INTRODUCTION

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park offers spectacular beauty and evokes a sense of timelessness for those who wander its trails. Each season brings increased appreciation for the biodiversity that makes this region rich with all forms of life. The Cataloochee area is a great place for locals and visitors to take in broad vistas, observe the local flora and fauna and gain appreciation for the cultural history of the region, all in a half-day hike.

The southern Appalachian region contains more than 2,500 species of flowering plants, 130 species of trees, over 400 species of mosses and approximately 1,500 species of vascular plants. This is more plant diversity than in any other national park. The southern Appalachians trees. The exceptional biodiversity is due to the variety of ecosystems in the region, all in a half-day hike.

TRAVEL DIRECTIONS:

The Science Center Observation Deck offers tremendous views. Cold Mountain and Mt. Pisgah 120°S, Crabtree Mtn., Sandy Mush and Newfound Mountain range 90°E. Mt. Sterling due N (best seen from roadway). Purchase Knob to the SW. Wild turkey, butterflies and bird migrations (spring and fall) are also abundant. The Cataloochee Divide is a defined line of mountain ridges separating the Cataloochee drainage basin or valley from the Jonathan Creek drainage basin or valley. Both of these drainage systems flow into the Pigeon River watershed which flows to the French Broad River and eventually into the Mississippi River ending at the Gulf of Mexico.

CATALOOCEHE DIVIDE

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PURCHASE KNOB

In the Blue Ridge region, a knob is normally a prominent, isolated, symmetrically rounded hill or mountain. Early settlers had no name for a mountain standing up sharply by itself. So they used the word "knoebel" from the middle low German "knobel", meaning knob or bud. Knoebels are formed by weathering sandstone or granite. Purchase Knob received the name from the old sign "knobel" from the middle low German "knobel", meaning knob or bud. Knoebels are formed by weathering sandstone or granite.

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.

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 (170 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. Proceeding the road through a short wooded area to the second and larger meadow on Purchase Road. Follow the sign towards 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 (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 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 Fir 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 wildflower guides and field glasses.

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Wild turkey, butterflies and bird migrations (spring and fall)

Hemphill Creek watershed

Ferguson Cabin

Fir Plantation

REFRESHMENTS:

Pack a picnic. DON’T FORGET WATER!

HIKER’S CHECKLIST:

Check the daily weather forecast.

Bring suitable clothing, especially boots or shoes for rough terrain.

Bring your map and/or a field guide for the area.

Bring a mobile phone for emergency purposes.

MOUNTAIN FORMATION

The Appalachians were formed approximately 450,000 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 creeks we appreciate today.

CATALOOCEHE

The Catalooche region is the valley 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 many 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, Nolan 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 farmes and hunted in this area until European settlers brought human tragedy and forced removal in the 1830’s. Today, the Cherokee are working to preserve their culture and a visit to the Museum of the Cherokee Indian in the town of Cherokee, NC provides the visitor with a detailed history of these native peoples. www.cherokeemuseum.org

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 to the www.nps.gov/grsm/index.htm, follow the links to the web cam at Purchase Knob.

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For additional information and bibliography go to: Facebook at Phoenix2Reach

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