

# PATH AWAYS

Of the Piedmont Appalachian Trail Hikers

PATH Year 59, No. 4

Holiday 2023



## A Reaction to the First AT Vista

No, the new AT Vista programs cannot be compared to the cherished AT biennials so many of us remember. They may take place every two years, but they're shorter, they don't feature well-known performers like Pete Seeger (New Paltz, N.Y., 1983) or John McCutcheon (Lynchburg, Va., 1987), and they're smaller. August's gathering in Johnson City, Tenn., attracted not-quite 300 people, a lot less than some past biennials; New Paltz attracted 1,000. The last biennial was in Maine in 2017.

Nevertheless, it was good to see something like this return to the AT world. The workshops are almost always valuable, and it's good to spend time, either on the trail or in late-night bull sessions, with hikers and maintainers from other trail clubs and parts of the country. I particularly enjoyed a Saturday workshop and worktrip with eight other hikers – including New York City and Massachusetts teenagers just learning this stuff. We talked about controlling water on the



Johnson City Tourism

[The trailhead for the Tweetsie Trail in Johnson City, Tenn.](#)

trail, we knocked off berms and we built a few waterbars. In the process, we hope we created a new generation of trail workers.

As our teacher, Greg Ritson, commented, “Once you understand this stuff, you’ll never look at a trail the same way ever again.” It’s true.

The conference took place at East Tennessee State University, and that turned out to be a good location. ETSU is near both the trail and some rivers, and it seems to have a lot going on outdoors-wise. It was good to see that some ten miles of the roadbed for the old East Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad – better known as “Tweetsie” – has been turned into a

rails-to-trails bike path. Riding that path is a good way to remember a Blue Ridge legend. Tweetsie once ran from Johnson City to Boone, N.C.

There were a couple of problems with the first AT Vista. There was precious little information about workshop schedules, which made it hard to plan out your days. The absence of get-togethers for life members and 2000-milers – if repeated – will make it harder to keep in contact with the history (and historians) of the trail. Too, it would have made more sense to have the ATC annual meeting in Johnson City, instead of on the Web later in August. “Those (Web) meetings are terrible,” someone else commented.

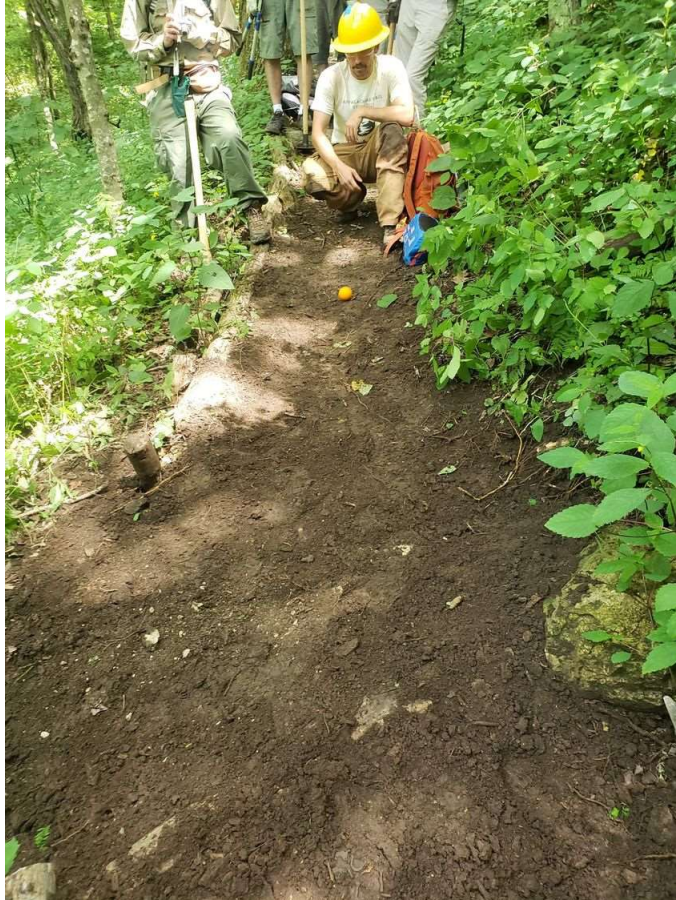
And please, please, can we keep the governmental gobbledygook out of these sessions? Most workshops I attended were quite worthwhile, but one – no names here – used too much government jargon. I still don’t know what “metrics” are; isn’t that word an adjective?

Much better were sessions led by Christine Hoyer, backcountry manager for the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (and a former Konnarock crew leader for ATC), and longtime thru-hiker Warren Doyle, who gave the keynote address Friday night. Both talk in common language – Christine has great bear and lost-hiker stories -- and Warren remembers the old days, when the Appalachian Trail Conference (as it was named then) had fewer staff members and could do things without outside consultants and endless meetings.

Of course, we couldn’t really get by with that small a number of ATC staffers today. The conservancy does much more today than it did years ago, as was noted in a workshop about the Landscape Conservation Program -- which is working with land trusts along the East Coast to protect land near the AT. It may be the “Appalachian Trail” Conservancy, but it’s not just about hiking any longer. The name went from “conference” to “conservancy” in 2005, for the record.

Nor is the trail primarily about thru-hikers or speed records. As Benton McKaye said very late in his life, the purpose of walking the trail is “To walk. To see. To see what you see.” That’s something we should remember as we attempt to hold onto our past. We may not need Pete Seeger or John McCutcheon, but we do need to remember where we came from. Here’s hoping ATC keeps that in mind planning AT Vista 2025.

-- Tom Dillon (with help from Diana Christopulos, Roanoke AT Club)



ATC

[Greg Ritson rolls an orange down the trail to simulate movement of water toward a waterbar.](#)

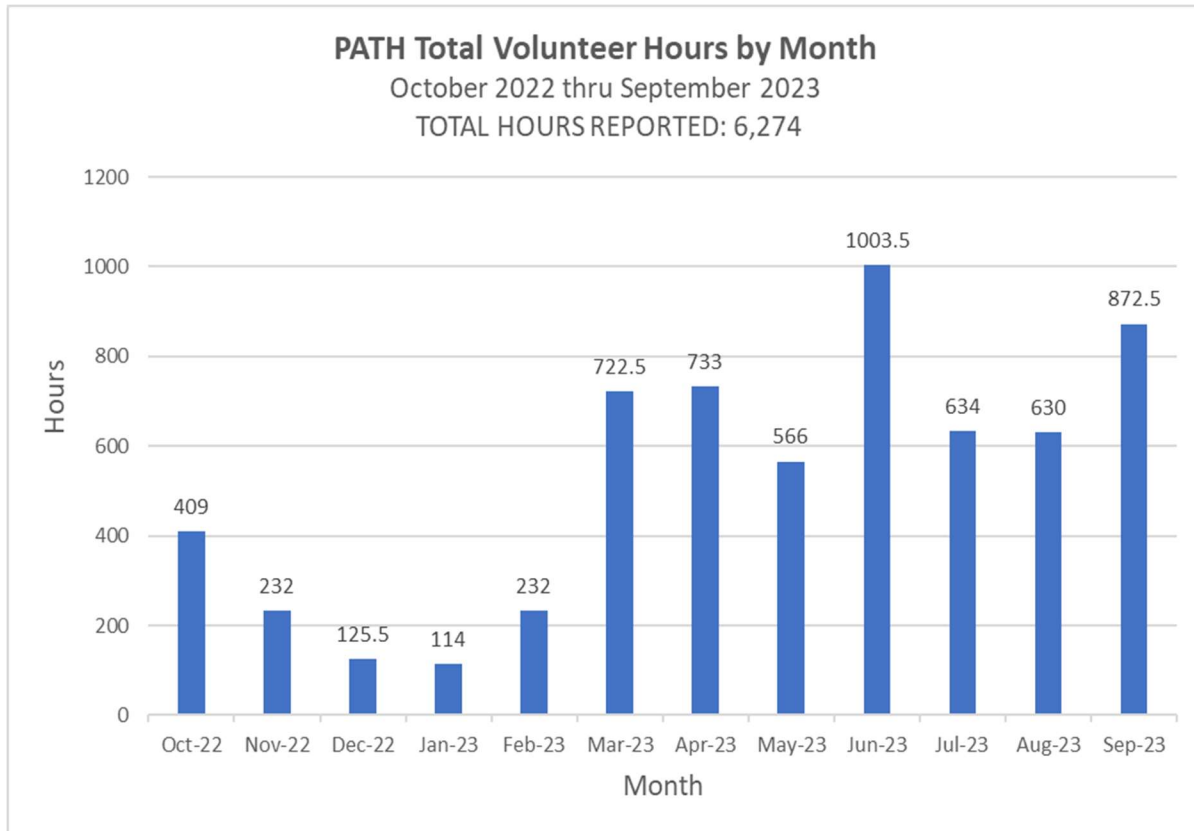
# Bits and Pieces

■ **WHAT TO DO ABOUT JAPANESE STILT GRASS?** Don Smyth noted the appearance of this invasive grass – see some at right -- while working his section this fall and asked if there's any guidance from ATC or the Forest Service on getting rid of it. No answer yet, but it's an issue we're going to confront more and more as the stuff gets a toehold in southwest Virginia. Jerry Adams said he's seen it consuming large areas off the trail. "I've been told the seed can remain viable in the soil 7 years, so it's a beast to control," he wrote. "I've just started to try spraying and controlling at my farm, so we'll see." Any other ideas about dealing with the grass are welcome. Weedeating is definitely necessary.



■ **ANOTHER WILDERNESS AREA?** No big surprise, but we understand that the area north of O'Lystery Picnic Shelter on Virginia 42 is now being considered as the Lynn Camp Creek Wilderness Study Area, which means another of our AT sections is now potentially going to be off-limits to chain saws and other mechanized trail tools. That's one more reason to consider signing up for those crosscut saw recertification courses. It's too late for the one that took place in October (which produced four new PATH crosscut sawyers), but consider it for the spring. You won't regret it.

■ **PATH ANNUAL MEETING:** The PATH annual meeting took place Nov. 18 in Winston-Salem with a board meeting, annual meeting and sumptuous potluck feast. We were told we're still in good shape financially, and we agreed to donate \$1,000 again to the Settlers' Museum of Southwest Virginia, where our Summerfest took place in June and may well be in 2024. Ed Martin was elected to the board replacing Tina Tempest, whose term was up, but Tina said she will continue to work on a new web site for PATH, including a members' section. A prototype has received good reviews. Other officers remain the same. We agreed to continue work helping maintain access to two old cemeteries, the Davis and Tilson cemeteries, on our 66 miles of trail, and will talk with ATC about mowing on Chestnut Ridge, which got overgrown this past summer. We've had several new members join this year, including Scott Smith of Burlington, N.C., who was at the meeting.



Here is our work report for the fiscal year as reported in October by timekeeper Michele Nester. “That’s a tremendous accomplishment,” she said. “Thank you for your time and commitment to the AT.” Michele is stepping down from timekeeping after this year, with Jenn Whiteis taking over. Future hours should go to [jennwhiteis@gmail.com](mailto:jennwhiteis@gmail.com). Many thanks!

■ **EARL SHAFFER SHELTER:** The Appalachian Trail Museum in Boiling Springs, Pa., has embarked on an effort to recreate a stone shelter built by the first AT thru-hiker, **Earl Shaffer**, and has asked AT clubs, including PATH, to contribute \$200 each to the effort; no decision yet here. A stone shelter foundation and walls have been finished, but still to come are roof support beams, the roof, a rustic fence, an information sign and possibly a plexiglass front. The original 1956 shelter was at Deans Gap on Blue Mountain in Pennsylvania. Shaffer’s thru-hike took place in the 1940s, after World War II. He called it “walking off the war.”

■ **NEWSLETTER -- MORE ISSUES, HELP WANTED:** This newsletter is hopefully going from four issues a year to five issues a year in 2024, and it needs an assistant editor / heir apparent if it is to keep going into the indeterminate future. Please contact the editor if you’re interested in the job, and we’ll talk about things like how duties should be divided up, how many issues there should be and who should do what. Thanks!

■ **PATH T-SHIRTS:** Remember that you can order both the popular yellow PATH t-shirt and the new Poop Pushers t-shirt, strictly for people doing privy work, at the Web address below. Thanks to those making these t-shirts available.

<https://mommas-custom-tees-llc.square.site/product/PATHVolunteer/262>



Swimming in a cenote, a geological oddity thought to date to a strike by an asteroid.

## In Mexico: Strolling Among the Maya

Story and Photos by Sue Freeman

A friend sent me an article about a new trail in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico called the Camino del Mayab. We're always on the lookout for new trails to hike, ones that haven't been discovered by hordes of people and converted into tourist runs. This one fit the bill.

A group of people are working to develop a hiking and biking trail through indigenous Mayan country to boost the financial status of the locals. We used Google translate to convert their web site (<https://caminodelmayab.com>) to English and signed up for a 5-day/4-night guided hike with an English-speaking guide. I think we were among their first English-speaking customers. We headed south with a very limited vision of what we actually had signed up for.

**Adventures elsewhere**

It turned out far better than our expectations. We thought we'd be hiking a roughly 70-mile loop, but in reality we only hiked one to three segments a day, each ranging from 4 to 7 miles. In addition to our guide, we had an English-speaking driver who met us at the end of each

trail segment and drove us to cultural experiences and the next trail segment. By doing this, we didn't have to hike any road-walk sections.

The cultural experiences are what made this trip shine. We dined at tables set up in people's yards and ate traditional Mayan food hand-prepared and lovingly served. In each small community we visited, the women vied to be "cookers." We learned about the Mayan uses of native plants, visited a Mayan pyramid complex and a local artisan.

The Yucatan region was invaded by Spaniards beginning in the 1500s. They built palatial homes called haciendas and enslaved the Mayans to run

cattle ranches. Eventually, they discovered a plant called henequen that could be grown and processed into sisal to make rope -- a valuable commodity in the days of sailing ships. So the building of haciendas boomed, until plastic was discovered and replaced sisal for rope making. The Spaniards returned to Spain and left the Mayans jobless.

We visited haciendas that were renovated to their former glory and ones that lay in ruins. We also visited communities that are turning the hacienda buildings into libraries and community kitchens.

Most fun was swimming in the many crystal-clear cenotes. The asteroid that caused the dinosaur extinction (along with a succession of sea rises and falls) created underground streams through the limestone. When the surface eroded and caved in, it created a cenote, either as an open pool or deep inside a cave. We saw pristine ones covered in lilies, and we swam in at least eight -- each one a unique experience, complete with stalactites and stalagmites.

The trails we hiked were on the boring side -- flat, straight, and rocky. They were the former narrow-gauge train lines from back in the boom days of the haciendas. But we welcomed the chance to stretch our legs between cultural experiences.

At night they set up a tent for us on the grounds of secluded cenotes, or we stayed in an oval stone cottage built as a traditional Mayan home. One night we were spoiled with a gorgeous local hotel room with a bank of windows overlooking a pool. Even this was built with local materials just like all the homes we saw in the region.

We capped off our trip with a few days exploring the city of Merida, then a week on the Gulf of Mexico in a beach house in the small town of Chelem.

As hiking trips go, this one was easy. Anyone could do it. As a step off the beaten path to experience a native culture, it was superlative, and safe. The Yucatan region is known for its low crime rate. We felt welcomed and secure wherever we wandered, and we wandered a lot!



**The trails may have been boring, but the food was great!**

# 2024 Calendar

**March 15-17, 2024**

**March Work Weekend**

**Sugar Grove, Va.**

Trail survey and maintenance, with a potluck or meal out on Saturday night. We're looking for wintertime damage to our trail sections and putting together a work schedule for spring. We may also work on reconstruction of the Hunting Camp Creek bridge near Jenkins Shelter. This is Ron Hudnell's model of what it will look like.



**April 19-21, 2024**

**April Work Weekend**

**Sugar Grove, Va.**

Continued work on trail maintenance, with a potluck or meal out on Saturday night. More complete calendar coming in March.

## PATH Officers

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This is a newsletter for the Piedmont Appalachian Trail Hikers, a trail work club that maintains some 70 miles of the Appalachian Trail in Southwest Virginia. This newsletter comes out four or five times a year, as long as we have enough material and contributions. It is sent by email to the PATH List and others, or by U.S. Mail to members who don't have email or prefer print. It's OK to print and post in your local outdoor store. MARCH DEADLINE February 20, 2024. Web site: [www.path-at.org](http://www.path-at.org). Or for info: [PiedmontATHikers@gmail.com](mailto:PiedmontATHikers@gmail.com). Or see our Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/PiedmontATHikers/](http://www.facebook.com/PiedmontATHikers/)

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## Want to Join?



We will be working on the Trail in 2024. If you'd like to join us, here's how: You may join PATH (or renew) at our Web site, [www.path-at.org](http://www.path-at.org), with PayPal, or print and mail this form with check or money order. You can also attend work weekends/meetings and join or renew there. Please don't mail cash!

Name (s) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Annual membership dues are \$20 for an individual \_\_\_\_\_, \$25 for a family \_\_\_\_\_ or \$15 for a student\_\_\_\_\_. Donations are also accepted. Donation total \_\_\_\_\_

Send payment to PATH Treasurer, P.O. Box 4423, Greensboro, North Carolina 27404. Total amount enclosed \_\_\_\_\_

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Address correction requested



*Happy Holidays!*