

Great Smoky Mountains National Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



SMOKIES GUIDE

The Official Newspaper of the Smokies • Winter 2025–26



Cades Cove is a great place for winter wildlife viewing—especially for white-tailed deer, which prefer the edge habitat between open meadow and dense forest. *Photo by Joye Ardyn Durham.*

Tips for Winter Driving in the Park

Start your trip by checking road closures and conditions

Winter is typically the quietest season in the Smokies, which makes it a great time to get out and explore the park. With a little planning and a few extra layers, the well-prepared can find frosty fields, snow-dusted mountaintops, and waterfalls dripping with icicles. The first step is knowing which roads will take you there.

Several of the park's secondary and higher-elevation roadways are closed for the winter season to ensure visitor safety. Other roads may be closed temporarily due to unsafe conditions. To protect vegetation and water quality, road salts are not used within the park. Instead, road crews plow regularly and apply a mixture of sand and gravel called "chat" to improve traction.

One major roadway subject to frequent closure is Newfound Gap Road (US 441), the main route connecting Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and Cherokee,

North Carolina. This road stretches 33 miles across the mountains and rises to a height of 5,046 feet. Even though conditions may seem safe near Gatlinburg or Cherokee, temperatures drop rapidly at higher elevations on Newfound Gap Road, and precipitation is much heavier and more frequent. The road's steep grades and blind corners quickly become dangerous in inclement weather.

As you enjoy the park this winter, remember to reduce your speed, avoid sudden braking, and leave extra space between you and the vehicle in front of you. Speed limits on most of the park's paved roads average 30 miles per hour. To plan your trip, see the park map on page 6 for seasonal road closures and the regional map on the back page for alternate routes. For current closures, visit nps.gov/grsm/playyourvisit/conditions.htm.

Words with a Ranger

In my role as chief of facility management, I'm responsible for the maintenance and operations of park buildings and infrastructure, including ten campgrounds, 11 picnic areas, 90 historic structures, 150 cemeteries, 270 miles of road, and 848 miles of trail. Thankfully, I'm only one member of an incredibly capable and devoted team that makes it all possible day in and day out.

Some 16 years ago, I began my park service career right here in the Smokies as a park engineer, but before that I worked as a community planner and transportation engineer in the public and private sectors. After moving on to other managerial positions in different regional and Washington offices, I was grateful for the chance to

Continued on page 8



PARKING TAG REQUIRED!

Parking in the Smokies for more than 15 minutes requires a valid parking tag (annual tag pictured).

For more info, scan code with camera app



OUR PARK
ON SOCIAL MEDIA



GreatSmoky
MountainsNPS



GreatSmokyNPS



GreatSmokyNPS

SMOKIES TRIP PLANNER



Visitor centers

Sugarlands, Oconaluftee, and Cades Cove: open 9 a.m.–4:30 p.m. December through February, 9 a.m.–5 p.m. in March.

Kuwohi: *closed for the season.*

GSM Institute at Tremont: open 10 a.m.–4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday only.

All visitor centers are closed on December 25.



Road closures

• Many secondary and higher-elevation roads close in late fall and remain closed in winter. Refer to the map on pages 6-7 for further details.

• All park roads are subject to temporary closure during dangerous driving conditions. Click “Alerts” at nps.gov/grsm for all current closures.



Shuttle services

Local shuttle services offer convenient transportation to and from the park’s most iconic destinations. Routes, schedules, pricing, and pick-up/drop-off locations vary. Visit go.nps.gov/grsmshuttles for a list of authorized concessioners.



Weather

As winter arrives, days can be sunny and 65°F or snowy with highs in the 20s. Conditions vary considerably between low and high elevations.

Mount Le Conte receives nearly 70 inches of snow every year. Lows of -20°F are possible at the higher elevations. At lower elevations, snows of an inch or more can be expected about three to five times a year. Milder temperatures typically arrive by mid-to-late April.



Campgrounds in the national park

The National Park Service maintains developed campgrounds at ten locations in the park, two of which are open year-round. There are no showers, and hookups are available only at Look Rock Campground (closed in winter). Circuits for special medical uses are offered at Cades Cove, Elkmont, and Smokemont.

Campsite reservations are required at all park campgrounds. Sites may be reserved up to six months in advance. Camping is permitted only in designated sites.

Make your reservation online at recreation.gov or call 877.444.6777.

Site occupancy is limited to six people and two vehicles (a trailer is considered one vehicle). The maximum stay is 14 days.

Campsites for larger groups are located at Big Creek, Cades Cove, Cataloochee, Cosby, Deep Creek, Elkmont, and Smokemont. Reservations are required and may be secured up to a year in advance. For more information, visit nps.gov/grsm.

Campground	No. of Sites	Elevation	Status	Nightly Fees	Max RV Length
Abrams Creek	16	1,125'	closed for winter	\$30	12'
Balsam Mountain	43	5,310'	closed for winter	\$30	30'
Big Creek	12	1,700'	closed for winter	\$30	tents only
Cades Cove	159	1,807'	open year-round	\$30	35–40'
Cataloochee	27	2,610'	closed for winter	\$30	31'
Cosby	157	2,459'	closed for winter	\$30	25'
Deep Creek	92	1,800'	closed for winter	\$30	26'
Elkmont	220	2,150'	closed for winter	\$30	32–35'
Look Rock	69	2,600'	closed for winter	\$30–36	no limit
Smokemont	142	2,198'	open year-round	\$30	35–40'



Firewood

To prevent the spread of destructive pests, only USDA- or state-certified heat-treated firewood may be brought into the park. Campers may gather dead and down wood in the park for campfires. Find purchase locations at FirewoodScout.org.



Picnic areas

Picnic areas at Cades Cove, Deep Creek, Greenbrier, and Metcalf Bottoms are open year-round. Big Creek, Chimneys, Collins Creek, Cosby, Look Rock, and Heintooga are closed for winter. Picnic pavilions may be reserved for a fee at recreation.gov.



Accommodations

LeConte Lodge (accessible by trail only, reopens late March) provides the only lodging in the park. Reservations required. 865.429.5704, lecontelodge.com



Services

There are no gas stations, charging stations, showers, or restaurants in the national park. Limited food options are available in visitor centers and camp stores.



Event reservations

Reserve the Appalachian Clubhouse or Spence Cabin at Elkmont for daytime events at recreation.gov. Cabin and clubhouse reopen in April.



Pets

Pets are allowed in campgrounds and along roads as long as they are restrained at all times. Pets are not allowed on park trails, except for Gatlinburg and Oconaluftee River trails. Pets must be kept on a leash no longer than six feet.

SMOKIES GUIDE

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nps.gov/grsm
SmokiesLife.org

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Bicycling

Most park roads are too narrow and heavily traveled for safe or enjoyable bicycling. Bicycles are permitted on park roads but prohibited on trails except Gatlinburg, Oconaluftee River, lower Deep Creek, and Indian Creek trails. Helmets are required by law for persons age 16 and under and strongly recommended for all.



Horseback riding

Some 550 miles of park trails are open to horses. See park trail map for trails and rules. Horse camps are located at Anthony Creek, Big Creek, Cataloochee, Round Bottom, and Tow String. Cataloochee and Round Bottom camps are currently closed due to damage from Hurricane Helene. Make reservations at recreation.gov.

Three concession horseback riding stables offer rides from March through November. Call for exact opening dates.

- **Cades Cove** 865.448.9009 cadescovestables.com
- **Smokemont** 828.497.2373 smokemontridingstable.com
- **Sugarlands** 865.436.5470 sugarlandsstables.com



Fishing

Fishing is permitted year-round in the park, but a Tennessee or North Carolina fishing license is required. Either state license is valid throughout

the park, and no trout stamp is required. Fishing with bait is prohibited. Special permits are required for the Qualla Boundary and Gatlinburg, and licenses are available in nearby towns. A free fishing map with a complete list of all park fishing regulations is available at visitor centers.



Backcountry camping

The park service maintains more than 100 campsites and shelters dispersed throughout the Smokies' backcountry trail network. Although all overnight stays require a permit and reservation at a designated campsite, the greatest challenge might be deciding where to go. See below for help as you prepare for your next adventure:

1. Get the map. Go online to view the park's official trail map (go.nps.gov/grsmmmaps), which shows all park trails, campsites, and shelters. Park rules and regulations are also listed here. You can purchase the printed version of the trail map for \$1 at any park visitor center or online at SmokiesLife.org.

2. Plan your trip. Call the park's Backcountry Office from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. or drop into the office located within Sugarlands Visitor Center for trip-planning help. The office is open to visitors during visitor center hours. 865.436.1297.

3. Get a permit. Make your reservation and get your permit through the Backcountry Office at Sugarlands Visitor Center (*by phone or in person*) or online at smokiespermits.nps.gov.

Reservations and permits are required for all overnight stays in the backcountry. The cost is \$8 per person per night. Reservations may be made up to 30 days in advance. Backcountry camping permit holders are not exempt from parking tag requirements.

Winter hikers should be especially aware of abrupt weather changes and the danger of hypothermia—the dangerous lowering of body temperature. Always carry an ample supply of food, water, and reliable rain gear. Layer clothing that provides warmth when wet (not cotton). Be prepared for rain, snow, cold, wind, and sudden weather changes, especially at the higher elevations. Stay dry and know your limits.

See page 4 for more hiking tips and trip essentials.



Special events and ranger activities

- **December 13:** Festival of Christmas Past, Present, and Future at Sugarlands Visitor Center, 10 a.m.–2 p.m.
- **December 20:** Holiday Homecoming at Oconaluftee Visitor Center, 11 a.m.–3 p.m.

See page 5 for more things to do. For a full calendar of events, visit go.nps.gov/grsmcalendar.



The only two pet-friendly trails in the Smokies are the Gatlinburg Trail in Tennessee and the Oconaluftee River Trail in North Carolina.

Learn the BARK principles so you and your pet can have a safe and fun visit in the Smokies.

Take the BARK pledge:



Bag and bin your pet's waste



Always leash your pet



Respect wildlife



Know where you can go

GSMNP BY THE NUMBERS



12 million+ visitors per year



1,000+ species new to science found in the park



31 species of salamanders



70 species of mammals



10,500+ species of insects



16 mtns. higher than 6,000'



Give the gift of the Smokies with an annual parking tag!

Available for purchase at visitor centers or online at SmokiesLife.org.



Keep it **SMOKIES SMART**:

- S** Stay hydrated
- M** Map your hike
- A** Always wear proper clothing/footwear
- R** Remember your flashlight
- T** Turn back when conditions change

Tell someone where you're going, stay on established trails, pack the essentials, and know what to do in case of an emergency.

Let the NPS Backcountry Office help you plan and prepare for your hike.
Call 865.436.1297,
8 a.m.–5 p.m. daily

PACK ESSENTIALS

Trail maps and many more of these items can be purchased at any park visitor center. Visit nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/hikingsafety for more hike planning tips.

- Traction support like microspikes and hiking poles
- Navigation—map, compass, and knowledge of how to use them
- Water and food
- Warm extra layers
- First aid kit
- Headlamp or flashlight
- Rain gear and pack cover or waterproof bags
- Emergency whistle
- Sun protection with sunscreen, sunglasses, and hat



FOR A LONGER HIKE

- Repair kit with multi-tool or knife
- Fire starter
- Shelter—emergency tent or tarp

IN AN EMERGENCY

- Call 911 if you can acquire a signal.
- Remain with any injured parties until help arrives. Use what basic first-aid techniques you know, but do not attempt invasive intervention unless you are medically trained.
- Use an emergency whistle to issue a series of three spaced blasts every few minutes to alert rescue crews. If you are in an open area, display brightly colored clothing or gear.



YOUR CELL PHONE IS **NOT**

- a strong light source
- always going to have service
- always going to have battery

THINGS TO DO IN THE WINTERTIME

Hit the trail

More than 800 miles of trail wind through the Smokies, ranging from leisurely quiet walkways to challenging mountain ascents. Enjoy exploring this winter, but come prepared with rain gear, layers, traction support, and plenty of water and snacks.

Download a free copy of the park's trail map at [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov) or purchase one for \$1 at a visitor center or kiosk. Visitor center bookstores also offer hiking references such as *Hiking Trails of the Smokies*. For a list of pack essentials, see page 4. *Photo by Michael Hicks.*



Celebrate the holidays with us



Photo by Paul Driessche

Explore Smokies history

Immerse yourself in culture and history while visiting the park's gateway communities.

In Townsend, Tennessee, the Great Smoky Mountains Heritage Center brings the past to life through its museum, historic village, amphitheater, and garden pathways. Meanwhile Cherokee, North Carolina, is home to the Museum of the Cherokee People, one of the longest-operating tribal museums in the country.

Inside the park, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, find historic structures such as churches, mills, and log cabins. In Cades Cove, Elkmont, and Oconaluftee, the bareness of winter reveals hidden structures, cemeteries, and other reminders of past Smokies residents. *Cherokee museum photo by Judy Baxter.*



See wild hog damage? Report it!

If you come across a spot where the earth has been turned up as though by a small bulldozer, it's likely that you've found an instance of wild hog damage. These invasive animals are the descendants of wild European boars that escaped from a hunting preserve in the 1920s and interbred with domestic swine. They are shy and skittish around people but extremely harmful to park ecosystems.

Wild hogs root out native plants, destroy habitat, and carry diseases. You can help the park protect native species by reporting any hog damage you see. Email a photo, location information, and any other details to GRSM_Wildlife_Staff@nps.gov. *Hog photo by Cricket Raspet.*



Some ranger-led programs may be held during winter on a day-to-day basis. For a full list, inquire at a visitor center or visit:

go.nps.gov/grsmcalendar

Parking tag purchase locations within the park

Parking tags may be purchased at locations designated by these symbols on the map:



Automated Fee Machine (AFM)

- Available 24 hours per day
- Accepts credit/debit only
- Daily and weekly tags only

Located at Sugarlands Visitor Center, Cades Cove Loop Entrance, Metcalf Bottoms Picnic Area, New-found Gap, Oconaluftee Visitor Center, Deep Creek Picnic Area, Kuwohi, Greenbrier, Cosby, Big Creek, Townsend Wye, Look Rock, and Cataloochee.



Visitor Center

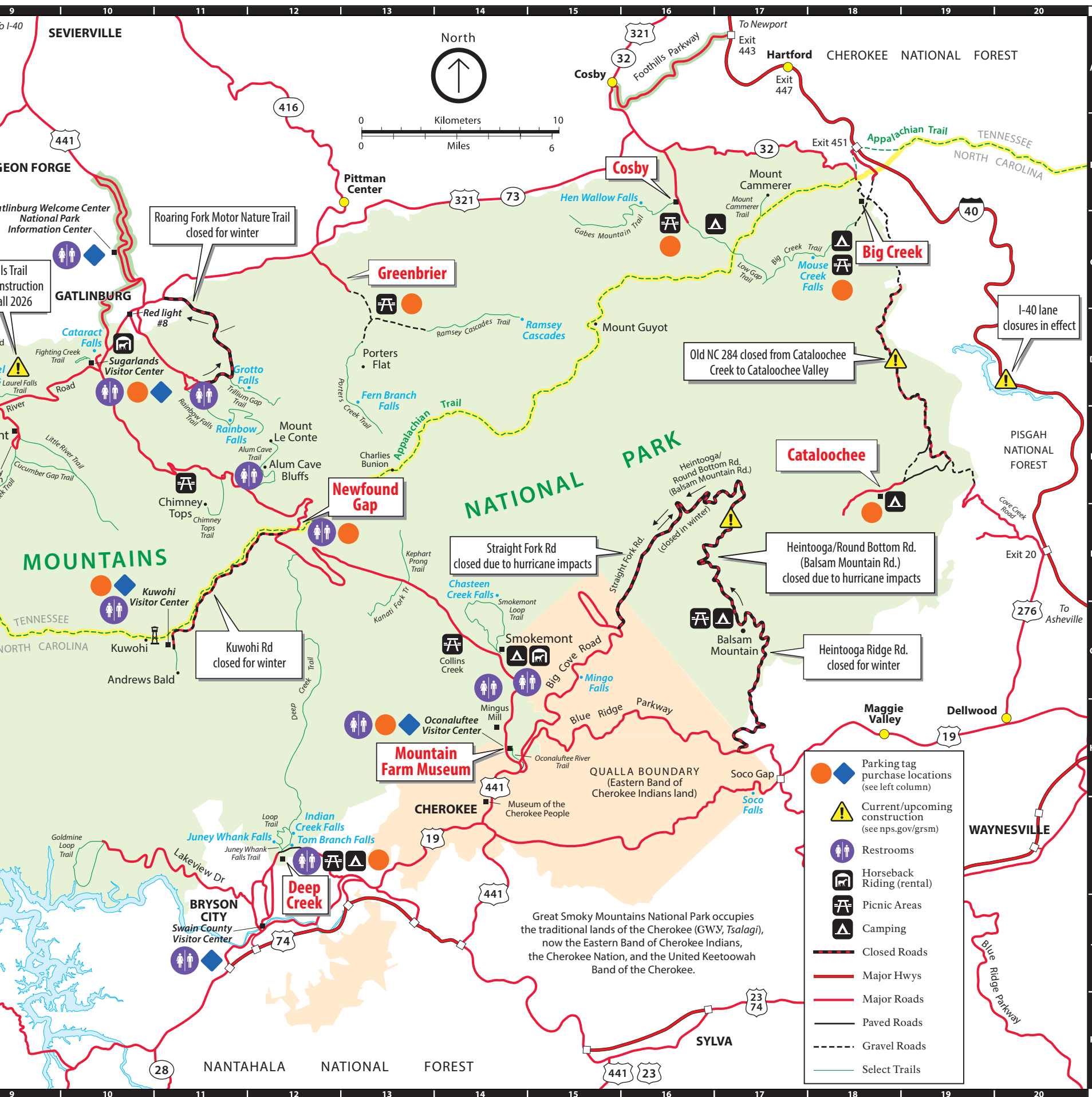
- Open business hours (see page 2)
- Accepts cash or credit/debit
- Daily, weekly, and annual tags available

Located at Sugarlands, Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont, Cades Cove, Oconaluftee, and Kuwohi.

Parking tags are available outside the park at Great Smokies Welcome Center in Townsend, Gatlinburg Welcome Center, Swain County Visitor Center in Bryson City, and select area businesses.

For all purchase locations, see go.nps.gov/grsmfees.





Words with a Ranger
Continued from page 1

return to this park in 2022. The Smokies family is second to none, and I’ve made many of my most cherished memories hiking and camping here with my loved ones.

Winter is typically a quiet season in the mountains, but there will still be plenty going on behind the scenes. Our roads, custodial, and utilities teams will be waking up early and staying out late so the rest of us can continue to enjoy the Smokies.

Road crews based in Cherokee, Gatlinburg, and Cades Cove are out seven days a week maintaining roadways and keeping them clear of rocks, trees, ice, and snow. Our custodial and grounds employees arrive early—often before sunrise—to clear walkways and make sure visitor centers and restrooms are clean and accessible. Every day, utility operators conduct testing and repairs to ensure we maintain a potable water supply for drinking fountains and toilets.

If all goes smoothly, the hard work and many different jobs of the facilities management team will fade into the background as you explore the Great Smoky Mountains this winter. Just be sure to pay attention to road signs, avoid relying entirely on your phone for directions, and make a backup plan. Some roads or facilities may be closed due to dangerous conditions, but there’s still plenty to see and do even when wintry weather strikes. Visiting the park is about the experience—not always the destination.



Raccoon and firewood pest illustrations by Lisa Horstman. All others by Emma Oxford.

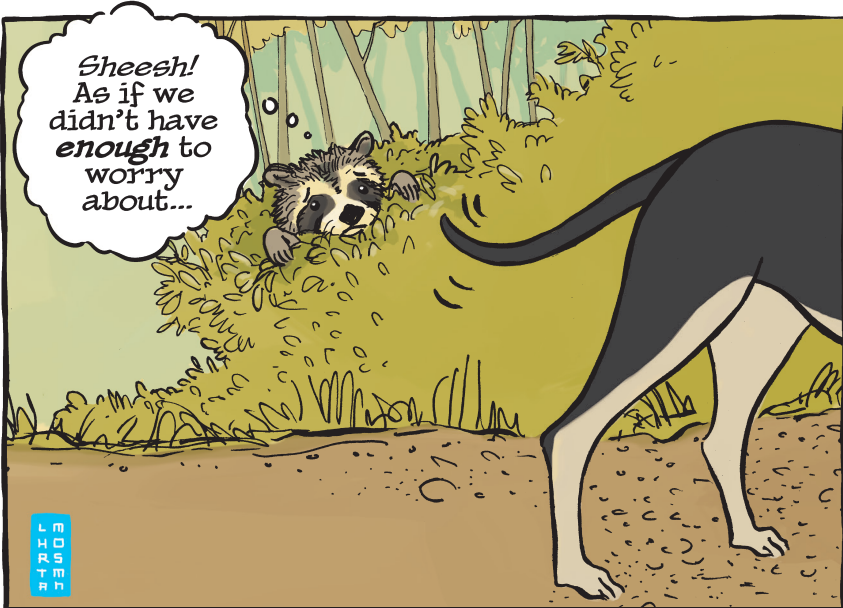
LEAVE ONLY FOOTPRINTS

Writing on or carving into trees, stones, or structures can cause permanent damage—it’s also a crime! Taking a photo is always a better way to remember your time in the Smokies and helps preserve the park for others too.



BIN IT FOR THE BEARS

Help protect bears by packing out all trash and food waste and using bear-proof dumpsters in the park.



KEEP PETS ON DESIGNATED TRAILS

Remember that the Gatlinburg Trail and Oconaluftee River Trail are the *only* pet-friendly trails in the park.

All pets must be kept on a leash no longer than six feet at all times.

THE BREAK DOWN ↓

Sources:

"Hikers: Eat Bananas – but Take Your Skins Home." theguardian.com; "How Long Does Your Litter Live?" slocounty.ca.gov; "'Organic' Litter is Not Copacetic." hcn.org; "Recycling Mysteries: Candy Wrappers." earth911.com

Packed it in? Pack it out.

What you may not know about the life of commonly littered items



Even a mushy apple core can linger on the landscape for as long as two months. That's more than enough time to draw wildlife to places they shouldn't be.



Citrus contains a natural insecticide, meaning ants won't touch discarded orange peels. They can take six months or longer to break down.



Banana peels can take around two years to completely rot—the thick skin protects the inner fruit from cold and resists decomposing quickly.



Cigarette filters contain cellulose acetate, a form of plastic. These frequently littered items remain intact for five to ten years on average.



Most candy wrappers (and granola bar wrappers) are made of a plastic and aluminum combo that won't break down for ten to 20 years.

Thank you for leaving no trace and taking these items (and all litter) with you when visiting the park!

PARK WITH CARE

Always park in a designated paved or gravel parking area with all four wheels of your vehicle off the roadway. Parking elsewhere can damage protected vegetation, trap your car, and obstruct emergency vehicles.



PLEASE LEAVE YOUR FIREWOOD AT HOME

Use only heat-treated or dead and down wood within the park. Harmful pests can hitchhike into the park on your firewood, which could kill millions of trees.

IF YOU LOVE THE SMOKIES

Help protect this special place for future generations! Consider joining our nonprofit park partners described on this page. They, along with over 1,600 National Park Service volunteers, help serve park staff and address many needs across the park’s 522,000 acres, maintaining this natural resource for millions like you who visit each year.

Smokies Life



Smokies Life operates the park’s bookstores and publishes books and other media about natural and cultural resources. Since 1953, Smokies Life has given more than \$54 million toward scientific and historic preservation efforts.

- Members, known as Park Keepers, stay informed through:
- a subscription to the award-winning semi-annual, full-color *Smokies Life Journal*
 - digital access to this quarterly newspaper and the Smokies LIVE blog, which includes “Word from the Smokies”
 - 15 percent off books and other products at visitor centers and on the web store
 - access to expert-led group hikes, backpacking excursions, and educational sessions
- Join today by visiting SmokiesLife.org, or call 888.898.9102, ext. 257.



Friends of the Smokies

As the park’s philanthropic partner, Friends has raised more than \$90 million to give to the park since 1993, helping:

- Trails Forever crews improve trails
- Forever Places crews preserve historic structures
- protect bears, elk, and other animals
- supply search and rescue crews with training and equipment
- improve park access for people with mobility needs
- fund educational programs and transportation for school children
- monitor air and water quality while restoring native species’ habitat
- protect trees from invasive insects



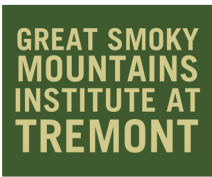
Friends raises money through events, business sponsorships, memorials and honorariums, private gifts, and specialty license plate sales in North Carolina and Tennessee.

Visit FriendsOfTheSmokies.org to donate.



Tremont

Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont is an environmental education center inside the park that connects people to nature through immersive, multi-day experiences. The institute promotes curiosity and inspires learning for thousands of students and adults each year.



Adult programming includes the Southern Appalachian Naturalist Certification program, photography courses, a writer’s conference, backpacking adventures, professional development for teachers, wilderness first responder training, and a naturalist-led adult summer camp.

Youth summer camps and school field trips allow kids ages 4 to 17 (and sometimes their families) to explore the national park for days at a time and connect with nature through new, empowering, discovery-oriented experiences.

Visit GSMIT.org for program information. *Photo by Rich Bryant.*



Discover Life in America

Since 1998, DLiA has collaborated with the National Park Service, scientists, and community members on the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory. This ambitious effort aims to identify every species living in the park and understand their roles in relation to one another and within the ecosystem.



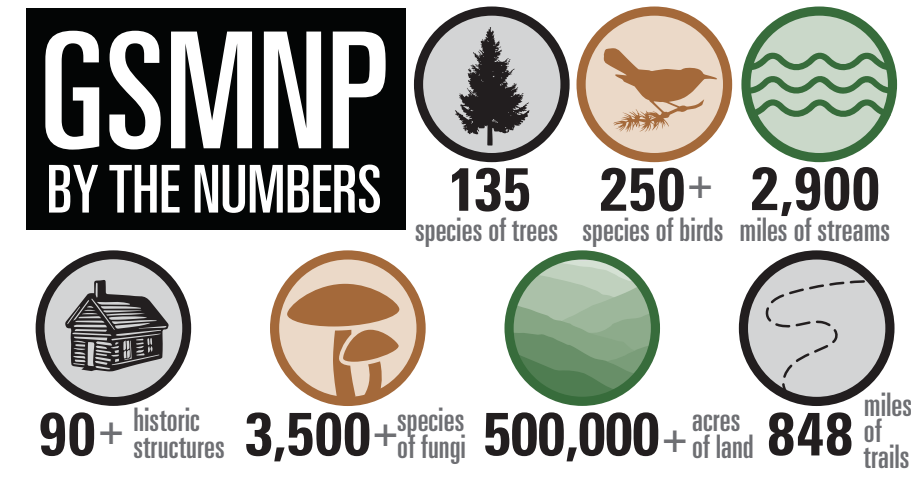
The ATBI has documented more than 12,000 species previously unrecorded in the Smokies, including over 1,000 new to science. This research informs critical conservation decisions.

DLiA engages people of all ages through outreach and education programs, inspiring stewardship of the natural world and fostering the next generation of nature advocates.

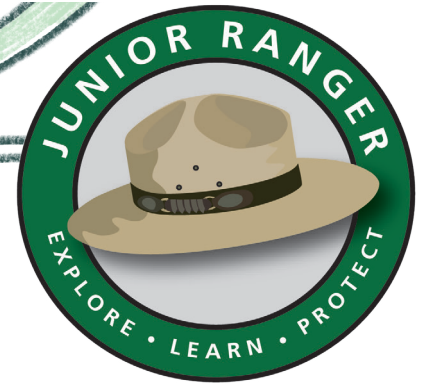
Learn more and join the effort at DLiA.org.

Record life in the park with the iNaturalist app! DLiA.org

SMOKIES MOST WANTED



PLAY



Life in the mountains wasn't all work and no play. Toys were handmade from everyday materials like corn shucks, string, or wood scraps. Games included strategy games, like checkers and fox and geese; active games, like tag and hide and seek; tests of skill, like darts and graces; as well as puzzles, riddles, and games of chance. **TEST YOUR BRAIN** by trying to solve these riddles, then make up your own Smoky Mountain riddle to fool a friend!

1. WHAT HAS AN EYE BUT CANNOT SEE?

2. WHAT HAS A HEAD BUT NEVER WEEPS, HAS A BED BUT NEVER SLEEPS, HAS A BANK BUT NO MONEY, AND CAN RUN BUT NEVER WALKS?

3. I'M ALWAYS HUNGRY, I MUST BE FED. THE FINGER I TOUCH WILL SOON TURN RED. WHAT AM I?

YOUR RIDDLE:

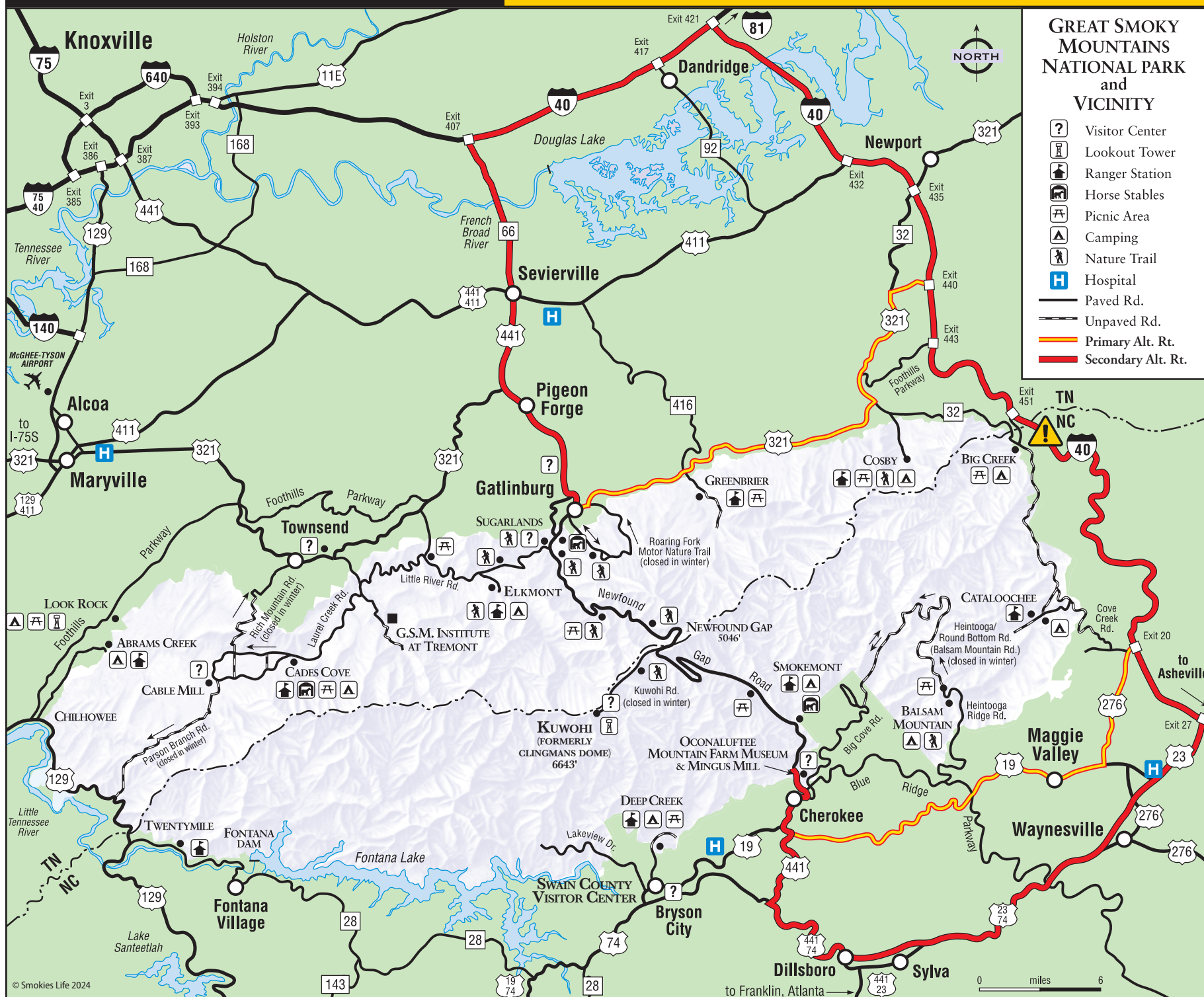
ANSWERS TO RIDDLES:
1. A needle or potato or hurricane
2. A river
3. A fire

Illustration by
Jesse White



THIS ACTIVITY IS ADAPTED FROM GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK'S JR. RANGER ACTIVITY GUIDE! WORK AS A TEAM TO FILL OUT THE GUIDE AND EARN A JR. RANGER BADGE. AVAILABLE AT ANY PARK VISITOR CENTER!





Emergencies

911

Gatlinburg Police
865.436.5181

A valid parking tag must be displayed when parked for more than 15 minutes anywhere in the park. Pets are permitted only on the Gatlinburg and Oconaluftee River trails, which allow dogs on a leash. Persons feeding wildlife are subject to a \$5,000 fine. Picking or digging plants is prohibited in the park.

Restrooms at Cades Cove, Oconaluftee, and Sugarlands visitor centers are fully accessible. For more information about accessibility, go to nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/accessibility.htm.