

Cherohala Skyway Photo Essay

By Stanley E. Long

“God’s Country” may be an overused phrase to describe an area of scenic beauty, but if anyplace fits that description, it would certainly be the area transited by the Cherohala Skyway. Dedicated in 1996, the concept of the highway dates back to 1958, when a group of men from Tellico Plains, Tennessee organized a wagon train of 67 covered wagons and numerous horseback riders to cross the mountains to Murphy, North Carolina to demonstrate the need for such a road. The Cherohala Skyway drive now covers about 41 miles, starting at the Visitors Center at Tellico Plains, Tennessee, at 860 feet elevation. This two lane highway passes through the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee and the Nantahala National Forest in North Carolina; thus the name Cherohala. It is now designated Tennessee Highway 165, switching to North Carolina Highway 143 at the border.

Fall is a great time to go, but peak foliage occurs earlier than in the Smoky Mountain National Park by about a month due to the higher elevations. This essay contains photos of some of the scenic spots along the way. A pleasant side trip at the beginning of the trip east is a visit to Bald River Falls, a short drive off the Hwy 165 to the junction of the Tellico River and Bald River.



Bald River Falls is a short drive along the Tellico River from Tellico Village, TN. While somewhat of a diversion from the Cherohala Skyway, it is one of the best waterfalls in East Tennessee, and can be viewed from the car window.

Back on the Cherohala, there are many overlooks with parking areas, some with picnic areas. For a change of pace, one can visit Indian Boundary Lake, by turning north on the access road, just west of the Turkey Creek overlook. It offers camping and picnic areas.



Indian Boundary Lake is a short drive off the Skyway to the north, via an access road just west of the Turkey Creek overlook.

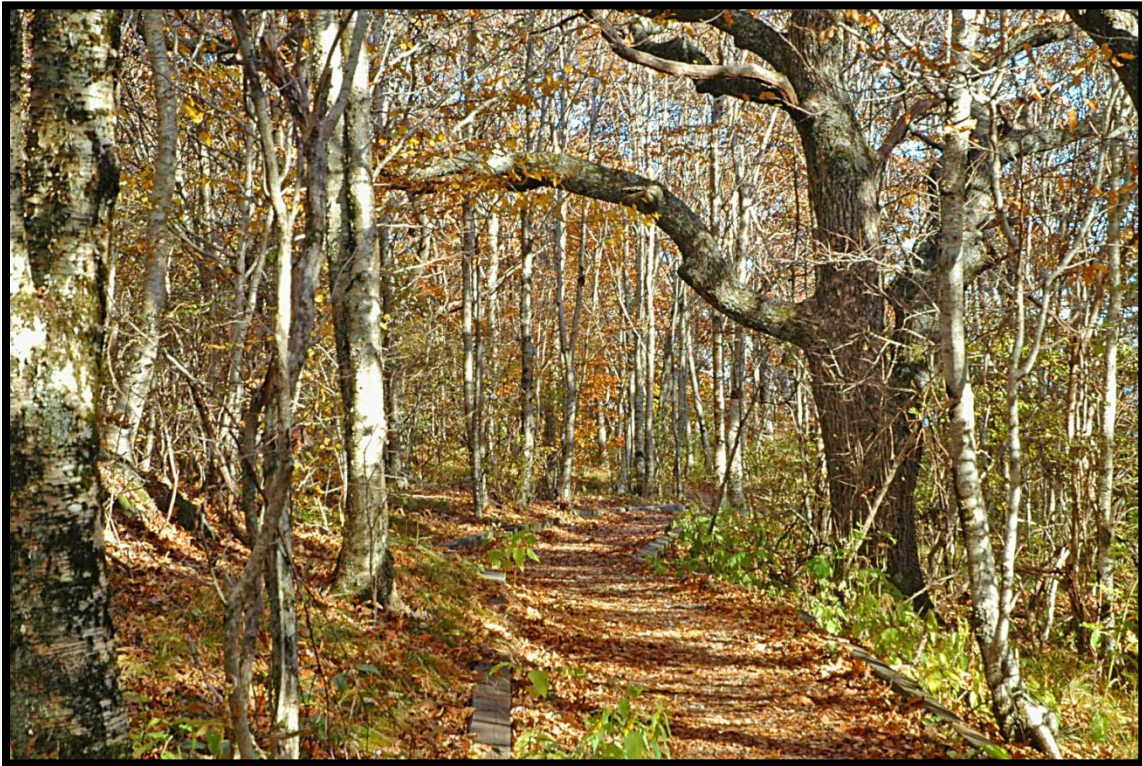


The Skyway is a two-lane road following the mountain ridges where possible, with concrete bridges where necessary, such as this one spanning Stratton Meadows.



Big Junction overlook, just below the peak elevation reached on the Skyway, appears a bit stark in the Fall after most leaves have fallen from the trees.

Big Junction Overlook is about two thirds of the way to the east end of the Skyway, and signals the approach to its peak altitude of 5390 feet at Santeetlah Overlook. Moving on east from Santeetlah Overlook, an interesting scenic area just below the peak altitude is Hooper Bald, at 5290 feet. A hiking trail, about a quarter mile long, is a moderate uphill climb from the marked trailhead. Views from Hooper Bald make the hike well worthwhile.



The trail to Hooper Bald is a moderately steep climb from the marked trailhead on the Skyway.



Atop Hooper Bald, the terrain flattens out, and is covered with tall grass, bushes, and other vegetation, making it easy walking to the scenic viewpoints.

Once there was a Lodge up here, long gone now, called the Hooper Bald Lodge. There was an effort to establish a farm for Blue Boar hogs here around 1912. It seems to have failed and many escaped. Other history of this area and Graham County, North Carolina where locals were attacked by bushwhackers during the Civil War years can be found at:

<http://www.cherohala.com/>



Seasonal varieties of foliage and wildflowers may be found on Hooper Bald.



Another typical scenic view from Hooper Bald.



Ascending toward the peak altitude of the Cherokee Skyway, the road ahead can be seen disappearing into the trees on the right.

Going east from Hooper Bald, the Skyway descends to Santeetlah Gap, North Carolina at 2660 feet elevation. From there, North Carolina Highway 143 leads to Robbinsville, North Carolina. To include some stops to view the scenery, allow about 2.5 hours for a one-way trip on the Skyway. It has been estimated that average traffic on the Skyway is 50 cars and 100 motorcycles per day, but most probably occurs in the summer. In winter, it is very desolate and might be closed due to snow and ice.



Winter robs the landscape of much of its color, but dramatic features are always present in these mountains.