

Oconaluftee River

At a Glance

Sam's Rank: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

GPS Fixes: This mouth fix below is not the official “*mouth*” – that’s about twelve miles downstream on the Tuckasegee River. The fix below is about 2.6 miles north of Cherokee at MP 469 on the Parkway. The *source fix* below is the actual undisputed source of the river:

- Source fix: N35 35.274 W83 21.742 @ 2,800’
- Mouth fix: N35 30.362 W83 18.009 @ 2,020’

Size: large at mouth

Gradient: flat 1.8% source to mouth average (8.2 miles / 780’)

Effort: lower section - easy / upper section - difficult

Pressure: lower section - moderate / upper section - slight

Fishing Quality: both sections - good to excellent

Species: Rainbows, Brooks, Browns, Goldens

Access: US 441 / Newfound Gap Road parallels the Oconaluftee along the 8.2 miles from mouth to source – within five to twenty yards in most places. There are plenty of pullouts, side roads and parking all the way up. Along lower elevations below Smokemont, access is easy. But as you gain elevation, getting to river level requires some hand over hand descent and / or bushwhacking. In these cases, you might reread the chapter entitled *Cautions & Precautions* to avoid becoming a statistic or the subject of a late night campfire story with a bad ending.

Overview & Description

There’s a certain irony in the fact that the Oconaluftee River, one of the few really large rivers actually crossing the Parkway along its 469 mile route, is the first river in this North Carolina edition. There’s irony in that it’s also one of my favorite places to fish on the Parkway. Whether it’s an “*assisted living*” step out of the car and into the river – or a “*high-octane*” backcountry style that flicks your switch, there’s something for everyone. It has every water type and trout species this guide covers. I like that variety, along with its extremely rich history. What follows is my description of this great watershed.

According to local tribesmen, *Oconaluftee* comes from a Cherokee root word *Egwanulti*, meaning “*by the river.*” Its waters were sacred. Cherokees were the dominant Native American tribe in the area and were primarily farmers and gatherers. During the infamous period of the 1840s when Cherokees were being removed from the area (*an event known as the “Trail of Tears”*) a small band of Cherokees refused to leave and hid in an area that’s now called the Smokies. Survivors eventually returned and found a way legally to acquire their land. The area became the *Qualla Reservation* – known today as “*Cherokee.*” This story could go on – but let’s get back to the river and fishing.

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The Oconaluftee sections included here are entirely contained in Great Smoky Mountains National Park (*GSMNP, Smokies or Park*), save a few miles of Raven Fork in the Qualla Reservation. The Smokies encompass 800 square miles / 512,000 acres of which 95% is forested in second growth timber and some old growth timber. There are over 2,115 miles of streams and 750 of those support trout. Many are accessed by pulling off the road – but a good many of the best ones require hiking and / or bushwhacking.

The Park is world renowned for its diversity of flora and fauna and is one of the more biologically diverse areas in the US. In 1976 it was designated an *International Biosphere Reserve*. More species of trees grow in the Park than all of Northern Europe, an area 1,000 times larger. The Park has over 100,000 acres of old growth forest. As far its fauna, it's not uncommon to see elk, deer, turkeys, black bear, groundhogs, etc. while fishing. Elk are spotted frequently during the rutting season along the lower Raven Fork and Oconaluftee Visitor Center area.

Aside from the Cherokee's influence and history, it's also home to many other historical happenings and places – many to be discussed in the watershed segments in which they occur. These include places like the Civilian Conservation Corps (*CCC*) and Work Progress Administration (*W.P.A.*) Camps, decommissioned fish hatcheries, working grist mills, abandoned settler farmsteads and saw mill towns, and cemeteries as well as road, trail and bridge construction projects, etc., etc. The area's history can enhance your experience if you pay attention to it – the past is all around you.

The river's main run is considered large by Smokies' standards and is classic freestone trout water. Along with its tributaries, it constitutes one of the best, if not *THE* best, trout habitats in the Smokies. Its gentle gradient creates a steady flow rate that's not too turbulent in periods of normal precipitation. The flow types are mostly riffles, long slow runs and a variety of pools and drop pools. The headwaters are a different story.

The Oconaluftee comes to life as the result of *Beech Flats Prong* and *Kephart Prong* - two high elevation streams that ramble down the Smokies' south slope and converge. Both start as seeps and descend at steep gradients while picking up feeders that transform them into streams when they converge at 2,800'. That convergence is where the Oconaluftee officially comes to life and is about 8.2 miles north of the Parkway – a few yards east of US 441 / Newfound Gap Road.

From its source, the river's *Upper Section* loses elevation in the first 3.9 miles at a flat 2.8% gradient. Along there it's still small and shrouded in a thick canopy. Boulders form large pockets with deep holes and sections of shallow and deep runs and riffles combine to create good feeding and holding lanes. As it continues southward, it gains added flow from *Collins Creek* and *Bradley Fork* – Bradley being the larger. At the bottom of the *Upper Section*, the river has grown larger

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The Oconaluftee River flowing under the Parkway at MP 469 and continuing down into Cherokee and beyond. / Image by Author / 2015

and has cut a wide valley between *Richland Mountain* to the east and *Thomas Ridge* to the west. Upon reaching *Bradley Fork*, the river becomes a large stream.

Below *Bradley Fork* the river continues into what I consider its *Lower Section*. From there it flows at a flat 1% gradient for about 4.3 miles to its mouth at 2,020' at the Parkway. Along the way it gathers water from *Mingus* and *Couches Creeks* and finally *Raven Fork*, its largest contributor enters just above the Parkway. This section has spread out and created a huge mountain meadow – where deer, elk and turkey are common. This section's mild gradient, soft flowing water and open canopy offer easy casting and wading. The *Lower Section* ends at the Parkway.

Below the Parkway the river assumes another personality. Aside from entering civilization, it's now a full-fledged river, entering the *Qualla Indian Reservation* and then on into *Cherokee* some three miles down. Approaching Cherokee you will see several fishable streams - *Lambert Branch* and *Owl Branch*. They're fishable and if you want to try them, knock yourself out. I never have.

From Cherokee, the river continues another 10 miles until it converges with the *Tuckasegee River*, (better known as the "Tuck") just east of *Bryson City, NC*. Just beyond Bryson the river enters Fontana Lake.

Moving upstream from the mouth at the Parkway, the *Lower Section* up to *Bradley Fork* is large, has open canopies and sides, flat gradients - and larger trout! There are lots of places for big browns and rainbows to hide in the undercut banks, roots balls and rocks that provide cover. Distance casting is much easier – including roll casts.

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Up the *Lower Section* .5 miles, *Raven Fork* enters river right, at 1.2 miles *Mingus Creek* enters river left, and about 2.5 *Couches Creek* enters river left – all very fishable. In my opinion, this stretch of the *Lower Section* is the most overlooked stretch of the river - probably because most anglers drive along US 441 looking for more scenic and secluded water. Also, the highly stocked waters in the Qualla Reservation draw attention away from this section of the river in the Park. That's just my opinion.

The *Upper Section* starts with *Bradley Fork* entering river right at about 4.3 miles above the Parkway. Here the river begins to get much smaller, gradients steeper, canopies tighter, and the trout smaller. This section has lots of runs, riffles and pools and a canopy and sides of dense foliage. You will find yourself bushwhacking your way up the stream while using short casts and even “*sling shotting*” for good presentations to the trout hiding underneath all those *Rhododendrons*. At 5.9 miles up, *Collins Creek* enters river left – also fishable. At 8.3 miles you reach the mouth at the confluence of the headwater flows *Beech Flats Prong* and *Kephart Prong*. This section is full of trout and is fun to fish.

As for trout populations along the main flow, the Oconaluftee is known for robust brown trout populations in the *Lower Section* – often yielding Typhoon Class specimens in the 18” – 24” range. In fact, as of this writing, it holds the NC record for a brown - weighing in at 15.9 lbs. Nonetheless, rainbows are the primary inhabitants throughout the watershed, with some in the 6” to 14” range - all the way into many headwaters. The Park's efforts to restore brookies now has them prospering in many high elevations. Most of these tend to be in the 4” - 6” range with some surprisingly larger.

The Oconaluftee's distribution of trout is like all mountain watersheds. As source water leaves the higher elevations and starts descending, changes in gradient and flow channels combine with changes in water chemistry, substrate composition and temperatures to effect the distribution of trout. In the lower section's big water, especially below the Parkway and *Raven Fork's* trophy section, trout are large and smart due to pressure. These fish see a lot of fake bugs, and many are hair-lipped from being caught so many times. This makes fly selection and presentation more difficult. Conversely, in the upper section's smaller waters, where there's less pressure, trout aren't as spooked or selective and are eager to eat the standard fare of caddis flies and bead heads. I've had as many as four missed takes on the same caddis, by the same trout, in the same pool, before I finally caught it. Whether that speaks of my persistence and / or poor skills, or perhaps how hungry and desperate that poor trout was, I can't say for sure. But it was probably the latter!

In concert with healthy trout populations, the river also boasts some of the best insect populations in the Park – over 100 species in most streams. In the Park's slightly acidic waters, mayflies, caddis and stoneflies are important aquatic food

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chain players. This results in some good hatches and is the key reason for a thriving trout population - even in these wild, non-stocked waters. Even so, I rarely fish with more than three to five different bugs – wet or dry. In the upper sections, as with most Appalachian streams, the fish just seem to be hungry most of the time, and one of my standard imitators will most likely fool them. For the lower sections where fish are more selective, I always check with a local outfitter and ask what the “*sure fire*” bug selection is for the section I’m fishing.

As a heads up, the *Cherokee Fisheries & Wildlife Management* does stock the section of the Oconaluftee beginning at Raven Fork where it enters just above the Parkway and downstream into Cherokee. In fact, it’s some of the heaviest stocked waters in all of the Southeastern US. At last count, I understood yearly stocking to be in the 300,000 - 500,000 range. Brook, brown, rainbow and golden are stocked in the section below the Parkway into Cherokee, as well as in the trophy section of Raven Fork - *more detail in the Raven Fork Chapter*. Some other easily accessible streams on the Reservation are also stocked. Special Qualla Cherokee Reservation permits are required for *ALL* waters within its boundary. Be sure to check the regulations specific to the waters you plan to fish.

As I understand it, Park waters don’t get stocked, but there are plenty of wild trout throughout the Oconaluftee watershed. And, there are some larger stockers that escape the reservation waters up the Oconaluftee and its tributaries waters.

Oconaluftee Tributaries

Beech Flats Prong

One of Two Oconaluftee Headwaters

At a Glance

Sam’s Rank: 👍👍👍

GPS Fixes:

- Source fix: N35 36.422 W83 26.087 @ 4,780 ft.
- Mouth fix: N35 30.362 W83 18.009 @ 2,780 ft.

Size: small at mouth

Gradient: moderate 8.4% source to mouth average (*4.5 miles / 2,000'*)

Effort: moderate to difficult

Pressure: none to slight

Fishing Quality: average to good

Species: Rainbows, Browns & Brooks

Access: About 8.4 miles up US 441 / Newfound Gap Road from the Parkway, Kephart and Beech Flats Prongs converge about 200 ft. off the right side of the road. The road continues, paralleling Beech Flats from its mouth for about 3.2 miles to where the creek goes under US 441 for the first time – right to left. Along

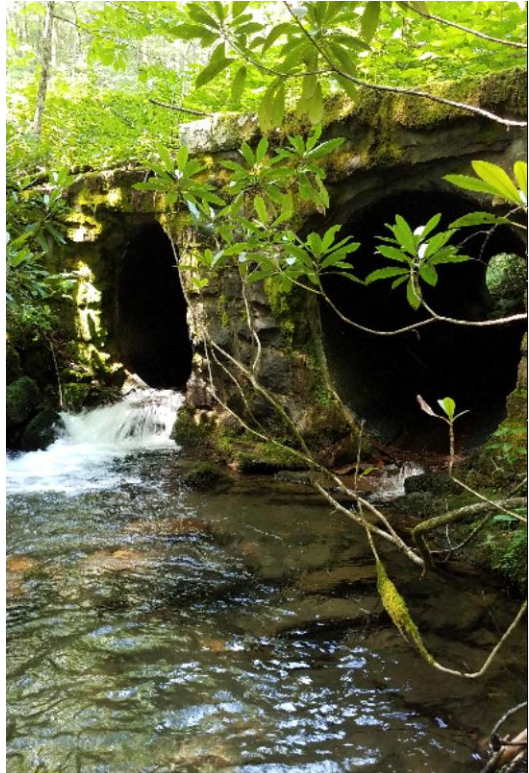
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that stretch the road is about 200' to 400' from the creek, but requires a 100' descent to get to it. Getting to the water can require serious bushwhacking and fancy foot work. There are numerous places to park most of the way up. After the prong goes under the road for the second time – left to right, it starts a 1.2 mile ascent to its source at Luftee Gap. Access to this remote section can be found up US 441 another .3 miles to a NPS trail on the right. This trail parallels the prong all the way up, but getting to it requires a steep hike of about 300' – 500'.

Overview & Description

This prong is a beautiful and rugged little stream and well worth the effort to fish it. With that said, you should know it's not the most productive fishery on the

Oconaluftee due to an unfortunate chain of events that started years ago during the building of US 441 / Newfound Gap Road. As fate would have it, Beech Flats flows through an ancient formation of acid bearing shell called the *Anakeesta Formation*. Over the eons, the stream leached out and sealed the formation making the stream tolerable to aquatic life. As the story goes, early in the 1900s when US 441 was being built, the Anakeesta Formation was blasted into and the stream was re-exposed to a fresh dose of the toxic stuff. This re-exposure once again dramatically changed the pH and damaged the aquatic life. Over time the stream healed to some degree, and the aquatic life adapted. Yet as fate would have it again, a decision was made to widen US 441 some years ago



Beech Flats Prong emerging from under Hwy 441 after leaving its source. / Photo by Author / 2015

and another dose was released. Recovery is ongoing, but the damage is done for our lifetime. You'll catch fish, but just imagine what this fishery would be like if those projects had been thought through and managed more efficiently. This account was confirmed by NPS personnel, some of the locals, as well as writings I've seen. Considering its unfortunate history, Beech actually has a decent population of browns and bows, with a few specs high up.