TRAIL LENGTH, GRADE AND CONDITIONS: approximately 5 miles: allow 3 to 4 hours with stops for views and observations. An extended walk from here is possible. Refer to the map. Nearly 900 feet of ascent (274 meters) considered easy-to-moderate grade. Gravel road bed for half the distance; shaded forest, sunny meadow environment and shaded forest trails for the last half. Good family walking. Accessible in all seasons. Restroom facilities are closed November through May.

WALKING DIRECTIONS: Park your vehicle outside the National Park gate on Purchase Road. Pass through the gate on foot and follow Purchase Road uphill through a forest on a gradual incline to the first small meadow. Proceed uphill on the road through a short wooded area to the second and larger meadow on Purchase Road. Follow the signage toward Ferguson Cabin for a very short distance (a few yards or meters) then continue uphill. On your immediate right through the meadow pathway (clear but unmarked) the Science Education Center will come into view. The meadow and Science Education Center offer the best observation points of Purchase Knob, Blue Ridge Parkway, Newfound Mountains and Mount Sterling. Continue to the rear of the Science Education Center following the signage toward the Cataloochee Divide Trail. When reaching the trail head, veer left toward The Swag Resort. (1.4 miles) on the hiking and horse trail. Walk downhill to the next trail head (McKee Branch). Turn left at the intersection, continuing downhill. In a few yards, you will come to another trail head. Take the pathway “for hikers only” to Ferguson Cabin. To return, walk to the rear of Ferguson Cabin (1.6 miles) on the right and cross under the power lines adjacent to a large Red Spruce conifer. Take the short uphill to the meadow along the fence line of the Fire Plantation. This will return you to Purchase Road. From here, it is downhill back to your vehicle.

DO NOT MISS:
• Spring, summer and autumn flora. Bring your wild flower guides and field lens.
• The Science Center Observation Deck offers tremendous views. Cold Mountain and Mt. Pisgah 120° SE, Crabtree Mtn., Sandy Mush and Newfound Mountain range 90° E, Mt. Sterling due N (best seen from roadway). Purchase Knob to 120° SE, Crabtree Mtn., and eventually into the Mississippi River ending at the Gulf of Mexico.
• Hemphill Creek watershed
• Ferguson Cabin
• Fire Plantation

REFRESHMENTS: Pack a picnic. DON’T FORGET WATER!

HIKERS’ CHECK LIST:
• Check the daily weather forecast.
• Bring suitable clothing, especially boots or shoes for rough terrain.
• Bring this map and/or a field guide for the area.
• Bring a mobile phone for emergency purposes.

MOUNTAIN FORMATION:
The Appalachians were formed approximately 450 million years ago when at least two continental plates collided. This process, known as “folding”, pushed the mountains up to heights of approximately 20,000 feet in elevation (6,100 meters), heights we see today in the Rockies and the Alps. Over time, these plates were softened by tectonic activity and climate change which impacted the flow of ancient rivers causing them to flow side-to-side forming the valleys and coves we appreciate today.

CATALOOCHEE:
The Cataloochee Divide is located in the Great Smoky Mountains composed of three narrow valleys running parallel to one another. These valleys are walled-in at the west by the high perpendicular ridges of the Balsam Mountains. There are also two major parallel ridges. To the north west is Sterling Ridge and to the south east is the Cataloochee Divide both of these rise above 5000 feet (1524 meters). Two lower ridges,roland Mountain and Big Fork Ridge run parallel between Mount Sterling and the Divide forming the three valleys.

These valleys were favored by the Cherokee as hunting grounds. “Cataloochee” is a Cherokee word meaning “fringe standing erect”. This comes from the trees standing along the ridgelines, spines running along the tops of mountains, representing a fringe found on their coats.

Cherokee:
The Cherokee inhabited the southern Appalachians for 11,000 years. They were a proud, intelligent and highly spiritual people with democratic values, a deep respect for the land and a strong belief in balance in all aspects of life. Cherokee farms were not just a farm, they were also one of the many things they did to show respect and honor the land and the animals that lived with them.

SCIENCE EDUCATION CENTER
This center rests at approximately 4,850 feet (or 1,478 meters) with Purchase Knob just off to the southwest. Its purpose is to perform scientific research in Smoky Mountains National Park, while making it accessible to the public. It is one of the primary locations for studying salamanders, bird migrations and air quality in the Smoky Mountains.

WEB CAM
Located at this site is one of two web cams in the national park. If you would like to know the conditions for a good view before you hike, go to www.nps.gov/grsm/index.htm, follow the links to the web cam at Purchase Knob.

Produced and illustrated by Ken Czarnomski, Blue Ridge Naturalist
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For additional information and bibliography go to: Facebook at Phoenix2Reach

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