Self-Guided Tours
Georgia's Blue Ridge Experience

Driving Tour #2
The Cohutta Wilderness

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In Fannin County the Cohuttas rise in the west and the Blue Ridge to the south and east. The Cherokee Indians considered the Cohuttas to be the "poles of the shed," holding up the sky in this, their "Enchanted Land." Although there were no Cherokee villages within the Cohutta wilderness, Cherokees hunted the area extensively and played their own version of field hockey on the ballfields at Little Bald Mountain, today's group camping area. The Cohutta Wildlife Management Area (WMA) encompasses 95,000 acres, 40,000 of which are within Fannin County. The Cohutta Wilderness is the largest wilderness area east of the Mississippi River, a rare and beautiful place seen by few people. The area is inhabited by black bears and wild boars, along with smaller animals like bobcats, coons and squirrels. The changing seasons bring blooms to rhododendron, mountain laurel and a profusion of wildflowers. Driving Tour #2 is a 3 hour trip through the forest without stops, but you will want to stop and enjoy the view, take a hike and picnic at beautiful Lake Conasauga.

Your vehicle needs to be in good mechanical condition with adequate fuel. Low clearance cars are generally a bad idea on these rough roads. Get a USFS Chattahoochee Forest and Cohutta Wilderness map. You may want to carry some food and drink. You will average only about 15 to 20 miles per hour on the steeper or more winding gravel Forest Service Roads. You will start from the intersection of GA Hwy 5 and the Appalachian Hwy (515) at McDonald's and will return to the same spot. Set your odometer on zero.

Total Miles Directions/Description

1.5 On the left is **Mercier Orchards**, a 300-acre orchard which produces 25 varieties of apples, as well as sweet cherries, blueberries and peaches. Mercier's, Southern Living Magazine's "favorite apple orchard," has the best fried apple pies in the south, guaranteed.

3.8 Turn left onto S.R. 2.

6.9 **McKinney Crossing** on Fightingtown Creek. Old house on the left is well over 100 years old. Notice the old stacked stone chimney. The McKinney family ran a grist mill and had a general store across the street. Early settlements or "hollers" typically had a church, small store, school, one or more family homesteads and a post office attached to a residence.

7.8 On the left is the **Mt. Moriah Baptist Church**, one of over 100 small churches which served isolated congregations in rural settlements throughout the area. The church has been operating since 1858, but the current building was built in the 1970's.

9.7 **Watson's Store**, on the left, is typical of the hundreds of small general merchandise stores scattered throughout the area to serve small farming communities. A store probably has been on this site for 150 years.

12.7 End of pavement. Begin mountain upgrade and gravel roads. From now on, you will have hardwood forest on both sides of the road. The most common species are black, red and white oaks, hickory, poplar, ash, sourwood and dogwood. Ahead, (13.2 miles) notice the sheer rock outcrop on the right, showing the composition of the mountains. The rocks of north Georgia are some of the oldest in the world, being estimated as between 680 and 800 million years old.

14.0 **Watson Gap**, altitude 2,700 feet. Here the road divides, left to Lake Conasauga, right to the Ocoee River in Tennessee. Take U.S. Forest Service Road 64 toward Conasauga.

17.2 **Dyer Gap**, altitude 2,840. The Dyer family was pioneer family before the area became a national forest, and they still maintain the family cemetery. Keep right at the intersection at Dyer Gap. Ahead, the diamond blaze marks identify a portion of the Benton MacKaye Trail.

17.9 **South Fork Trail** is on your right, a 3 mile USFS Hiking Trail north to Watson Gap.

18.0 **Jacks River Fields** is on your left, marking the headwaters of the Jacks River, one of the most pristine trout streams in the Georgia mountains. Facilities include picnic tables, fee camping, and a horse park for trailers in this pretty spot.

19.8 **Mountaintown Creek Trail**, a 5.6 mile trail south to Hills Lake Road.

22.4 **Three Forks Mountain**. On this mountaintop, you will find a Forest Service bulletin board, parking area and the East Cowpen Trail, a 7 mile hike along an abandoned roadbed, the former route of Old Hwy 2. Continue your drive left on USFS 64 toward Lake Conasauga.

23 **Mountaintown Overlook**, altitude 3,484, offers a spectacular view.

25.2 **Betty Gap**. This trailhead for the Conasauga River Trail was named for a widow who sold meals and lodging to travelers. Many visitors to the Cohuttas are unaware that the area was heavily logged between 1915 and 1930. The Conasauga River Trail is a 13 mile easy to moderate trail which follows the Conasauga River, also one of the most beautiful rivers in the mountains. (Take care while hiking the trail, there are 38 fords along the river.)

26.6 Junction. Continue straight ahead to Lake Conasauga.

28.6 **Chestnut Lead Trail**, a 1.8 mile easy-moderate trail, is on the right. Look for spring wildflowers and old-growth hemlocks.

30.1 **Ballfield Group Camping Area** was once the playing field for the Cherokee Indians in their own version of "field hockey."

31 **Lake Conasauga Recreation Area**. A simply beautiful area for camping, picnics, short hikes and swimming. Lake Conasauga is the highest lake in Georgia.

Return to Civilization – Restart your odometer to zero and leave the recreation area the same way you entered.

4.3	Turn right on USFS 68
5.8	Vista Point: A magnificent panoramic view
6.5	Barnes Creek Falls (Recreation Area)
7.6	Take the left fork at Holly Creek Gap, USFS 90
8.3	Leaving the Cohutta Wildlife Management Area
9.2	Begin pavement
14.6	Dead end; turn left onto GA Hwy 52 to Ellijay
19.7	Ellijay Square; continue on Hwy 52
30.7	Intersection with Appalachian Hwy; turn left
36.9	Original starting point

A Word to the Wise … The law of the forest is "leave no trace." See the USFS web site at www.fs.fed.us/conf/. The law of the forest is "leave no trace." Please pack in all you will need and pack out all your trash. If you build a fire, never leave it unattended. Use good judgment when hiking, particularly around waterfalls where rocks are often wet, moss covered and slippery. If hiking during hunting season, wear a brightly colored vest. Unexpected encounters with animals can be pleasurable or problematic. A hawk or owl soaring silently above is a pleasure. Watch for woodpeckers, turkeys and mountain grouse near the forest edges. The flash of a white-tail deer is an every day occurrence. More rare is sighting a black bear or bobcat. Most animals will flee the presence of humans, but be on the lookout for copperheads, wasps, yellow jackets and other biting, stinging critters.

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Fannin County Chamber & Welcome Center
152A Orvin Lance Drive, Blue Ridge, GA 30513
1-800-899-MTNS