



Mt. Sterling Hike

Atop Mt. Sterling (5,842 ft elevation) in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the historic, 60 ft. steel fire lookout tower built in 1935 by the Civilian Conservation Corps. This is the highest elevation of any fire tower remaining in the eastern USA. From the top of the Mt. Sterling Tower, you overlook Cataloochee Valley, the Pigeon River Gorge, the Unaka Mountains, the main ridge of the Smokies, the Black Mountains (east), and the end of the Southern Appalachians.

The 2.5 mile hike (5 mi round trip) from Sterling Gap is an easy jeep trail with a hike difficulty Rating of 9.60 (moderate) due to the 1953 feet in elevation. At 1/2 mile up the trail, the Long Bunk Trail intersects. Continue climbing for two miles until you reach the ridgeline. At roughly 2.3 miles you'll reach the Mount Sterling Ridge Trail junction. Turn right on the Mount Sterling Ridge Trail and the Tower will be about 4/10 mile on the right. There are no views from the base of the tower at 5842 feet! You will need to climb to enjoy the panoramic views of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Back Country Campsite #38 is at the base of the tower. Water is 1/4 mile down the Baxter Creek Trail on the left. You could even spend the night in the small cab atop the tower. Mt. Sterling was known as the Devil's Bedchamber to early Cherokee hunters.

Since the beautiful Cataloochee Valley is nearby, you will definitely see elk, the historic structures and more hiking trails there. Another tower is located on neighboring Mt. Cammerer.

There are several routes that will take you to the summit of Mt. Sterling. The shortest route to the fire tower is via the Mount Sterling Trail from Mount Sterling Gap.

The Mt. Sterling area is one of the more historic places in the Great Smoky Mountains. According to the early settlers in the area, the mountain was given its name after a two-foot wide streak of lead was found in the bed of the Pigeon River, near the northeastern base of the mountain. Unfortunately those residents mistakenly thought they had found silver.

One of the most famous stories associated with the area occurred during the Civil War. Towards the end of the war the remote valleys around the base of Mt. Sterling became popular hideouts for deserters from both sides of the war. Both Northern and Southern troop detachments would make frequent raids into the area to find and capture these fugitives.

Directions: Take exit 20 from I-40 and go west on U.S. Highway 276. Take the first right on Cove Creek

Road and drive 15.7 miles. All but a few miles of this road is unpaved, curvy and bumpy. So allow plenty of driving time. At about 7.5 miles, you will see the turn-off to Cataloochee Valley. Continue straight to Mt. Sterling, following signs for Crosby.

One local legend recounts an incident in which Captain Albert Teague of the Confederate Army captured three deserters: George Grooms, his brother Henry, and Mitchell Caldwell, a man described as being a simpleton. The three captives were forced to march on foot from Big Creek, over Mt. Sterling Gap, and then down to the Cataloochee Turnpike near Indian Grave Branch. Known as a talented fiddle player, Henry Grooms was purportedly ordered to carry his fiddle during the long march. Just before his execution his captors demanded that he play one last tune. He fittingly chose to play "Bonaparte's Retreat," a haunting melody that to this day is still known as "The Grooms Tune" in many parts of the region.

Before their execution Grooms asked if he could pray for a moment. His brother Henry is said to have died cursing the troopers, while Caldwell simply grinned. This so unnerved the captors that they were forced to cover his face with his hat before mustering the strength to shoot him. Teague's unit simply left the three bodies on the side of the road.

Trail details:

On a clear day hikers will be able to see Balsam Mountain and Luftee Knob towards the west, Mount Guyot towards the northwest, Max Patch to the east, and the Cataloochee Valley towards the south. If you have a very good eye you may even be able to spot the Mount Cammerer fire tower, which lies due NNW from the mountain.

It was here atop Mount Sterling in 1963 that the balsam woolly adelgid infestation was first noticed in the Great Smoky Mountains. This tiny insect is now responsible for killing most of the park's Fraser firs.

The 60-foot fire tower at the summit was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1935. In the park's early days a lookout spent many hours in the tower, keeping a close eye on the heavily forested terrain of the surrounding mountains. From February 15th to May 15th, and then again from October 15th to December 15th, the tower was manned by lookouts who lived on the premises on two-week tours. When he wasn't at his station the watchman stayed in a small cabin that once stood just north of the tower.

Today the Park Service uses the tower as a radio repeater. The trap door is still open, the views are breathtaking.

According to Peter Barr, author of "Hiking North Carolina's Lookout Towers," the Mt. Sterling lookout has the highest elevation of any true fire tower left standing in the eastern United States. In addition to a wealth of historical background on fire towers, his book also serves as a hiking guide to many of the towers in the region.