

2008 Southern Trip

by Wayne Carey

I guess I just don't have that Kobak charisma. I planned a trip and everybody bailed. My bags were packed and I had a van load of firewood to keep my paddling buddies warm at night. I couldn't very well cancel my leave and go into work with my tail between my legs. So it was off to the Nolichucky. And believe it or not, there were about 100 boaters there. Bluegrass Whitewater Association was having their annual clinic. They were nice enough to let me tag along on the Noli for two days. It was running about 800 cfs. A few students stayed over Monday to run the lower Noli. I headed over to the French Broad.

There was plenty of water in the French Broad, but no boaters. I hung around at the takeout for a while and then drove over to the Pigeon. There was a release and raft trips, but no kayakers. Planned releases don't start until the end of April, but there were releases all week.

The Pigeon is right next to the eastern side of Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP). Just up the road from the put-in is Big Creek Campground. It is a cross between walk-in camping and drive-in camping, like a mule, which is what you need to haul all your food, coolers, and cooking gear back and forth from your campsite to your car every morning and night. There are twelve sites. I picked the one closest to the parking lot.

Big Creek from Big Creek Campground to Walter's Power Plant, the put-in for the Pigeon, is a popular class IV run. A virtual gauge is on Boatingbeta.com at <http://www.boatingbeta.com/cgi-bin/myflows.cgi>. Upper Big Creek, above the campground is seldom run.

There are two good hiking trails from Big Creek Campground; Big Creek Trail and Baxter Creek Trail. Big Creek Trail follows an old road bed for five miles along upper Big Creek. Midnight Hole swimming hole is at 1.8 miles and Mouse Creek Falls is at 2 miles.



Midnight Hole

Big Creek Trail also serves as a horse trail. Horses are available at liveryes. Baxter Creek Trail climbs 4100 feet in 6.2 miles to the top of Mt. Sterling. There is a fire tower at the top with great views in all directions over the Smokys. Both trails have back country campsites at their ends. There is also a trail connecting the two campsites, which would make a great two night backpacking trip. I had my backpacking gear but chose to hike the two trails out and back and stay at the campground. I did have that van load of firewood.

April 23-27 was the Spring Wildflower Pilgrimage at GSMNP. This may sound lame to a bunch of badass boaters, but they were spectacular. There were trout lilies, painted trilliums, crested dwarf iris, fire pinks, and many more. The scent filled the air on sections of Baxter Creek Trail.



Crested Dwarf Iris

Gas - \$165, camping - \$69, one meal at Ryans - \$11, springtime in the Smokys - priceless. And no mosquitoes!