

Joyce Kilmer Slickrock Wilderness

(Excerpted from Johnny Molloy's book Waterfall Hiking Tennessee)

Lower Falls

IN BRIEF:

Lower Falls is situated on Slickrock Creek, a wild stream deep in the mountains just south of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Cruise past ridge-rimmed Calderwood Lake then enter Slickrock Creek. Negotiate one ford then reach powerful 15-foot Lower Falls, with its wide outcrops and deep plunge pool. Consider returning via an alternate route, climbing from Slickrock Creek over wooded hills.

DISTANCE & CONFIGURATION:

Waterfall height: 15 feet; Distance: 6.0-mile there-and-back; Hiking difficulty: Moderate; Approximate hiking time: 3.5-4.5 hours; Trail surface: Natural; Canine compatibility: Dogs allowed on leash; Land Status: National Forest; Fees and permits: No fees or permits required Maps: National Geographic Cherokee National Forest – Tellico and Ocoee Rivers; USGS Tapoco; Trail Contacts: Cherokee National Forest, Tellico Ranger District, 250 Ranger Station Road, Tellico Plains TN 37385, (423) 253-8400, www.fs.usda.gov/cherokee

HIKE DESCRIPTION:

This waterfall walk lies within Joyce Kilmer Slickrock Wilderness, a federally designated preserve. While hiking along Slickrock Creek you will be straddling the boundary between the Volunteer State and the Tar Heel State.

The hike first cruises along Calderwood Lake, squeezing past steep bluffs before turning into the Slickrock Creek watershed, a translucent superlative mountain rill dancing and dashing among rocks, in a riot of vegetation, broken by tree-covered islands overlooking trout pools.

The Slickrock Creek Trail wanders creek bottoms and sneaks past defiant bluffs, going on and off an old railroad bed from logging days of yesteryear. You will not miss Lower Falls. Slickrock Creek spills over a wide stone lip 15 feet into one of the larger pools in the Southern Appalachians. Lack of tree cover over the wide pool forms a sun-splashed break in the thick woods. Wide and level boulders form ample waterside seating.

You can backtrack to the trailhead or make a 6.4-mile loop. For the circuit hike, continue .7 mile and one ford past Lower Falls to reach an intersection. Here, head left on the Ike Branch Trail. Climb away from Slickrock Creek, passing the Yellowhammer Trail. Stay left with the Ike Branch Trail, wandering the mountainside on a narrow path. Pass the Hangover Lead Trail just below Yellowhammer Gap. Continue straight on Ike Branch Trail. Cross Ike Branch a few times then pass a lonesome home site on your right. Meet the Slickrock Creek Trail and from there backtrack to the trailhead.

MILES:

- 0.0 JOIN the Slickrock Creek Trail. Mountain-rimmed Calderwood Lake is on your right.
- 0.5 The Ike Branch Trail leaves left. Keep straight with the Slickrock Creek Trail.
- 1.8 Descend to reach Slickrock Creek. The path is more primitive here.
- 2.9 Hike past a tributary of Slickrock Creek forming a small trailside waterfall.
- 3.0 Come to 15-foot Lower Falls, with its open stone slabs and deep pool.
- 6.0 Arrive back at the trailhead.

DIRECTIONS:

Finding the Trailhead: From Knoxville, take US 129, Alcoa Highway, south through Maryville and beyond to the North Carolina state line at Deals Gap. Stay with US 129 south to soon cross Calderwood Lake just below Cheoah Dam. Turn right into a parking area just after crossing Calderwood Lake. Trailhead GPS: N35° 26.953', W83° 56.517'

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