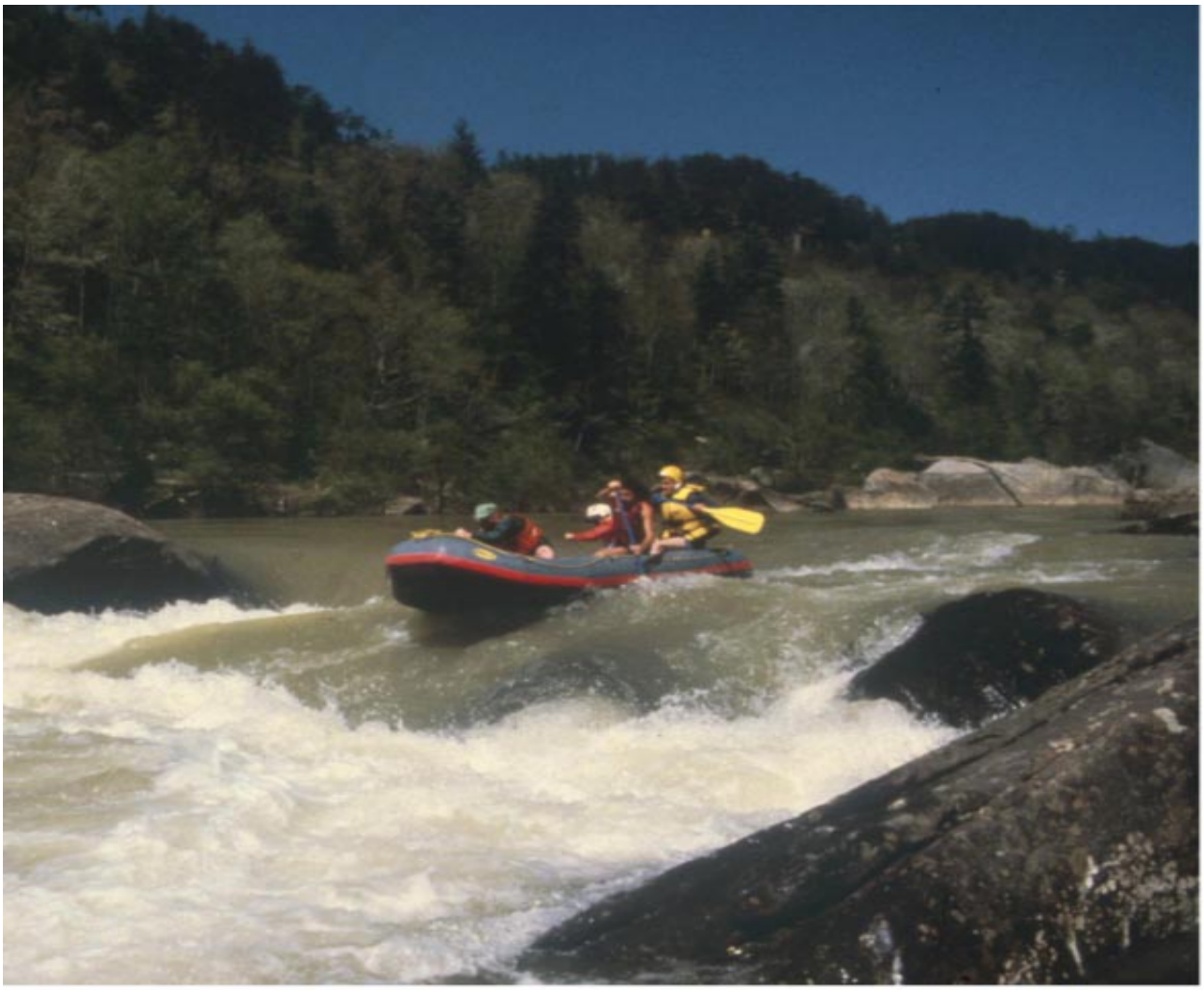
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area
Oneida, Tennessee

A Guide To Paddling in the Big South Fork



Paddling the Big South Fork

Floating the streams of the Big South Fork will give you entry to a land that time and events have visited, impacted and left. Although you can still see the results of previous agricultural, mining and logging practices, the land today has a quality of wildness with limited access and sparse development. At no time is this more apparent than when floating the streams or camping on a river bank as the sun sinks behind the gorge rim.

Where the stream flows slow and smooth, you are able to look closely at the banks and cliffs. Where the stream speeds up and twists and drops between and around boulders and over ledges, you become one with your paddle. Rapids that you thought you would shoot through in seconds seem to take minutes as you lunge and thrust your way to calmer waters. Then the adventure ends abruptly and the pace again changes.

River Safety

Proper planning and common sense can keep an enjoyable river trip from turning into a dangerous and possibly life-threatening experience. The following safety tips are provided by the American Red Cross, read them carefully and practice safe river paddling techniques.

Travel in groups of at least three boats while on the river. Keep the boat behind you in sight. Secure all equipment in your boat.

Be sure you know your put-in point and especially your take-out point.

Avoid flow-through hazards (strainers). Even in slow water, these can trap you and be the cause of a fatality.

Avoid hydraulics - you can get trapped. Swim down to get out.

Capsized? Stay at the upstream end of the canoe. Don't take chances saving equipment. Leave the boat and swim if doing so will improve your safety, especially in cold water or very rough water. Keep your toes up and your feet together, pointed downstream. Never try to stand up in fast water unless it is too shallow for swimming.

When striking an obstruction sideways is inevitable, lean the canoe downstream but don't get caught between the canoe and the obstruction. With the upstream gunwale up, the canoe will be easier to remove from the rock. If the upstream gunwale is down, with the water moving at 5 mph, a 16-foot canoe would have hydraulic force of 2,240 pounds exerted upon it. The canoe could be severely damaged.

When you approach obstructions, set your course well in advance. Know how to approach. If in doubt, scout from shore.

When other streams join the main stream, there can be strong crosscurrents, sandbars, debris, etc.

Remember that river current is usually faster on the outside of a bend. It also spirals (folds under) down to the bottom.

Be aware that upstream V's indicate rocks. Downstream V's with haystacks indicate gaps between rocks.

Think ahead. Set your course well in advance. Know your approach. Use a back stroke in standing waves. Set stern toward desired shore.

Emergency access to and from the river may be accomplished by using trails at the Confluence, Honey Creek, No Business, Williams Creek and Bear Creek or by road at Pine Creek,the O&W Bridge, Leatherwood Ford, Station Camp.

River Levels

The following are descriptions at various water levels of the Clear Fork and Big South Fork Rivers from Brewster Bridge (Highway 52) to Leatherwood Ford Bridge (State Route 297). Gauge readings are from the Leatherwood Ford gauge. These descriptions were provided by four whitewater clubs in 1989 and are generalized statements about conditions that may be experienced while running the gorge.

These descriptions are meant as an aid to help you use your own judgement in deciding if you should run this section of the river. Because of changes in the river over time, these descriptions may not be accurate. Use them as a guide, but scout each rapid before you try it.

500 (CFS):

This level is considered very low. The rapids, especially on Clear Fork, are extremely technical. Broaching on rocks due to the tight passages is likely. Bottoming out in the vertical drops is common. Rapids, especially in the main gorge, are steep and rocky. Pinning is possible. River classification: Class III with one or two Class IV's.

1000 CFS:

This level is considered optimum for open canoes. Rapids remain technical and rocky. Several drops are still very vertical. Waves grow to 2-4 feet in height in places. Canoe swamping is possible. River classification: Class III with a few Class IV's.

1800 CFS:

Clear Fork becomes much less technical and sports several Class III rapids. The main gorge begins to have big water at this level, with several waves topping out at 4-5 feet. Vertical drops still exist at Double Falls, Washing Machine, and The Ell (The Big Three), as well as two drops in the canyon. The Big Three section is solid Class IV. Rescue between drops becomes problematic at this level, and some rapids, e.g., Krekels (Honey Creek Rapid), are continuous for over 1/4 mile. River classification: Class III-IV.

2500 CFS:

The river maintains a similar character at this level, with waves reaching 6 feet in heights. Some holes become very tenacious at this level, particularly those at The Ell, Rion's Eddy, and the Canyon. Overall difficulty is Class III - IV with several strong Class IV's.

3500 CFS:

Clear Fork rapids become nearly continuous at this level. Water in the Little Three rapids is powerful, with reactionary waves beginning to form in the 6 foot range. The main gorge is Class IV and very powerful. Waves in the 6 foot range are common, with several waves up to 8 feet. Swirly water and whirlpools begin forming at the bottoms of rapids at this level. Rescue becomes very difficult because of the swiftness of the water, and the length and difficulty of the rapids.

5000 CFS:

At this level, the river changes character. Waves in the 6-8 foot category are common, with a few attaining 10 feet in height. Some eddies are very unstable, and waves begin to pulse. Diagonal reactionary waves are common in the gorge and make upright boating continuously difficult. Equipment is frequently lost if not retrieved expeditiously. River classification: Class IV.

10,000 CFS:

Clear Fork has rolling 4-5 foot waves for much of its length. The Little Three is a solid Class IV plus with large reactionary waves for 1/2 mile. The main gorge resembles the New River Gorge at medium water levels. Waves are huge, especially in the Big Three and the canyon sections. The canyon is very dangerous at this level because it is continuous for 1-1/2 miles with only a few eddies. The waves in the main current average 7 - 8 feet. The water is up in the brush and trees in places, thus making rescue extremely difficult and broaches a possibility. Several giant holes appear which can be extremely dangerous, e.g., Krekels (Honey Creek Rapid). Above 10,000 CFS there is a river wide hole between the EL and the Honey Creek Rapids, caution is advised. River classification: Class IV - V.

20,000 CFS:

The river has a similar character to levels around 10,000 CFS. Holes become bigger and meaner. Waves begin to explode irregularly. River debris (logs and trees) become a factor. Most rapids in the gorge are over 1/4 mile long. Swims are likely to be life-threatening to the swimmer and the rescuer. Rescue of equipment is almost too difficult. This level is considered high flood, and much of the gorge is Class V. Walk-outs are common at this level. Overnight stays may be the result. River classification: Class V.

40,000 CFS:

The Little Three has 8 - 9 foot waves. The Big Three is a mile-long Class V with continuous 10 - 15 foot erratic (reactionary) waves terminating in a river-wide hole at Honey Creek Rapid. The Canyon is a 1-1/2 mile CONTINUOUS series of 12 - 15 foot reactionary wave trains with several offset holes, one of which is 2/3 of the river wide and probably a keeper. Floating river debris is very problematic. Walk-outs are very likely. River classification: Class V plus.

Run Descriptions

Peters Bridge to Brewster Bridge

Distance	6 Miles
Difficulty	I-II
Average Drop	7
Use Season	W-Sp

When there is enough water, this section makes a very nice half-day trip. the valley walls are close together and quite steep as the Clear Fork begins to cut into the Cumberland Plateau. Laurel thickets are common in this heavily wooded valley. The river is characterized by long pools and short, quick, easy drops.

Brewester Bridge to Burnt Mill Bridge

Distance	10.5 Miles
Difficulty	II-III
Average Drop	12
Use Season	F-W-Sp

This is a very beautiful section featuring numerous boulders in the streambed, precipitous bluffs, and moderate rapids. The only named rapid in Decapitation Fork, formed where the stream goes under an undercut rock.Though not particularly dangerous, it is rather striking and requires some maneuvering skill to negotiate.

Burnt Mill Bridge to Leatherwood Ford

Distance	11 Miles
Difficulty	III-IV
Average Drop	20
Use Season	F-W-Sp

This is the run usually made by paddlers wishing to float the gorge. The trip begins deceptively easily, but quickly develops into serious, powerful whitewater which is challenging to even expert and advanced paddlers. Emergency access exists at the O&W trestle, Pine Creek and by a steep footpath at the Honey Creek Pocket Wilderness. Numerous sheer, massive sandstone cliffs are visible on the run. The scenic values of the gorge are of the highest order.

Whiteoak Bridge to Burnt Mill Bridge

Distance	11 Miles
Difficulty	II
Average Drop	13
Use Season	W-Sp

Whiteoak Creek is a scenic 5.5 mile run past numerous rockhouses and bluffs as it heads for the Clear Fork River. The last half-mile of Whiteoak Creek has some nice Class II rapids. The 5.5 miles of Clear Fork river to the take-out are likewise beautiful and have no major rapids.

New River Bridge to Leatherwood Ford

Distance	15.5 Miles
Difficulty	I-IV
Average Drop	14
Use Season	F-W-Sp

New River, for its first six miles is a placid stream, the drop in the last two miles picks up considerably and some Class II-III ledges appear. The last 7.5 miles are run on the Big South Fork River which contains several Class III-IV drops. The trip will require a long day of paddling.

Zenith Mine to Leatherwood Ford Bridge

Distance	8.5 Miles
Difficulty	II
Average Drop	22
Use Season	W-Sp

North Whiteoak Creek in an enjoyable seven mile run of moderate difficulty down a 400 foot, strikingly beautiful gorge. Boulders of assorted shapes and sizes are strewn along the way. Rapids are short and may be rather tricky, so good maneuvering ability is necessary.

Leatherwood Ford Bridge to Station Camp or Blue Heron Mine

Distance	8 or 27 Miles
Difficulty	I-II (Angle Falls & Devils Jump IV)
Average Drop	5
Use Season	F-W-Sp-Early Summer

The stretch from Leatherwood to the Blue Heron Mine is a two day run combining moderate paddling difficulty with spectacular scenery. It is often run as a fall color trip, usually during October. There are two major drops, the first Angel Falls is two miles below Leatherwood Ford which should be portaged on river right at any level. The second, Devils Jump is located just above the take-out and may be portaged on river left. Be sure you are familiar with the landmarks which are associated with the approach to each rapids.

River Access

BLUE HERON/MINE 18:

The Blue Heron site may be reached by taking Kentucky Route 742 west from Revelo, Kentucky. Coming from the north or south, take U.S. Highway 27 to Highway 92, turn left and follow Route 92 through Stearns to 1651, follow 1651 east to Revelo and turn right onto Highway 742. Blue Heron is located 9.5 miles down Kentucky Route 742.

YAMACRAW:

Yamacraw Bridge is on Kentucky Highway 92 north of Stearns, Kentucky, or 92 south from Monticello, (KY side of Park)Kentucky.

ALUM FORD:

Alum Ford area may be reached by taking Kentucky Route 700 west from U.S. 27 at Marshes Siding. (KY side of Park) Follow Kentucky Route 700 approximately 5 miles to the ford.

WORLEY:

Take Highway 92, 1.8 miles west from Stearns, Kentucky to Highway 791. Take Highway 791 for (KY side of Park) approximately 1.4 miles. The road to Worley is a gravel road that drops off sharply to the right. Continue down this road approximately 0.9 miles to Worley. The road to Worley is often in poor condition and may not be suitable for some 2 wheel drive vehicles. Caution is advised.

NEW RIVER BRIDGE:

From Bandy Creek Road, turn east (left) onto Route 297. Drive 12 miles to Oneida and U.S. 27. Turn (south end of Park) south (right) onto Route 27 and drive 10 miles to New River Bridge. River access immediately south of the bridge.

WHITE OAK CREEK:

From Bandy Creek Road, turn east (left) onto Route 297 and continue to Oneida and U.S. 27 south. (south end of Park)Follow Route 27 south to Route 52 in Elgin. Turn right onto Route 52 east and drive toward Rugby approximately 5 miles to White Oak Creek Bridge.

BURNT MILL BRIDGE:

IMPORTANT NOTICE: Due to structural concerns, the Scott County Road Department has close the bridge at Burnt Mill to vehicular traffic. Access to the Burnt Mill Bridge river access parking area is only possible by taking the Mt. Helen Road off Highway 52, east of Allardt, Tennessee.

BREWSTER BRIDGE:
Follow above directions for White Oak Bridge. After crossing bridge continue east on Route 52 through (south end of Park) Rugby to Brewster Bridge on the Clear Fork River.

PETER'S BRIDGE:
The Peter's Ford Road leaves Highway 52 at Pleasant View Church of the Nazarene 3 miles east of Allardt (south end of Park)and 8 miles east of Jamestown, Tennessee. It can also be reached via Rugby by the above directions for Brewster Bridge. After crossing the bridge, continue west on Route 52 for approximately 7 more miles to the church on the left.

ZENITH:
Access is possible by continuing 5.2 miles from Burnt Mill Bridge (directions above) to Mt. Helen Road. (south end of Park) Take the right fork of Mt. Helen Road, then drive 3.3 miles to Zenith Road on the right. From Allardt, take Highway 52 east for 5.5 miles to Mt. Helen Road. Turn left onto Mt. Helen and drive 4.9 miles to fork in the road at Garrett's Grocery. Take the paved road to the left and drive .2 miles to Zenith Road to the left.

LEATHERWOOD FORD:
From Bandy Creek Road turn (left) east onto Route 297, drive 1 mile to Leatherwood Ford. From Highway 27 in Oneida take TN Route 297 west ten miles to Leatherwood Ford (TN middle section).

STATION CAMP:
From Bandy Creek Road turn (left) east onto Route 297 for approximately 8.5 miles to junction of 297 (TN-middle section) and Station Camp Road. Turn left onto Station Camp Road at Terry & Terry Store and drive 8.1 miles to river.

From Highway 27 in Oneida take TN Route 297 west six miles to the Terry & Terry Store. Continue straight onto Station Camp Road at Terry & Terry Store and drive 8.1 miles to river.

(Approximately4 miles of this road is gravel and becomes steep before reaching river).

River Difficulity

The following rapid classifications were provided by the American Whitewter Affiliation. Rapids on a river generally fit into one of the following classifications, but if the water temperature is below 50 degrees Fahrenheit or if the trip is an extended one into a wilderness area, the river should be considered one class more difficult than normal.

CLASS I

Moving water with a few riffles and small waves. Few or no obstructions.

CLASS II

Easy rapids with waves up to 3 feet and wide, clear channels that are obvious without scouting. Some maneuvering is required.

CLASS III

Rapids with high, irregular waves often capable of swamping an open canoe. Narrow passages that often require complex maneuvering. May require scouting from shore.

CLASS IV

Long, difficult rapids with constricted passages that often require precise maneuvering in very turbulent waters. Scouting from shore is necessary, and conditions make rescue difficult. Generally not possible for open canoes. Boaters in covered canoes and kayaks should have the ability to Eskimo roll.

CLASS V

Extremely difficult, long, and very violent rapids with highly congested routes, which should always be scouted from shore. Rescue conditions are difficult, and there is significant hazard to life in the event of a mishap. Ability to Eskimo roll is essential for boaters in kayaks and decked canoes.

CLASS VI

Difficulties of Class V carried to the extreme navigability. Nearly impossible and very dangerous. For teams of experts only, after close study has been made and all precautions have been taken.

Emergency Information

The Big South Fork of the Cumberland River and its main tributaries, the Clear Fork, North White Oak and New River offer a variety of whitewater paddling experiences. Some stretches are ideal for beginners, while other sections should be attempted only by highly skilled paddlers. Some streams can be floated during any season of the year while others have enough water for boating only during seasons with sufficient rainfall.

Floating can be a dangerous sport in certain stretches of the streams in the Big South Fork and at times of rising water. The river is a dynamic system which changes constantly. Expect the unexpected. Conditions change quickly.

This guide is intended to help you plan a safe and enjoyable adventure paddling in the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area. Paddling guides for both Tennessee and Kentucky may be purchased at the Bandy Creek and Blue Heron Book Stores. These publications provide additional information on paddling in the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area.

Additional information such as current river conditions, flow rates and available commercial outfitters may be obtained by calling the Bandy Creek Visitor Center at (423) 286-7275 during normal hours of operation.

Be prepared for self-rescue. Sections of the river are very remote and help from others could take several hours. Do not over estimate your skill level.

Beginner: A person without knowledge of basic strokes and maneuvers.

Novice: A person with knowledge of basic strokes and maneuvers such as eddy turns, peel offs, and ferries.

Intermediate: A person able to execute all basic maneuvers and strokes confidently in continuous Class III water.

Advanced: Takes Class III in stride and seeks challenge in Class IV. Can maneuver in Class IV rapids.

In the event of an emergency park rangers may be contacted during the day by calling the Bandy Creek Visitor Center at (423) 286-7275 or after hours by calling any County Sheriff Office. Telephones are located at the Leatherwood Ford river access and the Blue Heron Mining Community.

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