

Leaf season always bright in Highlands

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If you're lucky enough to be in Highlands you're lucky enough. Or so the saying goes. And at no time during the year is the old saw more appropriate than during the Fall Leaf Season. Just drive up the Gorge Road (Hwy 64) from Franklin to Highlands, and the beauty is breathtaking.

Actually, you can go anywhere in Highlands and witness the brilliance of nature's splash of reds, yellows and oranges. Hillrie Quinn, who heads up the Highlands Plateau Greenway effort, says, "Leaf Season is just what it says — a season. It's not just a day, not even a week, but a season. I like to study trees by species. For example, why is one poplar a brilliant yellow and another mixture of yellow and green? After the leaves are gone, I study the bark, the texture. And if you remember the species from when there were leaves, you can learn to identify them from the bark. I love trees. That's why I live in Highlands."



Sunset Rock

Quinn does have his favorites even though you can see beautiful trees anywhere in Highlands. He says, "My favorite red oak is on Cheney Lane. It's an old tree that's beginning to rot. It's got a lot of character. I just love that tree. My favorite maple is on Buck Creek Road about four or five miles down from the Cashiers Highway. And my favorite poplar is off of Rich Gap Road.

"The more you learn, the more you know, the better you can understand about trees. And you can grow to love them too," Quinn says.

As long as you're taking the time to look, you ought to take in some of Highlands and the surrounding area's fantastic sights as well.

- You could begin with a stop at Dry Falls on your drive up Highway 64 from Franklin. Approximately 16.5 miles from Franklin and 3.5 miles west of Highlands, this 75 foot falls recently reopened after being closed for over two years for renovations. A new parking lot makes entering and exiting easier for vehicles and increases the space for visitors. The recently constructed observation deck adjacent to the parking lot provides a wonderful view for those unable to walk down to the bottom of the falls. For those who are able, walking underneath the falls is not only exciting but can be accomplished without getting wet—thus the name of the falls.
- Travel another mile to within 2.5 miles of Highlands to see Bridal Veil Falls. While you can observe this 120 foot falls from the highway, a pulloff— which was once part of the original Highway 64—allows you to actually drive under the falls.
- One of Highlands' favorite sites, and arguably its most famous, is Whiteside Mountain. From downtown, take Highway 64 East 6.6 miles toward Cashiers. Turn right on Whiteside Mountain Road and travel one mile. The trailhead and parking lot will be on your left. While there is ample parking, visitors should know that there is a \$2 per vehicle U.S. Forest Service fee.

This is a 2-mile loop round trip hike that can be taken either clockwise (easier) or counter-clockwise. The mountain summit is a ridge with several overlooks to the south with spectacular views of the Blue Ridge and to the north and east with equally spectacular views of ridges and mountains as well as Cashiers and Whiteside Cove. Hikers will enjoy the beautiful trees in all directions.

If you want to know more about this magnificent mountain, "The Mountain at the End of the Trail—A history of Whiteside Mountain" by Robert Zahner is an excellent source.

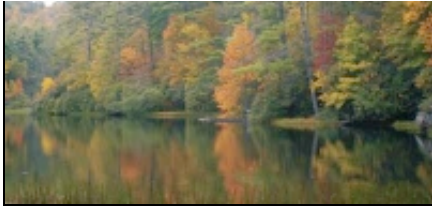
- Another trek you won't want to miss is the hike up to Sunset Rock. From its peak, you not only get a gorgeous view of colorful trees but a great look at downtown Highlands from above. From downtown Highlands, drive out Horse Cove Road approximately 0.5 miles and park adjacent to the trailhead across the road from the Highlands Nature Center. The distance is only 1.2 miles round trip. From the turnaround at the summit, take the right trail to Sunset Rock.

Once you've viewed the leaves and downtown Highlands from this excellent vantage point, you can take a narrow trail heading east or to the left to Sunrise Rock for a good view of Horse Cove. Here, the panoramic view of leaves may be even more spectacular than that from Sunset Rock.

- About a mile west of Dry Falls on the Gorge Road (Highway 64)—4.5 miles from downtown Highlands—is the entrance to Cliffside Lake Recreation area. Some of the most colorful trees can be seen as you hike the 1.5 miles up to a gazebo and vista overlooking the lake. For a shorter and more level trail, you can walk around the lake and enjoy just as much color.



A small sand beach leads to a swimming area (for summertime visitors) where the water is always cold. Picnic sites are available as well as nearby camping sites at the Van Hook Campground. Parking at this venue is \$4 per vehicle.



Cliffside Lake

- Another favorite site that provides plenty of color is the Old Iron Bridge and Chattooga River Loop. From Highlands take Horse Cove Road for 4.5 miles to the intersection with Bull Pen and Whiteside Cove Roads. Turn right onto Bull Pen Road and proceed for 3.1 miles to the Iron Bridge. The trailhead is to the left just before the bridge.

The hike is a 2-mile loop that travels upriver for some distance before switching back to the left and returning through a hemlock forest to a campsite slightly higher up than the parking area on Bull Pen Road. Some prefer not to make the loop, but to just return by the river. The leaves are most colorful along the riverbank. For the more aggressive hiker, you can continue to follow the Chattooga River Trail upriver. This is a more strenuous hike with many water

crossings—6.25 miles total.

- While there is currently no dedicated public parking, a walk from downtown Highlands to Satulah Mountain rewards the hiker with beautiful views. The total distance from town is approximately 3.5 miles with a 700-ft elevation gain. Follow Satulah Road to its intersection with Worley Road—0.3 miles. Bear right on the road until it turns into a graveled lane. Go to the end of the lane and follow the trail at left to the summit. You'll experience several nice views from granite outcrops. About half of this hike is on a paved road, skirting private properties. Public hiking access to the top is guaranteed under covenants with the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust.

- The highest falls in eastern America is Whitewater Falls at 422 feet. From Highlands take Highway 64 East to the lighted intersection in Cashiers. Turn left onto Highway 107 South for nine miles to the South Carolina border. After approximately two more miles, at an intersection with a sign reading "to SC 130" and "Whitewater Falls 3 Mi" turn left. After about two miles, turn left at the next intersection. Within a mile you will see the Whitewater Falls parking lot on your right. A short 0.5-mile hike up the paved trail leads you to the observation post for the falls. You won't be disappointed.

If you're in Highlands next weekend, you can also attend the annual Fall Colors Fine Art Show that takes place Oct. 21 and 22 at the Highlands Recreation Park. The show includes a variety of art including paintings, jewelry, pottery and photography.

In addition, a special children's area will be set up to entertain young artists. The show is sponsored by the Art League of Highlands.

If you've traveled to Highlands from Franklin to have a look at the beautiful trees with their magnificent colors, you might consider returning by way of Buck Creek Road. You might just be lucky enough to get a glimpse of Hillrie Quinn's favorite maple.

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