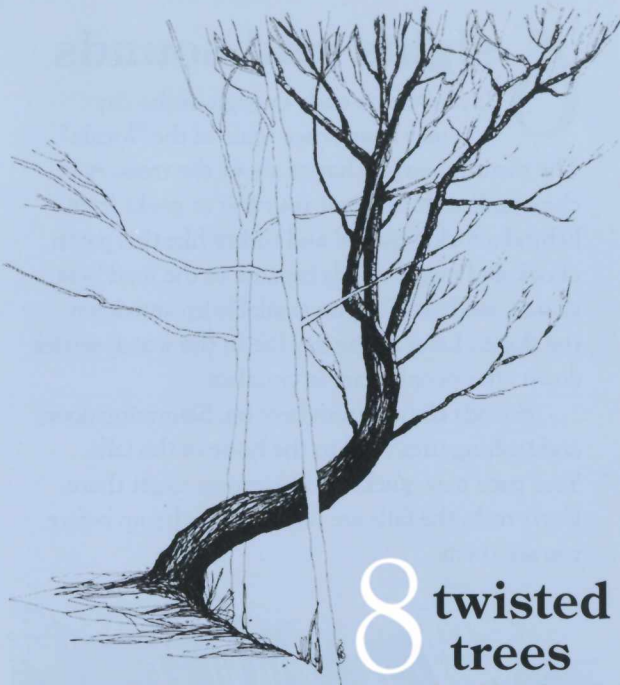




8 twisted trees

Stiff winds twist, prune, bend and break these trees. Even normally straight pines are contorted into odd shapes. The higher up the mountain, the more pronounced this effect. Lightning also works on the trees. Many of them bear stripes and scars from crown to ground, reminders of past run-ins with thunderbolts.

9 persistence

Rock tripe, the scaly lichen on rock faces from here to the falls, has found a way to cope with the harp weather. Being only one-half inch tall, but maybe dozens of years old, it hugs the rock and successfully resists the wind that would tear it loose. During brief wet periods it soaks up whatever moisture it can and then waits out the drought again. The lichen eventually destroys its host by secreting acids that etch the surface of the rock, flaking it loose in microscopic bits and breaking it apart like the freezing water—much more slowly, but no less surely.

10 cliffhanger

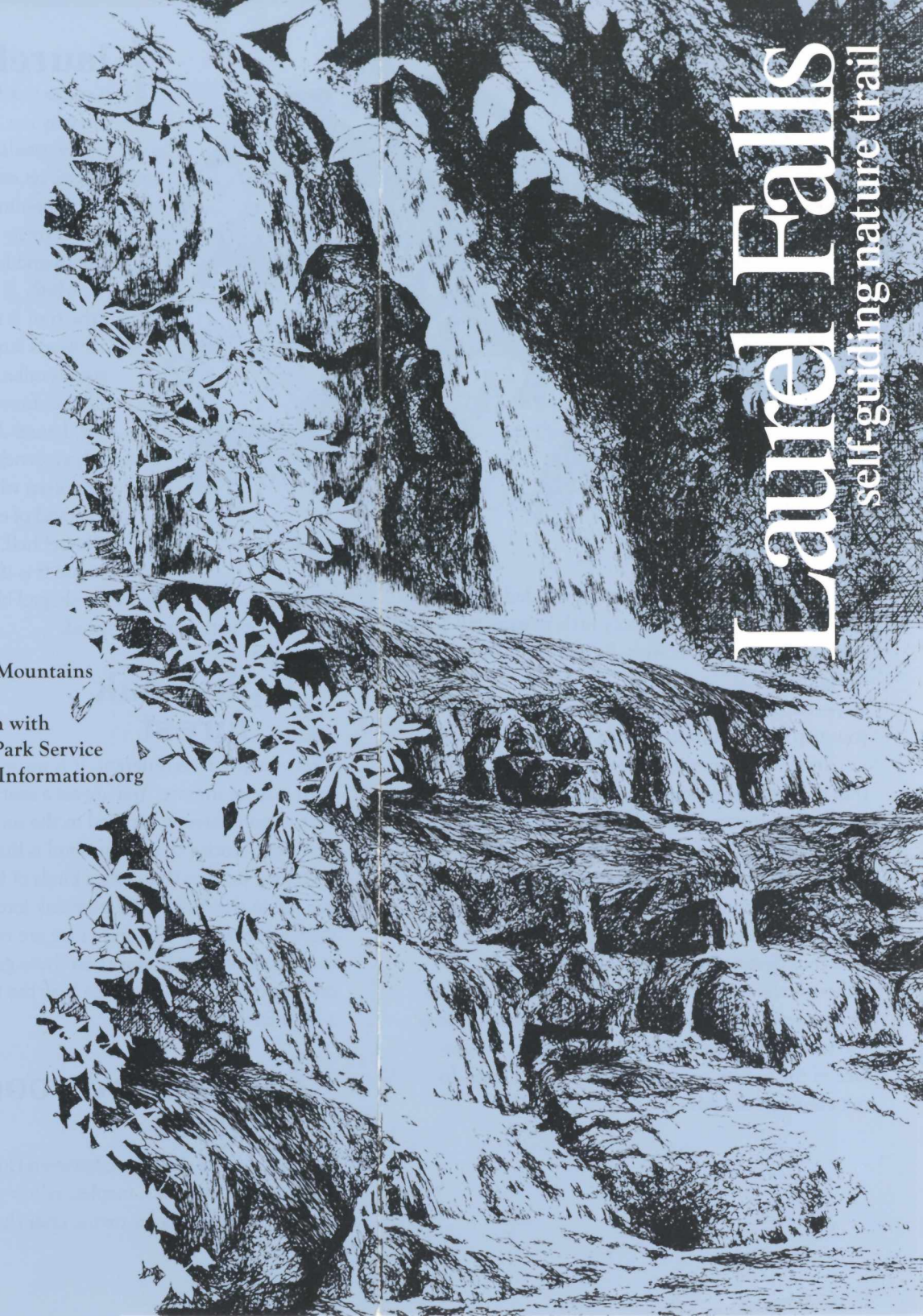
The rest of the trail clings to the mountainside as you walk along a narrow rock ledge to the falls. Sheer drops are long and steep, so be careful. The trees along the way sometimes create a tunnel effect, almost closing completely overhead or considerable stretches. Contrast this mood with the open forest and gentle slopes of the first half of the trail. The ruggedness and steepness of these “gentle” mountains are hidden by vegetation. On maps, or from the air, terrain like this is misleading, so hiking can involve considerably more effort than first thought. Be careful when outlining a hike. Conservation planning will keep you from getting in over your head.

11 laurel falls

Laurel Branch tumbles down from Cove Mountain and eventually becomes part of Little River. It is representative of the hundreds of miles of Smokies streams, whose purity is unexcelled by streams anywhere else in the United States. Their beauty appears in many forms, slow trickles and gurgling branches, to torrents and cascades. The abundance of surface water comes from the heavy annual rainfall of about 55 inches per year. The rocks near the falls are covered with wet, slick algae, and safe footing is impossible to find. Please don't mar their beauty or risk an injury by climbing on them.

Perhaps this trail has been your introduction to the mountains wilderness. It is short, not very steep, and barely stretches beyond the sounds of the highway, but maybe that is sufficient for your tastes and physical condition. If you would like greater challenges and more solitude, they are here, too. For example, this trail will take you to a majestic virgin hardwood forest about a half-mile beyond Laurel Falls. The trail is steeper, rougher and is not paved, but seeing the big trees is worth the effort.

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Laurel Falls

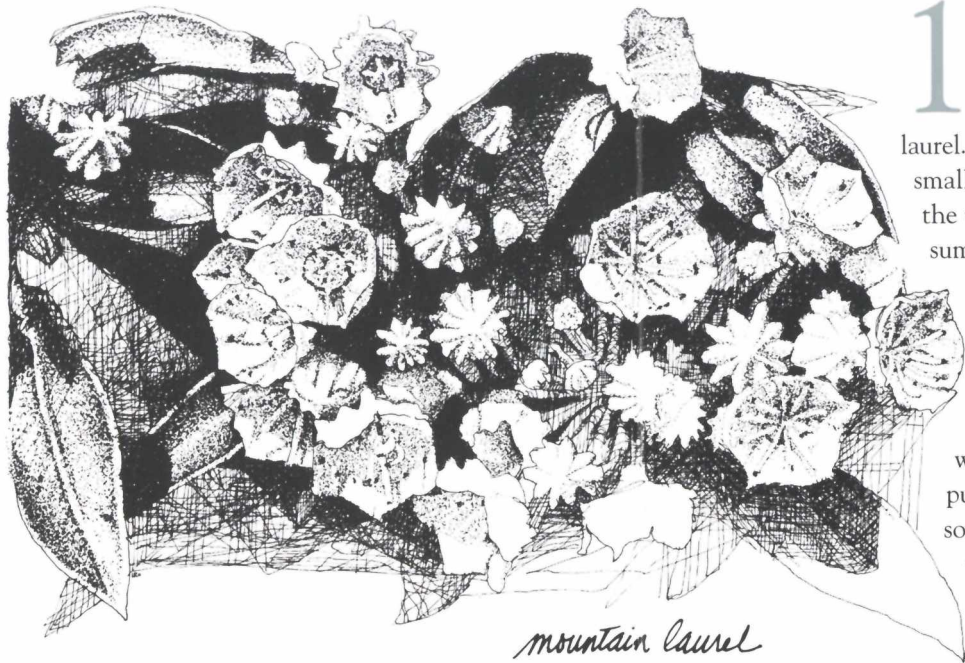
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mountain laurel

There's variety along this trail; wooded ridges; cool, damp ravines; a cozy little stream; fall color and spring wildflowers. Be alert to little things along the way—nature's sounds and aromas that will make your trip special. Linger a while and enjoy the walk.

In all seasons except the dead of winter the trail carries a large amount of traffic, so it is paved to prevent erosion. The wilderness can withstand vicious winters, summer drought, and all other punches the Nature throws, but not the simple trampling of human feet. Please, stay on the trail and do not shortcut.

Your destination is probably Laurel Falls, although the trail continues for another three miles to the crest of Cove Mountain. Enjoy the falls. Keep the memory of their music, the cool spray on your face of the beauty of frozen spires of ice. Please do not climb on the falls!

1 laurel

If you're not from the hills, you may not know the laurel. It's the smaller bush with small leaves, on either side of the trail. Blooming in the early summer, it turns large patches of woods and hillsides to pink or white. A few yards up the trail is rhododendron. It wears larger leaves, stands taller, and flowers with hues from white to purple. Laurel does well on dry soil; rhododendron appears more often where it is damp. A stand of either is called a "laurel hell," because that's what it is if you are trying

to get through it. The wedge-shaped black bear glides through it with ease and speed.

2 pine-oak forest

This area just feels different. It is warmer, drier and light is more intense. You are on a south-facing slope that is more directly exposed to the sun. Pines do well here. Notice that the ground is littered more with pine needles than other kinds of leaves. In fact, you are in the middle of a pine-oak forest, with a few maples thrown in. The trees here are more adapted to the warmer conditions than those growing in the ravine on up the trail. Notice how the forest changes a little farther along.

3 cove hardwood forest

Can you tell the difference between this area and the last one? The oaks, maples, yellow-poplars and dogwoods in this cooler ravine offer shade that makes

it a little more pleasant in the summer. The leaves of the trees are colorful in the fall, but their dense canopy also blocks sunlight from the forest floor, so the groundcover tends to be sparse.

As you continue up the trail, notice the change in surroundings as you switch from ridge to ravine, and back to ridge again all the way to the falls. The direction the slope faces determines what lives there. You really don't need to be able to identify all of the plants in the different communities. You can feel the difference!

4 rocks

If you're a bit winded by now, have a seat on the rocks. These rocks stand on edge because on internal earth pressures that jammed colliding layers of rocks and soil together. The only way they could go was up. The rocks will be here for a few more millions of years, until freezing water cracks and crumbles them. How does that happen? The answer is in your refrigerator. When you fill an ice tray the surface of the water is level. In a few hours it freezes, expands and forms dome-topped ice cubes. Water in the small cracks in the rock has no place to go, so it splits the rock apart.

In a word, that's one of the ways these mountains were formed and how they're being torn down.

5 water

This stream is typical of the unnumbered thousands in the southern mountains. It does an important job. Moisture-loving plants thrive along its banks (hemlock, beech, and rhododendron). Animals drink from its flow. It contributes to the rivers far below. Even in the driest of weather this one still runs; during spring floods it gushes about in all directions.

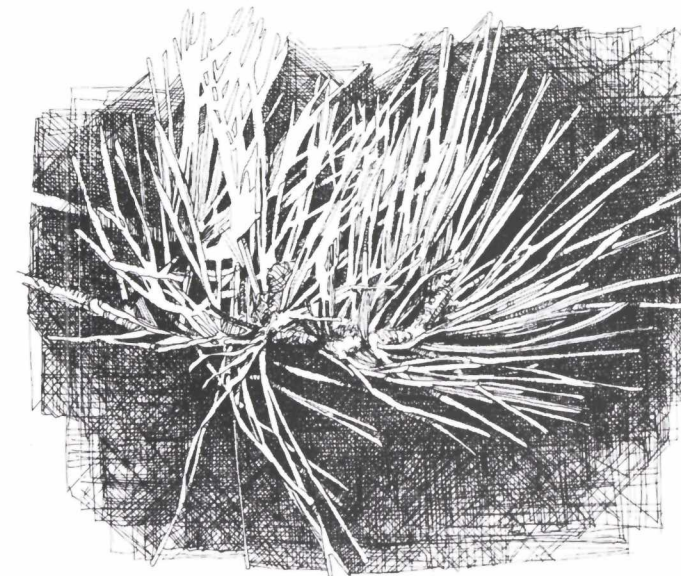
This is a restful place anytime of year; shady in summer, sunny in winter. Nature's little coves and sheltered places are often more satisfying than her more majestic extravaganzas.

6 sights and sounds

If you're here early enough in the day you may hear or see some of the "locals."

The plentiful crows chatter above the trees. A chipmunk scampers past your feet or peeks from behind a rock. Squirrel and turkey like this patch of oak and maple woods because of the food here: acorns, seeds and berries available up and down the slopes. Later in the day life in the woods settles down after people start to circulate.

Sounds change from here on. Slamming doors and rushing tires yield to the noise of the falls. Your pace may quicken in eagerness to get there. Don't rush; the falls are not likely to dry up before you see them.



pitch pine

7 picture window

What is there to say about such a view? Spring wildflowers, fall color, icy beauty in winter and lush green in summer. It has everything. Your bench in this little amphitheater is a choice seat for Nature's displays and a place you'll not want to leave. When posing for photos don't back off the edge!