6/20/98

I flew from New Orleans into BWI, arriving at 0135. Kristen picked me up at the airport, and from there we drove to her house in Alexandria. We went to sleep around 0330, and we got up at 1000. We were planning on getting up earlier, but both of us were really tired.

The flight from New Orleans was uneventful, but I did have a layover in Houston, Texas for about 45 minutes. Damn, it took a long time to go from New Orleans to BWI. I boarded the plane at 1940 and didn't get to BWI until 0135. I suppose part of it was the time zone change, but even so, it was a long trip.

After packing and stopping at CVS for some drinks for the drive, we finally left Alexandria at 1215. The AAA trip-tik told us to take 95 to 85 to 40, which we did. Except for a few traffic jams on 95, we made good time, getting to Asheville in about 8.5 hours. From there, we continued West on 19 until arriving at the Nantahala Outdoor Center (NOC), which took about another 1.5 hours.

We reached the NOC around 2230, and I called Corky to make sure the pickup for tomorrow morning was all set. Then we parked in a parking lot beside a stream, and slept in the car with the windows open. Sleeping in the car seat was rather uncomfortable, but it was nice to fall asleep to the stream gurgling.

6/21/98

Woke up at 0600, got up about 0610. Put long pants, and my fleece vest on because it was chilly. I then walked down to the main NOC area. It was a nice setup, with a bridge over the river, a restaurant, an outfitter store, and a white water rafting departure site. All of the buildings were natural wood color. It looked very nice. The AT comes right across the bridge in the middle of the the NOC.

After wandering around for a while, I accidently fell into the river up to my knees. Good thing I was wearing my Tevas, and not my boots.

After falling into the river, I went back to the car to wake Kristen up. She really didn't want to wake up. Finally, after much cajoling, she became conscious, and we drove over to the parking lot in front of the restaurant, packed up our backpacks, then went to breakfast at about 0715.

Corky arrived around 0745, and after going over some map details, we headed out to the end of section six to park the car. She thought that the end of section six would be the best place to park, because that way we could just come back down the hill from section seven (assuming we made it that far), instead of hiking quite a distance along the AT to get back to the NOC.

I haven't mentioned it yet, but the mountains are beautiful. Even from the car there are beautiful outlooks, the likes of which get a big sign on highways here that says "Scenic Overlook". I can understand why the tourists flock to this area. It wouldn't make sense to have many "Scenic Overlooks" here, because almost everywhere you drive, you pass so many places for them.

Reaching Rabun Bald, Corky dropped us a short hike below Bee Gum Gap. After saying our goodbyes, we started up the mountain which tops out at 4,696 feet. First, we hiked 0.1 mile up a 4wd woods road to where it ended at Bee Gum Gap, where we met the Bartram Trail. From here, the trail went roughly North and South. Our hike goes North in general, but from here we hiked about two miles South to the top of Rabun Bald. We went up the mountain, along the

yellow blazed trail, to the lookout tower at the top. Adding an extra four miles to our hike was worth it, especially to get some early gratification from the view. The 360 degree vista was amazing, mountains fading off in every direction into the blue haze caused by the humid air. Playing in the updrafts around the peak of the mountain we spotted first one, then two then three Buzzards circling around.

This region is part of the Chattahoochee National Forest, an area rich in Cherokee Indian history. To the North, and South, we could see the Tennessee Valley Divide, the ridge line we would follow North to Scaly Mountain, visible in the distance. We would get there tomorrow morning, and look back at the ground we covered, ogling the land. To the East, we could see Rock Ridge descending from Rabun Bald in a Southeasterly direction. West gave us views including Alex Mountain, and Chestnut Mountain.

The trail from the top of the woods road to the peak was nice. There were a few places where we had to climb over some erosion control rock walls across the trail. I didn't notice many yellow blazes along the trail to the top, and the few that I did notice were faded, it looked like they needed to be repainted. The trail From Bee Gum Gap, to Rabun Bald, to Hickory Gap Road (about 13 miles of hiking) roughly follows along the Tennessee Valley Divide ridge line.

We began the descent after getting few pictures, and groaned at the fact that we had to backtrack with our packs. (If we thought about it, we would have left the packs at Bee Gum Gap.) About this time, I was beginning to realize that Kristen's pace was slower than mine, so I worked to compensate by walking slower. It took us about 5 hours to reach Hale Ridge Road at the end end of the first subsection. Trail conditions were good. There were a few glades of Rhododendron that were nice to walk through. The forest appeared to be rather young. We stopped less than a mile from Hale Ridge Road to cover our packs because it was beginning to rain.

The fringes of a thunderstorm had caught up with us. I love hiking in the woods in the rain, listening to it patter on the leaves. It didn't last long, and we didn't get any strong winds or any close thunder and lightning. We couldn't have hoped for a better rainstorm. The Rhododendron caverns were so dense that when we passed through one, no rain at all fell on our heads. I think only a heavy rainstorm with strong winds would cause any rain to fall inside such caverns. I daresay that for blocking the rain, the Rhododendron caverns are better than a thick fir tree.

Subsection two from Hale Ridge Road to Osage Overlook was a beautiful hike through numerous cavernous Rhododendron glades and ravines with split log bridges over rushing streams. Several of the log bridges were out, and there were many blow downs across this section of the trail. Even so, this was one of my favorite parts of the hike. The foliage was so thick that it kept a lot of the rain off of us, and many parts of the trail felt like a tunnel through a dark green dripping cave. I loved walking across the little ravines on the log bridges with their streams gurgling past under my feet. I also especially liked the style of most of the log bridges, not constructed with pressure treated lumber, but just a log split lengthwise with notches along the flat top, and a fragile railing made of smaller trees, not hewn, processed lumber. Bridges made out of wood from a lumberyard tend to lessen the experience by bringing too much civilization out into the wilderness, especially when the tags are still stapled onto the ends of the boards.

We finally reached the end of the subsection at Osage Overlook, with a great vista over Hurrah Ridge descending into Blue Valley. By that time, our feet were soaked from brushing against the wet foliage along the trail, and it was beginning to get a bit late, so we decided to

camp the next place we found. That turned out to be under a big pine tree at about 4,240 feet up Scaly Mountain. We camped beside a logging road that ran over to a paved loop of road with some nice houses along it. It was a good campsite, the only worry was that the thunderstorm from earlier that could still be heard and seen in the distance would circle back around and lightning would strike the tree we were camped under. Even though it was a tall tree, and there weren't many other trees in this immediate area, I thought it would be safe since we weren't near the top of the mountain, and it seemed that the storm was still moving away.

We covered about 11.2 miles this first day. First, 0.1 miles from where Corky dropped us off to Bee Gum Gap. Then Two miles to to the top of Rabun Bald, and again back to the gap. Next, 2.7 Miles from the gap to Hale Ridge Road. After that, 3.7 miles to Osage Overlook. And finally, 0.8 miles up Scaly Mountain, to our campsite. We hit the trail at about 1030, and struck camp around 1930. Roughly nine hours of hiking, which gives an average speed of 1.25 miles per hour.

Since this was Kristen's first night spent camping in the wild, it took a while to get to sleep because I had to keep calming her fears of flashing lights (fireflys, distant lightning) and weird noises (leaves and small twigs falling on the tent, small rodents scurrying around, some larger animals making noise in the distance). I assured her that since we hung our food in bear bags, that she had nothing to worry about, the worst that would happen is some large animal, out of curiosity, would come sniffing around the tent and then wander on. I fell into a content and well deserved sleep, happy to be in the woods again.

6/22/98

Woke up late, had oatmeal for breakfast, and didn't get on the trail until about 1030. We proceeded up Scaly Mountain, to where the spur trail went to the peak. There we doffed our packs (see, we can learn) and headed up to the summit at 4,804 feet. All that work getting there was well worth it. Looking out over the valley, we could see endless mountains fading to the horizon in the hazy water vapor filled air. Words can't begin to describe the beauty. The view covered an arc from the Southwest through the Southeast. Back along the Tennessee Valley Divide, we could see Rabun Bald, where we started. We took the maps out, and as the crow flies, it looked to be about five miles away, which put the horizon at about ten miles.

From Osage Overlook to the spur trail was in good shape. I noticed a couple of things that could be a problem. Runoff has dug deep trenches in a few spots. So far, it isn't too bad, but a few large rain storms might make the trail very difficult. The other problem is that near the top of the mountain, a small stream is running along the path the trail follows along some exposed bedrock for about a hundred meters or so. Some of the rocks are slippery, and after a heavy rain, I'm sure the stream will be more than an inch deep. Between the summit trail, and Hickory Gap Road trail head, there was only one blowdown, a rather large tree, about four feet off the ground.

The Hickory gap walk was okay, but I don't like road walking very much. We stopped for water part way down the first incline, where a road grader passed us. The stream was small and shallow. Finally, we reached the bottom of the hill, and shortly after that, we came to a man made pond, where we sat and ate lunch, and I went for a swim. Kristen didn't want to go in the water, even though I did my best to convince her to. She thought we would get shot. Shortly before reaching the pond we passed a small house off the gravel road with scores of beautiful flowers growing everywhere, and a sign that said "pick a flower, get a shot". Talking to Corky after the hike was over, it turns out that indeed we could have been shot for swimming there,

other hikers had been threatened, just for walking down the road.

The swim was relaxing, the water mostly warm, with occasional cold spots. The bank was steep, and soft. The area was rich in mica, and the dirt on the bank sparkled in the sunlight. I went swimming twice. Once when we first got there, and again after lunch. Unfortunately, I accidently lost my glasses, because I forgot to take them off the second time. We spent about a half hour looking around on shore for them before I realized they were probably in the lake. I was so mad at myself for loosing my glasses that I stormed off up the road without waiting for Kristen. I had the Bartram Trail maps, but thought that the route was easy enough that Kristen wouldn't need them.

I stopped at the end of the subsection, in Hickory Gap, about a hundred meters before the Nantahala National Forest boundary sign. The route here became unclear, since the bulldozer parked beside the road seemed to have recently turned the next hundred meters into a tank trap, and someone cut down all the trees with Bartram Trail blazes on them. I sat on top of the dozer and updated this trail journal while I waited for Kristen to get here. By the time I sat down to write, I had used up my negative energy, and decided that this gave me a chance to go a week without glasses, something I hadn't been without for three years. The only really annoying part (other than my own stupidity), is that I purchased the glasses less than a week ago.

Kristen was upset, and rightly so, when she finally arrived, because I had the map, and she almost got lost. The trail made one confusing turn at a woods road rotary, and went through a gate. She tried the other two directions before hitting upon the fact that the trail continued through the gate. Luckily, she had a compass, and the Scaly Mountain topographic map, so she knew when she was going the wrong way. I apologized and promised never to do that again. I don't recall much of the scenery of this section, since I was wrapped up in my anger, but the forest did seem older than yesterdays, still not more than 30 or 40 years though.

Reaching Hickory Gap completed section one of the Bartram Trail. It gave us a real sense of accomplishment to put away the first map, and pull out the next one.

After Kristen rested, we continued over the tank trap, into the Nantahala National Forest, and on up to Keith Day Knob. From Hickory gap at 4,020 feet to the top of Keith Day Knob at 4,440 feet was a hike of about 0.8 mile. In the first quarter of of a mile, we descended to 3,840 feet, then up to onto the ridge line at 4200 feet. After the difficult part of the ascent, a rock clearing opened to the right of the trail, with views to the East. The trail description mentioned that Turtle Creek should have been visible, but we couldn't see it. After the steep ascent, it was a pleasant and easy hike over Keith Day Knob, to Jones Gap at 4,360 feet, ending this subsection after only one mile.

From Jones Gap, we continued roughly Northwest through a clearing, along the ridge line connecting Keith Day Knob, Jones Knob, Whiterock Mountain, Little Fishhawk Mountain, Fishhawk Mountain, and Wolf Rock. We missed the spur trail to the top of Jones Knob, not realizing how soon it split off. We came to Whiterock Gap at around 1645, 1.3 miles from Jones Gap. There was a big log across the trail, a flat area clear of undergrowth, and a rock fire ring. It looked like a nice campsite. Down off the ridge, to the Northeast, a trail led down to Stephens Creek, the only source of water in this 8.5 mile long subsection. We headed down to the creek to fill up. It turned out to be about a quarter of a mile hike down, and of course we didn't leave our packs at the top. (obviously, we still hadn't learned our lesson.) By the time we were done filling up, and had climbed back up into Whiterock Gap, it was about 1730. We decided to head to Fishhawk Mountain, and camp there.

The trail description said that from Whiterock Gap to Little Fishhawk Mountain, the trail passes through some old growth forest. Never having hiked through old growth forest, it may be that I just can't recognize it, but I could swear that the forest through here didn't seem like old growth. I was expecting large trees, a high canopy, and little undergrowth. Maybe it was the altitude, so the trees couldn't grow as big, but I didn't see any trees that I couldn't easily reach around the trunk and clasp my hands. Maybe since I didn't have my glasses, I just didn't notice bigger trees off the trail.

Whiterock Mountain also had a spur trail leading to the summit. We were smart this time, and left our gear to follow the trail. The view was absolutely stunning, with the whole Tessentee Valley laid out before us. We were on the Southwest side of the mountain, on the rocks that give the mountain its name. This was the best vista yet. Looking into the valley and up into the mountains fading off to the horizon was awe inspiring. I felt like one of the early explorers seeing this fertile land for the first time. Directly to the Northwest, we could see Conley Ridge descending steep to the valley floor from the ridge line we were hiking. In an arc as far as was visible, from Northwest through Southeast, were many mountains climbing out of the valley, Cedar Cliff, The Pinnacle, George Gray Mountain, Richey Knob, Buck Knob, Chestnut Mountain, and possibly Scaly Mountain in the far Southeast. It was a stunning view that will be with me for the rest of my life.

From Whiterock, we continued on to Fishhawk Mountain, intending to camp there. We reached the blue blazed trail to the summit sometime after 1900. We left our gear, and attempted the trail to the summit. It was hard to follow, and other than one or two blue blazes at the beginning, it was not well marked. I figured that we couldn't go wrong as long as we went up, so from time to time, we stumbled across the trail and followed it for a while, until we lost it again. Eventually we reached the summit, after a hard hike up about 0.3 miles of steep terrain.

We were glad to get to the top because it meant a short rest, but not for long, since we left our flashlights with the rest of our gear, at the start of the spur trail to the summit. The description in the Bartram Trail Map made it sound like it was a 300 foot trail in length, not a 300 foot change in elevation! The summit was nice, but there were no views, because the clearing was surrounded by tall trees. We were able to watch the sun go down through the trees and behind the ridge of the mountains across the valley. Attached to the rock at the summit was a plaque dedicated to William Bartram, in memory of his travels through the valley below. The plaque was a bit loose. There were well worn carvings of names into the benchmark at 4,748 feet, others proud to have made it to the summit.

The hike back down went quickly, with practically no bushwhacking because the trail was easy to follow on the way down. We noticed red plastic survey ribbons tied on trees along the trail, and an occasional thin white ribbon such as you might find tied around a Christmas or birthday present. It confuses me that we didn't see these on the way up, but it might have been because of a big blowdown about a hundred meters into the trail that I decided to skirt instead of going through.

Reaching our gear, we started looking for a flat place to pitch the tent. The only one we found would have been a great campsite. It was right along the trail, at the edge of a big flat bedrock clearing, about a hundred meters along the trail back the way we came. There were great views of Whiterock Mountain, and the valley floor. We would have seen a great sunrise. Kristen wanted to pitch the tent in some nice lichen beds, but I explained to her how long it took the lichen to grow that big, so we should not disturb it, and we should avoid walking on it.

The flat spot we found was a soft spot where lots of leaves had collected, and there were a few bushes that would easily recover. As we were about to setup, I noticed some large dried feces in the moss bed beside the spot we were going to pitch the tent. It was as large as human feces, and I didn't know enough to tell what animal dumped it. Then I noticed that the moss bed was full of various smaller animal feces, some quite fresh, and some dried and white. Also, I noticed some small bones and claws sticking out of various pieces of scat. From the looks of it, more than one animal particularly enjoyed shitting there, and at least one of them was omnivorous, and one was large. Not wanting to disturb the animals here, (especially, with Kristen only having spent a couple of nights in the woods so far), we decided to continue the hike down the trail, and camp at the first site we found.

By that time, the sun had set, and we were into twilight. We continued hiking, not finding any flat spots. Shortly, we were descending from Wolf Rock on switch backs, and there was no hope for a campsite until we reached the relatively flat ridge line below. During this descent that Kristen tripped and fell into the weeds alongside the trail, luckily not hurting herself.

Along about this time, we came to a tiny clearing on the descending ridge line, where we stopped so Kristen could put on long pants (the thorn bushes were really ripping up her legs), and as we sat there the last vestiges of twilight disappeared. It was beautiful, looking out into the valley below, with the mountains rising high above us, listening to and watching the thunder and lightning over the valley on the other side of the mountains rising across the Tessentee Valley floor.

The onset of darkness forced our pace slower, and Kristen was getting tired. Her ankle began to hurt. We needed to find a campsite as soon as possible. We found one potential spot, but it was moss covered, and wet, and not quite flat. There was one spot I wasn't sure we would get past, where the trail came out onto steeply slanted bedrock. There was one blaze painted on the rock, then I couldn't find the next one. I scrambled to the bottom of the clearing, beginning a perimeter search on the far side, while Kristen sat and rested. Of course, it turned out to be a switchback, so the last place I looked is where the trail continued, back out on the same side just below where it came in.

As the land beginning to get flatter, we took a rest break, and I made Kristen try to eat an energy bar. It was about 2200, and we hadn't eaten since early in the day, and we really needed to find a campsite. Kristen's ankle was hurting, and she was at the end of her energy reserves. Finally, she called "The Bus!", it was about 2300. We were so happy to finally have found a stopping place! I climbed in the bus, and decided that it looked like a good, flat, enclosed place to sleep. We cooked dinner, and didn't bother setting up the tent. I hoped that if there was a rainstorm, the wind wouldn't blow too much rain in through the windows, or that I would wake up quick enough to set up the tent before we got drenched. After eating, I hung the bear bags, put my poncho down on the rusty floor as a ground cloth, laid out my sleeping bag and climbed in, expecting to pass right out into a good nights sleep.

Unfortunately, I was woken up shortly thereafter by a machine gun tapping noise. Kristen was scared that something was going to eat her. It sounded like a woodpecker was going nutty rapping on the bus (and felt like it, too). At first, turning on the flashlight caused it to stop. After trying that a few times, it decided the light wasn't harmful, so it didn't care. Banging on the side of the bus didn't help, either. I never saw the animal, it must have been on the roof. Finally I gave up. I was too tired to get up and chase it away. I told Kristen she could chase it away if she wanted, and I fell back into a fitful sleep. I woke up once, and realized that the

sound was finally gone, and then fell into a deep sleep, and didn't wake up until about 1000 the next day.

From our campsite the night before, to Hickory Gap Road was 1.7 miles. Taking the spur trail to the summit of Scaly Mountain added another mile (0.5 each way), for a total of 2.7 miles to the end of the subsection. The road walk along Hickory Gap Road, ending at the Nantahala Forest Boundary in Hickory Gap covered 2.5 miles, completing section one. From Hickory Gap to Jones Gap was one mile. From Jones Gap to the Bus near Double Top Fields was about 5.5 miles. Add a half mile hike to get water at Stephens Creek, a 0.6 mile round trip to the vistas atop of Whiterock Mountains, and a 0.6 mile round trip to the summit of Fishhawk Mountain to watch the sunset. In total, 12.9 miles in 12.5 hours, an average speed of about 1 mile per hour.

6/23/98

The bus turned out to be a good place to sleep for several reasons. First, we had been hiking for hours, looking for a good place to camp. Second, setting up camp consisted of simply kicking some leaves out of the way, and throwing down the sleeping bag. Last, but not least, the tent is very warm, and since all of the windows in the bus were out (and sitting in a pile of broken glass in the back of the bus) we took full advantage of the breeze. We were lucky enough to miss the thunderstorms that were a few mountain tops over, but we did get a bit of the wind which helped cool it down.

We didn't hit the trail until about 1100. Passing the bus, the trail went over a pile of tin roofing. Seemingly, at some point. there was a shed attached to the side of the bus, but it's in a pile now. It would probably be a good idea to move the pile of roofing over to the other side of the bus (where the rotting floor support boards are) to clear the trail.

I looked for poison ivy, but I didn't see any shiny, waxy looking leaves (and sitting here at 2048, I'm not itching, so I'm pretty sure there really wasn't any. I guess I'll know for sure tomorrow.

The descent led past some good views of the Tessentee valley. The trail from the bus to Buckeye Creek at the end of section two was in good shape. There was one washout along the switch backs coming down off the ridge. It made about five feet of the trail difficult for an inexperienced backpacker to navigate. Also, the trail description on the back of the map said the exit trail was blue blazed, but it wasn't. We could see blue blazes under the yellow blazes, so it appears that the change in blaze color is relatively recent.

Near the end of the section, as as the woods road comes out onto the gravel road, there weren't any trail markings, and a choice of three directions. We figured the gravel road led down to the parking area, and we were right. We did take the woods road down to the brook, and went swimming (well, wading, actually). The water was cold, but invigorating. The creek here ran through a Rhododendron glade, open enough to let some direct sunlight in, but enclosed enough to feel comfortable stripping and rinsing the past few days grime off. There was a great spot, right in a small rapid where the water thundered between some rocks, felt just like sitting in a jacuzzi filled with ice cold water.

After cooling off in the brook, we topped off our water from a stream crossing the road below the parking lot. Hiking on down SR1640 for 0.6 miles to Tessentee Road, we met a farmer at the intersection. He was friendly and pointed us to a grove where we could rest and change into road walking attire. We didn't take him up on it, but it was a nice offer.

Hiking along the black top road was burning hot, so I decided to try and hitch a ride. After

about a mile someone whose house we passed came by and picked us up. He drove us all the way to the intersection of Old Georgia Road and US 441, passing many great views along the way. He was a lifesaver because it would have taken us forever in the hot sun to hike the 14 miles he drove us, and it wouldn't have been much fun.

After he dropped us off, we hiked along Old Georgia Road, and SR1154 for about 1.1 miles until we came to Westgate Plaza. We spent several hours in the Burger King there to give the road a chance to cool down. Late in the day we hiked the 0.5 miles from the plaza to the start of Pressley Road, passing the Wayah Ranger Station. Then Pressley Road took us 1.7 miles up to Wallace Branch, the end of section three. Along the way, we had a few good views of Gibson Knob to the West and Trimont Ridge up to the North. We reached the end of the section at Wallace Branch around 1900.

We camped near the parking area, right beside Wallace Branch. The brook was shallow here. We met a group of 6 hikers from Virginia in the parking lot. They just graduated from high school, and decided to go hiking for their reward. It turns out that they were supposed to start at Rabun Bald, and they brought inflatable rafts and paddles for section three. Unfortunately, due to car troubles, they lost some trip time, so they started at section four. They are carrying the rafts to use on Nantahala lake.

After helping Kristen set up the tent, I updated my journal until it got too dark to see. Then I taught Kristen how to set up a bear bag. She had a hard time learning how to get the rope over a high enough branch, but she got everything else down cold. I told her she could practice throwing the rope over the branch tomorrow, hopefully while it was still light out.

Mileage for today was small, because we got a ride. From the bus near Double Top Fields, to the end of section two at Buckeye Creek was about three miles. We then hiked 0.6 miles along SR1640, to the intersection with Tessentee Road. About one mile along Tessentee Road, my thumb paid off, and we got a ride to the intersection of Old Georgia Road and US 441. Following Old Georgia Road, and then SR1154, we arrived at Westgate Plaza after 1.2 miles. Leaving the plaza, we covered 0.5 miles to the start of Pressley Road, followed by the 1.7 mile hike up Pressley to Wallace Branch at the end of the section. In total, we hiked eight miles, mostly along paved roads. Total travel time for the day was about seven hours, so our average speed was 1.14 miles per hour.

6/24/98

We got an early start today, getting up about 0730 and hitting the trail by 0830. The goal for the day was to hike the entire section, from Wallace Branch to Wayah Bald. The first part of the ascent up to Trimont ridge was a pleasant, easy hike. We passed the group of six rafters about ten or fifteen minutes up the trail. They were just getting up, and had not yet started to break camp. As we were climbing, we finally reached the sunlight working its way down into the valley. I really enjoyed this section of trail, I love the sound and feeling of the forest in the early morning. Climbing to the ridge line, Wallace Branch was good company, babbling along close to the trail. We saw a small waterfall that tempted me to go dunk my head, but our goal of Wayah Bald was looming.

We reached the ridge line in no time, and began the hard part of the trail, the steep ascents and descents along the ridge line from peak to peak. We skirted the first peak, Bruce Knob on the South side starting on the East side at 3,040 feet, and ascending to 3,160 feet on the West side. From time to time I told Kristen to look out through the trees to see the valley spread out,

It was easy to see how much elevation we had gained in such a short time. From Bruce Knob, we continued past William's Pulpit, a 100 foot long rock shelf, then climbed back to the top of the ridge, peaking at 3,560 feet, before descending into Locust Tree Gap #1 at 3,320 feet. We rested Here, and I snapped a picture of Kristen without her pack on. We were feeling good, because we were making good time. At this rate, we would reach Harrison Gap, the end of this subsection, and roughly the midpoint of the days hike, before noon.

Starting in the gap, we had a steep climb to Wilkes Knob, reaching an altitude of 3,680 feet, just South of the peak. The next two miles, from Wilkes Knob to Poplar Cove Gap consisted of ascents and descents over two unnamed peaks, the highest point being 3,560 feet, followed by a descent over about .7 mile to an altitude of 3,160 feet to Poplar Cove Gap. Along the descent into the gap, Kristen's ankle began bothering her again, so I stopped and tried re-lacing her boot, skipping the eyelet where the pain was concentrated. It helped somewhat. Reaching the gap, we rested for a few minutes then pushed on to Harrison Gap, the end of the subsection, and Lunch. The map assured me that we had no more than 0.6 miles to go, but it seemed to take forever. In this 0.6 miles, we climbed steeply up to 3,400 feet, skirting Cullasaja peak, before descending into Harrison gap at 3,280 feet. We arrived about 1130, covering 5.5 miles in 3 hours, amazingly our pace increased to about 1.8 miles per hour over this subsection, labeled as "more difficult". Certainly, it was the most difficult yet.

Trail conditions from Wallace Branch to Harrison gap were good, other than a couple of large blow downs. In one spot, near the beginning, I think it was close to where we climbed up onto the ridge, the trail was rerouted around a huge blowdown.

At the gap, Kristen parked in the shade, laid down, and using her sleeping pad as a pillow, went right to sleep. The night before, before going to bed, I rinsed my pants and a shirt in the stream. They were still wet, so I set them out in the sun, then lounged against my pack updating my journal. Since we broke camp and hit the trail early, breakfast was an energy bar. I was planning on cooking a hot lunch, but realized that we didn't have enough water to waste any by boiling it off. We forgot to top off our water at brook beside the campsite, and didn't realize until well past Locust Gap #1, that we forgot to fill up there. I was fine, because I still had a bit more than 2.5 liters of water, but Kristen was down to about one liter. I gave her half a liter, and had a Carnation Instant Breakfast for lunch, and my trail mix of pretzels, Italian flavored croutons, and an occasional vegetable chip. leaving me about 1.5 liters, which I filled my water bladder with. Kristen ate GORP with granola, and the rice leftovers from my dinner in the bus.

We lounged around for two hours, starting to pack up at 1330, ready to hit the trail by 1400. Grabbing my dry clothes from the sun, they felt like I just pulled them from a dryer. We had 6.5 miles of "more difficult" trail to cover to reach our goal of Wayah Bald, and about six hours of daylight, plus another hour of twilight to do it in. Based on our previous pace, it seemed a reasonable ↓ even easy ↓ hike, given the pace we made in the morning. If we were lucky, we could even watch the sunset from the top of the highest mountain we would climb.

It was quickly apparent that our pace from Harrison Gap to Wayah Bald would be considerably slower. The terrain was as steep, if not steeper than the terrain from Wallace Branch to Harrison Gap, and Kristen's ankle was bothering her the whole way. We passed through some beautiful forest, and this section of trail clinched the fact that I love ridge hiking. I love being on the top of the ridge, looking up the trail and seeing the mountain fall off on both sides of the trail. Kristen asked why they couldn't have put switch backs in to make the climbs easier, and I couldn't tell her that I wouldn't want them too.

Starting out, the trail quickly climbed up to a unnamed peak at 3,520 feet, in the first 0.3 mile. Following in quick succession, several more unnamed summits in the next 2.5 miles to altitudes of 3,640 feet, 3,840 feet, 3,760 feet, 3,920 feet, and 3,960 feet, before descending into Locust Tree Gap #2 at 3,720 feet. The gap was a big grass wildlife clearing, partially in the shade, and partially in the sun. Kristen was running low on water, and her ankle was getting worse.

As the day drew on, we slowed down. Kristen tried an ace bandage around her ankle to help the pain, but it didn't help much. The trail from here flanked the South side of the next summit, running along the steep valley wall, staying around 3,800 feet for the first half mile, then in the second half mile, it ascended sharply 520 feet, reaching another wildlife clearing on the ridge line at an altitude of 4,320 feet. This part of the hike was grueling for Kristen, and we had to go slower than ever. She ran out of water shortly after beginning the ascent. I was low on water, so I didn't drink any more, giving Kristen small sips from time to time.

At the wildlife clearing. Kristen was ready to give up. I would have suggested camping there, but by that time we were very short on water, and I didn't want to camp without a reliable source of water to fill up on. After resting for a while, I pushed us on, slower than ever, finding water becoming a growing concern. The trail description said that there was a perennial stream somewhere in the flat section right before the 0.5 mile ascent to the top of Wayah Bald. I hoped that it was flowing, and didn't want to leave Kristen back on the trail somewhere unless she collapsed completely and couldn't go on. If the stream wasn't flowing, we could have been in some serious trouble, and I wanted Kristen as far along the trail as possible. I figured that Wayah Bald would be a popular place, since there was a lookout tower at the top, and the AT came through, so I should be able to find someone there who could give us water.

The trail description for the final part of the trail from here to the top of Wayah Bald gave us good news and bad news. The good news was that we were within 2.1 miles of our goal. The next 0.8 miles were described as a 500 foot climb that completes Trimont Ridge, followed by a mostly level 0.8 mile hike through Mountain Laurel, Rhododendron and Oak, and across a perennial stream. Finally, the last half mile climb of 500 feet along the Appalachian Trail culminating at the Wayah Bald summit. The stream was key, we had to reach it to find out if it was still flowing.

The first 0.8 miles went exceedingly slow. Kristen was in so much pain it brought tears to her eyes. We climbed from 4,320 feet to 5,000 feet, a 680 foot ascent. After the grueling climbs throughout the day, the next 0.8 miles of relatively flat terrain were wonderful. Frequently posted along the trail were bear sanctuary, signs. I hoped to see a bear, but had no such luck. I was on the lookout for the stream. The forest looked young, mostly small trees and Rhododendron. Finally, I heard water! I charged ahead, the stream was flowing! We were safe! I gave Kristen the remaining water in the bladder attached to my pack, while I got out the filter and filled a half liter bottle and quaffed it in a matter of seconds. Then I filled another one and drank it slower. We rested and relaxed there, all of the stress as we began to run out of water evaporating.

I left Kristen there while I scouted for a campsite ahead along the trail. A few hundred meters down the trail, I found the perfect spot. It was a big campsite, with a fire pit and big logs in a square around it. The ground was cleared down to dirt, so I knew it was a heavily used site. I jogged back to the brook, to tell Kristen that I found the best site. I told her we could actually have a fire tonight! That perked her up a bit, and she shouldered her pack and hiked down to the

campsite. After the stress of the hike, the happiness of finding water and finding the campsite went a long way toward canceling her stress, and I was actually overjoyed!

It was still light out when we got there around 1930 so Kristen went to work finding kindling, and tossing the rope up over a branch for the bear bag. I set up the tent then gathered the tinder needed to start the fire without any paper. It would have been a one match fire too, except that the water proof matches wouldn't lite, so I ended up wasting two of them. Finally, I got the fire to the point that it didn't need constant attention, and I went hunting for some good wood to put on it. I didn't find much, the campsite was so well used that most of the wood in the area had already been scavenged. It turned out that the campsite was at the junction of the Bartram trail and the Appalachian Trail. This meant that we only had a half mile hike to the summit of Wayah Bald.

I cooked dinner by firelight as the last of the twilight faded. Macaroni and cheese with instant potatoes. It was delicious. Kristen cooked a Lipton pasta meal, and we ate. Amazingly enough, I ate every last bit of the food I cooked, and that pot was extremely full. It was about six servings worth of food. By the time dinner was over, the fire was burned down to a few coals. It never built up enough coals to be a cooking fire, so I spread out the remaining coals to cool quicker, and went to bed without worry. Kristen hung the bear bags while I attempted to read. I read a couple of pages before deciding I was too tired to do anything except sleep.

I was satisfied with the days hike. We covered an excruciatingly difficult eleven miles of trail, and had but a half mile to the top. Total travel time for the day was eleven hours. During that time, we covered 5.5 miles from Wallace Branch to Harrison Gap, followed by 5.5 miles from Harrison Gap to the campsite, giving us a speed of exactly one mile per hour. This is a remarkably good speed considering our speed over easier terrain was scarcely any faster.

6/25/98

And sleep I did. Last nights sleep was about the most relaxing I had on the whole trip. I woke up a few times, but felt refreshed when I finally got up. Slept well, even though we were on an incline. Made vanilla pudding for a breakfast treat to cheer Kristen up. This campsite was nice. It seems big enough for a huge army of campers.

After breaking camp, we hit the trail at about 0930. As we were about to leave, some Appalachian Trail hikers came through. We pointed them towards the stream to top off their water, and took their picture, they posed descending the trail, with a white blaze in the background. On the way up, we met many Appalachian Trail hikers, some passing us on their way up, and some passing us on their way down. One of the hikers we met on his way down enthusiastically told us, "You're almost to the top, and it is an impressive view, you'll be glad you saw it, and this is coming from a through hiker, so you know it's true!"

He wasn't kidding, the view was worth the hike! The view from the top of the fire tower was amazing. It was nothing except mountains and ridges off to the horizon. We spent about a half hour at the top, admiring the view, a perfect vista made all the better for the toil that went into getting us here. The mountains are real mountains, not like the ones in New Jersey where you a get a good view of the valley below, the ridge on the other side, and a city on the horizon. These mountains give you views of other mountains, and on and on, shrouded in a blue haze as far as the eye can see.

We started down the mountain together, but Kristen said that I should go ahead since she was going to go slow because of her ankle. I took her up on the offer, and continued down the

trail at a good pace, probably around three miles per hour. Part way down, I decided to call Corky, because I knew Kristen wouldn't be able to hike the next section, or at least, she wouldn't have any fun doing so.

The descent along McDonald Ridge, into Sawmill Gap was an easy, beautiful hike of about four miles. It passed through several wildlife clearings full of tall grass and wild strawberries. They were delicious. The second half of the descent, to Nantahala Lake, was fairly difficult. After climbing Jarred's knob, the descent became extremely steep. The trail descended through some pine groves, mostly deciduous forest, and near the bottom, a Rhododendron forest. The trail came out beside a tiny mountain stream, and just down the road, Wine Spring Creek, a big cold, mountain creek thundered down into the lake. Sitting here writing, its noise is a constant loud pleasant background.

I continued up the road to the first store I found. I called Corky and got an answering machine. I asked if she could pick us up at Sawmill Gap, and that I was going back up to the Gap. When I got back to the trail head, it was 1401. I decided to head back up with only the essentials. I doubted it would be a chilly night. Kristen had a rain poncho we could use as a tent, and I would make due without a sleeping bag. So I cleared out the fanny pack compartment, and refilled it with my water and a flashlight. Then I secreted my pack behind a large rock, and headed back up the extremely steep trail.

The climb was tough, but since I left my pack at the bottom flashlight it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. I was expecting to make it up to Sawmill Gap before Kristen reached it, and meet her there and give her the option to stay there and wait for Corky, or to finish the hike and meet Corky at the bottom. I made it up to the last steep part of the hike, up the side of Jarred Bald, where I ran into Kristen on the way down. I was impressed that she made it so far so fast, especially with the way her ankle was hurting her.

At that point, we had a couple of options. It was probably about 2 miles to the bottom, down steep descents to the end of the section at Nantahala Lake. It was a also a steep climb back up to Sawmill Gap. I told Kristen that I called Corky to pick us up, which she was happy about because she wasn't having much fun. I put the options to her. She chose to finish the descent, which impressed me. I was glad she wanted to push to finish the section because it would be easier for Corky to pick us up at the bottom, and Nantahala Lake was there to go swimming in.

I took her pack, and gave her my fanny pack. We made it to the bottom around 1730. there was plenty of light left in the day. I rested while Kristen set up the tent. After dinner, then I hung the bear bag. We camped right beside the road where in a clearing where Wine Spring Creek came rushing into Nantahala Lake. Wading in the creek for less than a minute made my feet so cold they hurt. I went across the street and waded into the lake. I couldn't believe it, the water was as warm as bath water! I had to go swimming, so I took off my shirt, emptied my pockets, and jumped in. The lake was so clear, unlike the other mountain pond I went swimming in. The water had a bit of a greenish tinge to it, kind of like oxidized copper. I went back to the campsite and told Kristen how warm the water was, so she went for a swim and loved it. It was a great end to a good day of hiking, and a great end for a long backpacking trip.

After we pitched camp and ate dinner Kristen went back to the store around 2100 to try to get in touch with Corkey, since the first two calls were answered by the answering machine. She was home, and said she would pick us up tomorrow morning.

For Kristen, the days hike covered about 8.4 miles. The first half mile to the top to Wayah Bald. Four miles to Sawmill gap. Then 3.5 miles from Sawmill Gap to Nantahala Lake.

Finally, a half mile hike from the campsite to the store and back to call Corkey. Total travel time was eight hours, resulting in an average speed of about one mile per hour. I covered more distance in the same amount of time, adding to Kristen's hike a four mile round trip back up to get Kristen, plus an additional half mile hike to the store to call Corkey the first time. In total, I hiked 12.9 miles in eight hours, resulting in an average speed of 1.6 miles per hour.

Kristen was worried that I would be upset because we cut the trip short, but I explained to her that it was exactly the opposite. I was impressed that she was able to hike this far, especially since this was the first time she ever backpacked, and the terrain we were hiking over was extremely difficult. Altogether, Kristen hiked about 51.5 miles and I hiked 56 miles. On this rough terrain, with an inexperienced backpacker, covering such a distance on a schedule designed for an advanced backpacker is quite an accomplishment. Besides, by cutting our hike short, we would be able to do some other things, like white water rafting on the Nantahala River, and visiting the Cherokee Indian Reservation.

So, we went to sleep beside a cold roaring mountain stream that ended in the beautiful and warm Nantahala Lake on the last night of our journey. I was happy, because backpacking with someone else at a different skill level was a new experience for me. Even though we had some tough times, we were able to keep to the schedule, and we both had fun. We got to hike over some beautiful mountains, through some wonderful forest, cool off in mountain streams and lakes, and in the process create memories to last a lifetime.