

## **Big Frog Wilderness \***

(Excerpted from Johnny Molloy's book *Five Star Trails: Chattanooga*)

### **DISTANCE & CONFIGURATION:**

GPS Trailhead Coordinates: N35° 3.278', W84° 30.067'

11.0-mile there-and-back; Hiking Time: 6.5 hours; Outstanding Features: Federally designated wilderness, most westerly 4,000 plus elevation peak in Appalachians; Elevation: 2,140 feet at trailhead, 4,224 feet at high point; Access: No fees or permits required; Maps: National Geographic Cherokee National Forest -- Tellico & Ocoee Rivers; USGS Caney Creek, Hemp Top; Facilities: None; Wheelchair Access: None

Info: Cherokee National Forest, Ocoee Ranger District, 3171 Highway 64, Benton TN 37307, (423) 338-3300, [www.fs.usda.gov/](http://www.fs.usda.gov/)

### **IN BRIEF:**

This long hike visits the Cherokee National Forest's Big Frog Wilderness. The Big Frog Trail leads from Low Gap and rises along Peavine Ridge, aiming for Big Frog. The first half of the hike is nearly level, but even after you begin climbing the grade is moderate and steady. When the ridge narrows, outcrops afford a few views. Rise ever higher, reaching the top of Big Frog, a campsite and trail intersection. The campsite is a good place to take a break before your return trip through the wilderness.

### **HIKE DESCRIPTION:**

Some hikers climb mountains simply because "it is there." Big Frog is such a peak. Known for being the most westerly crag above 4,000 feet in the entire Appalachian Mountains, Big Frog and its shoulder ridges and spring branches are protected as wilderness. Most of the mountain lies within Tennessee's 8,000-plus acre Big Frog Wilderness but also some lies within Georgia's Cohutta Wilderness, which covers a whopping 35,000 plus acres, mostly inside the Chattahoochee National Forest. Together Big Frog and Cohutta create the largest federally designated wilderness in the Southern Appalachians.

So while hiking to Big Frog you will be entirely within natural terrain, where the bears roam. Unfortunately, it is also where wild boar thrives. These exotic fast reproducers root up the land, disrupting wildflower habitat and consuming mast bound for native critters. I have seen boar on nearly every trip I've made into the Big Frog Wilderness. Along the way you will pass several other wilderness trails. Big Frog has an extensive trail network, with many potential loop hikes available. After this hike you will be tempted to come back here and create your own treks. Be appraised the trails of Big Frog can become overgrown in summer, requiring long pants.

Leave Low Gap on the Big Frog Trail, Trail #64, passing a kiosk. Join an old woods road, heading north along the east slope of Peavine Ridge. Gently rise among white pines, oaks and maple. In places young trees are growing up on the old roadbed, crowding the path. An easy walk leads you to the Big Frog Wilderness boundary at .7 mile. This preserve was established in 1984, and then expanded in 1986.

At 1.5 miles, reach a trail intersection. Here the Rough Creek Trail leaves left for West Fork Rough Creek while the Big Frog Trail keeps straight, leaves the old roadbed and becomes a simple singletrack path hugging the slope of Peavine Ridge. Elevation changes are minimal and the climb to Big Frog seems deceptively easy. Drift into Low Gap (same name, different place than the trailhead) at 2.3 miles, after passing through a sassafras, black gum and pine-filled south facing slope. You aren't much higher than when you started. Here, the Yellow Stand Lead leaves right for lower Big Creek. The faint and narrow Grassy Gap Trail keeps straight for Big Creek Trail. We take the Big Frog Trail, which leaves left and begins climbing, still on Peavine Ridge.

The grade is steady but not too steep. Step over a spring branch at 2.9 miles. At 3.5 miles, the trail curves around the head of a cove. Reach narrow Fork Ridge and a trail junction at 3.6 miles. Turn right here, still on the Big Frog Trail. Fork Ridge Trail leaves left. The long distance Benton MacKaye Trail runs in conjunction with the Big Frog Trail for the remainder of the trek. Continue climbing, now on an oak ridge with a grassy understory. Partial views open east and west. The ridge becomes knife edge and rocky. Skirt around Chimneytop, then reach an easily missed trail intersection at 4.2 miles. Here, a pile of rocks, a cairn, indicates the Big Creek Trail, which leaves right down to Big Creek.

The Big Frog Trail climbs evermore, and wanders among rock and trees. Reach an open vista at 4.4 miles. Here, a break in the forest allows easterly views into East Fork Rough Creek and across to Licklog Ridge. You can also look southeast to the Ocoee River basin. Curve around the point of a ridge at 4.6 miles, before resuming your southbound track. The trail levels off around 4,000 feet. Enjoy some easy high country hiking under a low canopy of wind-stunted, craggy trees.

The ridgeline widens and at 5.4 miles the trail makes one last jump to reach the top of Big Frog Mountain and a trail junction at 5.5 miles. A level campsite is just a few steps away and makes for a good relaxing spot. To your right, the lesser-trod Wolf Ridge Trail leaves right, while the Licklog Ridge Trail heads left and downhill. A fine rocked-in spring is just .1 mile down the Licklog Ridge Trail. Views on Big Frog are limited by the trees, though there once was a tower up here more than a half century ago. But, you stand at the most westerly point above 4,000 feet in the East. Traveling across the continent you must reach western Oklahoma to once again exceed this elevation. And besides, sometimes it feels good to climb a mountain because it is there.

**NEARBY ATTRACTIONS:** The Ocoee Whitewater Center, located on US 64 near Thunder Rock, is a hub for paddlers, whether they are kayakers in their own boats or those going on a guided raft trip. Also, an extensive network of mountain bike trails lies across the river, using nearby Thunder Rock Campground as a jumping off point.

**DIRECTIONS:** From the junction of US 64 and US 64 Bypass, just east of Cleveland, Tennessee, take US 64 east for 26 miles to the right turn at Ocoee Dam #3 and Thunder Rock Campground. Turn right and cross the dam, immediately passing Thunder Rock Campground. Join gravel Forest Road 45 and follow it for 2.7 miles to Forest Road 221. Turn right on Forest Road 221 and follow it for .7 mile to reach the trailhead parking at Low Gap on your left.

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