

Gee Creek Wilderness*

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

DISTANCE & CONFIGURATION:

GPS Trailhead Coordinates: N35° 14.814', W84° 32.409'

3.8-mile there-and-back; Hiking Time: 2.5 hours; Outstanding Features: Waterfalls, rock gorge, wilderness; Elevation: 930 feet at trailhead, 1,530 feet at turnaround point; Access: No fees, permits, or passes required; Maps: National Geographic Cherokee National Forest – Tellico & Ocoee Rivers; USGS Oswald Dome, Etowah; 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/

IN BRIEF:

Explore the incredible Gee Creek gorge. Leave the trailhead, walking an old roadbed and then enter the gorge. Make a seemingly instantaneous entrance into the back of beyond -- a wild, high, rock-and-tree rimmed chasm. Trace a slender footpath deeper into the defile, passing an old mine, a significant waterfall and towering stone cliffs. Multiple creek crossings on the latter half of the hike add to the excitement. The hike ends a little less than 2 miles into the gorge. Allow plenty of time for your return trip, as the trail is rocky and slow.

HIKE DESCRIPTION:

The Gee Creek Wilderness, at under 2,500 acres, may be small in size but it is outsized in ruggedness and true wilderness feel. Established in 1975 by Congress, Gee Creek cuts a 1,000 foot gulf between Starr Mountain and Chestnut Mountain. The ruggedness of this Cherokee National Forest hidden gem isn't evident until you start into its recesses, though if you're driving north up US 411 from Chattanooga, the steepness of the "V" shaped gorge is clearly visible. Prepare to be amazed at the deep pools of the small stream, the boulders and cliffs all draped in rich lush forest.

Pass around a vehicle barrier at the trailhead, tracing a wide but rocky trail in pine-prevailing forest. Gee Creek flows well off to your right. Walk deeper into the flat. The gorge begins tightening its noose around Gee Creek. After quarter-mile the trail sidles alongside Gee Creek. The translucent mountain stream is born high on Starr Mountain and its only major tributary is Poplar Springs Branch. Despite its smallish size and watershed, Gee Creek has some surprisingly deep pools that harbor feisty rainbow trout.

At .4 mile, a user-created trail dips to a flat and campsite. At .5 mile, reach a wooden foot bridge spanning Gee Creek. Big boulders line the streambed. You are now ascending the right bank of the watercourse. The first of many vertical walls rise from the clear-as-air stream. The hike officially enters Gee Creek Wilderness, where camping is not allowed. The path steepens underneath sycamore and hemlock in a now slender, steep chasm. Gee Creek wildly tumbles in multiple cataracts as you ascend, picking your way among boulders and trees. Even while peering down at the cascades, also examine the bluffs and walls of the gorge, reflecting the aquatic cries of the booming stream.

At .6 mile, reach a relic concrete structure, and in the creek an old flume. These are remnants from the Tennessee Copper Company, in operation from 1825 to 1860. They weren't mining copper here, rather seeking an iron ore used in the copper smelting process. Gee Creek continues to flow through the flume, located in the streambed, except in high water when it overwhelms the flume and flows through its old bed.

Continue up the gorge. At .9 mile, reach Twin Falls, and the first stream crossing. Twin Falls tumbles in two parallel cataracts into a pool far outsizeing the stream size. A hiker could easily dunk themselves here. Now begins the first of 8 unbridged crossings between Twin Falls and the trail's end. Even at high water or in winter you can make it here and then turn around. At normal flows, agile hikers will cross the stream dry footed. Shortly rock hop back to the right bank. Soon reach a small but level pine glen. A sheer rock wall rises to your right and Gee Creek flows to your left. This is a superlatively scenic spot.

The path cuts deeper into the boulder-strewn chasm. At 1.2 miles, clamber over a rock jutting into the waterway. Make a pair of quick stream crossings then open into a flat on the right bank. Watch for a huge tulip tree here. The small flat closes and the path crosses left at 1.3 miles. The gorge curves northeast, now in a cooler environment with black birch and scads of rhododendron. At 1.4 miles, look up the far wall of the gorge for a tributary stream dropping in a sheet flow cascade.

The main gorge is now but a slender slit, the eastern version of a slot canyon. Cross to the right bank at 1.5 miles. Hike well above the creek. Cross to the left bank at 1.7 miles. Pass serrated rock walls rising on your right. At 1.8 miles, make your final crossing. You are on the right bank. Enter a flat and here, at 1.9 miles, the trail dead ends. A faint user-created path continues, but I recommend turning around in this wild slice of East Tennessee.

Nearby attractions: Hiwassee/Ocoee State Scenic River Park, operated by the state of Tennessee, is located nearby. It offers attractive campsites in the flats near the Hiwassee River. Combine your hike into the Gee Creek Wilderness with a paddling or tubing trip on the river and also camp out overnight all in the same locale. For more information, visit www.tnstateparks.com.

DIRECTIONS:

From exit 36 on I-75 northeast of downtown Chattanooga, take TN 163 east for 15 miles to US 411 near Delano. Once at US 411, turn right, south and go just a few feet to then turn left on Gee Creek Road. Follow Gee Creek Road over railroad tracks and stay right, continuing with Gee Creek Road as it turns back north and turns into Forest Road 2013. Travel for a total of 2.2 miles from US 411 to reach the signed trailhead, just before a left curve.

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