

COLOR QUESTS

Whether you view the leaves from panoramic peaks or during a walk in the woods, these 10 hikes will lead you to fabulous Virginia foliage

Story by **CHRISTINA NIFONG**

SHARP VIEWS Sharp Top Mountain in Bedford County offers breathtaking 360-degree views. Read about the hike you'll take to reach the top on **Page 10**.

Trail Difficulty Rating

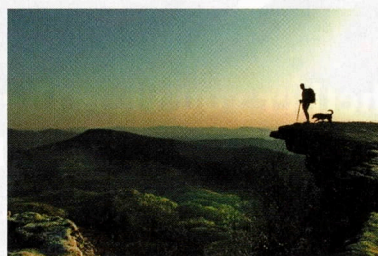
Hikingupward.com rates trails from 1 (an easy hike) through 5 (pretty tough). The number of boots indicates the difficulty level of the hike.



McAfee Knob

CATAWBA, ROANOKE COUNTIES

Made more famous than ever by 2015's "A Walk in the Woods" movie, McAfee Knob is arguably the most iconic, most photographed geological feature in Virginia and one of the jewels of the 2,200-mile, 14-state Appalachian Trail. The hike combined with Dragon's Tooth and Tinker Cliffs has been dubbed the "triple crown." Because of its popularity, it can also be crowded. Your trek begins across from Virginia 311. Come early and during the week to find a space in the parking lot. The trail is a pleasant four-mile climb, gaining 1,700 feet in elevation. You'll step beside ferns and grasses, along ridges, over boulders and through dense deciduous forests before



winding up to a wide expanse of rock that is the knob. At the top, a stone ledge juts over a steep ravine; standing on it feels like hovering in mid-air. A look around offers 270-degree panoramic views; in fall, reds, oranges and yellows blur to bring you a living oil painting. That's just the beginning of the rock playground, though. Climbing, leaping, shimmying between boulders and exploring shallow caves are all yours for the experiencing.



Sharp Top

BEDFORD COUNTY

Sharp Top is one of three mountains in the Peaks of Otter Recreation Area, along the Blue Ridge Parkway. There are also a visitors center, lodge, lake, historic farm, campground and series of hikes. The trek is short — about one and a half miles — but strenuous in places. Keep an eye out for fall wildflowers and colorful understory — the scarlet of Virginia creeper and iridescent yellow of scrubby beeches. At the top — once thought to be the tallest point in Virginia — you'll find 360-degree views and a pile of steep rocks to explore. From April to October, Peaks of Otter runs a shuttle up the mountain for those who'd like to take in the scenery with less sweat. For folks jonesing for a bigger adventure, begin your hike at the nearby Flat Top Mountain trailhead, follow that path for six miles, then summit Sharp Top and head back down for a combined 10 miles.



Dragon's Tooth

CRAIG AND ROANOKE COUNTIES

SUMMIT HIKES

*The hikes listed
here take you to
mountain tops*

Picture yourself as Gulliver, scaling a mythical beast from hoof to spine to skull. You'll drop down to a fire-warmed cuspid. Then you'll thank your stars both that you survived the journey and that you can see this breathtaking view from your perch. That is what it's like to hike Dragon's Tooth. The stats — just 2.3 miles to the top, gaining 1,500 feet in elevation — belie the full-body workout required to reach the peak. In the final mile you'll skirt rock ledges, scramble up iron ladders and struggle along stone faces. The payoff is a magical romp in an otherworldly setting, and the triumph of reaching the uppermost "tooth," where you stare into an expanse that feels impossibly far away. Returning to everyday life is a technical climb off the boulders, then a lovely descent through woods and along creeks. If this adventure has you dreaming of more, there's a 32-mile loop that begins and ends at the Dragon's Tooth trailhead and encompasses some of Virginia's most beautiful and beloved hikes.

The air is crisp. The sun is warm.

The leaves are putting on their annual pageantry. These are days that cry out for us to lace up our boots and hit the trails.

How is it that fall and hiking go together like pumpkin spice and latte?

There's the stunning display, for one. It's as if nature pulled out her palette and colored her canvas just for us. Then there's the chill — new again — that makes us want to move, to work it off.

But there's that deadline, too, the dark of winter that looms just weeks away. It is added incentive to breathe in this amazing landscape while the light and leaves are harmonizing to create a symphonic scene.

Southwest Virginia is home to dozens of noteworthy hikes, even a few of the most impressive treks the storied Appalachian Trail offers up. But the trails in our midst are not only for experts. Here we've highlighted 10 hikes that give us front row seats for autumn's famed foliage. There's a mix of easygoing and tough scrambles, of three-mile loops and eight-mile out-and-backs. At Peaks of Otter's Sharp Top, there's even a shuttle to the top.

In short, there's something for everyone.

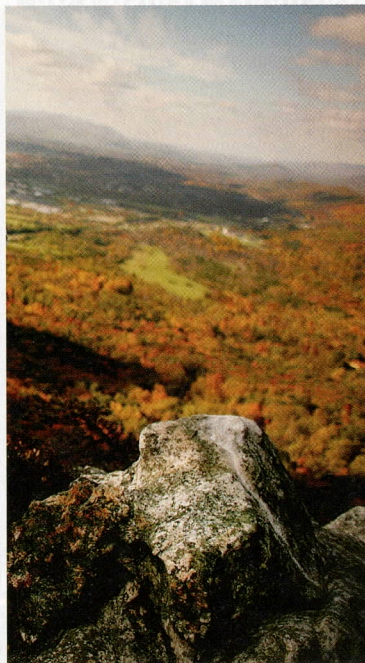
So peruse this list with pencil in hand and circle a few that appeal. No way should this fall fade without a little trail action out of all of us. ★



Read Mountain

ROANOKE COUNTY

Tucked away in a suburban neighborhood, Read Mountain doesn't have the rugged feel of a gravel lot alongside a sheer rock face. But don't let the grass fields fool you. Managed by Roanoke County, the preserve's 243 acres offer a series of interconnecting trails that can be mixed and matched to make a three-and-a-half mile out-and-back or a five-mile loop. The terrain can be tricky, the switchbacks can be steep, the stone outcroppings at Buzzard's Rock can be dizzying the way they drop away. But the hickories and dogwoods make the trek a fall delight and when you round the last bend, you'll likely be surprised at how picture-perfect is your view. Plan to stay a moment to play on the rocks that will remind you of dripping candles before you continue along tight trails circling slowly downhill to the parking lot.



Tinker Cliffs

DALEVILLE, BOTETOURT COUNTY

To summit Tinker Cliffs is to climb through a cow pasture, endure a series of switchbacks up a mountain face, dally in mountain springs and swagger along a ridgeline studded with spectacular sights. Like its sister trails, Tinker Cliffs has become increasingly popular in recent years, so expect company as you travel. With an out-and-back totaling close to eight miles and rising about 2,000 feet, there's much ground to cover. But it's never dull; the path and the views change often. While the way is lovely, the destination is a heart-stopping vista of the Catawba Valley from multiple angles. Think layers upon layers of umbers, ochers and golds. There's less rock to clamber along than at Dragon's Tooth or McAfee Knob, but there is still plenty of exploring to do.



Highlighted Hike: Rock Castle Gorge

Does it get more picturesque than a great black walnut tree and a giant lichen-covered stone huddled together in a wildflower-covered meadow where a bull, cows and their calves meander about noshing grass?

Actually, it does.

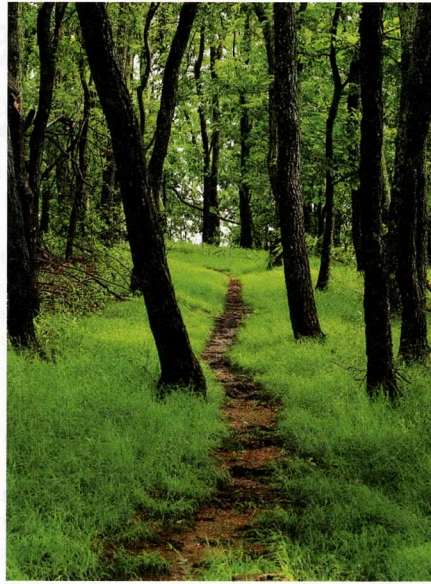
How about the sunlight streaming in, highlighting shiny river rocks? Or raindrops transforming a common spider web into a woodlands chandelier?

Or what about the golden glow of a stand of big tooth aspens in autumn, how they transform the creek bottom into a shimmering spectacle?

This hike has it all. Killer sunsets. A climb of 1,000 feet in three miles.

Overlooks with views into the valley that conjure a colorful, rumbled quilt.

There's a meander along a curling



ROCK AND ROLL ALONG The Rock Castle Gorge hike is a 10.8-mile path near Floyd that is rated from moderately strenuous to difficult. It can be accessed at multiple points along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

creek. The remains of a stone chimney, hundreds of years old. Critters from tiny camouflaged toads to full-grown bears. Balance-demanding stream crossings. Snapshots of mini waterfalls. A clamber across car-sized boulders. A wall of stone so wet it can't keep from weeping.

At nearly 11 miles, the Rock Castle Gorge loop is achingly beautiful, a long day of walking and the perfect anecdote to a plugged-in life.

First settled as a farming community in the 1700s, at its peak 30 families called this hollow home. The path was once part of the Appalachian Trail before it shifted west. The remains of this history provide yet another layer of interest.

So come, commune with the cows — and the newts and the song birds. Let your senses soak up the creek's damp and the sun's warmth and the soil's loamy scent.

You'll be glad you did, once you stop to rest your aching limbs.

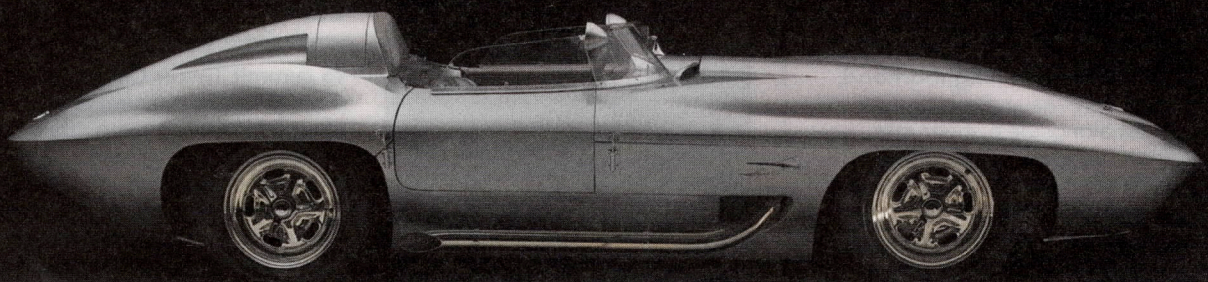
— Christina Nifong

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