



USDA Forest Service – Cherokee National Forest
Tellico Ranger District



Fact Sheet – Gold Collecting

2023-2024

Recreational mineral collecting is a recognized use of National Forest System land. Interest in this activity has grown over the past several years. Certain requirements and restrictions are in place to protect you and the environment.

Protecting the natural resources:

Numerous streams in and adjacent to the Tellico Ranger District contain species designated as “deemed in need of management” by the State of Tennessee and/or have Federally or State listed Threatened and Endangered (T&E) species in them.

Virtually all streams in the Tellico Ranger District are tributaries to the Hiwassee River or the Tellico River. Both of these rivers have designated “critical habitat” for several aquatic T&E species. Water quality is of the utmost concern.

Aquatic habitat monitoring of Coker Creek shows that recreational gold collecting has significantly altered the habitat. Fine sediment deposits are well outside the normal range for mountain streams and indicate a serious disturbance within the watershed. Coker Creek has been officially designated as “impaired” due to excessive sediments. The number of macroinvertebrates in the stream is at the lowest end of the scale which warranted this impaired status. Additionally, elemental mercury is present in the sediments and must not be disturbed.

Through the Clean Water Act and in cooperation with the Tennessee Department of Environment & Conservation (TDEC), the Forest Service is working to ensure that aquatic ecosystems (streams) are protected, and water quality standards are met.

The use of mechanized or motorized equipment is prohibited for gold collecting:

Class 2 prospecting is NOT PERMITTED on the Cherokee National Forest. Based on field observations, monitoring data, and the current TDEC ARAP Permit for Recreational Gold Prospecting, the use of mechanized forms of prospecting including dredges, highbankers, powered sluices, and trommels is prohibited on the Cherokee National Forest.

Class 1 prospecting (hand panning) is permitted in designated streams, on the Cherokee National Forest.

The following streams are currently designated as Class 1 hand collecting sites on the Cherokee National Forest:

Lyons Creek
Wildcat Creek

For more information:

For designated stream maps and additional information contact:

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