

Sampson Mountain Wilderness *

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

Squibb Creek Falls

DISTANCE & CONFIGURATION:

GPS Trailhead Coordinates: N36° 5.425', W82° 40.894'

4.4-mile there-and-back; Hiking Time: 3.0 hours; Outstanding Features: Squibb Creek Falls, multiple other cascades, wilderness; Elevation: 1,820 feet at trailhead, 2,900 feet at high point;

Access: No fees or permits required; Maps: National Geographic Cherokee & Pisgah National Forests – French Broad and Nolichucky Rivers; USGS Greystone; Facilities: Picnic area, campground, restrooms in season; Wheelchair Access: First 50 yards of trail

Info: Cherokee National Forest, Unaka Ranger District, 4900 Asheville Highway, Greeneville TN 37743, (423) 638-4109, www.fs.usda.gov/cherokee

IN BRIEF:

You don't have to wait until hike's end to enjoy picturesque mountain splendor on this hike to a waterfall deep in the Cherokee National Forest. First, enter Sampson Mountain Wilderness, heading up Squibb Creek valley, where lush woods escort you past a series of warm-up waterfalls and pools. Watch for trailside bluffs and cliffs before reaching Squibb Creek Falls, a fitting denouement to the cataracts aplenty along the way.

HIKE DESCRIPTION:

Despite being starting at a Cherokee National Forest recreation area (Horse Creek), the hike to Squibb Creek Falls is mistakenly overlooked. Not only is the destination a dandy, but the hike provides inspiring beauty along the way. Notwithstanding several creek crossings, nimble hikers can make the trek dry shod at normal water levels, thanks to well-placed boulders and rocks at the crossings.

Start your hike by walking along an all access gravel trail to a fishing pier overlooking Horse Creek. Continue up Horse Creek Road beyond the fishing pier, joining the gravel and dirt four-wheel-drive track. Pass by several deep pools that far outstrip the size of Horse Creek. At .1 mile, come to a wooden bridge crossing Horse Creek. Take the bridge and continue on a footpath, the Squibb Creek Trail. Shortly enter the Sampson Mountain Wilderness, as marked by a sign near the confluence of Squibb Creek and Horse Creek. Turn up the Squibb Creek valley shaded by black birch rhododendron and maple. Mosses, lichens, and ferns grow on anything that is not moving. Cliffs and boulders are interspersed in the woods.

At .3 mile, bridge Squibb Creek twice in succession. Watch out. These wooden bridges can be slick. At .4 mile, come to an A-frame cabin in the woods. Pass this private inholding then reach your first rock hop of Squibb Creek. Boulders are aligned for a dry crossing. However, if the water is high you will be rewarded by impressive falls that perhaps will make up for wet feet from fords. The trail narrows beyond the cabin. Cross the creek again at .6 mile.

Reach a trail intersection at .7 mile. Here, the Turkeypen Cove Trail keeps straight up a small creeklet. Our hike turns right here, crossing the small creeklet and staying with the Squibb Creek Trail up the Squibb Creek valley. At .8 mile, the Middle Spring Ridge Trail leaves left up to the high country along Rich Mountain. We stay straight, still on the Squibb Creek Trail as it passes through evergreen ground cover of partridgeberry in a former hemlock grove.

Cross Squibb Creek at 1.0 mile. At 1.2 miles, as you round a bend, look left for a small waterfall and large plunge pool deep enough to simultaneously dunk several hikers. The pool surely harbors a few trout as well. Cascades noisily spill through the valley. Cross over to the left hand bank at 1.3 miles. Now the trail climbs steeper and loses sight of Squibb Creek. Cross back over to the right hand bank at 1.6 miles. At 1.7 miles, cross to the left hand bank. Note the remains of an old wooden bridge embedded into the creek bottom. A man-made flat, leftover from the logging days, can still be discerned at the far bank. Keep up the narrowing valley. Trees and rocks and hills crowd the trail.

At 1.9 miles, cross Squibb Creek thrice in succession. Waterfalls, rock slides and pools come one after another here. The depth of these pools compared to the size of the creek is striking. The falls come as short quick drops as well as slides fanning out at their bases. What wilderness majesty! Three more crossings lie ahead as the trail and stream intertwine. Make an uphill switchback and resume deeper into the valley. As you round a corner, Squibb Creek Falls appears. Reach the cataract at 2.2 miles. The trail dead ends here at the base of an exposed cliff crossing the drainage. Squibb Creek Falls tumbles 20 feet over a rock lip then splashes at a leftward widening angle into a plunge pool. Ample boulders and rocks provide repose and photography locales. At this point, you are also wondering why this waterfall is not more popular.

NEARBY ATTRACTIONS:

Horse Creek Campground is just below the trailhead. It has streamside campsites in a scenic setting, each with a fire ring, picnic table, tent pad and lantern post. Restrooms and showers are on-site. The campground is open from May through October.

DIRECTIONS:

From exit 37 on I-26 near Erwin, take TN 81 north 6.2 miles to TN 107. Turn left and take TN 107 west for 13.4 miles to Horse Creek Park Road (marked with a Cherokee National Forest sign). Turn left on Horse Creek Park Road and follow it 2.7 miles, (At 0.8 miles Horse Creek Park Road makes a sharp right) and enter the Cherokee National Forest. Keep straight, passing the campground entrance road on your left. Just ahead, reach a parking area where the pavement ends, with a left turn toward a picnic area and Horse Creek Road dead ahead. Park here.

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