.

Riders have praised the shuttle's convenience. "Our experience was excellent. The pick-up location was convenient, bus comfortable, the drivers personable and they even waited for us to get down off the mountain (we were a bit slow and the last pickup)."

Several reviewers noted how glad they were to not have to worry about parking in an already full parking lot. "We were happy we took it when we got to the small parking lot and there were no spaces and cars milling about!! Well worth the money!"

Mention of the timeliness of the shuttle was a frequent review. "We had a great experience with the shuttle! The bus arrived on time at both the park n' ride and at the trailhead."

The shuttle continues to be an overall fantastic resource for the community following its reopening in March. "Great information, friendly drivers ... highly recommend. Let us relax and not worry with wrestling for spots/driving on 311."

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The shuttle proved to be especially valued by out-of-town hikers. Larger groups (i.e., groups of at least 20 hikers from Virginia Commonwealth University and Virginia Tech) also took advantage of the shuttle service.

Collaboration

Roanoke County staff meets monthly with a local group of stakeholders that began in 2017 to discuss visitor numbers, parking issues and other operational items involving the McAfee Knob area. This group is largely responsible for spreading the word about the shuttle service through their network of communication near and far.

Letters of support for grant funding from this group include local jurisdictions, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club, which have witnessed some of the most confounding parking scenarios imaginable at the trailhead parking lot.

The National Park Service provides support for the shuttle noting that “maintaining safe and efficient access to this location is critical for visitors from around the world.” In its initial support of this project, the National Park Service declared it would assist partners in their efforts to ensure safe and convenient access for all visitors.

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) declared its support because “maintaining safe and efficient access to this location is critical in maintaining a significant economic driver for the County, while preserving its reputation as an international destination for outdoor recreation.”

Model for Other Localities

In October 2020, increased visitation to McAfee Knob created severe and unsafe parking issues at the McAfee Knob Trailhead parking lot and along Old Catawba Road resulting in ticketing and towing by Roanoke County police.

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Roanoke County worked with VDOT to mitigate the illegal and unsafe parking issues on Old Catawba Road by installing “No Parking” signs in January 2021. In September 2021, to further alleviate the parking congestion at the McAfee Knob Trailhead parking lot, Roanoke County’s Catawba Greenway and trailhead parking lot opened with 25 additional parking spaces and a new connection to the Appalachian Trail (AT). Despite these efforts, additional measures were needed to address the parking congestion and safety issues at the trailhead parking lot.

In February 2021, the National Park Service received the final report from the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Volpe Center’s transit feasibility analysis for the Triple Crown area. The purpose of this project was to examine the feasibility of operating a shuttle service to one or more of the trailheads that make up the Triple Crown of the AT in Virginia. This project was completed to inform a Visitor Use Management (VUM) Plan being developed by the NPS Denver Service Center Planning Division and is intended to set the course for the future of the Triple Crown, including recommended improvements to accommodate user demand over the next 15-20 years. Within this document the Transit Feasibility Study was created to address the following goals:

Goal 1: Address acute parking demand and congestion challenges at the McAfee Knob trailhead

Goal 2: Disperse use across trailheads to improve visitor experience, visitor safety, and resource conditions along the Triple Crown trail segments

Goal 3: Connect to other destinations in the region to provide easily accessible service to a greater number of people

Goal 4: Provide a simple, easy-to-understand, and consistent service design for the public

Referencing the final report from the National Park Service Transit Feasibility Study, Roanoke County staff reviewed five different scenarios recommended to accomplish the above four goals. Of the five

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scenarios, the baseline scenario of transporting riders from the Exit 140 Park and Ride in Salem, Virginia, to the McAfee Knob Trailhead parking lot was selected by Roanoke County staff to assist in transporting riders safely to the trailhead parking lot and to address the issues that occurred in October 2020.

By implementing the baseline shuttle scenario, Roanoke County was aligning the launch of the shuttle with two of the priorities that were outlined in the County's Comprehensive Plan for the Catawba Community Planning Area. The County aimed to prioritize the improvement of access and accommodations of the AT for hikers visiting McAfee Knob in collaboration with the National Park Service and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy. Within these priorities for the larger Catawba community are objectives specific to the shuttle service which include addressing the acute parking demand and congestion challenges at McAfee Knob and to provide a simple, easy-to-understand, and consistent service design for the public.

The shuttle launched for service September 2, 2022 through November 27, 2022. The shuttle resumed services on March 3, 2023 and will remain in operation through November 26, 2023. Year to date, the shuttle has made 395 trips, providing services to 237 riders over the course of 49 days.

Tickets can be reserved online or bought through walk-up bookings. While waiting at the shuttle stops, riders can track the shuttle via the Live Tracker on the website.

DRPT has awarded Roanoke County an additional \$170,709 with \$42,677 local matching funds for future projects, including potential additional stops and expansion as the area continues to develop.

Roanoke County staff continue to meet monthly with the local group of stakeholders to keep up the partnership and ensure open lines of communication.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS See attached news articles and PowerPoint presentation

Pilot shuttle program ascends to McAfee Knob

Sam Wall

Sep 1, 2022



Bryan Johnson and Lisa Sink are owner-operators of the Ride Source McAfee Knob hiker shuttle using a Caribbean blue, 20-passenger retired seasonal shuttle pilot program will operate on Friday, Saturday, Sunday and holiday Mondays from Sept. 2 through Nov. 27, before starting up
MATT GENTRY, The Roanoke Times

Sam Wall



One of Southwest Virginia’s most visited trails will be a little easier to hike thanks to a pilot shuttle program.

Roanoke County officially launched its shuttle service from the park-and-ride off Interstate 81’s exit 140 to the trailhead at McAfee Knob on Virginia 311, something county officials say will help alleviate the yearslong parking issues at the iconic Appalachian Trail location.

There are limited spots in the parking lot at the start of the trail, which often leads to people parking along the roadside or on nearby side streets, especially during the peak usage in the fall and spring.

In addition to quelling the traffic that often overflows to the sides of the narrow, mountainous roads, the \$10 shuttle service will make the nearly 8-mile trail more accessible to those without automobiles.

“People who use the Smart Way bus now have easier access to the trail,” said Megan Cronise, the county’s assistant director of planning. “The possibilities are really endless for who can use the service. People can travel here on the train and now have reliable transportation to the trail as well.”

Bryan Johnson and Lisa Sink are owner-operators of the Ride Source McAfee Knob hiker shuttle — they were the bidders awarded the contract as the result of a procurement process.

The repurposed Caribbean blue 20-passenger school bus that will be used as the shuttle will run from Friday through Sunday starting today until Nov. 27. Service will resume March 3, 2023, and run through Nov. 26, 2023.

The shuttle will depart every 30 minutes from the park-and-ride, following a route to the Catawba Community Center to turn around and then safely deliver passengers to the designated shuttle pull-off near the McAfee Knob Trailhead parking lot, according to the county.

The route is approximately a 15-minute ride to and from the trailhead. The service will be available from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. through September, with end times going down to 6:30 p.m. in October and 5 p.m. in November.

The service is all digital, with hikers buying tickets online, on their phone or through a tablet on the bus.

Commonly referred to as the “most photographed” spot on the roughly 2,190-mile trail extending from Georgia to Maine, McAfee Knob saw 50,000 visitors in 2021, according to Cronise.

Catawba District Supervisor Martha Hooker applauded the efforts by multiple organizations and agencies in the state for completing the project.

Among the agencies that advocated for or funded the project are the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation, VDOT, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club, the Roanoke Valley-Alleghany Regional Commission, Visit Virginia’s Blue Ridge and the Virginia Tourism Corporation, according to the county.

“It truly takes a village to accomplish a project like the McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle, and we are grateful for the support and enthusiasm of all of these partners,” Hooker said Thursday morning at a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Made possible by an approximately \$100,000 grant from the DRPT, the program will be funded through November 2023, according to Cronise, also noting ticket sales will go toward funding the service.

She said while there is no other grant funding at the moment, the county will continue to pursue it as a funding source for the shuttle going forward, hopefully expanding in the future and making it a permanent fixture.

Cronise said how the service might be run in the future depends on how it goes in the fall, with revisions likely for spring 2023.

Additionally, a pedestrian bridge from the trailhead parking lot to the start of the trail is planned for 2024, which will allow hikers to get to the trail without crossing the busy and winding roads.

Diana Christopulos, a member of the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club, said she and her nearly 300 cohorts who take care of approximately 120 miles of trail in the region are thrilled with the new shuttle service.

“If you drive up there in July you won’t see many cars,” she said. “But starting in the fall and in the spring, 600 to 1,100 people go up there and parking gets overflowed ... it’s dangerous for everyone.

“We [volunteers] have wanted this for a while. That way on weekends and holidays we can smooth things out.”

For more information on the new shuttle service, visit www.mcafeeshuttle.com.

More Information

The shuttle departs every 30 minutes from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Fridays through Sundays and occasional Mondays for holidays from the Park and Ride lot at Interstate 81's Exit 140 and will run starting Friday through Nov. 27 and then resume March 3 to Nov. 26, 2023.

To make reservations: Visit www.McAfeeShuttle.com and click BOOK NOW. Tickets are \$5 one way plus booking fees.

For more information visit: www.roanokecountyva.gov/McAfeeKnobShuttle



Local state and regional dignitaries participated in a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the start of a new McAfee Knob trailhead shuttle at the Interstate 81 Exit 140 park-and-ride Thursday. The shuttle pilot program is funded by anticipated fares, the Department of Rail and Public Transportation and Roanoke County. MATT GENTRY, The Roanoke Times



A shuttle service pull-off has been created at the Appalachian Trail McAfee Knob parking lot on Virginia 311. MATT GENTRY, The Roanoke Times

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Taking The McAfee Knob Shuttle To Virginia's Appalachian Trail Hotspot



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By Jennifer Bain (/users/jennifer-bain) - May 21st, 2023



Volunteer ridge runner Bill Dawson photographs hikers at McAfee Knob on the Appalachian National Scenic Trail/Jennifer Bain

Before my first giddy moment alone on the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (<https://www.nps.gov/appa/index.htm>) in Virginia (<https://www.virginia.org>), I stood in a parking lot across from the trailhead studying a stern sign and feeling anxious.

"Are you ready to hike to McAfee Knob?" it asked. "You are if you have at least two quarts of water, durable hiking boots, a working flashlight, an early start, stayed on trails at all times, high energy foods, raingear/extra clothing, COMMON SENSE."

Without these things, it continued, you could face dehydration, cramps, headaches, sprained/broken ankles, being lost in the woods at night, or not having enough time to reach the Knob. You could damage or destroy fragile plants, wind up hungry and out of energy, or just be wet, cold and miserable.

It was 8:30 a.m. on a sunny spring day in May and while I hadn't brought rain gear or a flashlight, I did have three layers of clothes and everything else listed for what promised to be a four- to six-hour hike.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE PARKS (/ARTICLE-CATEGORY/CLIMATE-CHANGE)

NATIONAL PARK TRAVEL (/ARTICLE-CATEGORY/TRAVEL)



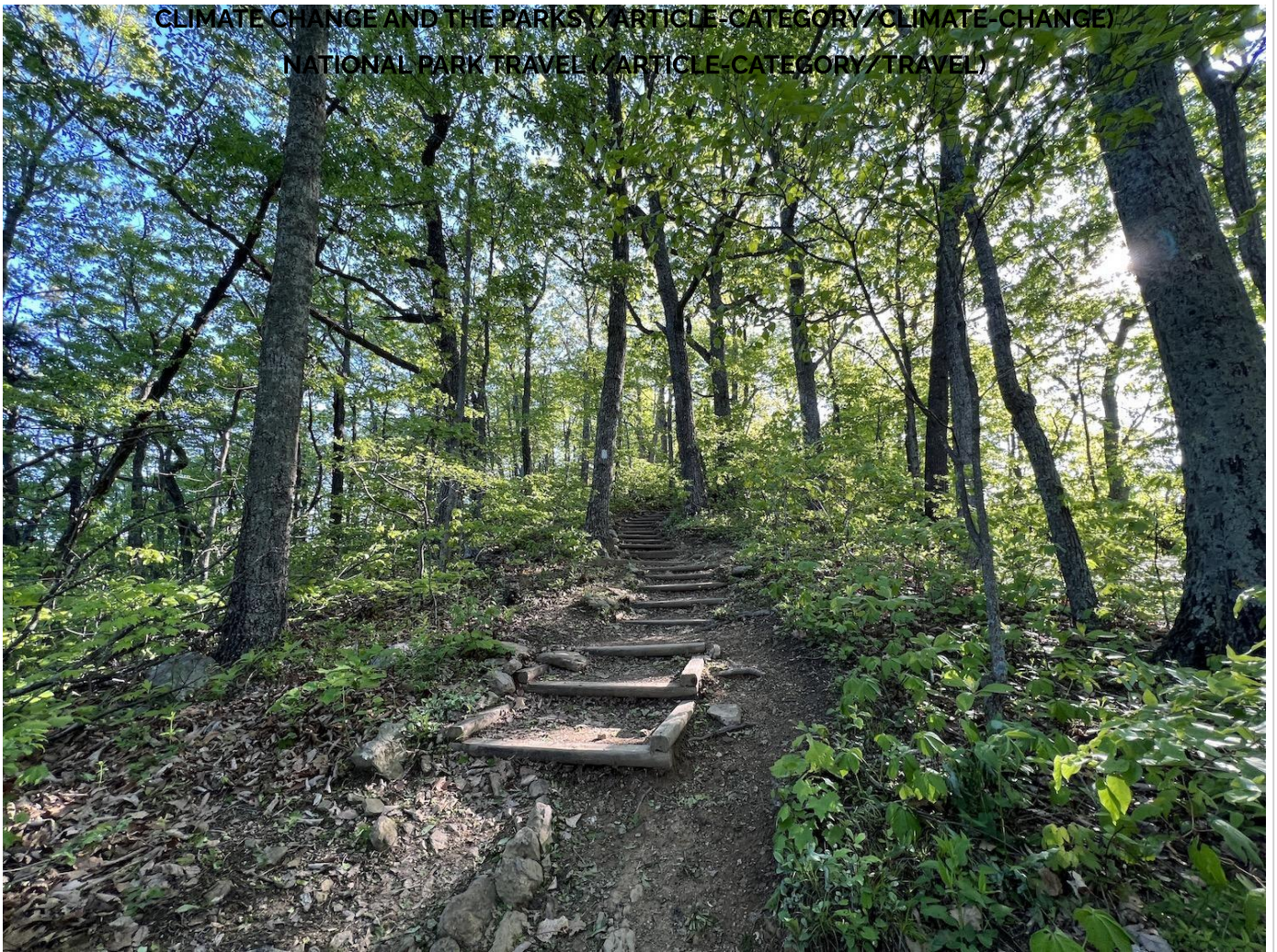
Ride Source founders Bryan Johnson and Lisa Sink run the McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle in the Roanoke, Virginia area/Jennifer Bain

The new Ride Source shuttle (<https://mcafeeshuttle.com>) had whisked me to the trailhead so I wouldn't contribute to the overcrowded parking lot problem. As a solo hiker, I took comfort in knowing that I was expected back in about six hours or, worst-case scenario, by the last shuttle at 6:45 p.m.

I read the pointers on being safe in bear country and used the porta-potty, painfully aware that there would be just one vault toilet over the next 7.8 miles. Construction hadn't started yet on a pedestrian bridge (<https://www.virginiadot.org/projects/salem/appalachian-trail-bridge-over-route-311-in-roanoke-county.asp>) that promises to get hikers safely across busy Route 311, so I waited for a break in the traffic and dashed across.

The first thing I saw as I stepped on the trail was a brilliant purple patch of irises.

The first thing I heard was the loud, whistled call of the Tufted Titmouse.



The McAfee Knob trail starts out with a short, steep climb in an instantly beautiful forest/Jennifer Bain

For those, like me, that need an introduction to the Appalachian Trail, it's a 2,190-mile-long public footpath that "traverses the scenic, wooded, pastoral, wild and culturally resonant lands of the Appalachian Mountains" in 14 states from Maine to Georgia. Conceived in 1921, built by private citizens and completed in 1937, the trail is managed by the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, numerous state agencies and countless volunteers.

Bill Bryson famously wrote *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail* and Robert Redford later starred in the film. Virginia's Blue Ridge (<https://www.visitroanokeva.com>) proudly promotes three hiking legs along the trail in the Roanoke Valley as its "Triple Crown."

I was prepared to tackle the iconic McAfee Knob but not Dragon's Tooth and Tinker Cliffs. Dragon's Tooth is a deceptive 4.6 miles, but it's apparently a steep climb that ends on top of a 35-foot-tall quartzite rock spire. Tinker Cliffs is a doable 7.7 miles but has nearly 2,000 feet of elevation gain.

McAfee Knob is the longest hike by a smidge, but it's also the gentlest and it takes you to a pronounced rock ledge with legendary views. It's one of the most recognizable points along the trail and the most popular hike in Virginia's Blue Ridge. You've surely seen the photos of grinning hikers standing — or sitting — at the edge of the mountain.



Writer Jennifer Bain takes her turn on McAfee Knob for photos/Jennifer Bain

Wild Turkey. Yellow Warbler. American Crow. Scarlet Tanager. Red-eyed Vireo. Black-throated Blue Warbler. Blue Jay.

The mountains near Roanoke (<https://www.visitroanokeva.com>) were alive with the sound of songbirds that Friday morning. This I knew thanks to the Cornell Lab's Merlin Bird ID app (<https://merlin.allaboutbirds.org>). You can upload photos to your phone or turn on the sound ID and see what comes up.

The mountain was unexpectedly quiet on the human front, but I wasn't fooled — more than 50,000 people visit McAfee Knob each year.

I had been alone on the shuttle — except for Ride Source (<https://goridesource.com>) owner-operators Lisa Sink and Bryan Johnson, plus driver Jonathan Wright — and the trailhead parking lot was only a quarter full. I counted about a dozen fellow hikers on my way up to the Knob. But I also knew that Triple Crown crowding has prompted the NPS and its partners to do a visitor use management study (<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/projectHome.cfm?projectId=106762>).

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE PARKS (/ARTICLE-CATEGORY/CLIMATE-CHANGE)

NATIONAL PARK TRAVEL (/ARTICLE-CATEGORY/TRAVEL)



A pedestrian bridge is coming, but for now hikers must cross busy Route 311 to get to the McAfee Knob trailhead/Jennifer Bain

There have been conflicts among hikers, drone users, climbers and trail runners. Trail widening and shortcuts, as well as visitor-created campsites, are proliferating and causing loss of vegetation and erosion. Visitor-created fires and visitor-wildlife conflicts are on the rise. There's a lack of basic amenities such as wayfinding and vault toilets. There are several dangerous highway crossings.

A plan should be unveiled this summer and strategies could include hiker shuttles, modifying or adding campsites, actively managing parking and rerouting trails. When the county put out the call last year for a McAfee Knob trailhead shuttle, Ride Source won the contract and piloted the route from September to November.

Now the shuttle runs Friday to Sunday from March to November from the Exit 140 Park and Ride. It takes just 10 minutes, 15 if the parking lot is full and the bus has to drive down to the Catawba post office to turn around. It's \$10 return.

"We want to make it easy for people to visit these places," Sink told me. "With COVID, everything got overloved."



The trailhead to McAfee Knob is near the curve of a busy road/Jennifer Bain

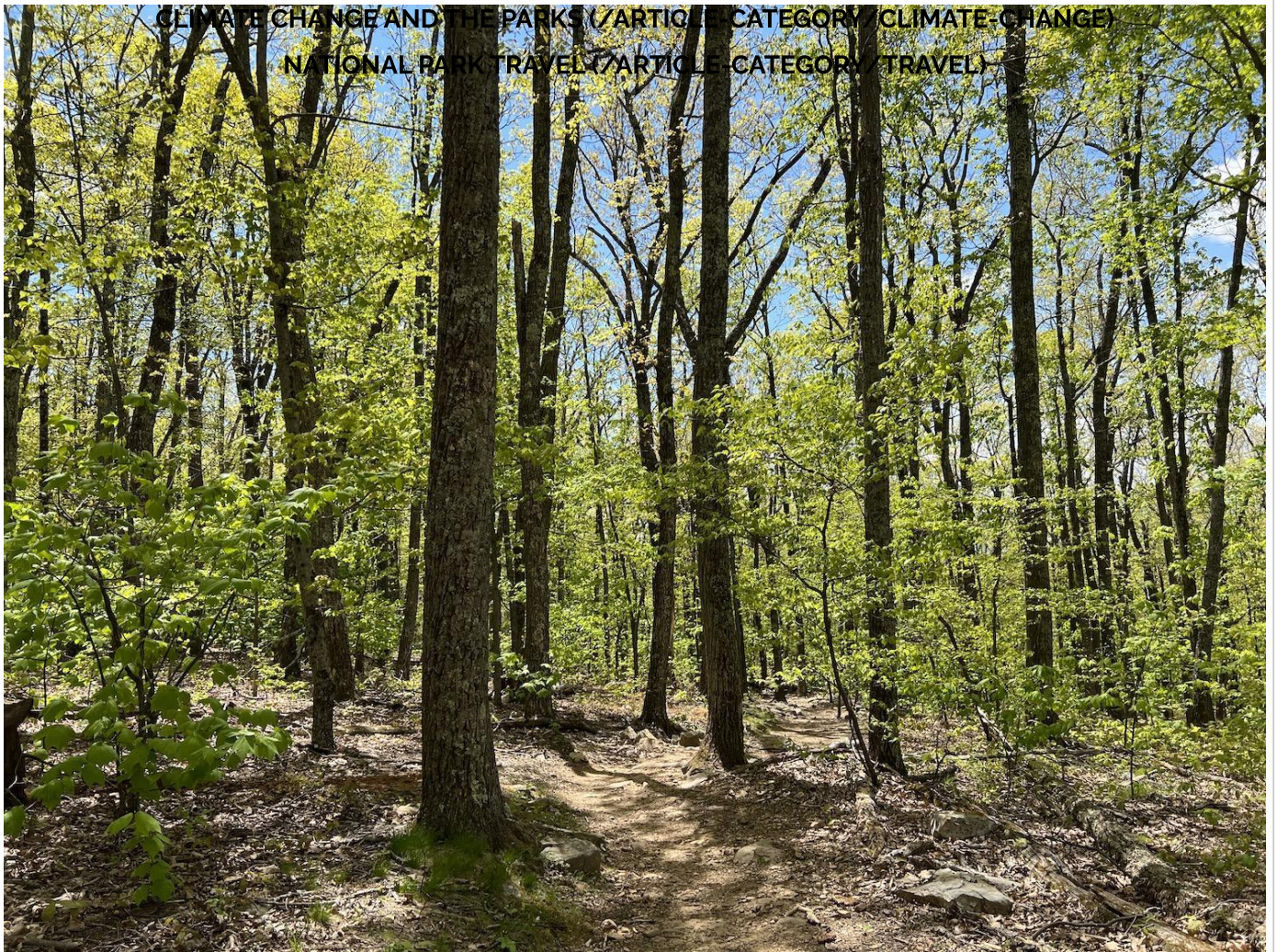
That's a nice way to put it.

All kinds of people started hiking and getting outdoors during the pandemic, and they didn't always know how to behave. Sometimes they show up to places like the McAfee Knob trailhead in flip-flops and t-shirts like they're going for a stroll, and carrying Starbucks coffee instead of water.

"It's such a popular trail, I don't think people realize you're going on a hike," Sink said. Indeed, seeing the Knob in so many social media posts makes it seem easily attainable. One person recently called Ride Source from the trailhead parking lot and asked for lift to the Knob, not realizing it was up to them to hike those 7.8 miles.

Hairy woodpecker. Pileated Woodpecker.

It sounded like one woodpecker drilling into a tree, so maybe the Merlin app was confused.



The McAfee Knob portion of the Appalachian Trail is serene in May/Jennifer Bain

The big decision you have to make when hiking McAfee Knob is what to do after the first 10 minutes when you come to a trail map and a fork. Turn right for the single-file and ridiculously scenic Appalachian Trail. Turn left for the much wider, easier and flatter Fire Road.

I took the trail up because I'm a morning person and wanted to harness that first burst of energy. I took the road down because it's easier on the knees. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

As I eased into the rhythm of the hike and reminded myself to slow down since I had nothing else planned for the day, I took two short detours to check out camping shelters.

The Johns Spring Shelter honors the late John P. Haranzo, a beloved Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club volunteer, and his dog and hiking companion Chester. There's a memorial plaque with a poem by Haranzo, and a newspaper article that explains that he committed suicide in 2001. His family funded the shelter but since they aren't usually named after people, everyone agreed to dub a nearby spring Johns Spring so the shelter could become Johns Spring Shelter.



A single toilet can be found along the Appalachian Trail side of the McAfee Knob route/Jennifer Bain

The other shelter, Catawba, was near a lovely wooden vault toilet nestled in the trees. It was also near a reforestation area with a handful of discreet signs urging people to stay on the trail to help restore natural plant life.

Wood Thrush. Eastern Towhee.

The woods got quieter for a spell until I hit the place where the trail reunited with the fire road. From there, it was a final 1.3-mile uphill push to the overlook, which sounds easier and shorter than it was. Or maybe I was getting tired.

At the top, I saw the astounding view but also witnessed first-hand why volunteers are the soul of the Appalachian Trail.



Retired clergyman Bill Dawson is a volunteer ridge runner with the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club/Jennifer Bain

Volunteer Bill Dawson was there welcoming people. The Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club (<https://www.ratc.org>) "ridge runner" checks shelters, campsites and water flows. He carries clickers to count "day hikers" like me, "section hikers" overnighting while doing the Triple Crown, and "through hikers" walking from Maine to Georgia or vice versa.

A 74-year-old retired clergyman, Dawson also loves offering to photograph people. "This is the fun part — the social. Everyone's excited to be here and for most of them it's the first time. We meet people from all over the world. This is on their bucket list and here it was in my back door and I didn't know it until I was 70 years old. It has turned into an addiction for me. I just love it."

We chatted in fits and spurts, in between hikes, and I learned that Dawson volunteers here three times a week during "trail season" (but hikes it personally year-round). His wife won't join him because of the dearth of toilets.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE PARKS (/ARTICLE-CATEGORY/CLIMATE-CHANGE)

NATIONAL PARK TRAVEL (/ARTICLE-CATEGORY/TRAVEL)



Those photos on McAfee Knob look dangerous, but there are actually several ledges hidden from view/Jennifer Bain

I devoured sweet and salty trail mix, and finished half my water, while watching a young dad change his baby's diaper on the ground. I listened to tourists from Germany, Minnesota and upstate New York rave about this special place. I watched people politely take turns standing on the Knob for a photo. Well, there was one guy who got a tad peevish when asked to pack up and move out of the prime photo spot.

By the way, that photo spot looks more dangerous than it actually is because there's another couple of feet of rock ledges that you can't see until you're standing there.

Clive Hillyard, another ridge runner, wandered by to talk about all the trash he'd picked up that morning. He and Dawson talked about a wedding that took place on the Knob that morning, and all the proposals they've seen.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE PARKS (/ARTICLE-CATEGORY/CLIMATE-CHANGE)

NATIONAL PARK TRAVEL (/ARTICLE-CATEGORY/TRAVEL)



Volunteer ridge runners Bill Dawson, left, and Clive Hillyard, right, chat with each other/Jennifer Bain

It's fair to say that McAfee Knob never disappoints. Dawson loves being a witness to people's joy.

"Oh, you rock — thank you so much," a group of day trippers told him as they left after securing their photos.

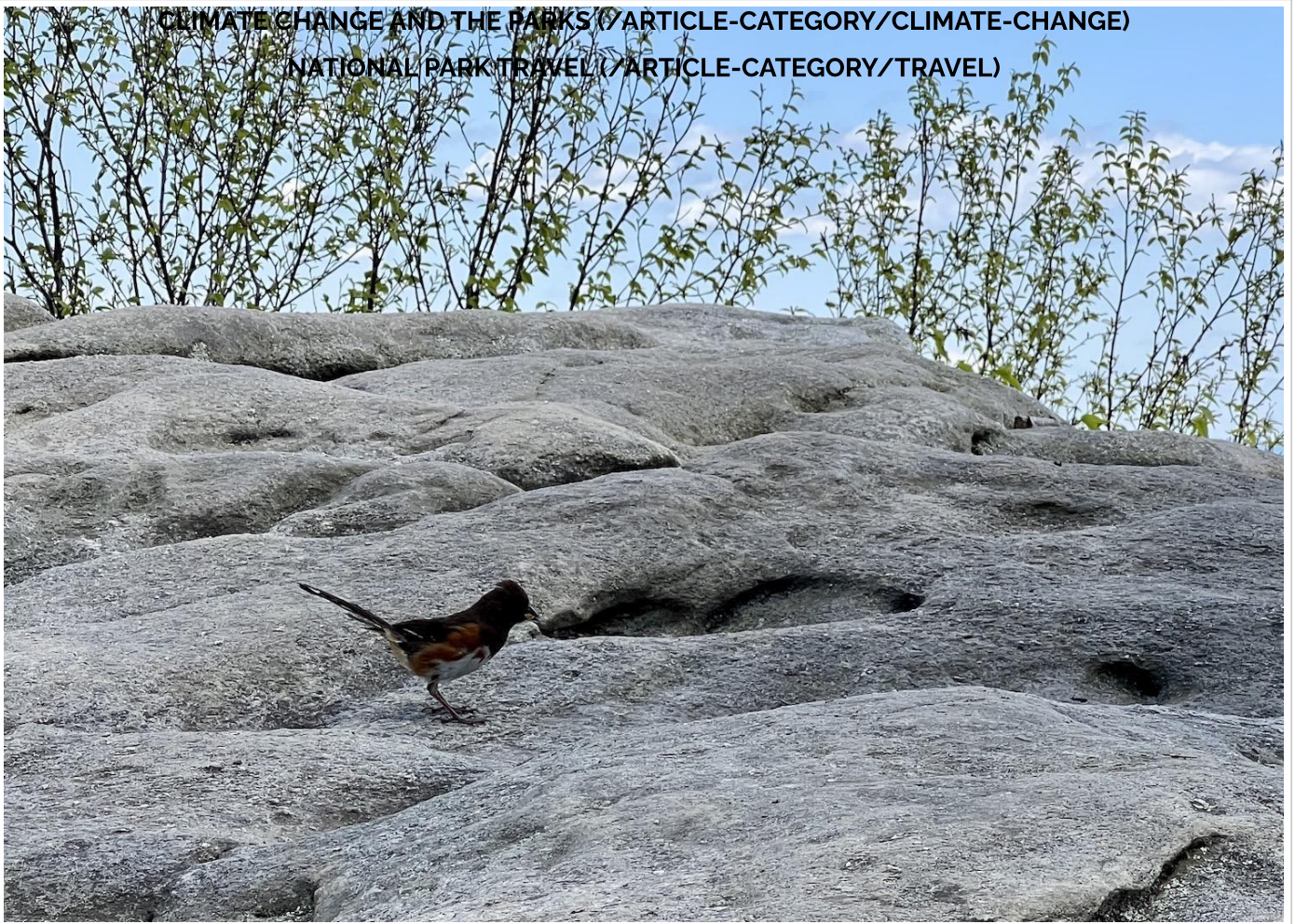
"Thank you again," enthused another guy. "That was cool."

I spent most of my time at the top transfixed by a hyperactive bird that looked like a plump robin but with a white breast and some reddish-brown coloring. It was an Eastern Towhee, which are hard to spot because they usually hide in the undergrowth. This one hopped all over the rocks almost mimicking the steady stream of hikers that was coming and going.

After the towhee flew off into the shrubs, it felt like my cue to leave. This time, when I got down to the trail-fork junction, I took the Fire Road.

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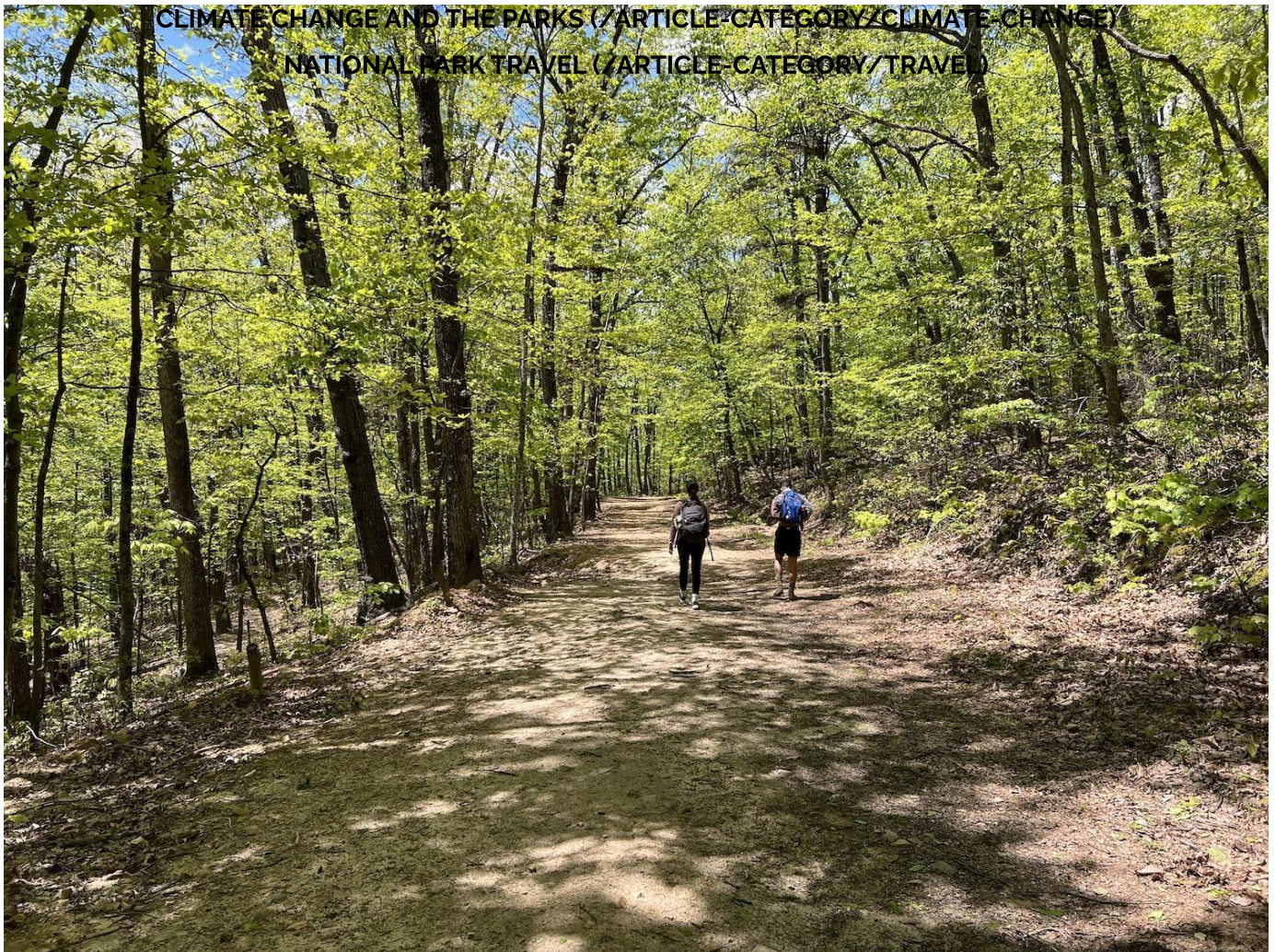


I only had a cellphone camera when this Eastern Towhee hopped by/Jennifer Bain

Dark-eyed Junco. Great Crested Flycatcher. Eastern Towhee. Carolina Chickadee. Northern Cardinal. Scarlet Tanager. American Redstart. Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Northern Mockingbird. Chipping Sparrow. Worm-eating Warbler. Indigo Bunting.

"It takes some skill to read while you're hiking," said one breathless man, nodding at my hardcover notebook and not seeing the phone balanced on the open pages to catch the bird sounds.

Next time I'll carry binoculars to look for birds instead of just listening to them.



The Fire Road is a wide, flat and easy option for part of the McAfee Knob hike/Jennifer Bain

It takes most people four to six hours to hike McAfee Knob. For the record, it took me six hours — 2-1/2 hours up, 90 minutes lingering at the top, and two hours down. But I could have enjoyed another four hours and caught the last shuttle if I was more patient person and not so goal oriented.

Just as I was feeling guilty about taking the “easy” and obviously less-traveled route down, a young deer darted across the road. It stood motionless in the bushes until I made eye contact and it realized I could see it. Then it dashed away, madly waving its white tail while it thundered across the brittle carpet of dead leaves.

Eventually I stumbled unscathed off the trail and crossed the road to a parking lot that was now nearly full. I had been told I was likely to wait up to 15 minutes for the shuttle to arrive. It rounded the corner just seconds later.



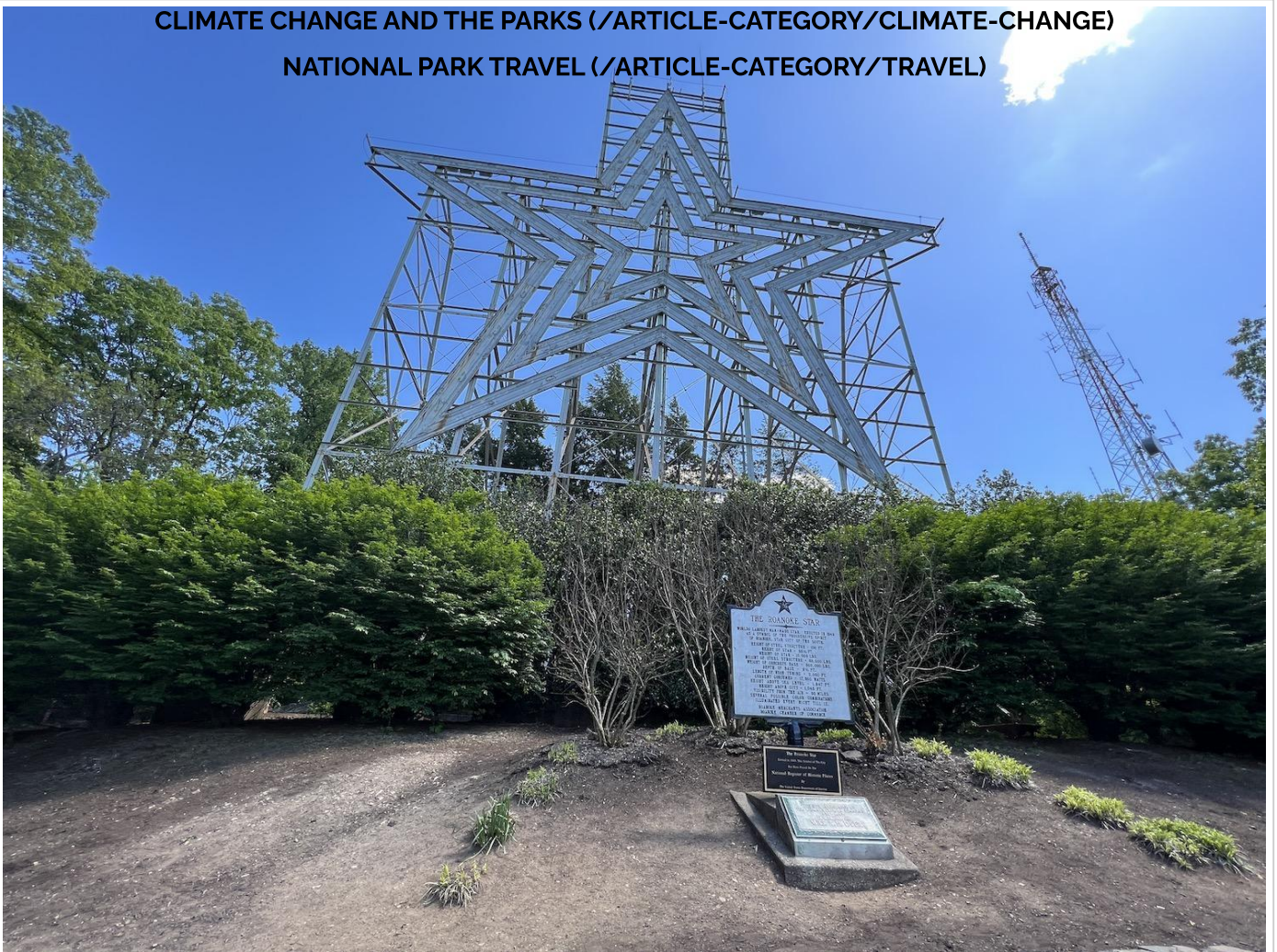
The Liberty Trust hotel in Roanoke started life as a bank and is on the National Register of Historic Places/Jennifer Bain

To get my first taste of the Appalachian Trail, drive the Blue Ridge Parkway (<https://www.nps.gov/blri/index.htm>) and visit the Booker T. Washington National Monument (<https://www.nps.gov/bowa/index.htm>) (more on that in an upcoming story), I used the Liberty Trust in downtown Roanoke as my base. The seven-story hotel is on the National Register of Historic Places and dates back to 1910 when it started life as the First National Bank. There are preserved copper doors on some of the rooms, a vintage mail drop box and two original vaults. At the Vault at the Liberty Trust restaurant, chef Andy Schlosser (the hotel's general manager) designs the constantly changing dinner menu around a travel theme with global dishes like the khachapuri (a traditional cheese-filled, boat-shaped bread from the country of Georgia) I devoured after my McAfee Knob hike.

Roanoke is nicknamed the "Star City of the South" so a drive to the Roanoke Star is a must. It sits on Mill Mountain and is illuminated every night, making it the world's largest, free-standing, man-made, illuminated star. Constructed in 1949 from 2,000 feet of neon tubing to serve as a seasonal Christmas decoration and be a symbol of the city's progressive spirit, the 88.5-foot-high star (which is actually three stars) is also on the National Register of Historic Places.

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The Roanoke Star looms over the city and is also on the National Register of Historic Places/Jennifer Bain

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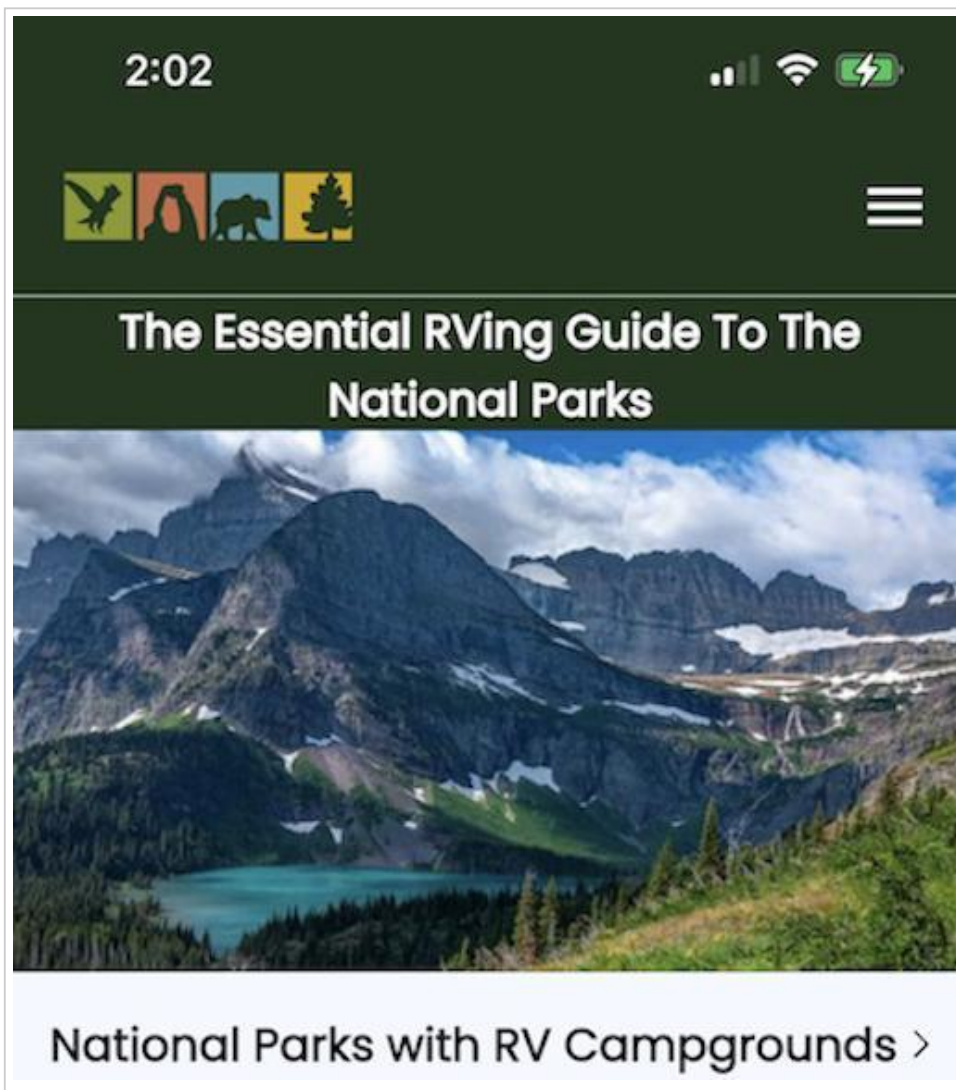


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The Essential RVing Guide



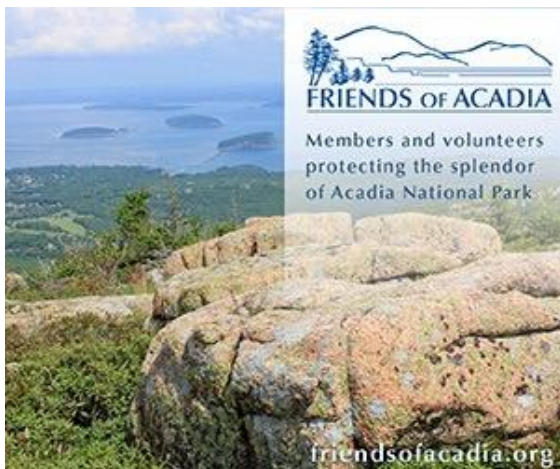
The *National Parks RVing Guide*, aka the *Essential RVing Guide To The National Parks*, is the definitive guide for RVers seeking information on campgrounds in the National Park System where they can park their rigs. It's available for free

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This app is packed with RVing specific details on more than 250 campgrounds in more than 70 parks.

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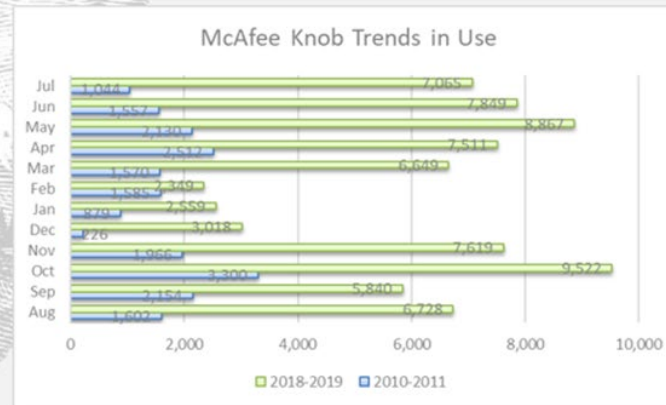
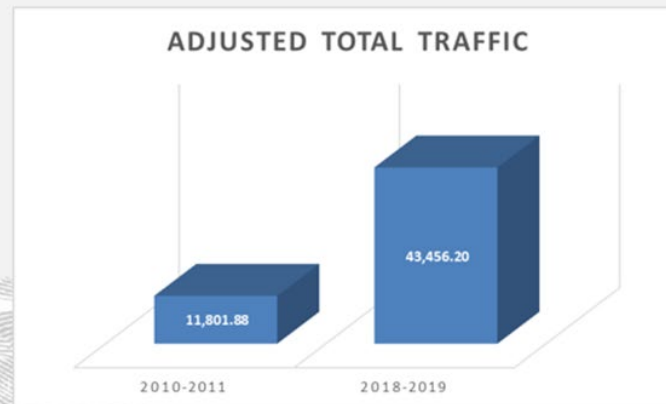
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Visitation to McAfee Knob on the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (AT) has more than tripled in the last decade, exceeding 40,000 hikers in 2021. This substantial increase has exacerbated existing challenges and created new ones.



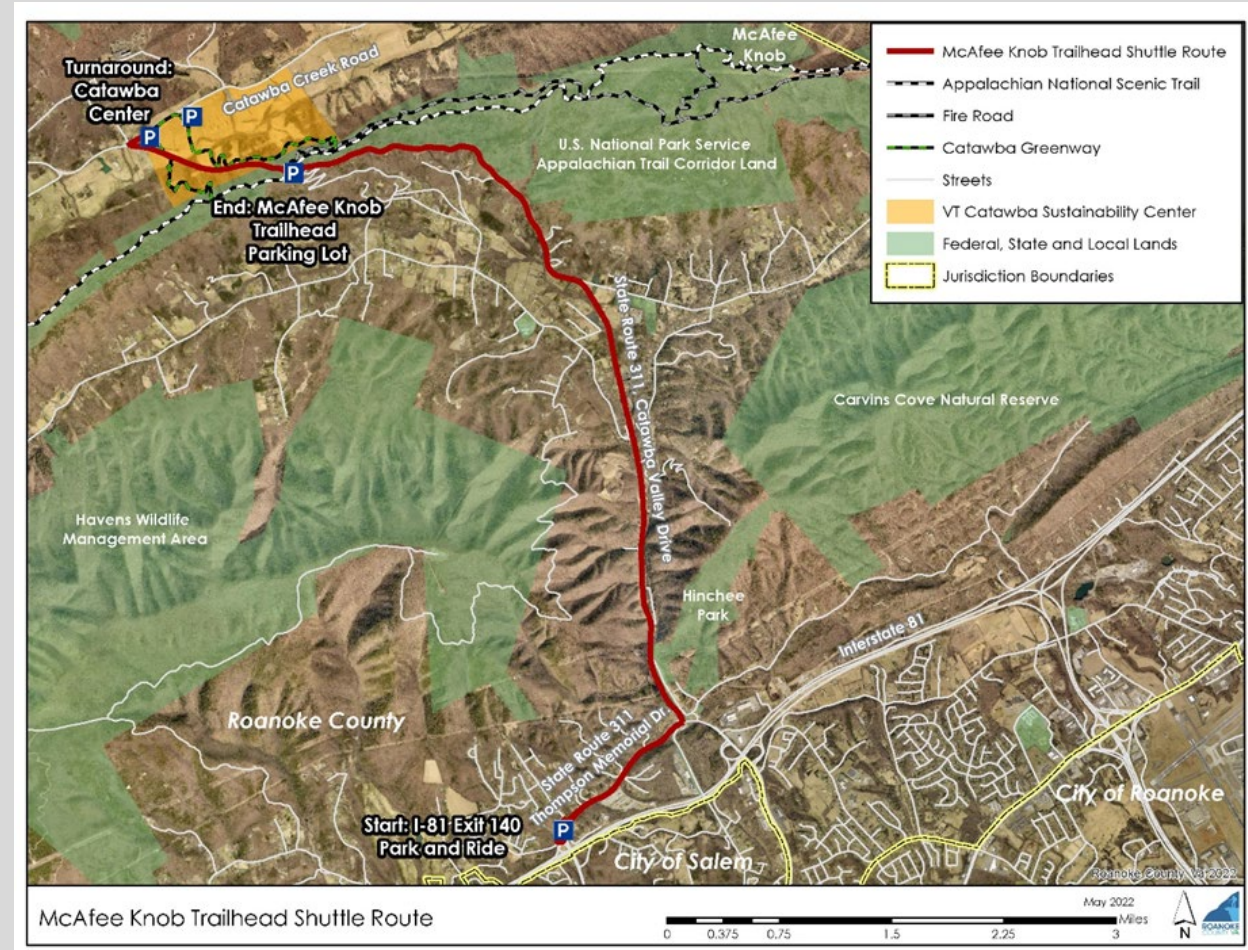
October 2020: Heavy AT visitation created severe parking issues along Old Catawba Road, resulting in ticketing and towing by Roanoke County Police.

January 2021: VDOT installed No Parking signs along Old Catawba Road which has reduced improper parking.



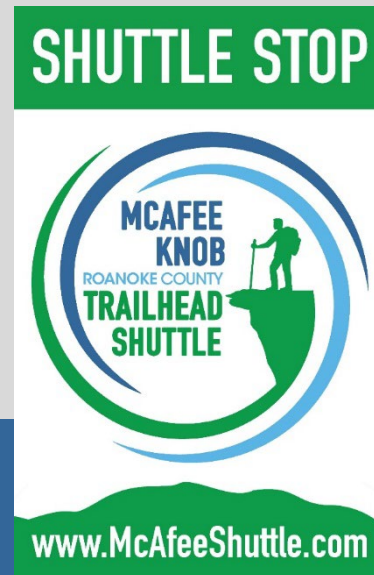
Shuttle Duration

- September 2, 2022 (Labor Day Weekend) to November 27, 2022 (end of Thanksgiving week)
- March 3, 2023 through November 26, 2023 (End of Thanksgiving week)
- Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and Holiday Mondays for 8-12 hours each day



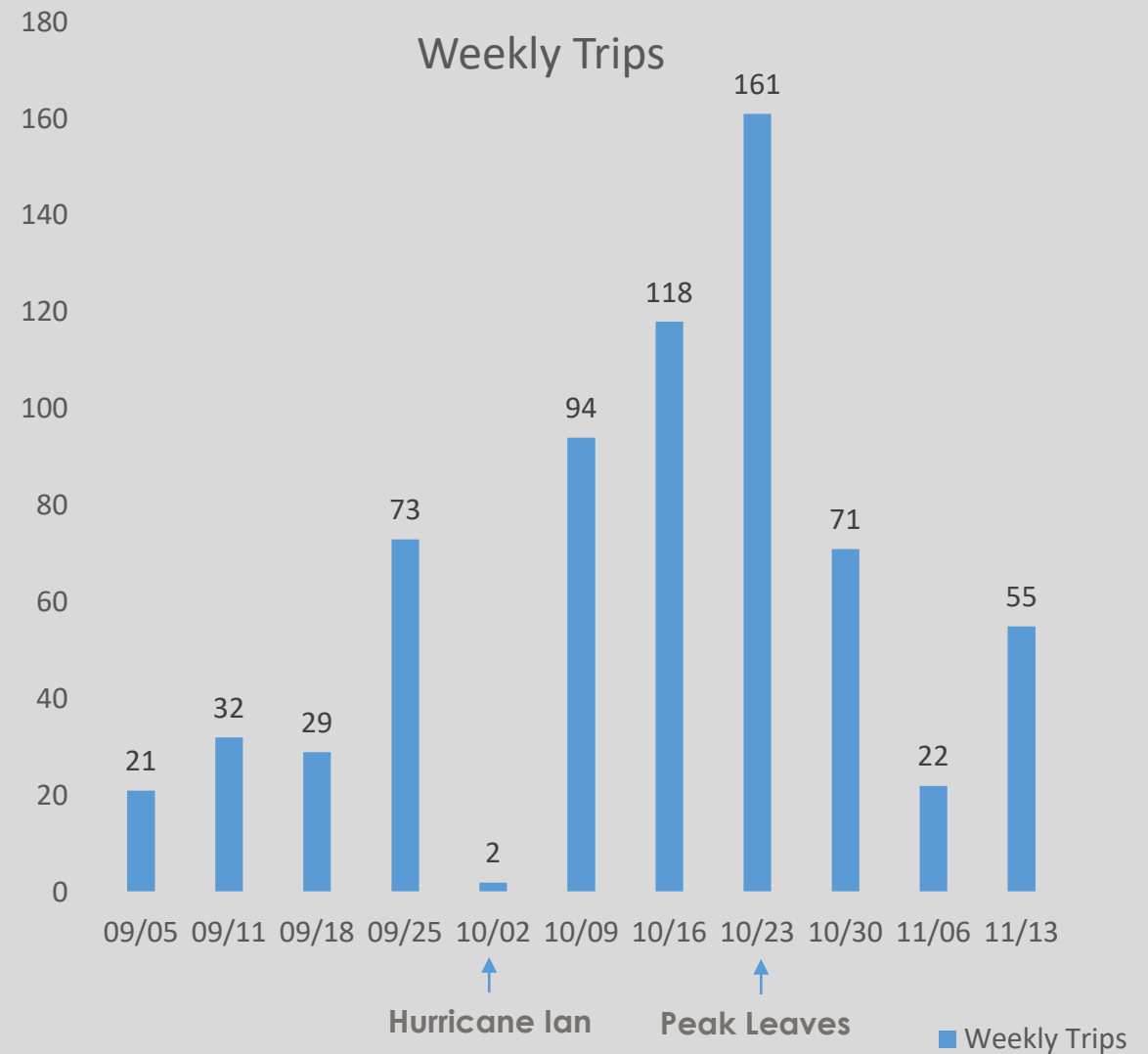
Shuttle Route

- Pick up riders at the Interstate 81 Exit 140 Park and Ride
- Turn around in the Catawba Center parking lot
- Drop off riders in the newly-constructed shuttle pull-off along Route 311 adjacent to the McAfee Knob Trailhead Parking Lot



Current Shuttle Stats

- September 2 through November 27 had 716 reservations for 488 individuals in 37 days of service
- October 21-23 had 161 reservations, 24% of total rides to date





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Roanoke offers public transit to hiking trails. Should more parts of Virginia do the same?



WYATT GORDON

JANUARY 27, 2023 12:08 AM



□ The McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle in Roanoke County. (Amy Friedenberger)

For many folks, the hardest part about hiking Roanoke County's famous McAfee Knob isn't its eight-mile length or its elevation change of nearly 1,700 feet. It's finding a parking spot in the gravel lot at the trailhead.

The pandemic pushed record levels of visitors to seek adventure and exercise in the great outdoors over the last few years, creating unprecedented parking problems at certain sites. Could a new state-sponsored shuttle become a model for helping Virginians take public transit to the trails?

Lot of issues

As an official trail maintainer and president of the [Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club](#), Bill Neilan regularly witnesses the mayhem that unfolds at McAfee Knob's parking lot. Designed to safely accommodate 50 vehicles, the gravel lot is often overrun with more than 80 cars and even more people parked along the sides of the windy, winding Route 311, according to Neilan. Last October, a dozen tow trucks descended on the lot, hauling off illegally parked vehicles and angering their

owners, who returned from the summit with no clue as to where their cars were.

“There are times people are stuck in the parking lot for hours because other visitors will come and just park anywhere and block them in,” he said. “You have people coming from all over the country to hike McAfee Knob, and when they get there they get frustrated and just park anywhere. You could build a lot twice as big, and it would still be short of spaces.”

With more than 50,000 annual visitors, McAfee Knob is one of the most photographed spots on the entire Appalachian Trail. In an effort to reduce the congestion that such intensive use causes at America’s most beautiful sites, in 2017 the National Park Service released a [Visitor Use Management Plan](#). One of the proposed improvements for Virginia’s Triple Crown — the triad of hikes including McAfee Knob, Dragon’s Tooth and Tinker Cliffs — was a trailhead shuttle.



□ The interior of the McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle. (Amy Friedenberger)

Transit to trails

When Roanoke County won an innovation grant from the Department of Rail and Public Transportation last year, the idea for a hikers’ shuttle was finally ready to

be realized. The county contracted RIDE Solutions to operate a dawn-to-dusk [McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle](#) running Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and holiday Mondays starting Sept. 1.

“This pilot project is a bit of a unicorn for us,” admitted DRPT Director Jen DeBruhl. “There is no traditional funding for this type of program, but we look at this as a way of not just providing a shuttle to the trails but a connection to regional public transportation and Amtrak. This is focused on moving visitors from outside the region more efficiently through the great natural amenities we have around McAfee Knob.”

Virginia residents and visitors alike interested in avoiding the trail’s parking problems can simply book a ride online. The shuttle picks people up at Interstate 81’s Exit 140 park-and-ride lot in Salem, which is accessible via the intercity [Virginia Breeze](#) buses as well as the local [Valley Metro Smart Way Bus](#).

Each 12-minute ride to or from the trailhead costs \$5 plus a \$1.25 booking fee and can be scheduled for the exact hour hikers would like to arrive and be picked up. The shuttle’s last day of operation until spring was Dec. 27. Over its initial 37 days of service, 716 rides were reserved.

“The county had never run any sort of shuttle service like this, so it was a ground-up, learning-as-we-go kind of thing,” said Paula Benke, Roanoke County’s transit planner. “It’s not automatically an up-and-back or round trip for everybody.”

Students would often get dropped off and then only catch the shuttle back to town. Many long-distance hikers would reserve a one-way ride into or out of town to restock gear and provisions in Salem. One lesson local officials learned is that the service is “very weather dependent.” When Hurricane Ian hit, lots of hikers booked one-way trips off the Appalachian Trail to seek shelter.



□ A shuttle driver at the service's September unveiling. (Amy Friedenberger)

More than McAfee?

Although the trailhead shuttle is shut down for the winter, the service will return on March 3 of this year and run through at least Thanksgiving weekend when the DRPT funding runs out. To make the shuttle a permanent public service, Roanoke County is currently applying for several grants.

“There is some potential for continued demonstration funding, but the maximum grant is for three years and depends upon performance and availability of funding,” DeBruhl said. “Beyond that, the locality is going to have to figure out how to fund the shuttle itself.”

National Park Service plans to build a pedestrian bridge over Route 311 mean the trailhead's gravel parking lot will be closed to all visitors beginning in 2024. The county is currently planning to continue operating the shuttle during the construction, but outside funding would make such hopes a certain prospect.

In response to shuttle users' requests that the service extend to more destinations like downtown Salem and Catawba, Roanoke County has begun conversations with the cities of Salem and Roanoke, the town of Vinton and Botetourt County to

add additional stops. Currently, riders must transfer to a local bus or walk the remaining two miles into town to eat, shop or stay in a hotel.

Another option is to add a stop serving Dragon's Tooth to alleviate parking issues at that trailhead as well. As McAfee Knob is overseen by NPS and Dragon's Tooth by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service, overcoming the jurisdictional disputes to expand the shuttle service may, however, prove too difficult.

No matter the shuttle's ultimate route, Neilan just wants to be certain of its permanent return: "I would like to see it come back because you're not going to change the congestion at the trailhead," he said. "There will never be enough parking. For those who take advantage of the shuttle, this service makes their lives much easier."

For other parts of Virginia looking to emulate Roanoke County's trailhead shuttle success, DRPT may be willing to negotiate.

"I'm not going to preclude any other such shuttles, but we have a limited amount of funding for demonstration projects and we need to focus those dollars on areas that don't have service so they can move people to jobs, education and health care, which are our focus," said DeBruhl. "But to the extent that we receive other well-thought-out ideas that could become more long-term projects, we are not opposed to taking those under consideration."



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Wyatt Gordon covers transportation, housing, and land use for the Mercury through a grant from the Piedmont Environmental Council and the Coalition for Smarter Growth. The Mercury retains full editorial control.

Wyatt is a born-and-raised Richmonder with a master's in urban planning from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and a bachelor's in international political economy from the American University in Washington, D.C. Most recently he covered transportation as Greater Washington's Virginia correspondent.

Previously he's written for the Times of India, Nairobi News, Honolulu Civil Beat, Style Weekly and RVA Magazine. He also works as a policy manager for land use and transportation at the Virginia Conservation Network. Contact him at wgordon@viriniamercury.com.

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