

TrailGroove®

Issue 24



The Lost Girls Ride Again

Location: Ouachita Trail, Arkansas

by Susan Dragoo



Close Call

The rock looms large in my headlamp as I stand, trying to gather both my wits and my hiking poles. The sun is long gone and we are hiking in the dark along the ridge of Fourche Mountain, searching for a flat place to pitch six tents. The guidebook says there is good camping somewhere up ahead, but we're desperate to stop and in this blackness can see very little beyond the trail's edge.

In my hurry, tired and leading this group of equally tired women to a stopping place, I stumbled on the rocky trail and fell headlong. I landed on my shoulder, barely

missing a piece of granite that could have dealt my skull a serious blow had I been a few inches closer. Getting an injured hiker off this mountain to medical care in the darkness might be impossible, and at best an ordeal. I shake off the image. After the day we've had, it's not what any of us need.

We are section-hiking the Ouachita Trail, a 223-mile national recreation trail running west to east along the ridge of the Ouachita Mountains of southeast Oklahoma and western Arkansas. This is Section 4, our sixth section (hiked in a hodgepodge order). We knew it would be

Right: Blue stencils of the Ouachita Trail symbol on rocks are infrequent but helpful; most trail blazes are painted on the trees of the Ouachita National Forest.

Below: An optimistic group prepares to start Section 4 at the Foran Gap trailhead. From left, Janet Hamlin, Deb Cox, Pam Frank, Carol Harper, and Mary McDaniel.

Previous Page: Pam leads the way on a downhill stretch of the reroute.



a dry segment but weren't mentally prepared for its other quirks. Before this hike was complete, we would have a new moniker for our heretofore-unnamed hiking group, and a new appreciation of our own vulnerability.

Spring and Fall

Mary McDaniel is a former critical care nurse, now a triathlete, trail runner, long-distance cyclist, and backpacker. She works on the information technology side of health care these days but still carries a whopping first aid kit. Her hiking companions, like most who know her, find comfort in her presence. Besides being a source of reason and light, Mary is a planner. Together we organize these hikes. Since 2011, Mary and I have undertaken two hikes a year – Spring and Fall – on the Ouachita Trail. We skipped it the Fall I trekked to Mount Everest Base Camp and the Fall we did the Eagle Rock Loop (Arkansas' longest, toughest loop hike), but have been otherwise relentless in chipping away at the trail. In the south central United States, Spring and Fall are prime seasons for backpacking. Winter can be good when the weather is mild, but we avoid backpacking in summer (ticks and poison ivy).

Except for Mary and me, the composition of our Oklahoma City-based group changes from time to time. New hikers

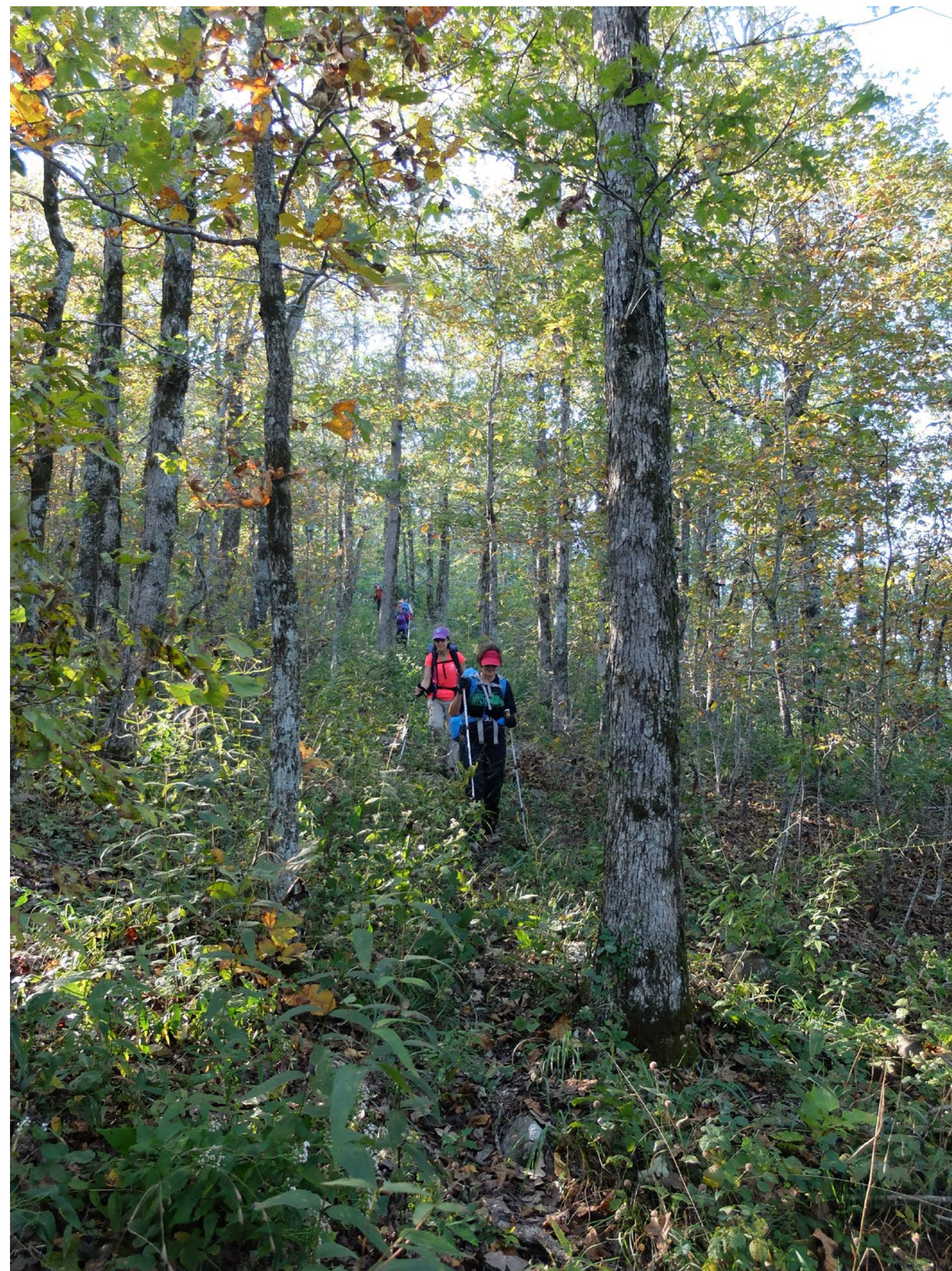
Right: A sassafras seedling pushes up through the pine needle-covered forest floor where I dropped my poles.

Opposite Page: Jan and Pam lead the way through the undergrowth on a downhill segment of the trail.

have joined us, some becoming regulars and others discovering that backpacking is not their thing. The number has stabilized at five or six, and Section 4 would create a new cohesiveness in the group, as stressful events are prone to do.

The Trail

The Ouachita Trail is rugged and remote but mostly well maintained, thanks to Friends of the Ouachita Trail (FoOT), a volunteer organization whose members adopt sections of the trail and routinely conduct maintenance to keep it clear. It begins at Talimena State Park in southeastern Oklahoma, climbs to a maximum elevation of 2,610 feet at the top of Rich Mountain, and crosses into Arkansas near mile marker 46, five miles west of Queen Wilhelmina State Park.





Left: The hardwoods begin to show off their fall colors on the late October hike.
Above: Mile markers are a welcome but infrequent sign on the Ouachita Trail. Many are missing.

Large stands of pine mix with hardwoods in the Ouachita National Forest, in which most of the trail lies. It terminates at Pinnacle Mountain State Park near Little Rock, Arkansas. Built from 1979 to 1981, it was the first long-distance hiking trail in this part of the country, and is the longest. In our guidebook, the trail is divided into 10 sections, ranging from 14.6 to 27.9 miles in length.

Access points along the way are plentiful but a fair distance from any community of consequence. We have headquartered at Talihina, Oklahoma for western reaches of the trail and Mena, Arkansas for central

stretches. Shelters in the Appalachian Trail style (three-sided log structures on raised platforms) have existed on the eastern end of the trail for many years. Recently FoOT built eight new shelters on the western trail, and four more are scheduled. Their goal is a shelter every 10 miles. Tim Ernst's Ouachita Trail Guide is the Bible of "OT" hikers and Ernst is something of an Arkansas hiking demi-god. He had a hand in creating the Ozark Highlands Trail, a long-distance trail of national repute, and has published multiple guidebooks for hiking in the region. The guides are detailed and authoritative, and we wouldn't think to question one. Until now.

Section 4

This late October day starts well enough. We had driven four hours from Oklahoma City to Talihina the night before and stayed at Hootie Creek Bed and Breakfast, a favorite before-and after-hike resting spot. Ordinarily, we would have stayed in Mena, Arkansas – much closer to the trailhead – but a large motorcycle gathering has monopolized the town’s lodging. Section 4 is 26.4 miles long and begins at Foran Gap, a parking area about six miles north of Acorn, Arkansas. Before we start, we cache water on a side road with trail access, then drive to the section’s end at Big Brushy Campground, on Highway 270, to leave a car. It is 11 a.m. when we return to the trailhead at mile 68.1.

Since Ernst describes this section as “long, high, and dry,” we carry extra water. I have about three liters – at 2.2 pounds per liter that’s nearly seven pounds, bringing my normally lightweight pack to something over 25 pounds. Ernst’s guidebook says Section 4 is “pretty easy hiking,” a claim we would soon question.

It’s a warm, sunny day. The foliage is still mostly green, but reds and yellows are beginning to emerge. The trail starts on an old road and we make excellent time the first three miles. Then, things change. As our path becomes more remote, it gets more overgrown and difficult. And we are by no means on level ground. The Ouachitas are nothing like the Rockies in elevation, but long, steep climbs are a constant part of hiking here. We struggle through brambles and over deadfall for hours, essentially bushwhacking.

As the sun sets, Mary mentions that we need to start looking for a campsite. We come upon a partial clearing. “I don’t think we’re going to find anything better than that right there,” says Mary. But the group wants to press on, hoping for the “great campsites” Ernst mentions just beyond a saddle at mile 79.5. Nothing materializes and we are still hiking when night falls. After my close encounter with the rock, I realize just how tired we are and look for anything that might work. We are feeling desperate and I



Spider webs stretching across the trail were a constant source of irritation, but made for a beautiful sight when they caught the sunlight.

feel the weight of responsibility. Even Mary, usually so full of energy and optimism, seems worn down. Eventually, we find a flat spot and stop. We are too tired to cook and since we are conserving water anyway – our water cache is still six miles away – we set up camp by headlamp, eat a snack, and go to bed. Even the bear bag goes unhung. With bypasses and course corrections the GPS says we hiked 12 miles today. My body feels like it was twice as much.

It is an uneventful night and on day two we hit the trail at 8 a.m., with 15 miles to finish. We make short work of the six miles to our cache near mile 85.5, at the intersection of two dirt roads about five miles off the highway. We break out the JetBoils and cook an early lunch, savoring our hot oatmeal after a cold breakfast of Clif bars. Stomachs and hydration bladders full, we head out with renewed optimism.

The Ouachita Trail is marked with blue blazes and they serve as our source of truth. Perhaps too much so. From the site of our cache on Forest Service Road #76, our blue blazes continue east through the forest. But the trail guide says that here we will be walking for 2.7 miles on the road, which parallels the visible trail. And there are also blue blazes along the road. It is mildly confusing. We opt for the road, and nearly three miles on we find the junction where FR #76 makes a sharp turn to the left and, just as the guidebook says, the trail leaves the road to the right. We see blue blazes to our right and start that way.

The trail here is lovely, the best we've seen on this section. Much of it follows an old road padded with pine needles. I momentarily question whether we are going in the right direction – it seems we may be walking west instead of east, but blazes keep turning up and I don't bother to look at my compass. After about three miles we reach a rocky overlook and begin to scramble up for a view, but Jan slips on an outcropping, injuring her knee. Mary delivers first aid and we continue, soon emerging onto a road. It looks familiar. There we see a milepost – 86. We have walked in a circle. A six-mile circle.

It is 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The sun will set before 7 p.m. We have already hiked 10 miles today. Jan's knee is hurting, Carol is having pain in her hip, and Pam's iliotibial band is inflamed. Our food supplies are running low. Including the three miles of road we must hike for the second time today, and assuming we can find the correct trail, we will have another

eight miles to finish. We can only guess how difficult the last five miles may be. Perhaps fast and easy, or possibly miles of bushwhacking and an after-dark finish with a group of hungry women in pain. The risk is too high. Wisdom prevails and we decide to hitch a ride back to our car.

FR #76 is not well traveled. The only motorists we saw today were hunters on ATVs. We start walking toward the highway, five miles away, knowing we can hitch a ride once there. Soon a dusty blue Nissan pickup approaches and the driver stops to see if we need help. Jan explains our dilemma and asks for a ride for one of our group, who would then come back for the rest. Angels of mercy, Delton and Joyce Hughes insist on hauling all six of us back to the car.

We're so relieved that we're giddy. We pile into the truck bed like country kids on their way to a picnic and Delton points his truck toward the highway. It must be a comical sight when we pull onto Highway 270. Sagging in the rear, the truck struggles to get up speed under the heavy payload of six full grown women and their packs. Other motorists pass us with amused looks. We wave and smile, not in the least embarrassed.

Big Brushy Creek Campground soon appears and we let out a hoot and a holler. Delton and Joyce deliver us to our vehicle and take time for some friendly conversation. "We've had a busy day," says Delton. "Had to pull a calf and dress out a couple of deer and now, we're rescuing some Lost Girls!" There it is, our new



A giddy group of women enjoy the ride in the back of a pickup truck.

name. After a photo with our rescuers we drive back to the trailhead to pick up the other car and then to Talihina, where we take refuge at Hootie Creek. Pizza, wine, and cake help us celebrate birthdays and our safe return.

What Just Happened?

Once home, we try to figure out why three separate, parallel paths within a three-mile segment were all blazed blue. I email Tim Ernst and tell him what happened. "That reroute you found was included when we updated the guidebook in 2012," he writes in response. "There are a couple of other new reroutes that were added to that newest edition - trail conditions change

over the years, so it is always best to have the latest edition."

I check the guidebook we had used and it is dated 2006. I notice on my bookshelf a copy of the 2012 edition, which I had the good sense to buy, but not to actually use. Oops. The portion of the trail we hiked backwards is the new section.

New guidebook in hand, the Lost Girls agree to go back and day hike the portion of Section 4 we missed. Carol has custom t-shirts made up for our return trip with "I Survived Section 4" and the OT insignia on the front, and "The Lost Girls" and a replica of the mile 86 marker on the back. We may as well laugh about it.

We return in late February and start where we cached water on our October trip. Backtracking, we try to find mile marker 86 so that we can hike the trail on the reroute, as it was intended, but that mile marker is nowhere to be found. Whether it's gone now (more mile markers are missing than are still in place) or we just overlooked it, we don't know. But we found the reroute, and completed the trail uneventfully. Some parts of it still don't make sense, though. We were out past sunset following Mary down part of the trail looking for a missing connection, to no avail. We finally had to call it a day. Mary says someday she

will come back and through-hike the entire trail, hoping to solve the mystery once and for all. She's nothing if not tenacious.

A Final Word

The Lost Girls finished Section 7 of the OT in Spring of 2015 and are making plans to wrap up the final three using, of course, the latest edition of the guidebook.

The Lost Girls: Pam Frank, Deb Cox, Carol Harper, Janet Hamlin, Mary McDaniel and Susan Dragoo.



Upper Right: The wet environment of the forest produces interesting fungus on fallen trees.
Lower Above: A signpost directs hikers to Forest Service Road 813 but a blue blaze indicates the Ouachita Trail is straight ahead.
Below: The Lost Girls return to the trail on a foggy February morning.





The Lost Girls celebrate completion of Section 4! From left, Susan Dragoo, Deb Cox, Pam Frank, Mary McDaniel, Carol Harper, and Janet Hamlin.

Information:

The Ouachita Trail is primarily within the Ouachita National Forest and is administered by the US Forest Service. It traverses the Flatside Wilderness, the Upper Kiamichi Wilderness and several wildlife management areas. Camping is allowed anywhere along the trail, except near Queen Wilhelmina State Park and the last 30 miles on the eastern end. No permits are needed to hike or camp. Five campgrounds are located along the Ouachita Trail: Talimena State Park, Winding Stair, Queen Wilhelmina State Park, Big Brushy and Lake Sylvia. Shelters are located along much of the trail. See details here:

http://friendsot.org/about_the_trail/trail-shelter-project/

[Friends of the Ouachita Trail \(FoOT\)](#) is a non-profit organization created by trail users to maintain the Ouachita National Recreation Trail as a healthy and enjoyable outdoor recreational asset.

Getting There:

The western trailhead is at Talimena State Park near Talihina, Oklahoma, 142 miles southeast of Tulsa. The eastern terminus of the trail is near Little Rock, Arkansas. Multiple access points exist along the length of the trail.

Best Time to Go:

Late fall, winter and early spring are best for cooler temperatures, minimal undergrowth and insects, fall colors and spring wildflowers.

Books:

[Ouachita Trail Guide](#), by Tim Ernst.

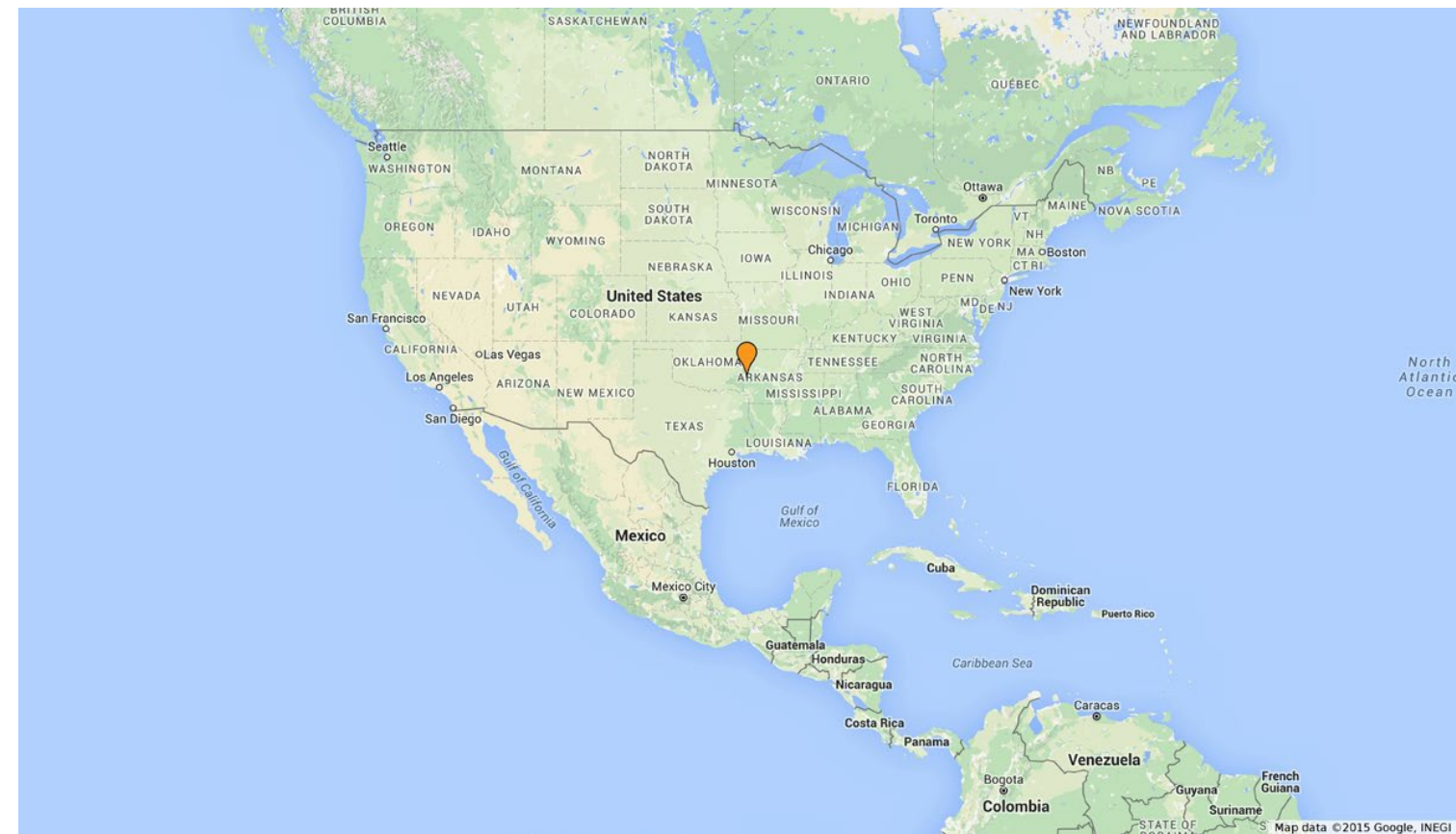
Maps:

[Hiking Trails of the Ouachitas and Ozarks](#)

About the Author:

Susan Dragoo is a writer and photographer living in Norman, Oklahoma who would rather be hiking just about any day of the year.

Web site: Susandragoo.com



Mary strides up a hill with Carol and Deb close behind.