



Managing Your North Carolina Woodlands for Outdoor Recreation

Privately owned woodlands can be wonderful recreational resources. Whether you, your friends and family enjoy hiking, horseback riding, mountain biking, fishing or hunting in the North Carolina woods, taking the time to build trails on your property will yield outdoor enjoyment for years to come. If you're thinking of building one or more trails, here are some things to consider.



Determine Who Will Use Your Trails

Different recreational activities require different kinds of trails. Your first step is to decide who will use your woods, and when. Are your family, friends and neighbors outdoorsy types who enjoy a really challenging hike, or are they bird-watchers who proceed at a more leisurely pace? The answers to these questions will help you plan your trail.

Plan the Route Your Trails Will Take

Digital topographical maps are available for free download from the U.S. Geological Survey. (See the “Learn More!” section below.) Google Earth also can help you visualize details of your property when you’re planning your trail. Once you’ve checked out these visual guides, take note of features in the landscape such as hills, streams, wetlands and boulders, as well as existing roads, tracks and points of interest. Then decide on your trail’s trajectory.



Walk Your Proposed Trail Route

Maps alone won’t tell you everything you need to consider in planning your trail. There’s no substitute for walking your land and experiencing its topography and features for yourself. The best time of year to see the landscape is late fall, but try to scout in all four seasons to identify the highlights and the hazards of the corridor you’re considering. For example, spring may bring high water or temporary ponds you’ll want to avoid. As you walk your proposed route, mark points of interest, obstacles, existing trails and roads on a map or record their GPS coordinates.

Ridgelines, bluffs and stream bottoms all offer natural trail routes, as well as points of interest. Try to avoid wetlands and swamps, rocky or steep slopes, the edges of streams, thickets of invasive plants, old homesteads with wells or cisterns, active farmland and property boundaries. Also make sure that your trail will not disturb any natural resources that are listed as threatened or endangered. Not sure? The North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources can help you determine what species need special protection. If

your trail crosses over streams, wetlands or roads, you may need a permit from a local water or road authority. Make sure to obtain any permits before you begin construction.

Construct Your Trail

The simplest trails are narrow, cleared footpaths through the woods. Others might be wider paths covered with wood chips or gravel, or more elaborate boardwalks. Walking and hiking trails are generally two to three feet wide. Trails for off-road cycling or horseback riding should be at least five feet

wide. If you plan to open your trail to the public, you'll probably need to consider erecting some signs—simple blazes on the trees to indicate turns or more elaborate interpretive signs to identify features of interest. Again, the trail you build will depend on how you intend to use it and the terrain it will cross.

Learn More!

- **MyLandPlan.org.** This website for woodland owners contains extensive, easy-to-understand information and resources on building recreational trails on your property, while safeguarding your trees, water and wildlife resources. To get you started on building recreational trails through your woods, visit <http://mylandplan.org/content/designing-trail>
- **U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).** To help you plan the route of your recreational trail, the USGS offers free, downloadable digital topographical maps of North Carolina. The USGS website also offers helpful video tutorials on how to find the maps you need and use the different types of data in the maps you download. <http://nationalmap.gov/ustopo>
- **Google Earth.** Google offers powerful, free tools to explore your land—and free tutorials on how to do it. Using Google Earth can be a great way to see the big picture in order to plan the best route for your new trail(s). If you're a beginner with this tool, try one of the tutorials found at <http://www.google.com/earth/learn>
- **Trails.com.** This website offers a step-by-step process for building a simple woodland trail. http://www.trails.com/how_2436_build-trails.html



- **National Trails Training Partnership.** This website offers a variety of resources on building trails, including selecting materials. <http://www.americantrails.org/resources/trailbuilding>
- **Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.** This state agency has published a highly regarded trail design manual that offers a great deal of useful information applicable to North Carolina or any other state. Download it free at <http://atfiles.org/files/pdf/MNdesignSchoenbauer07.pdf>



Information for this fact sheet was compiled from a variety of sources, including the American Forest Foundation, U.S. Geological Survey, Google Earth, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Trails.com.