

CUTBANK FINDING CITICO CREEK

Words:
Ty Goodwin

IF YOU WANT TO FIND Citico Creek, go east, away from the stark band of I-75 that rives the Tennessee River valley like an old wound. Go beyond places like Knoxville and Etowah and Madisonville. Go beyond even Indian Boundary, beyond the hard oily edge of the paved road and down the scree switchbacks to the stony vault of the gorge. Go where the crumbling track at last flattens, hair-pinning to the northwest to stretch out along the clear braid of the stream for miles and miles, all the way to the Tellico Reservoir.

There, at the turn, cross the low-water bridge into Warden's Field and park your truck. String the rod but don't begin fishing. Instead, weave your way through the ragged grove of tents and campers, through last night's wisping fire rings, through the overturned lawn chairs and piles of empty beer cans to the trailhead on the far side of the trampled field.

Before horses and pigs and the unnerving clank of metal in the forests that de Soto brought, the Cherokee once walked here, although this is hard to imagine until you are well down the trail. Even so, this remains a Cherokee place, and the first stream crossing feels like something more than a stream crossing, a definitive shift away from one thing and toward another. You begin to pick up the scent of the past, a whiff of what is left of the wildness in these woods.

But the true wildness does not assert itself until you're beyond where Citico Creek becomes whole, where the North and South forks merge to form the stream proper, the lesser two forced into a greater one by the relentless

defiles of Brush Mountain and Sassafras Ridge. Here the trail divides with the stream into northern and southern tangents. Take either, but in any case, again go farther, until the poplar and the oak assert themselves, closing in like walls, dark and thick, blocking out one kind of world and becoming another. This is youthful second- and third-growth many mistake for the old, the ancient, because the many no longer have true ideas of the old and ancient. Even these young trees pass for giants in this version of the forest.

Do not begin fishing. Continue along the trail still farther. Continue until you feel inexplicably relieved, as if some burden has been shed, something you carried in like a heavy pack. This will be where the sun is filtered and refiltered through the heavy-leaved crowns like shine through a thump keg, distilled to something less than light before reaching the cool wet loam. This will be where the stream itself grows black in the deepness of this place, a slick dark blade serrated with the whitewater tumble of plunge pools, curving through the feet of mountains.

This will be where even the songbirds remain silent, deferring to the older music of moving water and wind racing through the canopy. This will be where wildness still lives. In copperheads coiled in the leaves. In bear and, some say, panther moving unseen through the trees. In the still air taut with the silence of the past. In the bright trembling bolts of silver and crimson finning in the cool heart of a trout stream born on a summit.

Begin here. ↪

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"I brought a couple of Florida boys up to North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains to look for trout—something a little different from the tarpon and redfish on the flats." Photo: Steve Seinberg

