

Upper Bald River Wilderness Study Area

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

Upper Bald River Falls

DISTANCE & CONFIGURATION:

Waterfall height: 15 feet

Distance: 4.8-mile there-and-back; Hiking difficulty: Easy-moderate; Approximate hiking time: 2.5-3.5 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 Bald River Falls
Trail Contacts: Cherokee National Forest, Tellico Ranger District, 250 Ranger Station Road, Tellico Plains TN 37385, (423)253-8400, www.fs.usda.gov/cherokee

IN BRIEF:

This hike offers everywhere-you-look beauty on the way to a worthy waterfall. Explore the Upper Bald River Wilderness Study Area in the Cherokee National Forest, tracing a gentle track alongside the Bald River. Your trip ends at a trailside cataract, presenting watery wilderness wonderment deep in the back of beyond.

HIKE DESCRIPTION:

The Upper Bald River Wilderness Study Area is an unsung hiking destination – and waterfall destination – in the Cherokee National Forest. With the nearby Bald River Gorge Wilderness, Citico Creek Wilderness, as well as Joyce Kilmer/Slickrock Wilderness, the Upper Bald River is overlooked. Not only can you enjoy an attractive waterfall, you can also experience solitude in the shadow of the stateline ridge. **The Forest Service treats wilderness study areas as de facto federal wildernesses that are simply awaiting Congressional designation as a wilderness.**

The hike to Upper Bald River Falls uses the Brookshire Creek Trail. This path traces an old logging roadbed, making the footing hiker friendly. The elevation gain is consistently moderate, too. This way you can enjoy your surroundings rather than watching every footfall. The path leads deep into the wilderness study area before making a crossing of Bald River. However, at this point the Bald River is decidedly creek like and relatively small. It is a prototype crystalline mountain stream, sporting feisty trout as it flows off Beaverdam Bald and other peaks that form the division between Tennessee and North Carolina.

Upper Bald River Falls is located just below the confluence of Bald River and Brookshire Creek. It is a ledge type cascade deeply ensconced in the boughs of rhododendron, moss and thick tree cover. Upon approaching, its roar is unmistakable. If for some reason you do bypass the waterfall, the nearby trail intersection with the Benton MacKaye Trail and the crossing of Brookshire Creek lets you know you have gone too far.

MILES:

0.0 **START** your hike by joining the Brookshire Creek Trail, Trail #180. Walk just a few feet and immediately rock hop Henderson Branch. Join a singletrack path overlain upon a faded out forest road. Bald River is to your right. Rise above Bald River, then return creekside.

0.7 Enter a large flat to your left. The walking is easy under lush forest of black birch, among other hardwoods.

1.1 Reach the crossing of Bald River. There has been a log bridge here in the past but not one guaranteed to be here in the future. At normal water levels, it is an easy ford. Begin heading up the right bank of Bald River, keeping the steady but moderate ascent. Rhododendron and doghobble crowd the trail.

1.5 Bridge Service Branch by culvert.

1.8 Bridge an unnamed streamlet by culvert. The ascent remains gentle.

2.4 Reach Upper Bald River Falls. A short spur trail leads sharply down to the creek below with rocks available for viewing the cataract. The intersection with the Benton MacKaye Trail is just .1 mile ahead on the trail. Backtrack on the Brookshire Creek Trail.

4.8 Arrive back at the trailhead on Forest Road 126.

Waterfall Tidbit: The upper Bald River and its tributaries are a Tennessee stronghold for the brook trout, the native trout of the Southern Appalachians.

DIRECTIONS:

Finding the Trailhead: From Tellico Plains, drive east on TN 165, Cherohala Skyway, for 5.3 miles. Turn right on paved Forest Road 210. Follow it for 13.9 miles to Forest Road 126, located just past Sourwood Campground. Turn right on gravel Forest Road 126 and follow it for 5.1 miles to the Brookshire Creek trailhead on your left, at Bald River Camping Area #11. If you reach Holly Flats Campground, you have gone too far. Trailhead GPS: N35° 17.063', W84° 9.987'

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