

## **Citico Wilderness \***

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

### **Falls Branch Falls**

#### **DISTANCES & CONFIGURATION:**

Waterfall height: 70 feet; Distance: 2.6-mile there-and-back; Hiking difficulty: Moderate; Approximate hiking time: 2.0-3.0 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 Big Junction; Trail Contacts: Cherokee National Forest, Tellico Ranger District, 250 Ranger Station Road, Tellico Plains TN 37385, (423)253-8400, [www.fs.usda.gov/cherokee](http://www.fs.usda.gov/cherokee)

#### **HIKE DESCRIPTION:**

The Falls Branch Trail starts at nearly 4,000 feet in elevation, high on the Cherohala Skyway. The 51-mile skyway was designed with the mountain scenery lover in mind. Auto accessible overlooks, picnic areas, campgrounds and trailheads lie along the road – including the trail to Falls Branch Falls.

Located south of the Smokies in Monroe County, the Cherohala Skyway winds through the highlands of the Cherokee and Nantahala national forests as it connects Tellico Plains, Tennessee with Robbinsville, North Carolina -- hence the name “Chero-hala”.

Starting at Tellico Plains, the skyway heads east along the Tellico River, known for quality trout fishing. Eventually leave the Tellico River and head for the high country. Stop at Turkey Creek Overlook along the way, taking in a far-reaching view of the Tennessee River Valley to the west. Ahead lays Indian Boundary Campground, one of the finest camping locales in the Southeast. The 100 quality sites are situated around a quiet mountain-rimmed lake. Beyond Indian Boundary stretches Citico Creek Wilderness. A network of challenging trails penetrates this land of wild trout and wilder bears.

This hike is located within the Citico Wilderness. First, leave the Cherohala Skyway on the Falls Branch Falls Trail, running in conjunction with the Jeffery Hell Trail. They soon split apart and we stay with the Falls Branch Falls Trail. It gently meanders westerly, a singletrack path overlain upon an old forest road.

The trail actually comes near the Cherohala Skyway then turns to cross Laurel Branch, part of the Tellico River watershed. Shortly after this crossing, the trail leaves the old roadbed and climbs a hill, dropping into the drainage of Falls Branch, itself part of the Citico Creek watershed. The hiking is much rougher and steeper on this rocky slender unimproved track. However, the siren song of Falls Branch Falls calls you downward. Old growth buckeye, Carolina silverbell and yellow birch trees tower over the trail. Soon, you are at Falls Branch, and can look upstream at the waterfall. Nevertheless, to reach it you must squeeze between two mossy boulders then work uphill through a rhododendron thicket. Eventually the trail tops out at the base of Falls Branch Falls. Admiringly look upward as the high falls drops over a naked

ledge skimming a rock or two before crashing seven stories below. This high country waterfall delivers high drama in a setting worthy of its wilderness designation.

### **MILES:**

- 0.0 START your hike on the Falls Branch Falls Trail, Trail #87. The first part runs in conjunction with the Jeffery Hell Trail, Trail #196.
- 0.1 Reach a trail junction and the Citico Creek Wilderness. Here, Jeffery Hell Trail leaves right for Citico Creek. This hike stays left on Falls Branch Falls Trail. Come relatively near Cherohala Skyway under a maple and buckeye forest.
- 0.6 Curve right and drop into Laurel Branch watershed.
- 0.7 Bridge Laurel Branch by culvert in rhododendron.
- 0.8 The trail abruptly leaves the old roadbed and heads right, surmounting a small hill, now on a singletrack, rocky rooty path. Descend toward Falls Branch, crossing a couple of streamlets.
- 1.2 Reach Falls Branch after stepping over the root tangle of a yellow birch. Rock hop the creek then cut through two huge boulders, a stone door of sorts. Keep upstream on a narrow path, snaking through rhododendron thickets.
- 1.3 Reach the base of Falls Branch Falls. Overhead, Falls Branch tumbles over a nearly sheer rock face, then splatters into a shallow pool. Be careful, as many boulders near the falls remain constantly wet. Backtrack.
- 0.1 Arrive back at the trailhead on Cherohala Skyway.

### **DIRECTIONS:**

Finding the Trailhead: From Tellico Plains, drive east on TN 165, Cherohala Skyway, for 18 miles to the Rattlesnake Rock West pull-off, on your left. The Falls Branch Falls Trail, Trail #87 and the Jeffery Hell Trail, Trail #196, both start on the left hand side of the parking area as you face away from the road. Trailhead GPS: N35° 20.804', W84° 3.669'

~