

# Big Creek Trail Hike in Great Smoky Mountains National Park



The Big Creek Trail is a serene, lesser-traveled gem in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, offering an 8-10 mile out-and-back hike through lush forests, alongside cascading streams, and past two stunning waterfalls. With a moderate elevation gain of 1,500-2000 feet, this trail delivers solitude, old-growth scenery, and refreshing creek-side ambiance, making it perfect for hikers seeking a quieter escape in Western North Carolina. Ideal for a half-day adventure, the trail is accessible year-round, with September's cooler temperatures and vibrant foliage enhancing the experience.

This hike is a hidden treasure for those craving a peaceful escape with just enough challenge and plenty of natural beauty. Watch for elk, deer, and bears. Make noise on blind corners to avoid surprises. Enjoy your adventure along Big Creek!

**Permits:** No permit needed for day hikes. Overnight at campsite #50 requires a free backcountry permit via [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov).

**Best Time:** September offers mild temps (50-70°F), low humidity, and early fall colors. Start early (8 AM) to enjoy cooler mornings and avoid afternoon haze.

## Trail Details

- **Distance:** 10-12 miles round-trip (extendable to 12 miles by continuing to backcountry campsite #50).
- **Elevation Gain:** Approximately 1,500-2,500 feet, mostly gradual with short steeper sections.
- **Difficulty:** Moderate, with easy stream crossings and some rocky terrain.
- **Estimated Time:** 4-5 hours, including stops at waterfalls.
- **Why Visit:** Solitude compared to busier park trails, with highlights including Big Creek Falls, Mouse Creek Falls, and pristine forest. Not listed on the Carolina Mountain Club's 100 Favorite Trails Challenge, ensuring fewer crowds.

1. **Access Road:** Turn right onto **Big Creek Road** (paved, transitioning to well-maintained gravel) just before the park boundary. Drive 3 miles to the trailhead parking lot.
2. **Parking:** Park at the **Big Creek Trailhead lot** (GPS: 35.7492° N, 83.1006° W). The lot is spacious with restrooms and an information board. Arrive early on weekends to secure a spot, though this area sees light traffic compared to Gatlinburg or Cherokee entrances.
3. **Trailhead:** Cross the footbridge over Big Creek from the parking lot. The trail begins with a clear, signed path heading upstream along the creek's east bank.

## Trail Highlights and Route Description

### ▪ Mile 0-1.2: Gentle Start to Big Creek Falls

The trail kicks off on a wide, gravelly path, tracing Big Creek through dense hardwood forests and rhododendron tunnels. The soothing rush of the creek accompanies you as you pass towering tulip poplars and moss-covered rocks. At **mile 1.2**, a short spur trail on the right leads to **Big Creek Falls**, a 30-foot cascade tumbling into a misty pool. It's a perfect spot for photos or a quick snack, with the spray offering a refreshing pause.

- **Mile 1.2-4: Forest Immersion and Stream Crossings**

After the falls, the trail narrows into a dirt path, climbing gradually through old-growth forest. You'll encounter 4-5 shallow stream crossings—most are rock-hoppable in low water (September is typically dry), but waterproof boots or water shoes are handy for wetter conditions. The forest is alive with birdsong, and you might spot wildflowers like trillium or jewelweed in season. The trail's seclusion here feels almost meditative, with minimal foot traffic.

- **Mile 4-5: Mouse Creek Falls and Beyond**

Around **mile 4**, the trail levels out, and a signed side path leads to **Mouse Creek Falls**, a 25-foot waterfall spilling into a crystal-clear pool framed by ferns. It's a serene spot for a break or a dip on warmer days. This is the ideal turnaround for an 8-mile hike. For a longer trek (up to 10 miles), continue another 0.5-1 mile toward **backcountry campsite #50**, a quiet clearing by the creek perfect for a picnic or extended rest. The extra stretch adds scenic creek views but no major landmarks.

- **Return (Miles 5-10):** Retrace your steps back to the trailhead. The downhill return feels quicker, with the creek's sparkle and occasional deer sightings keeping things lively. The final footbridge crossing signals you're back at the lot.