



PHOTO BY TY GOODWIN

Lookout Creek, TN By Ty Goodwin

When the American Civil War came to Chattanooga, Tennessee, Union and Confederate armies slammed into the landscape like a train gone off the rails, tearing apart earth and men alike. Cannons echoed from mountain to ridge. Scabs of defoliated ground festered where soldiers camped, marched, and fought. The ground trembled and cracked under the weight of battle.

The considerable scars from “The War” are still visible today, and I often wonder if the turbulent history here somehow accounts for the profound calm now felt in once-bloody places like Lookout Creek. Paddling this quiet, peaceful stream, it’s difficult to envision the conflict that once raged along its banks as Yanks and Rebs fought for position. And while I come to Lookout to enjoy that tranquillity, I also come for the excellent fishing. A tributary of the Tennessee River, the creek harbors robust populations of bass, crappies, carp, gar, catfish, and bluegills.

This mixed bag of angling opportunities demands a two-prong approach with regard to gear. I carry both 7- and 4-weight rods on this stream. The 7-weight outfit works well for tossing big bugs to bass and has the backbone to handle the brute strength of a large carp or gar. A slender 4-weight is perfect for tangling with feisty panfish. I typically set up the larger rod with a stout 0X or 1X tippet. Lookout Creek is littered with deadfalls and brush; a sturdy setup is a must for steering bigger fish clear of these obstacles. If toothy gar are your target, a wire leader is advisable. Fly selection is not crucial, but fly placement is. The ability to shoot a bug under streamside branches or through gaps in foliage is a valuable skill here. Proven producers like Woolly Buggers and Clouser Minnows work consistently, and poppers are good bets for morning and evening fishing. I also carry a box of large nymphs and San Juan Worms for bluegills and carp.

Spring is by far the best time to be on Lookout. The creek teems with fish preparing for their spawning periods, and packs of buck bass often patrol the currents, periodically tearing into schools of baitfish. Summer can be productive as well, once the peak days of spring have passed. This is the time to be on the water around dawn or dusk, working the edges of grass mats and blowdowns. Autumn brings yet another face to Lookout Creek as the hardwoods on the surrounding slopes begin to flame into their fall colors and fish become more active in the cooling temperatures.

Lookout Creek is best explored via canoe or kayak, because wading opportunities are limited. The current is minimal, so it’s easy to paddle from and then back to your launch point, whether you head upstream or downstream.

Launch sites are located at the US Highway 41 bridge about 1 mile south of the Tennessee River, and at the nearby Reflection Riding Arboretum & Nature Center. To reach both, take exit 174 from Interstate 24, then take US Highway 41 east. In approximately 1.5 miles this highway crosses the creek, with narrow gravel side roads on both ends of the bridge providing access. These are rugged, primitive put-ins, and portaging over a few feet of rocky bank is necessary to reach the water. Reflection Riding Arboretum & Nature Center, my preferred access, is about a mile south on Garden Road after you cross the aforementioned bridge and is well marked; follow the signs. The center boasts a dock designed for canoe and kayak use, and requires a daily fee of \$10. However, I fish Lookout frequently, so I find it more economical to purchase an annual membership to the nature center itself for \$50, which includes use of the dock. Note that the trail from the parking lot to the dock covers about 0.25 mile; a dolly is handy for moving watercraft to and from the launch area. Go to www.reflectionriding.org for more information.