

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

Visitor Experience Stewardship Newsletter

March 2021

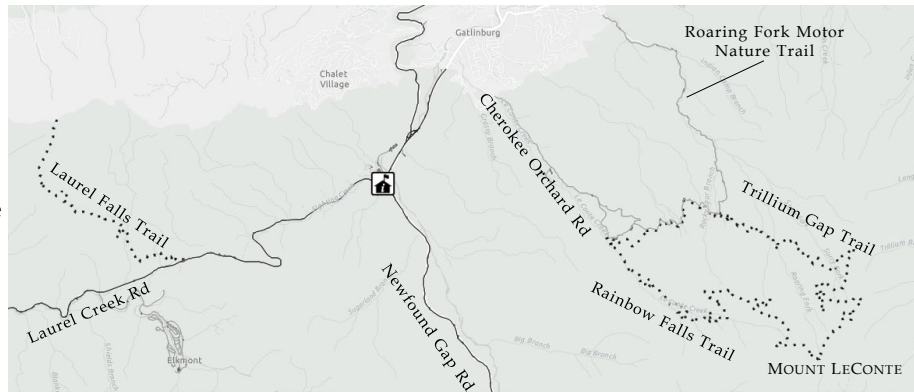


Visitors at Laurel Falls on a Wednesday in January 2021.



Great Smoky Mountains National Park is digging into congestion and crowding issues in the park. Following virtual workshops and online feedback, park managers have assessed the feasibility of implementing various congestion management solutions at some of the most-visited sites in the park. These congestion management solutions have the goal of improving access, improving the visitor experience, and protecting the very resources people flock to the Smokies to experience.

Park managers will test some congestion management strategies during the 2021 calendar year. Managers have selected **Laurel Falls**, **Rainbow Falls** trailhead parking areas as well as **Grotto Falls** parking area to focus on in 2021. These areas are all on the Tennessee side of the park, close to the Gatlinburg entrance.

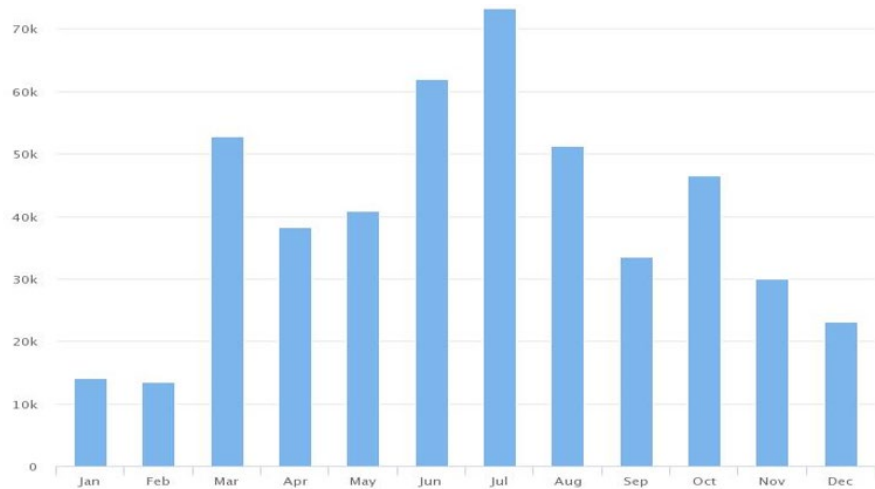


Laurel Falls Trailhead is 3.5 miles from Sugarlands Visitor Center. The 80' waterfall for which the trail is named is about 1.3 miles from the parking lot. The Rainbow Falls trailhead is accessible from Cherokee Orchard Rd. The falls are about 2.7 miles from the parking lot. Grotto Falls, which is accessed via Trillium Gap Trail is also a popular destination in the area. Trillium Gap trailhead can be accessed from the same parking lot as Rainbow Falls but is popularly accessed from its junction with Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, a narrow, winding, 5.5-mile one-way loop road.

Laurel Falls Trail

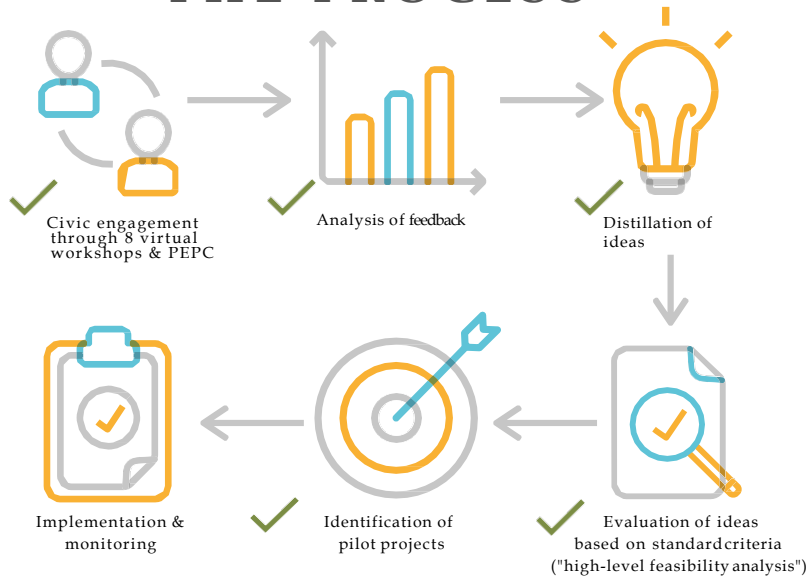
Spotlight on the area

There are over 800 miles of trail in the park, but fewer than 3 miles are paved. Laurel Falls Trail is the longest and most popular of the four paved trails in the park. Laurel Branch and the 80-foot high Laurel Falls are named for mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), an evergreen shrub which blooms along the trail and near the falls in May. The trail experiences fairly consistent, year-round visitation. The trail was originally built to allow fire crews access to the Cove Mountain area. Starting in the 1960s, Laurel Falls became a popular hiking destination and erosion began to take a toll. As part of the 1963 Accelerated Works Projects grant to the Department of Interior, Laurel Falls Trail was reconditioned, graded, and paved to halt the erosion.



Based on visitation data collected from June 2017 through March 2019, monthly averages range from 13,493 to 73,199 people. Average visitation peaks in July, followed by June and March.

THE PROCESS



IDEAL EXPERIENCES

On Laurel Falls, Rainbow Falls, and Trillium Gap trails

Through the recent visitor experience stewardship civic engagement, the park was able to hear from hundreds of individuals and learn about their ideal experiences in the park. The feedback that was provided reflected visitors' recent experiences, experiences from long ago, and even their imagined, ideal experiences. Let's take a look at some of what we heard about Laurel Falls, Rainbow Falls, and Trillium Gap trails.

Ideal Experiences at Laurel Falls Trail

- **Parking is available** in designated spots.
- Visitors experience a **well-ordered flow of foot traffic** to the falls.
- Visitors have **adequate physical space and time to enjoy and perhaps take photographs of the falls.**
- Visitors can **safely travel** from their vehicle to the trail head.
- There is **no litter** around the trailhead or along the trail.



Visitors congregate to view and enjoy Laurel Falls.

Ideal Experiences at Rainbow Falls & Trillium Gap trails

- Visitors find **safe, available parking.**
- The trail is in **good condition and not so crowded so as to have a negative impact on the visitor experience.**
- During certain times of day, days of the week, or seasons (particularly in the winter) visitors are able to experience the trail in **relative solitude.**



Hikers enjoy a summer day on Rainbow Falls trail.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Pilot projects and collection of monitoring data

Park managers have selected the sites – now what? During civic engagement, we heard many different congestion management suggestions from the public. The park assessed some of those strategies and is now in the process of selecting the best scenarios for these sites. The strategies will be designed to reduce congestion and improve access and the visitor experience, but how will park managers measure success?



A volunteer talks with visitors on Laurel Falls Trail.

In 2020, the park piloted a volunteer-driven visitor use monitoring program. About 40 volunteers were recruited and trained for the pilot season. While site-specific issues were taken into consideration, some information was collected across all sites including parked vehicle counts (both inside and outside of the official lots), counts of resource impact behaviors (such as dogs on trails where they are not permitted, litter etc.), and density counts at popular destinations such as Grotto Falls.

The 2020 pilot season yielded over 300 volunteer shifts and some interesting data. For example, we learned that there are sometimes over a hundred vehicles parked along the road shoulders around the Laurel Falls trailhead. The park recruited over a hundred additional volunteers for the 2021 season with the goal of having more consistent coverage across all sites.

The data collected through this effort will allow park managers to understand visitor use patterns and baseline conditions at some of the most congested sites in the park. As the park tests congestion management solutions, volunteers will continue to monitor the impacts of these solutions. These data will be a crucial tool in the work ahead.