

## **Pond Mountain Wilderness \***

(Excerpted from Johnny Molloy's book *Five Star Trails: Tri-Cities*)

### **Laurel Falls**

#### **DISTANCE & CONFIGURATION:**

GPS Trailhead Coordinates: N36° 17.123', W82° 9.132'

4.8-mile there-and-back; Hiking Time: 3.5 hours; Outstanding Features: Laurel Falls, rock bluffs, other geological features; Elevation: 1,860 feet at trailhead, 2,180 feet at high point; Access: No fees or permits required; Maps: Cherokee & Pisgah National Forests – South Holston and Watauga Lakes; USGS Elizabethton; Facilities: None; Wheelchair Access: None  
Info: Watauga Ranger District, 4400 Unicoi Drive, Unicoi TN 37692, (423) 735-1500, [www.fs.usda.gov/cherokee](http://www.fs.usda.gov/cherokee)

#### **IN BRIEF:**

This hike travels to one of the most well-known hiking destinations in the greater Tri-Cities – Laurel Falls. First, follow an old railroad grade into the heart of the Laurel Fork Gorge on the Blueline Trail. Pass a sheer rock bluff, the first of many geological features, before meeting the Appalachian Trail. Continue deeper up Laurel Fork, climbing a rock spine before descending to Laurel Fork again. Squeeze past another bluff before reaching Laurel Falls. This brawling cataract drops some 60 feet into a deep churning pool, and is still popular with swimmers, despite many fatalities.

#### **HIKE DESCRIPTION:**

The Laurel Fork Gorge is hemmed in by Black Mountain on one side and Pond Mountain on the other. Over time, Laurel Fork has cut through the layers of stone – leaving behind boulder fields, rock piles, and steep cliffs. The watershed was logged around a century back. This logging railroad grade forms the basic trailbed. Considering the inhospitable terrain it is hard to believe anyone would attempt cutting through this gorge with a railroad. The forest has recovered nicely and in 1986 most of the lower gorge became part of the Cherokee National Forest's Pond Mountain Wilderness.

Leave the Hampton parking area on the Blueline Trail. It follows the old railroad grade, then leaves acutely left away after quarter-mile, avoiding an old creek crossing. Pass under a powerline clearing, then reenter woods. At .4 mile, enter the Pond Mountain Wilderness. Just ahead, the Blueline Trail splits. Stay right, descending to flats along Laurel Fork. The tea colored stream flows in shoals and pools, bordered by sand and gravel bars. At .5 mile, a huge stone bluff rises across the stream. Continue upstream in rich forest of beech, sugar maple, black birch, tulip trees with tangles of rhododendron and mountain laurel. Doghobble and ferns thicken the ground cover. White pines tower above all.

At .7 mile, the Blueline Trail split comes in on your left. The Blueline Trail squeezes past a streamside outcrop. At .9 mile, walk around a conspicuous boulder in the middle of the trail. Continue up streamside flats, meeting the Appalachian Trail at 1.0 miles. It has descended from Pond Mountain. Keep straight, now southbound on the AT. Talus slopes fall off Pond Mountain

to your left. Reach a footbridge at 1.2 miles. The sturdy wooden span crosses over to the right hand bank of Laurel Fork. Tunnel through rhododendron on a sandy track.

Rock outcrops remain visible throughout the gorge. Bridge the stream yet again at 1.4 miles. Just ahead, meet Waycoster Spring, used by passersby from Cherokee Indians to yesteryear's loggers to today's Appalachian Trail thru-hikers. Occasional campsites are scattered in the flats.

At 1.6 miles, the path leaves Laurel Fork and ascends a stony, rooty track up to a rocky, pine-clad ridge, fringed with galax. Chestnut oaks and hickories reflect the dry ridge. Laurel Fork is curving around this outcrop that you have climbed. Soak in views of the stream and the imposing canyon. At 1.8 miles, the trail splits. The blue-blazed AT High Water Route leaves left toward Laurel Trail Shelter. Stay right with the white-blazed Appalachian Trail, quickly descending back to Laurel Fork. Streamside slabs make for fine water accesses and relaxation spots. At 2.2 miles, come to the reason for the alternative high water route. Here, the Appalachian Trail is forced to the edge of Laurel Fork by a jutting outcrop. The AT squeezes by here directly along the stream. If Laurel Fork is flooded this route is impassable, hence the high water route.

Watch for an impressive bluff just past this trail squeeze. Continue up the rugged gorge on an exceedingly rocky track. Laurel Falls becomes visible through the trees and you reach it at 2.4 miles. The watercourse is tumbling over a stone rampart in a froth of whitewater, framed in thick woods under in open sky. A huge pool, rife with tricky undercurrents, stretches between you and the falls. If you want to swim, stay back from the falls itself. On nice weekend days hikers will be gathered here, soaking in the scenery. Scores of boulders make for ample seating to observe the falls.

On your return trip you can simply backtrack or continue the Appalachian Trail southbound up a series of steep steps to reach an old railroad grade. Here, the AT leaves right but the AT High Water Route leaves left, passing through a railroad cut then cruising mid-slope along the gorge. It offers views of Black Mountain across Laurel Fork and then meets the Laurel Trail Shelter, a small three sided stone structure. From there the route descends back to the AT. This alternate adds about .2 mile to your hike and a 300 foot climb from Laurel Falls to the high water route. Nearby attractions: Cherokee National Forest's Dennis Cove Campground is situated upstream of Laurel Fork Falls and presents streamside camping on Laurel Fork with additional hiking and fishing opportunities.

#### **DIRECTIONS:**

From exit 24 on I-26 near Johnson City, follow the signs for Elizabethton, joining US 321 north/TN 67 east. Travel for 8.6 miles to reach US 19E and a traffic light (From Bristol Highway it is 9 miles to this same intersection on US 19E south, except you will keep straight through the traffic light). Turn right here, now joining US 19E south, Veterans Memorial Parkway, toward Roan Mountain, Mountain City, and Boone, N.C. Follow US 19E for 5 miles to the left turn for Hampton and Watauga Lake, TN 67 east. Turn left on TN 67 and follow it 1.2 miles to the Laurel Falls Trailhead on your right. The lot can fill on very nice weekends.