

Great Hikes in Tennessee State Parks:

Burgess Falls State Natural Area Offers the Most Waterfalls in the Shortest Distance

By Fran Wallas

In less than two miles, a moderately strenuous hike at Burgess Falls in Sparta has flowers, three waterfalls, overlooks and scenic limestone bluffs.

Burgess Falls became a natural area in 1973 because of the 130-foot waterfall and scenic stream.

As soon as you open your car door, you hear the sound of Falling Water River. The River Trail quickly leads to some cascades and a rock overhang. Although the river is now valued for its scenic beauty, the river was valued in the past as a source of power. In the 1920s, there was a gristmill, sawmill, and powerhouse on this site. You can still see the foundation of the gristmill and an old pipeline bridge that diverted water to the powerhouse.

Cross several beautiful seeps that flow down to the river. There are Foamflowers, Celandine Poppies, and

Dwarf Crested Irises along the way. In less than a quarter mile, you come to the overlook for the first waterfall. Although this is sometimes called "Little Falls," the falls is more than 30 feet high. After taking a few photographs, continue on to the middle falls. This waterfall looks very different from the first one. The cascade spans a wide part of the river and is 70 feet high. As the water cuts down through the rock, you begin a steep climb.

You soon get to the largest waterfall that is shaped like a horseshoe with water cascading off of the sides. There is a trail almost completed to the base of this falls. The trail goes down a metal stairway with 75 steps. Remember that you will have to climb these same steps to get out of the gorge. The spray kicked up from the protruding rocks cools you as you hike down. Once you get to the bottom, you can take off your shoes and



Bill Summers

The butterfly garden at Burgess Falls State Natural Area in Sparta has lots of Black-Eyed Susans and coneflowers.

socks, put your feet in the water, and enjoy the scenery and a snack.

After you climb back to the top, climb a little further on a gravel path turning right onto the Ridge Trail. To complete the loop back, follow the Ridge Trail along the bluff line. There are scenic overlooks of the river far below. The trail curves back to the gravel road. Turn right and follow the road back to the parking lot. You may want to get a butterfly identification book out of your car and walk to the butterfly garden. Look for the Northern Pearly Eye, the Least Skipper, and the Little Glassywing. You can rest, warm up, and enjoy the wildflowers and the butterflies they attract. You may even decide that you are rested enough to take the same hike all over again.

Burgess Falls in Sparta.



Fran Wallas

Directions

Directions to Burgess Falls State Natural Area Trailhead: Take I-40 to exit 286. Go South on Highway 135 for about eight miles. Follow the signs to the park. The River Trail begins at the picnic area parking lot. Brochures on the history and geology of the area and trail maps are available at the kiosk.

Burgess Falls State Natural Area



(Fran Wallas is an avid hiker. She works as an attorney for the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation in Nashville.)