

Great Hikes in Tennessee State Parks:

Frozen Head State Natural Area Offers an Overnight Hike With Scenic Detours

By Fran Wallas

Waterfalls and over 30 species of wildflowers blooming in May and June are among the highlights of a hike on the eight mile loop trail at Frozen Head State Natural Area in Wartburg.

You can do this hike as a strenuous day hike, but backpacking gives you more time to enjoy the beautiful detours. If you are backpacking, stop at the visitor center to fill out a free backcountry permit. Park staff have trail maps and helpful information about wildlife and wildflowers.

When you leave the visitor center, turn right and drive along the park road until it ends at the trailhead parking lot. The Panther Branch trail begins on an old logging road. As you follow the blue blazes, you will see over 30 species of wildflowers that bloom in May and June. Surveys have identified over 144 species of wildflowers in the natural area. There are also waterfalls on both sides of the trail.

The first detour is to DeBord Falls. Follow the loop trail to the overlook and then follow the trail down to the waterfall. This is one of the best places to have a snack and cool your feet.

Further along Panther Branch Trail, you come to a junction. Keep hiking straight ahead to take the half-mile detour to Emory Gap Falls. This waterfall is much steeper than DeBord Falls. Leave time to savor this site. There are enough big rocks for just the right picnic or resting spot. This cove and Panther Branch Cove are the richest in botanical diversity.

A hiker stops at DeBord Falls in Frozen Head State Natural Area in Wartburg.

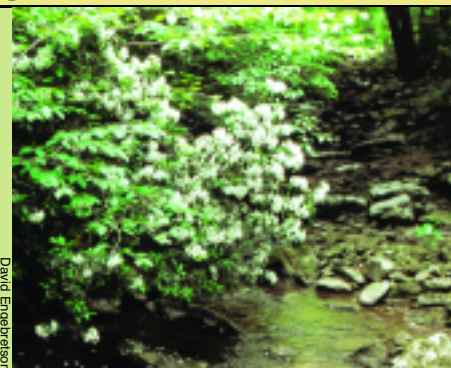


Fran Wallas

When you are ready to continue the hike, take the trail back to the junction, turn left and follow the blue blazes across the bridge. You begin climbing up Old Mac Mountain. Panther Branch runs beside the trail with scenic cascades, drops and pools. The trail winds through the woods and meets North Old Mac Trail. Turn left and follow the red blazes another mile to another logging road.

Just ahead of you, you will see a sign for the Panther Gap Rock House. You probably are ready to rest anyway so take a side trip down to this grand rock house. If you hiked at a leisurely rate, the sun is probably starting to go down. Climb back up to the logging road and turn left up Frozen Head Mountain to the Tubb Springs campsite. The Civilian Conservation Corps built the stone springhouse and fireplace at the campsite in the 1930s. Water is available year round but needs to be filtered or treated. It's a good idea to hang your pack to keep the mice out.

In the morning, you may want to hike to the fire tower. At the time of this article, the tower is closed for repairs, but the tower site has good views of the surrounding area. To return, take the South Old Mac Trail that is blazed in yellow. The trailhead is just across from the Tubbs Spring campsite. You will cross many seeps so be sure to wear waterproof boots and be careful on the slick rocks.



David Engelbrecht

Mountain laurel in bloom at Frozen Head State Natural Area in Wartburg.

When you come to the junction with Judge Branch Trail, don't turn left. Continue straight, following the yellow blazes. The trail ends at another logging road. Turn right and follow the logging road. There are many tempting trails that cut off on the right and left. Keep straight on the road until you come to a parking lot and trailhead restroom—a welcome sight. The restroom has a hot shower. Continue to the paved park road and turn right. You have less than a mile to road hike back to your car.

If you enjoyed the hike, you may want to come back on the third Thursday of each month to help build and maintain the trails. You don't need any experience or special tools, just a love for Frozen Head. For information call 423-346-3318.

Directions

Directions to Frozen Head: From Harriman, take Hwy 27 North to Wartburg. Turn right on Highway 62. Go two miles and turn left on Flat Fork Road. In four miles you will be at the park entrance.

Frozen Head State Park



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