

## Developed and Dispersed Recreation Use and Facilities

### Overview

Big Creek Study Area, located on the southernmost portion of North Cherokee, is bordered on the north and west by private lands and on the south and east by the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, Pisgah National Forest and private lands in North Carolina. Access into the area includes a system of county roads south of TN 25/70 and north of Interstate 40 off Exit 447 in Tennessee and State and Forest Roads off Exit 7 in North Carolina. Del Rio and Hartford, TN, are the closest towns.

There are three Cherokee National Forest LRMP Prescriptions in this study area, all recreation-related. A narrow corridor of Appalachian National Scenic Trail and up to ½ mile seen area viewshed makes up Prescription 4.A. Round Mountain Recreation Area, in Prescription 7.D, is the only developed recreation area. All remaining acreage is classified as 7.E.2, Dispersed Recreation Areas with Vegetation Management.

A significant feature of the area is the 6,800 acre “Gulf Tract” acquired in 2000 by the State of Tennessee and USDA Forest Service from The Conservation Fund. The tract was previously owned and managed by Champion International, a timber company. The State of Tennessee dubbed their 2,000-acre portion *Martha Sundquist State Forest*, now managed by Tennessee Division of Forestry. The state forest is framed by a 4,800-acre horseshoe-shaped portion, open to the west side, and managed by USDA Forest Service/Cherokee National Forest. (See map in Appendix A.)

### Pigeon River Recreation Zone

In 2005, in an effort to improve recreation information for Forest users, recreation managers defined the Forest into Recreation Zones. Each zone features activities and recreation opportunities unique to that area and that dovetail into the Forest recreation niche: sightseeing, trails, fishing/hunting/wildlife viewing, camping and water-based recreation. The Big Creek Study Area lies in *Pigeon River Recreation Zone*. Lying between French Broad and Pigeon Rivers, Pigeon River Recreation Zone features pockets of backcountry nestled among rural communities of Cocke County, TN. The nearest towns are Del Rio, Newport, Cosby and Hartford, TN and Waynesville, NC. On I-40, the Tennessee Welcome Center near Hartford and Waynesville Welcome Center offer visitor information and picnic facilities.

There are no developed recreation facilities in this zone.<sup>1</sup> However, there are a number of dispersed opportunities:

- A favorite pastime in this zone is whitewater rafting on Pigeon River in the Hartford area (I-40, Exit 447), where local outfitters offer guide services. Canoeing and fishing are popular on French Broad River, near US 25/70.

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<sup>1</sup> Round Mountain Recreation Area is included in French Broad River Recreation Zone, but was also included in the Big Creek Study Area boundary.

- The section of Appalachian National Scenic Trail (A.T.) from Waterville (I-40, Exit 451) to Lemon Gap across the Snowbird Mountain forms the southern boundary of this zone. The 7-mile segment of the A.T. between Lemon Gap and Max Patch is renowned for its spring floral displays. Trails in the Big Creek Area of Great Smoky Mountain National Park and Harmon Den Area of Pisgah National Forest are nearby.
- Anglers can fish for trout in Gulf Fork and Brown Gap Creek; naturewatchers can view prairie warblers and yellow breasted chats along the area's dry piney ridges, or catch a glimpse of turkey, grouse, deer and black bear. Hunters also use the area for game species.

#### **National Forest Recreation Survey Sites**

In the Big Creek Study Area, two National Forest Recreation Survey (NFRS) sites were identified in the 1959 Forest-wide inventory. The sites are:

- NFRS #38.1, Round Mountain, a 26-acre occupancy site located at the existing Round Mountain Recreation Area.
- NFRS #38.9, Round Mountain Expansion, a 26-acre occupancy site south of Round Mountain Recreation Area.

#### **Developed and Dispersed Recreation**

##### **In the Study Area:**

**Round Mountain Recreation Area**, on the extreme eastern boundary of this zone, is one of the highest elevation campgrounds in Cherokee National Forest. The altitude, dense vegetation of rhododendrons and hardwoods and small mountain stream create natural air conditioning during the hot summer months. Sixteen campsites include picnic tables, fire rings, lantern posts, with potable water and vault toilet. Remote access along winding, gravel roads might discourage anything besides tents and small camping trailers. ***The Best in Tent Camping: The Southern Appalachians and Smoky Mountains*** calls this "my favorite campground in the entire guidebook...[for] quiet solitude, classic high-country atmosphere and the magnificence of Max Patch." (See Round Mountain Recreation Area ROG, Appendix C).

Trailhead access to this 20-mile segment of ***Appalachian National Scenic Trail*** in the study area includes the following points:

- Just off I-40 at Waterville (Exit 451) on Green Corner Road
- At Brown Gap on the Coker County, TN/Haywood County, NC line near Harmon Den at the intersection of Forest Roads 148A and 2250, accessible off I-40, Exit 7 and FR 148.
- At Max Patch on Max Patch Road, accessible from FR 148 in North Carolina and County Road 107 in Tennessee
- At Lemon Gap, on Max Patch Road, accessible from FR 148 in North Carolina and County Road 107 in Tennessee

Two shelters lie along this segment, ***Roaring Fork*** between Lemon Gap and Max Patch and ***Groundhog Creek*** between Max Patch and Waterville.

In the Gulf Area, dispersed camping is concentrated on the relatively level lands in Martha Sundquist State Forest. Forest Service-managed lands are steep with little opportunity for recreation development except trails, fishing and hunting.

With acquisition of the Gulf Tract, the State of Tennessee and USDA Forest Service acquired a system of Maintenance Level II roads that form three large loops. The roads are single-lane, now even narrower with overhanging brush. In the event of two-way traffic, occasional wide pullouts offer infrequent opportunities for vehicles to pass. Bridges are narrow with no guardrails. Currently, these roads are used by street-legal, off-highway vehicles and equestrians.

This system of loop roads could be enhanced for equestrian and mountain bicycle use. Trailhead parking that accommodates horse trailers could be constructed near Gulf Road entrance into Martha Sundquist State Forest on FR 2250 and/or 22501. Future recreation development in this area will require coordination between Tennessee Division of Forestry and USDA Forest Service.

#### **Near the Study Area:**

Systems of equestrian trails and camping facilities are already in place nearby.

- ***Big Creek*** in Great Smoky Mountain National Park offers picnicking, camping, equestrian overnight facilities and trails. There are no direct trail tie-ins from Big Creek to the study area. To expand their experience, equestrians could trailer their horses into the area.
- ***Max Patch***, at 4,629 feet above sea level, is a high-elevation mountain bald, famous for spectacular long-range views. A 0.2-mile trail from Pisgah National Forest's trailhead on Max Patch Road accesses the A.T. that runs along the spine of Max Patch. Accessible fishing piers overhang a scenic pond just north of Max Patch.
- ***Overnight rentals***: Large and small groups can rent privately-owned accommodations in cabins and lodges near the study area.