

Introducing Ben's Branch, Virginia's Newest Sandstone Crag

On the western flank of Virginia's Stone Mountain sits a hulking sandstone crag with everything from tiered overhanging walls topping out at 100 feet to technical and slightly overhung faces.

In the summer of 2017, Central Appalachia Climbers Coalition (CACC) explored the area and immediately recognized its potential for climbing. The coalition reached out to Access Fund, and the two organizations worked together to develop a climbing proposal, which we presented at the local city council meeting. The council and local citizens asked good questions about climbing management, and the sentiment was positive.

In February of this year, the town of Appalachia signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Access Fund and CACC, formalizing a cooperative partnership that officially opens the area to climbing. The town will work with CACC to manage the climbing area.

"We are very excited to add Ben's Branch to our growing number of crags throughout the region," says Brad Mathisen, CACC president. "While route development has just begun, the area could hold up to 50 routes with unbelievable roadside access. It's a beautiful place where the cliff feels secluded, but you can still get there easily for some after-work climbing."

"Ben's Branch is another great win for rural Appalachian climbing and outdoor tourism in an area that's historically been dependent on coal," says Zachary Lesch-Huie, interim executive director for Access Fund. "We applaud the town for their forward-thinking partnership in opening this fantastic cliff."

Climbing and outdoor recreation are catching on in this rural mountainous area. Just a few years ago, CACC and Access Fund teamed up with the town of Norton, just 20 minutes up the road, to open bouldering and climbing in that city's Flag Rock Recreation Area.

Communities like Appalachia and Norton are capitalizing on their mountain landscapes by expanding sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities like climbing, hiking, and mountain biking.

Ben's Branch is officially open, but the area is still under development. Please wear a helmet, as routes are fresh and the potential for rock fall is high. Interested in learning more or helping develop the area? Connect with CACC at www.climbcentralappalachia.com. ■