

# THE GEORGIA MOUNTAINEER

QUARTERLY

Winter 2026

- ▶ A Year of Impact on Georgia's Appalachian Trail: Stewardship, Partnership, and Community in Action
- ▶ 73 Years with Gene Espy: Remembering a Trailblazing Legend

# THE GEORGIA MOUNTAINEER QUARTERLY

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## The GATC Mission

*The Georgia Appalachian Trail Club manages, maintains and protects the Appalachian National Scenic Trail in Georgia with volunteers from its membership and the interested public. The Georgia Appalachian Trail Club promotes the appreciation of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and natural outdoor places through education and recreational activities, with an emphasis on conservation ethics and protection of the forests, their natural resources and wilderness areas.*

The Georgia Appalachian Trail Club is affiliated with  
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### Cover photo taken by GATC member David Sarge.

We invite hikers and friends of the Trail to join us on Facebook and Instagram and share their own views of the Appalachian Trail.



# A View From the Appalachian Trail

## GATC President Ashley Luke

## The Hikers Are Coming—and We Are Prepared

Each February, we await the arrival of a new class of aspiring Appalachian Trail thru-hikers. Fifty years ago, just 92 hikers reported completing a hike of the entire A.T. to the Appalachian Trail Conference. Twenty-five years later, Georgia saw the impacts of just over 1,100 hikers starting their northbound journey and began to consider how the resources of the trail could support and survive all these hikers.

This year, we expect to see more than 3,000 hikers stepping off from Springer Mountain, making their way north. We often say, not every northbound hiker makes it to Maine, but they all make it to Georgia, and the work of the GATC supports the thru-hikers and all visitors to the Appalachian Trail in many ways.

A core part of that support is education. Hikers preserve the A.T. experience and protect fragile ecosystems and the overall hiking experience by following good Leave No Trace practices in the backcountry. Over the last 10 years, the GATC has provided training to certify over 100 Leave No Trace Trainers within the club. People who are educated in Leave No Trace are five times more likely to take actions that protect nature. Our Trail Ambassador program puts these educators on trail to share information about Leave No Trace, share their knowledge of the trail in Georgia, and generally offer assistance to hikers who may be in need.

Another critical point of support for thru-hikers in

*“Not every northbound hiker makes it to Maine, but they all make it to Georgia.”*

Georgia is registration. While the Appalachian Trail Conservancy operates visitor centers elsewhere along the trail, hikers beginning their journeys in Georgia register at Amicalola Falls State Park. Each spring, GATC volunteers staff Base Camp, a temporary Appalachian Trail visitor center at the park. Volunteers greet hikers from around the world, help them register their hikes, answer questions, and walk them through Leave No Trace best practices—helping set the tone for a safe and responsible journey north.

Managing the sheer volume of hikers also shapes how GATC approaches trail infrastructure. For example, as thru-hiker numbers increased in the 2000s, campsite expansion around Hawk Mountain Shelter led

to widespread vegetation loss and erosion. In response, GATC developed the Hawk Mountain Campsite, with 30 hillside tent pads located half a mile from the shelter, built specifically to absorb spring hiker demand. Combined with revegetation efforts around the shelter, this approach has allowed the area to recover—offering hikers a more natural camping experience. A similar rehabilitation effort at Gooch Mountain Shelter has produced comparable results.

Ongoing data collection further helps GATC adapt to thru-hiker impacts. Trail maintainers, Trail Ambassadors, and ATC Ridgerunners gather information on hiker use and trail conditions to guide future decisions. A recent inventory documented 318 dispersed campsites along Georgia’s 78 miles of the A.T., many of them visible from or adjacent to the trail. Using this data, GATC can identify which sites are sustainable, encourage hikers to use those locations, and allow heavily impacted areas to recover—balancing access with long-term trail health.

Behind the scenes, GATC’s trail maintainers work year-round to ensure the trail is ready for peak thru-hiker season. From clearing blowdowns and maintaining water drainage to refreshing blazes and building durable rock steps, these efforts help keep the trail safe, navigable, and sustainable for the thousands of hikers who pass through Georgia each spring.

Covid created new interest in hiking. Over half of Americans now say they recreate outdoors. At the same time, volunteer numbers on the A.T. have decreased by 19% since 2019, reflective of a drop in volunteer activity across the country. It’s exciting to see more people accessing and enjoying our public lands, but it also means more work than ever for trail clubs like ours.

If you love hiking and enjoy the Appalachian Trail, I encourage you to join the GATC. Whether you’re retired and have plenty of time to dedicate to volunteering, or can only offer a day or two a year, all contributions are valuable. In 2026, make a commitment to giving back to the trails we all love.



Vienna Pilgrimage Trail

## Following the Blazes — and Understanding Blood Mountain

Last summer I hiked the Vienna Pilgrimage Trail, where grass-covered fields, steep terrain with rocky outcroppings, and multiple directions to choose from often made the trail itself hard to follow. What kept me moving forward were the trail markers. Red and white blazes appeared just often enough to reassure me that I was still on route, even when the path underfoot nearly disappeared. Those markings didn't just show direction; they gave confidence.

That experience has stayed with me as questions have surfaced about trail markings on Blood Mountain, particularly in the wake of the tragic disappearance of Charles Hosch. Many have asked why people get lost on Blood Mountain, and why the trail is not more heavily marked.

The truth is that Blood Mountain is steep, rocky, and complex. In places, solid rock replaces tread, leaf cover obscures the path, and multiple use trails intersect near the summit. Descending can be especially disorienting. Even experienced hikers can momentarily lose the line of travel.

## Why Not Just Add More Blazes?

The Georgia Appalachian Trail Club is responsible for maintaining the white blazes on the Appalachian Trail in Georgia, including Blood Mountain. That responsibility is carried out by volunteers who maintain existing markings and trail infrastructure year-round.

But responsibility does not equal unlimited authority.

*Responsibility does not equal unlimited authority.*

Blood Mountain lies within a federally designated Wilderness area, one of six on the A.T. in Georgia. Under U.S. Forest Service policy, no additional blazes or signage may be added in Wilderness, even when concerns are raised by hikers or rescue agencies. The Appalachian Trail existed here before Wilderness designation, so existing blazes were grandfathered in, but new ones are not permitted. This means trail markings may feel sparse, especially when compared to parks or front-country trails. That is by design. Wilderness designation prioritizes natural character and expects visitors to bring the skills needed to navigate more rugged terrain.

## What This Means For Hikers

Wilderness designation reflects a philosophy that values:

- Natural landscapes over built infrastructure
- Self-reliance and preparedness
- Navigation skills appropriate to backcountry travel

In Wilderness areas, hikers should be prepared to:

- Carry a map (paper or digital)
- Use navigation tools
- Expect less frequent signage than in front-country parks or developed trails

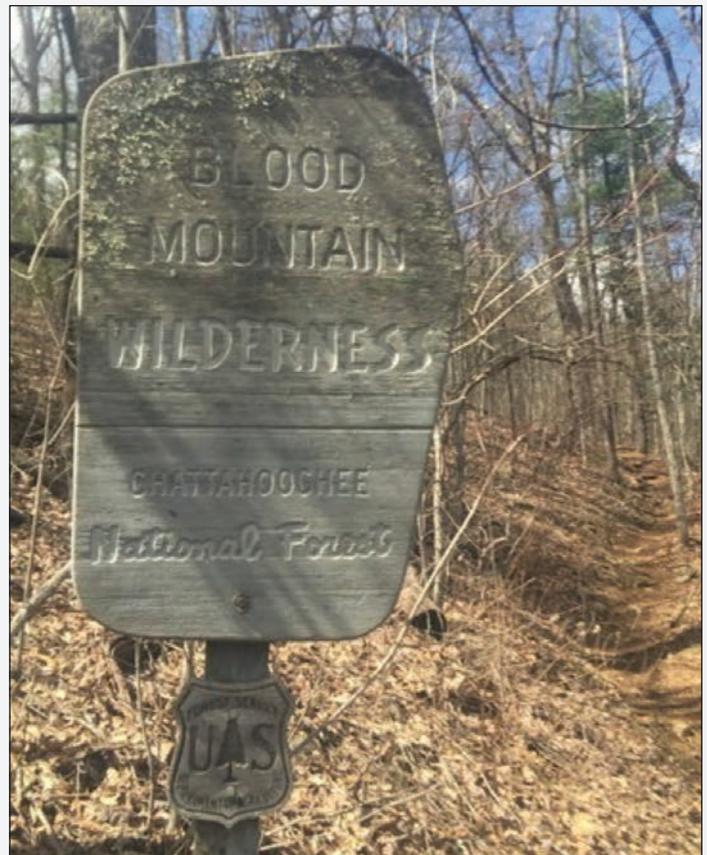
## Turning Concern into Stewardship

In the aftermath of the Charles Hosch disappearance, one person actually added blazes spaced very closely on the south side of Blood Mountain, presumably in order to correct the “problem.” Those new blazes will be removed, adding work to the GATC Trail Maintenance team schedule. This is not the way to express concerns.

Instead, we are grateful to those who reach out with concerns—and especially to those who offer to help. While we cannot add additional blazes in Wilderness areas, there are many ways to support trail safety and stewardship, including:

- Helping maintain existing blazes where permitted
- Assisting with trail maintenance and erosion control
- Supporting hiker education and preparedness efforts

***Care for the Appalachian Trail is a shared responsibility, and we welcome all who wish to be part of that work.***



# A Year of Impact:

## Stewardship, Partnership, and Community Action

Looking back at 2025 as we head into the new year, the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club's impact on the Georgia section of the Appalachian Trail and the communities it serves has never been clearer. Over the past year, volunteers, partners, and supporters worked together to protect, improve, and responsibly manage Georgia's most heavily used outdoor recreation corridor, the A.T. in Georgia and its connecting trails. The GATC, an all-volunteer organization, has accomplished much, demonstrating the value of sustained investment in trail stewardship, outdoor education, and public access to protected lands.

### GATC IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

12,000 + VOLUNTEER HOURS  
2,000 + THRU-HIKERS GREETED AT BASE CAMP  
80 + TRAINEES AT TRAIL SKILLS WORKSHOP  
47 GUIDED HIKES  
10 OUTREACH EXPERIENCES AT HIKE INN

### By the Numbers

In just one year, volunteers contributed more than 12,000 hours caring for the Georgia section of the Appalachian Trail and its associated facilities. These hours translate directly into safer paths, healthier ecosystems, and memorable experiences for thousands of hikers.

More than 80 trail maintainers from 13 organizations trained alongside us at our annual Trail Skills Workshop, strengthening stewardship across the region. Fifteen members attended a 2-day training course to become certified Leave No Trace Trainers, expanding education efforts that protect the trail for everyone who follows.

### Caring for the Trail, One Mile at a Time

Trail maintenance is invisible to many hikers—but absolutely essential. Thanks to volunteer support, crews completed a one-mile trail reroute, installed durable rock and log steps, serviced privies, repaired signs and trail structures, improved water diversions, cut back overgrowth, and cleared countless fallen trees.

Nearly 50 volunteers gave at least a dozen days to trail work, with several dedicating more than 50 days each to keeping the trail safe and sustainable. Supporting the Club means supporting this quiet, behind-the-scenes work that makes every hike possible.

Training is a cornerstone of GATC's trail maintenance program. The club offers a robust schedule of workshops as well as its annual weekend Trail Skills Workshop. Last year 21 hands-on trail maintenance workshops taught skills in essential maintenance, rock work, invasive plant removal, GPS trail mapping, and more – training the next generation of trail stewards.

Recently, GATC launched a two-day field leader training focused on crew management, further strengthening the club's capacity to lead safe, effective work trips. This investment in training is producing meaningful results. After their initial trail work experiences, many newcomers—often one or two per session—choose to step into section maintainer roles because they better understand expectations and feel prepared to succeed. GATC has also seen strong participation from younger volunteers, who are eager to learn modern, sustainable trail techniques that differ significantly from those used decades ago.

### Building Community on the Trail

Beyond maintenance, the Club brings people together outdoors. In 2025, we led 47 guided hikes, helping participants complete the Georgia section of the Appalachian Trail as well as the Benton MacKaye Trail, work toward the Georgia 4000-Footers Challenge, and explore new terrain with the addition of the Pinhoti Trail in Georgia to our hike series.

For many participants, these hikes are their first step into a lifelong connection with the trail and often their introduction to giving back.

### Events That Welcome Everyone

Our events open the door to the wider community. The A.T. Gateways event at Amicalola Falls State Park brought hundreds of hikers, families, and outdoor enthusiasts together for a weekend of learning, vendors, and shared enthusiasm for the outdoors.

We partnered with the Leave No Trace Center to host an LNT Spotlight event featuring education, new trail signage, and park cleanup projects. In Blairsville, the community celebrated its first Banff Film Festival, showcasing outdoor adventure through short films.

The year also included the second bi-annual Women's Trail Summit, welcoming more than 100 women for a weekend focused on skills, confidence, and connection in the outdoors.

### Reaching New Audiences

Through outreach and education, the Club helps ensure the trail is welcoming to all. More than 10 groups—including elementary and high school students, women veterans, and refugee girls—experienced overnight visits at the Hike Inn, often for their first immersive outdoor adventure.

At Base Camp, Trail Ambassadors greeted over 2,000 aspiring thru-hikers, helping them start smart with safety tips and Leave No Trace guidance. Trail Ambassadors and Ridgerunners also spend countless hours on the trail answering questions, sharing best practices, and helping hikers stay safe.



Rock steps built by GATC's Rock Crew protect the trail from erosion while making steep sections safer for hikers.

# Looking Ahead:

## An Invitation to Partner in 2026

The accomplishments of the past year reflect more than volunteer effort—they reflect a model of collaboration that benefits public lands, local communities, and the growing outdoor recreation economy. The Georgia Appalachian Trail Club works in partnership with land managers, nonprofit organizations, and volunteers to ensure that Georgia’s trails remain safe, sustainable, and welcoming to all.

As outdoor use continues to grow, so does the need for trained volunteers, public education, and coordinated stewardship. We invite legislators, outdoor organizations, businesses, and community partners to join us in supporting this work—through membership, collaboration, or direct support. Together, we can continue to protect the Georgia section of the Appalachian Trail, strengthen outdoor communities, and ensure this treasured resource endures for generations to come.

### Ways to Get Involved

- ▶ **Become a member** and support stewardship of Georgia’s Appalachian Trail
- ▶ **Take a hike with us** on guided outings across North Georgia
- ▶ **Join a Third Saturday Work Trip**—no experience required
- ▶ **Support our work** by purchasing an Appalachian Trail license plate



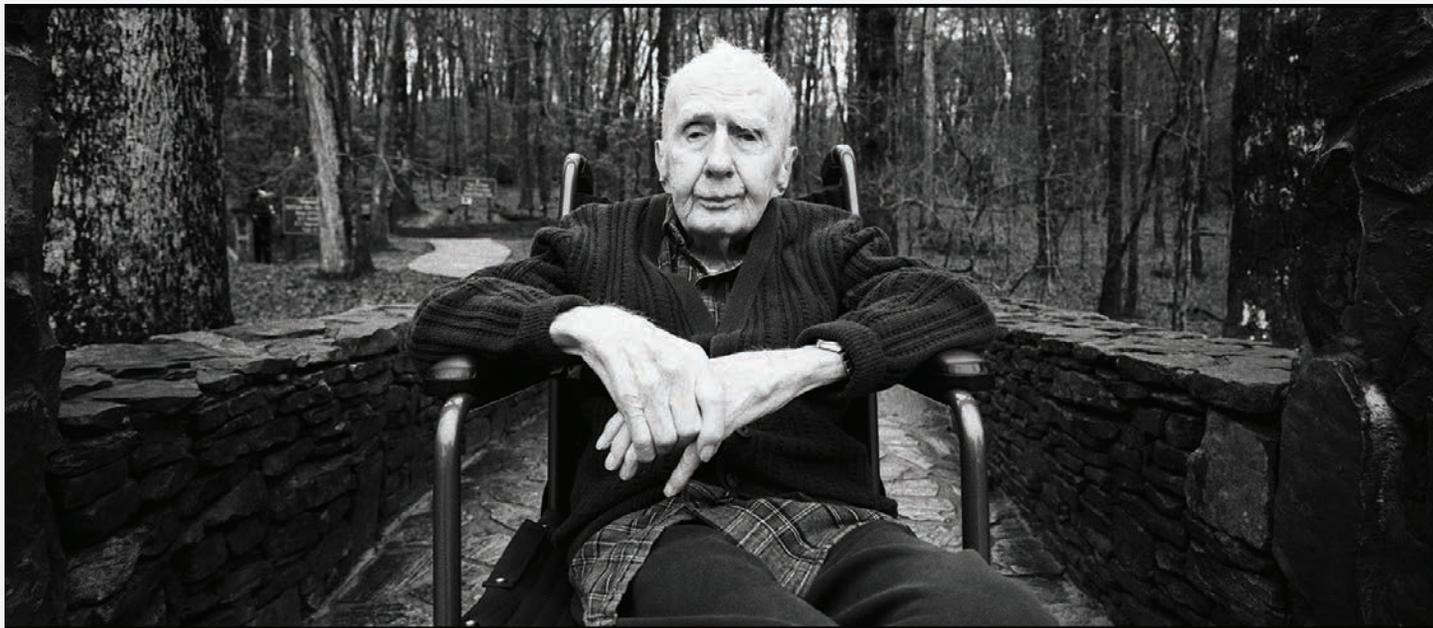
A moment from a guided group hike.



Women’s Trail Summit, 2025

# Paying Tribute to Gene Espy:

## Longtime GATC Friend and Legendary Thru-Hiker



Gene Espy at A.T. Gateways, 2024. Photo by Laura E. Partain (used by permission).

Partain—trail name Half Pint—is a Nashville-based professional photographer who thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail in 2024 with her 35mm camera. She is currently creating *American Pilgrims*, a book featuring portraits and stories of hikers she met along the Trail.

### Reported by Leon M. Rubin

It's not just anyone whose life is celebrated with an obituary in *The New York Times*. But Gene Espy's was.

**"Gene Espy, Pioneering Hiker of the Appalachian Trail, Dies at 98,"** read the headline following his death on August 22 of last year.

The second person to hike the entire Appalachian Trail in 1951, Gene was a longtime and deeply cherished friend of the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club. His membership profile shows he joined GATC on October 15, 1951—making him a 73-year member. He was an Honorary Member, a Lifetime Member, and, to no one's surprise, a 2,000-Miler.

"We think of Gene Espy as ours," said Lynne R. Beeson, Immediate Past President of GATC and current Board Member at Large. "He loved the trail and its people, and they loved him back. He was humble about having his thru-hike gear displayed in the GATC museum area at the Amicalola Falls State Park Visitor Center.

"It was amazing to see him at A.T. Gateways in recent years—still a magnet for hikers, a listener and teller of trail stories, and a steadfast supporter of GATC," Beeson said.

Eugene Marion Espy was born on April 14, 1927, in Cordele, Georgia. An avid outdoorsman from a young age, he was the first Eagle Scout in his hometown. He attended Georgia Tech, served in the U.S. Navy near the end of World War II, and earned a degree in industrial management and engineering in 1950.

Gene first learned about the Appalachian Trail from a seventh-grade teacher. Just after turning 24, he began his thru-hike on May 31, 1951, from Mount Oglethorpe in North Georgia—the southern terminus at the time. By the time he reached the summit of Mount Katahdin on September 30, he had lost 28 pounds, worn out three pairs of hiking boots, and completed a journey that helped define the future of the Trail.

“He loved the trail and its people, and they loved him back.”

When Gene reached the end of the Trail atop Mt. Katahdin on that cold September day, there was no grand celebration. There was no one else around. He took in the sweeping views, leaned his walking stick against the sign, and took a photograph.

"Then I knelt down and said a prayer of thanks to God for watching over me and allowing me to make this hike," Espy later recalled.

Gene's death was also acknowledged by *The Trek*, a long-distance hiking website. "His journey in 1951, completed over 123 days, helped pave the way for the countless hikers who have followed in his footsteps," the author wrote.

### Part of the Trail

Completing his thru-hike was only the beginning of Gene's lifelong relationship with the Appalachian Trail. According to his wife, Eugenia, hikers later stopped by their Macon home seeking advice and encouragement.

Longtime GATC member Marianne Skeen recalled leading a demanding 16-mile section hike from Dick's Creek Gap to Unicoi Gap when Gene signed up—wearing tennis shoes and carrying food and water in a grocery bag.

"He walked right behind me all day long and talked the entire way," she said. "He never even seemed to breathe hard. Appearances can be deceptive!"

In 2011, Gene was inducted as a charter member of the Appalachian Trail Museum's Hall of Fame alongside trail visionaries Myron Avery, Benton MacKaye, and the first A.T. thru-hiker, Earl Shaffer. He published his autobiography, *The Trail of My Life*, in 2008.

"One thing that separated Gene from the other pioneer thru-hikers," Appalachian Trail Museum president Larry Luxenberg told *The New York Times*, "was that he remained an active, consistent part of the trail community for the rest of his life. He was always encouraging—a gentleman and a fascinating storyteller."

## Multiple GATC Memories

Gene remained a steady presence within GATC throughout his life, including appearances at the Appalachian Trail Commemorative Forever Stamp dedication at Amicalola Falls State Park in 2024.

Following his death, GATC members attended memorial services in Macon and a Celebration of Life at the Amicalola Visitor Center, where many stopped to visit the display of Gene's hiking gear and share memories.

"He was one of the first GATC members we met," said Ron Hamlin. "We sat down at a holiday party table not knowing anyone and learned we were sitting with Gene and his wife, Eugenia."

Said Phillip Hodges simply, "He was one crazy adventurer!"

Gene was well known for instilling a sense of adventure in others. His granddaughter, Courtney Holliday, recalled how he lifted her beneath the iconic stone arch at Amicalola Falls when she was a child.



Appalachian Trail pioneers at the 1952 Georgia Appalachian Trail Club annual meeting. From left: Chester Dziengielewski, Appalachian Trail founder Benton MacKaye, Bill Hall, and Gene Espy. Dziengielewski and Espy both completed thru-hikes in 1951; Dziengielewski was recognized as the first successful southbound thru-hiker, while Hall completed all but 300 miles. *Photo courtesy Georgia Archives, Appalachian Trail Club, Georgia Records.*



"He was known for his generosity of time and encouragement of others," she said. "He especially loved spending time with past and future Appalachian Trail thru-hikers."

In addition to Eugenia and Jane, Espy is survived by another daughter, Ellen Holliday, and granddaughters Courtney and Amanda.

According to an obituary in *The Macon Melody*, "He kept going right up until the end," Jane Gilsinger said. "He was alert and sitting in a chair the day before he died. When he was in the hospital, he kept talking about getting out into the woods and going camping. He loved the trail."

Eugenia Espy was quoted as saying that her husband had been in declining health for several years, and had fallen a few weeks ago, but had not been ill. "He didn't have an illness," she said. "He didn't have diabetes, cancer or have a heart attack. At his age, he just wore out."

"My father lived life with an exclamation point," Jane said during his memorial service. "He lived it well and with great excitement. His joy in life never ceased. My father always cared about other people enjoying life to the fullest".

Gene Espy's life was a lesson to all of us in how to live a life of meaning and impact. Borrowing words from those who loved him and were moved by his example:

***“Live life as a declaration - and with an exclamation point!”***

Left: Gene Espy with family at the Appalachian Trail Commemorative Stamp dedication. From left: Jane Gilsinger, Eugenia Espy, and Gene Espy at the First Day of Issue Dedication Ceremony for the Appalachian Trail Commemorative Forever Stamps at Amicalola Falls State Park on February 28. *Photo by Leon M. Rubin.*

# Join GATC for These Winter Gatherings



**AT GATEWAYS**  
**FEBRUARY 27-28, 2026**  
 AMICALOLA FALLS STATE PARK

AMICALOLA FALLS STATE PARK  
 DAWSONVILLE, GA

APPALACHIAN TRAIL APPROACH

SPRINGER MTN 8.5 MILES  
 MT KATAHDIN, MAINE 2190.9 MILES  
 BENTON MACKAYE TRAIL 8.7 MILES

The Georgia Appalachian Trail Club (GATC), in partnership with Amicalola Falls State Park, will be hosting A.T. Gateways, formerly known as the Appalachian Trail Kick Off (ATKO)

A.T. History    Vendor Booths    Skill Workshops

A.T. Gateways will have something for everyone who loves the Appalachian Trail (A.T.) whether you are an aspiring thru-hiker or just someone who enjoys being on the trail and outdoors. Activities, programs and demonstrations will be held at both the Lodge and the new Visitor Center

706-344-1500

<https://georgia-atclub.org/about/at-gateways/>

For more information, contact [president@georgia-atclub.org](mailto:president@georgia-atclub.org)  
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