

Quiet-side first-timer checklist

Great Smoky Mountains · Tennessee quiet side

Park facts checked **Oct 31, 2026**
against NPS.gov & Recreation.gov.
Rules change — recheck before you go.
Sources: page 2.

1 Before you go: parking tag

- ☐ A parking tag is required for any vehicle parked longer than 15 minutes, anywhere inside the park. Tags aren't tied to one location. [A]

\$5 Daily	\$15 Weekly	\$40 Annual
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- ☐ Display a **physical** tag. Digital copies aren't accepted. The license plate on the tag has to match the car. [A]
- ☐ Buying online? Daily and weekly tags are sold on Recreation.gov. **Print it yourself**, because park staff won't print it for you. [A][B]
- ☐ Rental car: wait until you know the plate, then buy at a tag machine or in person. [A]
- ☐ America the Beautiful passes (Senior, Access, Military) **don't** replace the parking tag. [A]
- ☐ A tag doesn't guarantee you a parking spot. [A]

Quiet-side places to buy a tag (NPS list): Great Smokies Welcome Center (Townsend) · Cades Cove Visitor Center · GSM Institute at Tremont Store. **Tag machines** (credit card, no tap-to-pay): Townsend Wye · Cades Cove Orientation Shelter · Look Rock Campground · Metcalf Bottoms Picnic Area. [A]

3 Pack for a day hike

NPS "Ten Essentials" are the minimum for any outing: [F]

- ☐ Navigation: map, compass, GPS
- ☐ Sun protection: sunglasses, sunscreen, hat
- ☐ Insulation: jacket, hat, gloves, layers, rain gear
- ☐ Light: headlamp or flashlight (your phone doesn't count)
- ☐ First-aid kit, with supplies that haven't expired
- ☐ Fire: matches, lighter, fire starter
- ☐ Repair kit and tools: duct tape, knife
- ☐ Food that doesn't need cooking
- ☐ Water + treatment: at least 1 liter per 2 hours of hiking
- ☐ Emergency shelter: space blanket, tarp, or bivy

Offline first: NPS says cell coverage in the park is very limited and that GPS apps can send you the wrong way. Download maps or the NPS app before you leave town. [D]

2 Get oriented: quiet-side names

Townsend	Gateway town on the Tennessee side. The Great Smokies Welcome Center is at 7929 E. Lamar Alexander Pkwy. [A]
Little River	USGS posts live flow and height for Little River near Townsend from the park's conditions page. [E]
Cades Cove	11-mile one-way loop road, open sunrise to sunset. Closed to vehicles on Wednesdays, typically May through September. NPS suggests allowing at least 2–4 hours. [C]
Foothills Pkwy West	Walland to Wears Valley: 14.75 mi. Chilhowee to Walland: 16.6 mi. [C]

First-day order, built from NPS facilities

- That morning, check closures & conditions. [E]
- Tag first:** Great Smokies Welcome Center (Townsend) or the Townsend Wye machine (card only). [A]
- Map:** download the GPS-enabled park map or NPS app before you go, or pick up a free paper map at a visitor center. [D][H]
- Cades Cove:** the loop opens at sunrise. Get the tour booklet at the loop entrance. Cable Mill, near the midpoint, is open daily 9–5 through Nov 29, 2026. [C][O]

4 Bear country & Leave No Trace

- ☐ Don't approach within **50 yards** of a bear, or any distance that disturbs it. That's federal law in the park. [G]
- ☐ If a bear changes what it's doing because of you, you're too close. Back away slowly while facing it. Never run. [G]
- ☐ Never feed wildlife. Put trash in bear-proof containers or pack it out. [G]
- ☐ Lock your car. Bears can open car doors. [G]
- ☐ Dogs aren't allowed on most park trails. [G]
- ☐ Check Bear Closures and Bear Warnings before you hike. [G]
- ☐ Follow the seven Leave No Trace principles. [F]

Report a bear acting unnaturally: (865) 436-1230. Emergencies: 911. [G]

Wet day or full lot: have a Plan B

Lots fill up, so NPS says to plan two or more options. [I] After rain, expect swollen streams, washed-out bridges, and downed trees. [F] Swimming isn't recommended, since drowning is a leading cause of death in the park. [H] Weather up high can differ from down low. [E]

Local notes & sources

Practical notes taken only from official park pages. Each one is tagged to its source below. Checked **Oct 31, 2026**

5 Quiet-side notes (from official park pages)

Pull-offs: where to stop

- Stop only in a designated pull-off where your whole car fits off the road. If you spot wildlife, stay in the car. [\[H\]](#)
- In Cades Cove, use the paved pullouts to stop for scenery or wildlife. [\[C\]](#)
- Most park roads have a pullout about every mile. Driving slowly? Pull out and let others pass. [\[I\]](#)
- Skip no-parking zones and any spot that isn't built for parking. [\[N\]](#)

When it's quieter

- Park traffic usually peaks **9 a.m.–2 p.m.**, and most visitors arrive around 10–11 a.m. In busy seasons NPS suggests getting in by 8 a.m. or around 3 p.m. [\[H\]](#)[\[I\]](#)
- For parking, NPS points to cooler months, mid-week, and early mornings or late afternoons. [\[N\]](#)
- Cades Cove traffic is heavy in summer, in fall, and on weekends year-round. [\[C\]](#)
- Check the NPS congestion forecast (green, yellow, or red days) before you pick a date. [\[I\]](#)
- Cades Cove Loop is closed to cars on Wednesdays (May 6–Sept 30 in 2026) for walkers and cyclists. You still need a tag to park. [\[M\]](#)

Gas, groceries & food

- There are no gas stations, hotels, or restaurants in the park. Full services are in Townsend (and in Gatlinburg and Cherokee). Fill up and pack food before you head in. [\[H\]](#)[\[I\]](#)
- Inside the park, there's a seasonal camp store near Cades Cove Campground. [\[H\]](#)[\[M\]](#)
- Quiet-side picnic areas: Cades Cove, Metcalf Bottoms, Look Rock. Cades Cove and Metcalf Bottoms are open year-round. [\[H\]](#)[\[E\]](#)

Easy first walk: Lynn Camp Prong Cascades

It's **1.4 mi round trip** on the Middle Prong Trail near Tremont. NPS describes it as mostly wide and flat, with a gentle climb along an old railroad bed, and a few narrow spots where washouts have happened. The trailhead is at the end of Upper Tremont Road (unpaved). The nearest restroom is the Welcome Center in Townsend. No pets. Bring your tag. [\[J\]](#) Middle Prong is also on NPS's list of quieter hikes. [\[I\]](#) A short trail isn't always an easy one, so turn back if it feels like too much. [\[F\]](#)

Where to stay: base notes

- The park has no motels or rental cabins (except LeConte Lodge, which you can only hike to). Lodging is in the surrounding towns, and NPS staff can't recommend specific places. [\[K\]](#)
- The park has 10 campgrounds, and all of them need a reservation (Recreation.gov or 877-444-6777). Cades Cove Campground is open year-round. [\[H\]](#)[\[L\]](#)
- No showers in any park campground. Look Rock is the only one with hookups. If you're parked at your own campsite, you don't need a tag there. [\[L\]](#)



Townsend Wye Bridge, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, 1996. Photo: David Haas, Historic American Engineering Record, Library of Congress (HAER TN-35-C-19, public domain). Conditions today may differ.

6 Sources (all checked Oct 31, 2026)

A nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/fees.htm
Tag rules, fees, sales points, machines

B recreation.gov/activitypass/AP2510
Online daily or weekly tag that you print yourself

C nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/cadescove.htm
Cades Cove loop, hours, traffic, pullouts, booklet, Foothills Pkwy

D nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/maps.htm
Park maps, cell coverage, NPS app offline

E nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/conditions.htm
Closures, river gage, weather, visitor center & picnic seasons

F nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/hiking.htm
Ten Essentials, trail hazards, Leave No Trace

G nps.gov/grsm/learn/nature/black-bears.htm
Bear rules and report line

H nps.gov/grsm/faqs.htm
Peak hours, services, cell, swimming, pull-offs, picnic, camping

I nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/trafficandtraveltips.htm
Arrival times, forecast, Plan B, quieter hikes, pullouts, gas

J nps.gov/thingstodo/hike-to-lynn-camp-prong-cascades.htm
Lynn Camp Prong Cascades walk

K nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/lodging.htm
No lodging in park except LeConte Lodge

L nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/frontcountry-camping.htm
Campgrounds, showers, hookups, tag at campsite

M nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/cades-cove-vehicle-free-days.htm
2026 vehicle-free Wednesdays, camp store

N nps.gov/grsm/learn/management/park-safely.htm
When to find parking, where not to park

O nps.gov/grsm/planyourvisit/visitorcenters.htm
Cable Mill dates and hours

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