

Your Guide to a Multisport Weekend in Burke County

by *Ann Gibson* *Charlotte, NC Winston-Salem, NC* *October 17, 2018*



Between the remote forests of the South Mountains and the rocky peaks of Linville Gorge, the Catawba River cuts a fertile swath across Burke County, N.C. Lake James spreads out across more than 6,500 acres at the confluence of the Catawba, Paddy Creek, and the Linville River. Right in the middle sits Morganton, a former timber and furniture-making town that's now home to breweries, art galleries, and locally-owned restaurants serving everything from scratch donuts to Scottish salmon. Put it all together, and you have an excellent destination for adventurous travelers.

If you're looking for a new area to explore, you should plan an adventure sports weekend in Burke County, which is within easy driving distance of Winston-Salem and Charlotte. In this pocket of the Blue Ridge foothills you'll find everything from kayaking to hang gliding.

Hang Gliding

Riding thermals 1,500 feet above the landscape may be a bit outside your wheelhouse, but it tops our list as Morganton is the only place in the Southeast that you can hang glide between the Outer Banks and the Georgia mountains. Craig and Laura Pearson, with their son and aspiring pilot Liam, operate [Thermal Valley Hang Gliding](#) out of Foothills Regional Airport, and their enthusiasm for gliding is infectious. After a safety briefing, you'll harness in with your tandem glider pilot, and a tow plane will provide the acceleration to lift off. Once you reach maximum altitude, the tow rope is released and you'll experience the thrill of free flight. Try a stomach-churning corkscrew descent, or float gently and slowly down. The Pearsons will videotape every Instagrammable moment.

Hiking & Backpacking

Choose a hike from more than 50 miles of trails in Burke County's two state parks. For challenging climbs, hike the rugged slopes of [South Mountains State Park](#). The High Shoals Trail takes you to the top of an 80-foot waterfall, and Chestnut Knob ascends Jacob Fork Gorge to one of the most scenic overlooks in the mountain range. Backpacking loops from three to over 10 miles long travel the remote backcountry of this undeveloped mountain range. For distance without the elevation, hike the rolling hills of [Lake James State Park](#) and soak in the water views.

Some of the toughest trails in the region lie due north in Linville Gorge. Bag Linville's popular east rim peaks, Hawksbill, Table Rock, and Shortoff Mountain, or descend more than 2,500 feet to the Linville River and follow the 11.5-mile Linville Gorge Trail along the west side of the river. Backpack in to grab one of the riverside campsites for the night. Or, hike a less strenuous route off the Blue Ridge Parkway, like the Linville Falls Trail near milepost 317, leading from the Linville Falls Visitor Center through virgin hemlock forest to views of the upper and lower falls.

Trail Running



Get your trail running fix on the well-maintained trails at [Lake James State Park](#). More than 11 miles of forested terrain offers plenty of shade and lake views, while another 13 miles of singletrack is shared with mountain bikers.

Mountain Biking

A smooth and flowy newcomer has joined the ranks of beginner to intermediate singletrack in Burke County, and it's going to have a big impact. With 15 miles on the ground and another 35 to 45 miles in development, the [Fonta Flora State Trail](#) will be a game-changer for the region, connecting Morganton and other western North Carolina towns with Asheville. Power through the fast singletrack along the perimeter of Lake James from the trailhead at Fonta Flora County Park.

Another 13 miles of mountain biking trails at [Lake James State Park](#) are perfect for beginners practicing skills and building speed. Ride 3.5 miles on the easy, non-technical Tindo loops before taking on bigger climbs with lake views on the Wimba loops. If you're ready for more, head to [South Mountain State Park](#) for an all-out cardio challenge on 16 miles of fire roads. What this double track trail lacks in technical features, it more than makes up for in punishing climbs and rapid descents deep in the backcountry.

Road Biking

If road cycling is more your style, ride the 18-mile loop around Lake James on rural roads that take you through the state park and Pisgah National Forest. Follow Highway 126 as it crosses the lake at the Catawba River Access and heads north to Paddy's Creek. A moderate climb greets you as you exit Pisgah on your way back to the south edge of the lake, or add another 16 miles to your day by continuing east on Hwy. 126 to downtown Morganton.

Climbing



[Linville Gorge](#), also called the Grand Canyon of the East, is one of the southeast's premier climbing destinations. For beginners and intermediate climbers, the multi-pitch trad routes at Table Rock, The Chimneys, and North Carolina Wall are a short hike from the Table Rock parking area. The more challenging Amphitheater offers some of the best climbing in the state, with amazing exposure, high-quality rock, and incredible views. Remote Shortoff Mountain and Hawksbill deliver classic routes for advanced climbers. Bouldering pros will love the impressive quartzite problems waiting at the bottom of the gorge along the Linville River.

Kayaking & SUP Boarding

Rent kayaks and stand-up paddleboards at the Paddy's Creek Access in summer, or at [The Outpost at CBS Sports](#) all year, to paddle the [Upper Catawba River Canoe Trail](#). The blueway hugs the quiet southern shoreline of Lake James for six miles from Black Bear Access to Canal Bridge. Further north, the put-in at the Linville Access is a shorter, 4.5-mile trip to Canal Bridge.

Written by Ann Gibson for RootsRated Media in partnership with OrthoCarolina.