

*Completely revised and updated—
31 wilderness trails in western North Carolina
and eastern Tennessee*

**3rd
Edition**

Tim Homan

Hiking Trails

of the
**Joyce Kilmer–Slickrock
& Citico Creek
Wildernesses**

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of the Joyce Kilmer–Slickrock & Citico Creek Wildernesses

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and eastern Tennessee*

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Preface

The Third Edition

During the spring, summer, and early autumn of 2006, I hiked all of the trails included in this guide except for Brush Mountain, which had not been maintained in some years and was being considered for possible decommissioning by the Forest Service. (Brush Mountain was not decommissioned, but it still needs a maintenance makeover.) As in 1988, when I last hiked every trail in the combined wilderness, I pushed a big orange, incessantly clicking, spoked wheel device that resembles a unicycle. By using the wheel, I was able to record distances in feet, such as 69,545 feet for the Fodderstack Trail, then convert the large numbers to the nearest tenth. If a measurement fell exactly between tenths, 2.75 for example, the figure was rounded up to the nearest tenth.

Over the months of hiking on weekends, holidays, and vacation days, I discovered a surprising number of changes, both large and small. Insect pests and floods brought change to the forests and streams. Additions, deletions, and relocations brought change to the trail network.

An especially deadly outbreak of pine beetles (natural home-grown insects that have long played an integral role in forest succession) killed over 90 percent of the mature pitch, Virginia, and Table Mountain pines in the combined wilderness. The hemlock woolly adelgid, an exotic and prolific pest, is killing the area's remaining old-growth hemlocks with methodical swiftness. Entire groves of these large, small-needled conifers are already dead or doomed in the upper Slickrock Creek basin and the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. Their sudden mass death is an aesthetic and ecological loss no sugar coating can soothe.

But not all is death and destruction. The pines will come back after the next big disturbance, probably a hot, hardwood-killing fire, and there is realistic hope that the hemlock will survive as a widespread species. In the interim, eastern white pine continue to invade

the uplands, bringing their tiered grace and year-round green to the forests where the other pines have recently died. Wildflowers still quilt the north-facing slopes, waterfalls still bend to gravity's bidding as they leap white and full of froth over ledges, Slickrock Creek's outsized pools are still an inviting green, and old-growth yellow buckeyes still grow noticeably thicker from decade to decade. And the Southern Appalachians are still an outdoor magic show, with enough surprise and beauty to last a lifetime of looking.

Hurricane-caused floods have eroded and, in some places, washed away short sections of the old railroad grades. These rampaging floods made footing a little more difficult, forced changes in the number and location of fords, and required short trail relocations above and away from the dangerously steep creek banks. On the positive side, these battering-ram floods help the streams to reclaim the land's former contours, to gradually erase the flat, the linear, and the manmade.

Over the years there have been numerous minor changes in the trail system. Naked Ground Trail is now 0.2 mile longer. Slickrock Creek Trail now has twelve signed fords instead of ten unsigned fords. The Forest Service moved South Fork Citico's trailhead out to FS 35, making the trail a little more than a tenth-mile longer, and the trailhead much cleaner and safer. Thanks go to the Forest Service. Good job.

Hikers have changed Big Fat Trail's second stream crossing back to its original location. Big Fat now officially ends at its junction with the Slickrock Creek Trail, and Nichols Cove Trail now ends at its junction with Big Fat Trail, making Nichols Cove 0.1 mile shorter. The lower-elevation end of Grassy Branch Trail has been rerouted, eliminating one Eagle Branch crossing and making the route 0.1 mile shorter.

The old Naked Ground cutoff—the path that once by-passed the last pull to the top of the Haoe for Haoe Lead Trail hikers headed toward Naked Ground—is long gone. And the Forest Service will no longer maintain the Jenkins Meadow Connector, the 0.9-mile path that linked Naked Ground and Jenkins Meadow Trails. And so on and so forth.

The two most noteworthy changes in the trail system are the routing of the long-distance Benton MacKaye Trail through the

combined wilderness and the relocation and further lengthening of the Fodderstack Trail, which the Benton MacKaye follows. At Cold Spring Gap, where Fodderstack once rose with the ridgeline to the northeast toward Stratton Bald, it now winds to the north through the Citico Creek Wilderness on Cold Spring Gap Trail's former treadway. After forking away from Cold Spring Gap Trail, Fodderstack follows a 1.2-mile stretch of treadway to the northeast, where it ties back into the old Fodderstack route 0.3 mile south of Cherry Log Gap. The Benton MacKaye Trail Association built this 1.2-mile segment in 2004.

Fodderstack's relocation made it easier to hike and 0.6 mile longer, and it made Cold Spring Gap Trail 1.3 miles shorter. It also left the former Fodderstack section from Cold Spring Gap to 0.3 mile south of Cherry Log Gap nameless and numberless. This 1.9-mile trail segment has been christened the Stratton Bald Alternate, trail 54A. All this moving and renaming means that the Stratton Bald Trail's upper-elevation end connects with the Stratton Bald Alternate, not Fodderstack as always before. It also means the Alternate is foot travel only; legal horse traffic has been rerouted away from the sometimes steep portion of trail up to and over Stratton Bald's western shoulder.


Over the last twenty to twenty-five years nature has made her own addition, a welcome wildness to the mile-high mountains of the wilderness. In 1988, when I camped in or beside the designated wilderness for four or five days at a stretch, I never heard the first note of coyote music. This go-around, their chorused yipping woke me on three different occasions. On my last backpack trip in the wilderness, the newcomers animated midnight with a ringing song just up the ridgeline from my tent.

As always, enjoy the mountains.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tim Homan". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.

We do not go to the green woods and crystal waters to rough it, we go to smooth it. We get it rough enough at home; in towns and cities; in shops, offices, stores, banks—anywhere that we may be placed—with the necessity of being on time and up to our work; of providing for the dependent ones; of keeping up, catching up, or getting left.

*“Nessmuk”
Woodcraft and Camping*



Slickrock Creek Trailhead



Wildcat Falls

Trails

Slickrock Creek
Ike Branch–Benton MacKaye
Yellowhammer Gap

Slickrock Creek Trailhead

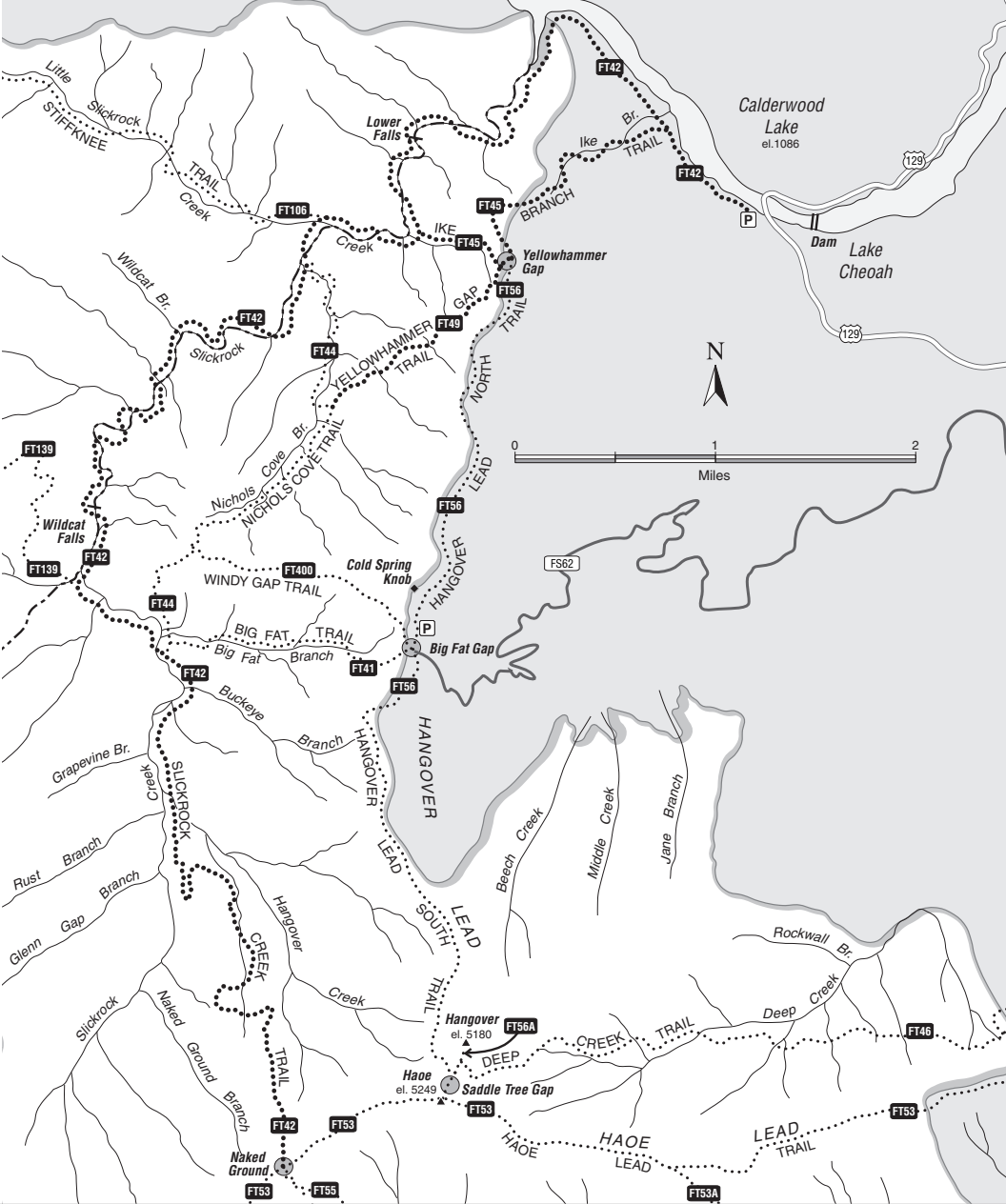
Directions and Map

THE SLICKROCK CREEK TRAILHEAD is on the west side of US 129 at the southern end of the bridge over Calderwood Lake, which is the boundary between North Carolina's Graham and Swain Counties. Signs for the Little Tennessee River and the two bordering counties (the welcome to/leaving kind) mark both ends of the bridge. The south side of the bridge (the trailhead side) is further distinguished by a fancy Graham County sign.

Approach from the south. Take US 129 North slightly over 14.0 miles beyond where NC 143 West turns left toward Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. This three-way intersection is approximately 1.0 mile north of Robbinsville, North Carolina. As you near the trailhead, US 129 parallels the Cheoah River (Cheoah means otter in Cherokee), passes the signed turn for Big Fat Gap, then finally crosses the Cheoah River at the community of Tapoco (name derived from Tallassee Power Company). After crossing the Cheoah, continue approximately 0.4 mile to the single-track road (paved entrance) to the left of the highway immediately before it crosses the bridge over Calderwood Lake. That road is the beginning of the trail. There is pull-off and pull-in parking along and slightly in from the highway at the trailhead.

Approach from the north. From the US 129–Foothills Parkway junction in Tennessee, travel US 129 South (the bridge is 2.1 miles beyond the Highway 129– Highway 28 junction) across the bridge over Calderwood Lake, then immediately turn off the highway to the right.

Approach from the southwest. If you are already near the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, or if you are traveling from the southwest—from Tennessee on the Cherohala Skyway—take the shortcut through Horse Cove Campground. Once you reach US 129, turn left and proceed northward approximately 7.5 miles to the trailhead to the left immediately before the bridge. (See page 32 for the shortcut directions from Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest to US 129.)



- | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| U.S. highway | Wilderness boundary | Forest trail |
| State highway | Campground | Parking |
| Forest Service road | U.S. highway | Knob |
| Forest trail | State highway | Peak |
| State boundary | Secondary road | Falls |
| Creek or branch | Forest Service road | Gap |

Slickrock Creek Trailhead

Slickrock Creek Trail

Foot Trail 42: 13.3 miles

- **Trail Difficulty** See trail description
- **Start** Slickrock Creek Trailhead, 1,160 feet
- **End** Haoe Lead and Naked Ground Trails at Naked Ground, 4,860 feet
- **Trail Junctions** Ike Branch–Benton MacKaye (two), Benton MacKaye (three), Stiffknee–Benton MacKaye, Nichols Cove, Big Stack Gap Branch, Big Fat, Haoe Lead, Naked Ground
- **Topographic Quadrangles** Tapoco NC-TN, Whiteoak Flats TN-NC (small amount)
- **Features** Cascades and waterfalls; old-growth forest; excellent spring wildflower display

SLICKROCK CREEK IS THE LONGEST AND WETTEST (twelve fords) trail in the combined wilderness. The stream it follows and fords is well-known for its clear water, cascades, waterfalls, swimming holes—and people. Its popularity combined with its easy access have a predictable outcome: Slickrock Creek’s northernmost 8.0 miles, from its beginning to its Big Fat junction, is the most heavily hiked long section of trail in this guide. On hot summer weekends there are often large groups of swimmers in the pools below the waterfalls. In season, hunters and fishermen also tread parts of this trail.

In addition to being the longest trail in the entire wilderness, Slickrock Creek also gains more elevation—3,700 feet—than any other footpath in this guide. Two factors make an overall difficulty rating impractical, if not laughably inaccurate. The first is that relatively few hikers walk the whole trail at one time. Most people traipse segments of the path parallel to the stream north of the Big Fat junction. The second is that the elevation gain is unevenly distributed. The route’s first 8.0 miles, from the trailhead to its twelfth and final ford, average a very gentle gradient of 105 feet of elevation gain per

mile. Despite its rocky footing and occasional dips and rises, this long section is easy to moderate walked in either direction, dayhiking or backpacking.

In contrast, the trail's last 5.3 miles—from its Big Fat junction to Naked Ground—ascend 535 feet per mile. Near its end, this stretch has a few short, rocky surges that are the steepest pitches in the combined wilderness. This portion of the walkway is, overall, moderate to strenuous for dayhikers and strenuous for backpackers.

Slickrock Creek, which originates outside of the wilderness, starts at the lowest elevation of any trail in this guide. This description begins at the trailhead bulletin board, 0.1 mile down the old road from US 129. The opening segment follows the road to the northwest, parallel to the shoreline of Calderwood Lake. Rock outcrops and boulders protrude from the upslope. Growing between the boulders is a diverse, second-growth forest—tall and straight and predominantly deciduous. For now at least, the over-100-foot-high white ashes and sweetgums are keeping up with the yellow poplars.

At 0.6 mile the treadway arrives at the first of its many junctions. Ike Branch Trail angles up and to the left. Continuing straight ahead, the well-constructed sidehill trail crosses Ike Branch, then undulates easily on the steep slope high above the lake. The rock outcrops are part of the bluff carved by the Little Tennessee, the river that was dammed to make the green lake below.

There are a few yellowwoods, a scarce tree of scattered and localized occurrence, on the downslope along this stretch. Its fragrant flowers, with their typical Pea-family shape, hang in white, wisterialike clusters, occasionally over a foot long. The yellowwoods throughout a given area bloom together, during the first half of May, at irregular intervals of two to five years.

Slickrock Creek Trail enters the wilderness in the middle of a descending horseshoe bend at mile 1.6. Once inside the boundary, the walkway swings to the south, then steadily works its way down below bluffs to Slickrock Creek. Here, where the treadway picks up the old logging railroad bed at approximately 1,160 feet, is the lowest trailside elevation within the two-state wilderness. Powerful floods have ripped up some of the old railroad grades where they were especially close to the creek. The result is the beginning of a more

natural contour and rough, wet, and rocky walking in places—tough going for the stumblefooted.

Almost as soon as it reaches stream level, the footpath rises up and away from the water before coming right back down to it. This is part of the pattern. For the next 7.5 miles, the trail parallels winding Slickrock Creek up its basin to the south. It often leads up and away or out and away from the stream, then returns. Despite these repeated roving, the route frequently remains right on the bank with scarcely a rhododendron branch between you and the rushing water.

At mile 2.8 where the wide walkway becomes pinched, and where the railroad once crossed over on a bridge, the track fords Slickrock Creek (east side to west side, North Carolina to Tennessee) for the first of twelve signed times. The Cherokee word for this watercourse means “slick rock.” As was so often the case, early settlers simply translated the Native American name. The Cherokee were right; the rocks are slippery.

Three-tenths mile beyond the first ford, you arrive at a particularly high cascade that drops, perhaps 15 feet altogether, over two wide ledges. This cascade is labeled as Lower Falls on the topo map. While this falls is small by Southern Appalachian standards, its plunge pool is remarkable by any standard. A slightly flattened circle, wider than long, this catch pool is one of the largest I have ever seen on a creek-sized stream. Lower Falls pool is the dark green color of a good, over-your-head-deep, goose-pimple-cold swimming hole.

The railroad grade treadway runs past fords and junctions in rapid succession above Lower Falls. The second ford is at mile 3.6. Two-tenths mile upstream from that ford, Slickrock Creek comes to its second connection with Ike Branch at a campsite and sign. The route fords for the third time at mile 4.0. Three-tenths mile after this ford, Stiffknee Trail ends at its usually signed junction immediately before the main trail rock-steps across Little Slickrock Creek. Slightly more than 50 yards beyond where it regains the eastern bank after the fourth ford, the track passes its meeting with Nichols Cove Trail at mile 4.5.

Shortly after crossing Nichols Cove Branch, the course closely parallels the creek below occasional bluffs or rocky cut-banks. In places the corduroy ripples of the old railroad ties are still evident.

Here the walking, down and upstream from the fifth ford at mile 4.9, leads beside a series of cascades.

Since this trail is so long and there is not space enough to mention every shoaling run, every bedroom-sized boulder, every enticing pool, every bank-to-bank ledge, I will simply state that this fast-footed creek is the embodiment of mountain water, which is to say that it abounds with the innately pleasing power and grace and beauty of a crystal clear stream flowing white through gray rock. All of this color and motion is flanked with forest and covered with sky and clouds, enhanced by the play of sun quiver and shadow on the moving mirror, and the unwavering sound of water wearing down rock. In the old days people categorized flowing water as quick and clean, clear water as sweet. This creek is quick and sweet.

The forest along Slickrock Creek was cut clean for miles up its watershed during the South's hell-for-leather logging days, in this case from 1915 to 1922. Today, the riverine and lower-slope forest is diverse, predominantly deciduous, and entirely second-growth. As you can see, the trees have grown up, competing for the canopy, rather than out. Yellow poplar, white ash, sweetgum, and an occasional sycamore and white pine are already at or above 100 feet in height.

Thirty yards after crossing a small side branch at mile 5.9, the trail bends sharply back to the right and up, bypassing a now problematic goat path on the high cutbank straight ahead. Starting with the sixth ford at mile 6.4, the route makes four fords in 0.3 mile. At mile 7.0 you come to Wildcat Falls—a series of four high cascades, sluicing raceways, and short free falls, cutting back into a series of stubborn ledges. The lowermost two chutes pour 20 feet into the larger of the two dividing catch pools.

The route fords for the tenth time right after the falls, then fords again at mile 7.3. Big Stack Gap Branch Trail ties into Slickrock Creek Trail at a campsite and signpost immediately across the eleventh ford.

Most of the next 0.6 mile is easy walking through a floodplain forest out of sight of the stream. This is the only stretch of trail in the entire wilderness where the umbrella magnolia is conspicuously common. This deciduous magnolia, distinguished from the much more abundant Fraser magnolia by its unneared leaf base, has the largest simple leaves and flowers of any tree in the wilderness.

Approximately 100 yards after the route returns to the rocky creekside, it reaches its twelfth and final ford at 7.9 miles and an elevation of approximately 2,010 feet. Once across, you will quickly arrive at the usually signed Slickrock Creek–Big Fat junction (mile 8.0). If you want to exit the wilderness by way of Big Fat Trail, turn left (northeast) onto the end of Big Fat and walk the well-worn treadway 0.1 mile to the Big Fat–Nichols Cove connection before turning right and slightly uphill with Big Fat Trail.

Slickrock Creek Trail proceeds southward up the watershed on the east side of the stream. The hiking, rising easily between dips to tributaries, is usually on railroad grade and often out of good sight of the brook. At mile 8.2 the track rock-hops Buckeye Branch; 0.8 mile farther it crosses Hangover Creek on a jumble of small boulders. As coolness and moisture increase with elevation, the trees, including several 35-foot-tall umbrella magnolias, become noticeably thicker than along the lower creek.

The route turns sharply left, up and away from its creek, at approximately 2,640 feet at mile 9.3. Over the years the sign that has marked this turn has had a few carved PG-13 phrases alluding to the climb ahead. The second word of the most recent hiker carving was “buster.” Above the turn, where the treadway no longer parallels Slickrock Creek, the ascent to Naked Ground begins. This final segment gains 2,220 feet in 3.9 miles. If you walk slowly, this lightly traveled section is not as bad as entering the infernal regions, as former graffiti suggested. The overwhelming majority of the grades are between easy and moderate. The short surges—the rocky scrambles that gain 30 to 50 feet of elevation on what seems like a 45-degree pitch—are challenging and memorable, especially during or right after rain.

The trail follows a logging spur to a fork of Hangover Creek before switchbacking up and away from the branch at mile 10.4. From here the footpath rises steadily by switchback to the crest of a spur ridge, and the first of the steep climbs. The track remains on or near the rocky keel for a few tenths of a mile, then half-circles through an impressive old-growth forest on a northwest-facing slope. At first the forest is dominated by both hemlock and Carolina silverbell. Many of the hemlocks are 9 to 12 feet in circumference and well over 100 feet in height, and many of the dark-barked

silverbells are 6 to 8 1/2 feet around and 80 feet tall. Clumps of multiple-boled Fraser magnolia are common and easily recognized by their smooth, light-gray bark and whorls of large leaves. At mile 11.3 the thickest trailside silverbell—an impressive specimen 8 feet 8 inches around with particularly dark and flaky bark—stands on the upslope just above the treadway.

The look and feel of the hemlock-silverbell forest has changed dramatically since the late 1980s. Then the understory was often scant and the forest floor was dark with dense hemlock shade. Now with many of the hemlocks already dead or dying and with the entire stand in danger of succumbing to the hemlock woolly adelgid, the numerous light gaps have encouraged rapid understory growth.

Farther up the slope, this respite of easy walking passes beside large red and sugar maples, some 9 to 12 feet in circumference. Most of the upper Slickrock basin above the clear-cut was high-graded—selectively cut for valuable species. Timbering in the basin came to a halt when Calderwood Lake flooded the railroad system. Thus, as the lake neared completion, the loggers were forced to hurry, leaving the old-growth sugar maple. They did, however, manage to drag out the virgin black cherry.

The treadway winds back up to the crest and continues to climb on or near its narrow spine. Here, where the bare rock backbone of the steep-sided ridge frequently pokes out, and where picturesque, old-growth hemlocks and yellow birches stand in the full force of the wind, the land has that rugged look of out-West country.

The narrow, rocky path ascends a ledged pitch with root holds at mile 11.9. At mile 12.5 the walking tunnels into a heath bald (the one plainly visible from the Hangover) composed primarily of Catawba rhododendron. Three-tenths of a mile into the tangle, the right fork leads a very short distance to an open view (over the rhododendron) of the Haoe and the rocky heath bald atop the Hangover.

The final 0.4 mile, out of the rhododendron and into northern hardwoods shading grass and ferns, angles to the west away from the ridgeline. Seventy-five yards before Naked Ground, a side path bends back to the right to a last-water spring. Slickrock Creek Trail ends at Naked Ground—a gap that is a major trail intersection and an overused camping area. Haoe Lead passes through the gap; Naked Ground Trail ends at its south side, opposite Slickrock Creek.

Slickrock is the widest and deepest creek in the combined wilderness. Its fords can become dangerous following heavy rainfall during any season. The water level is normally highest in winter and early spring before leaf-out. Throughout this time of the year, the lower fords often remain midhigh to crotch deep for weeks. With normal spring precipitation, the stream flows fairly full until leaf-out reaches the highest ridges in late May. During summer and fall, except after thunderstorms, the fords usually present no problems for adults, other than slipping and getting wet. Several of the upper fords may be crossed dry-shod during drought.

Nature Notes

Slickrock Creek's two most spectacular spring wildflower displays occur at opposite ends of the route—roughly 12.0 miles, 3,300 feet of elevation, and two months apart. The initial area is on the rocky northeast-facing slope at the beginning of the trail. Here, on the incredibly lush hillside above Calderwood Lake, spring first unfolds within the area covered by this book. A warm spell in late winter may bring the hepaticas to bloom in early March. This tract, which rivals Poplar Cove in sheer numbers of ground-carpeting wildflowers, peaks in diversity from March 20 through April 10. (See Ike Branch, the following trail, for a more detailed description.)

The second show starts when the heath bald blossoms along the narrow ridge near the top end of the path. Although the bald is practically a monoculture of the Catawba rhododendron, this particular flowering species has blooms that are big and showy and, in a good year, abundant. This evergreen shrub ordinarily peaks sometime in late May or early June.

The pocket of old-growth forest starting at mile 11.2 has a higher concentration of mature Carolina silverbell than any other trail-traversed area in the combined wilderness. The silverbell was one of the moist-site species that loggers routinely left when they high-graded the woods above the end of the clear-cut. Thus today, at the higher elevations in the wilderness, from the end of the old clear-cuts to the tree's upper elevation limit at approximately 4,800 feet, burly, old-growth silverbells are common on moist slopes and ridges.

The Carolina silverbell is also known as snowdrop tree and mountain silverbell. Throughout most of its range, which is confined

to the South, this silverbell is a shrub or small tree. But at the rainy, southern end of the Blue Ridge, it attains heights from 75 to 100 feet and girths from 7 to over 10 feet. People can't quite believe that the tall, straight silverbell in the Southern Highlands is the same species as the stooped, understory silverbell in the Georgia Piedmont. Hence the name mountain silverbell.

This hardwood's alternate leaves—3 to 5 inches long, finely saw-toothed, and long pointed at the tip—are not particularly distinctive. The appearance of its bark, fruit, and flower, however, is unique in this wilderness. The bark on seedlings and saplings is longitudinally lined with light yellow streaks. These lines disappear while the tree is still fairly young. This trail's old-growth sil-



Carolina silverbell

verbells exhibit the typical bark of mature trees, which is dark blackish brown and divided into small, flaky squares. In the shady forest, splotches of their boles look black, so black they appear fire-scorched.

Dangling in clusters beneath the branches, the countless bell-shaped blossoms wave back and forth in the spring winds. The flowers are white, four-lobed, and 1/2 to 1 inch long. The resulting chestnut-colored fruits have four broad, symmetrical wings running the length of the seedpod. Silverbells bloom along this trail, depending upon the altitude, from late April through most of May.

Directions

See the beginning of this section, page 36, for directions to the Slickrock Creek Trailhead.

Notes