



# Foundation Document Overview

## Gauley River National Recreation Area

West Virginia



### Contact Information

For more information about the *Gauley River National Recreation Area Foundation Document*, contact: [gari\\_superintendent@nps.gov](mailto:gari_superintendent@nps.gov) or (304) 465-0508 or write to:  
Superintendent, Gauley River National Recreation Area, P.O. Box 246, Glen Jean, WV 25846-0246

## Purpose



*The purpose of the GAULEY RIVER NATIONAL RECREATION AREA is to preserve the scenic, geological, and natural resources of the rugged gorges of the Gauley and Meadow Rivers, while providing for compatible and safe recreational use and access.*

## Significance

Significance statements express why Gauley River National Recreation Area resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Gauley River National Recreation Area features globally rare plant communities and remnants of old-growth cove forests that are part of a globally significant unfragmented Appalachian forest system. The rugged geology; complex nature of the Gauley and Meadow River Gorges; and the associated rock outcrops, cliffs, and boulder fields provide refugia for a wide array of rare and federally threatened species.
- The steep gradient and high concentration of boulder-choked class five rapids of the Gauley and Meadow Rivers provide some of the most challenging whitewater recreational opportunities in the world.
- The rugged, undeveloped, scenic and wild character of the Gauley River Gorge provides park users with exceptional opportunities to experience unspoiled nature rarely found in the eastern United States.



## Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Biological Diversity.**
- **Undeveloped, Rugged Geologic Landscape.**
- **Opportunities for World-Class Recreation.**
- **Water Quality.**

Gauley River National Recreation Area contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Cultural History of the Gauley River Gorge.**



## Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The rugged and complex geology of the Gauley and Meadow River gorges has provided a refugia for globally rare plant communities, remnants of old-growth cove forests, an unfragmented Appalachian forest system, and a biologically diverse ecosystem.
- The extreme topography of the gorges has shaped the way people throughout history have traveled through, settled in, extracted resources, and impacted the landscape.
- The Gauley and Meadow River gorges provide a refuge for plants and animals displaced from warmer and lower elevation ecosystems and will become more vital as global climates change.
- The rugged, undeveloped, scenic, and wild character of the Gauley and Meadow River gorges provides park users with exceptional recreational opportunities such as traditional uses (hunting, fishing, trapping) to leisure-based recreation such as whitewater boating, rock climbing, hiking, and bicycling.



## Description

The Gauley River National Recreation Area was established by Congress to provide the public with outdoor recreational opportunities including whitewater boating, picnicking, camping, hiking, fishing, hunting, trapping, and sightseeing while protecting a large natural area. Today, the Gauley River National Recreation Area protects 25 miles of the Gauley River and 6 miles of the Meadow River, both of which pass through scenic gorges and valleys containing a wide variety of natural and cultural resources. Natural conditions including low natural ambient sound levels, little noise intrusion, and little light pollution contribute to the healthy natural environment and create a serene setting for visitors. The quality of the night skies in the vicinity of the Gauley River corridor help ensure that the Milky Way and other celestial objects are typically visible.

Every September, as water is released from Summersville Dam, whitewater enthusiasts from all over the world flock to the Gauley River to experience what is considered by many to be one of the most thrilling whitewater rafting opportunities in the country. Dropping more than 668 feet through 25 miles of rugged terrain, the Gauley River's complex stretch of whitewater features more than 100 rapids with a steep gradient, technical runs, an incredible volume of water, and huge waves. Its vigorous rapids, scenic quality, and inaccessibility combine to make Gauley River one of the premier whitewater runs in the world.

While the Gauley River and its steep gorges have historically served as a natural barrier, the area provided an important corridor for human activity. The area was used for fishing and hunting by American Indians for 10,000 years and neighboring upland areas were populated by Europeans in the late 1700s. The confluence of the Gauley and Meadow Rivers was also the site of an 1861 Civil War battle. Union troops forced Confederate forces from their fortified earthwork position overlooking the Gauley River. The site, which is adjacent to the park, is part of Carnifex Ferry Battlefield State Park.

In the late 1800s, railroads and lumber companies came to the gorge to harvest its vast supply of timber. Industrial pollution drained directly into the Gauley River, earning it the nickname "the River of Ink." This pollution killed fish and prevented people from swimming and enjoying the river's water. In 1922, the West Virginia State Wildlife League was successful in cleaning up the Gauley River, forcing the industrial plants along the Gauley's tributaries to dispose of waste properly. The area has largely recovered from the heavy impacts of early settlers who mined the land, logged the timber, and polluted the water. Although the area is currently in good condition, much of the land within the recreation area boundary is not under federal protection.

A number of plant and animal species that are rare, threatened, or of special concern inhabit the area. The Gauley River's rugged 25-mile gorge features a stream gradient of 28 feet per mile that supports diverse and abundant wildlife. Extremes in topography, elevation, and microclimate have resulted in a great diversity of plant life. Within the gorge, the river is characterized by alternating pools and rapids with torrential water, boulders, and exposed bedrock. Twenty-three vegetation community types, including the globally rare Eastern Hemlock-Chestnut Oak / Catawba Rosebay, Yellow Birch Cold Cove, and river-scour forests support a wide variety of wildlife species including many rare and threatened species such as the Allegheny woodrat, cerulean warbler, eastern hellbender, northern long-eared bat, eastern small-footed bat, and finescale saddled darter. High-energy rivers like the Gauley are an ecological driving force for some plant communities. Gauley River is an excellent example of a high-energy system that supports rare plant species and their communities. Rare plants here include Virginia spiraea, Appalachian blue violet, and balsam squaw-weed. Thirty-six rare or threatened plants are currently documented from Gauley River National Recreation Area including the federally threatened Virginia spiraea and the only records in the state for hemlock rosette grass and downy danthonia.

