

State Park - Gorges State Park

Driving Directions: Gorges State Park is located in Sapphire, NC in Transylvania County. Follow Hwy 64 West out of Brevard until you reach Sapphire, turn left on Hwy 281 south. The park entrance is .7 on your left. The Visitor Center is located .5 miles inside the park on Grassy Ridge Road. If you're driving from Asheville take Exit 40 of I-26 and head east on NC 280 through Brevard.

Mileage: 3.0 miles round trip

Hiking Directions: To reach Rainbow Falls, you'll need to hike 1.5 miles from Gorges State Park at the Grassy Ridge Parking Area drive .7 miles after entering the park. You may want to stop at the Visitors Center first. Then drive .2 miles and look for the cluster of information boards at the end of the parking lot. The first section of trail you will hike has a gravel surface. It leads gently uphill at first, but very soon begins descending. From the very beginning, you can hear the roar of the Horsepasture River in the valley far below, which you'll reach in about a mile. The trail winds downhill through a ridge-top forest and intersects an old roadbed just after a hairpin turn. Bear right to continue on the trail.

The old roadbed continues downhill as well, and its surface has also been graveled. It resembles more of an ATV track than a trail at this point. The roar of the river grows louder before fading completely as you dip into a side cove. You'll notice the trail getting a bit steeper before it crosses a small stream. Just past this crossing, the trail passes off of Gorges State Park property and onto National Forest property. It's still called the Rainbow Falls trail (#499).

Once it crosses onto the National Forest – and into the Horsepasture Wild and Scenic corridor- the trail is no longer gravel. The trail descends a bit more steeply to another, larger creek crossing. You'll get your feet wet on this one if the water is up.

At this point you're near the river. Some narrower paths thread through the woods on the left just before the creek – that is the trail to Stairway Falls, which is not part of this hike.

Just past the creek, the trail winds up in a large, flat campsite. Follow the trail through the campsite and out the other side, which will take you to

within a few feet of the river. The trail begins following the river uphill on the right side, where it gets a bit rougher and steeper. At times, the trail is very close to the river; at other times, it climbs uphill a bit further away.

There are several cascades along this stretch of the river, interspersed by deep pools – but nothing like what lies just upstream. The trail will begin a more significant climb before long and that's when you know you're getting close to Rainbow Falls. About ½ mile past the campsite, the trail curves right, into an open area created by mist from the raging cascade. That's where you get your view of the falls, from behind a fence along the trail. There is an observation deck closer to the falls. Return to your vehicle from here to make this 3-mile round trip.

Caution: Waterfalls can be dangerous! Even dry rocks can be slippery. People have died at waterfalls. Choose your actions wisely.

Information

Gorges State Park is located where five streams carry water to the ocean. Their waters plunge over spectacular falls and rush through steep-wall gorges. With such a rugged and contrasting topography contained in a small area, the park includes 21 of the 44 natural community types known in the mountain regions of North Carolina, including 12 endangered or threatened plant and animal species. Conservation studies began in the area in the late 1970's. In 1982, nearly 275 acres of land currently in the park was placed on the N.C. Registry of Natural Heritage Areas because of the numerous rare species. In the late 1990's, Duke Power determined that it is no longer needed portions of Gorges for future hydropower and offered the land for sale to the natural resources agencies in North and South Carolina. With the support of local citizens and the General Assembly, the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation created the first state park west of Asheville.

One of the most damaging interferences to the Gorge environment occurred in 1916 when the dam broke containing Lake Toxaway; the largest private lake in the state. Record amounts of water gushed southward down the river, destroying the communities in its path, scouring

the gorges and leaving piles of debris 15 to 20 feet high. These debris piles still remain.

Gorges State Park opened in 2009 with paved roads, parking areas, trails, primitive campsites and two picnic shelters. The 7,100 square foot, eco-built visitor center includes a lounge equipped with a stone fireplace, top-notch exhibits and gift shop, and a large balcony for enjoying the view. A nature center is packed with displays explaining the history and ecological uniqueness of the park. There are eco friendly features such as the 10,000-gallon rain barrel that captures the plentiful rainfall in the park for reuse. The center runs on passive solar and closed-loop geothermal heating and cooling system. The park is considered “trash free”. While recycling bins are placed around the park, visitors are encourage to carry out their own trash.

The park continues to grow through donations and acquisitions. Currently, park acreage is nearly 8,000 acres. Georges State Park is the spot to park for a hike to the waterfalls on the Horsepasture River.

Rainbow Falls is sometimes cited as being unique in that you can see not only rainbows in the spray, but also moonbows. A moonbow is the same phenomenon as a rainbow, except that light rays from the sun reflect off the moon before refracting and being reflected by water droplets. Actually, moonbows occur at many waterfalls. If you can see a rainbow at a waterfall, you can see a moonbow when the conditions are right.