



WITHOUT A TRACE

Ecotouring in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Steve Claxton patiently explains the fine points of digging a cathole latrine to a group of skeptical 11- and 12-year-olds. It's obvious they hadn't considered this aspect of primitive camping when they signed up for the Summer Adventures Program at Swain County Middle School. Claxton ignores the cringing faces and continues his talk on the use of "Leave No Trace" principles when visiting the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Indeed, this is an amazing natural woodland that's worthy of the special care.

Claxton, a lifelong wilderness enthusiast and resident of Swain County, North Carolina, practices what he preaches. On weekends he takes small groups of hikers, birders and fly-fishers into the park's 800 square miles of pristine Southern Appalachian wilderness. "All of us who live in Swain County know what a treasure we have here," says Claxton, owner of Smoky Mountain Adventures. "That's why we're doing all we can to preserve it."

Amazing Biodiversity. The GSMNP is indeed one-of-a-kind. No other area of equal size in a temperate climate can match the park's astounding diversity of plants, animal and invertebrates. To date, the documented species count is more than 10,000, but scientists estimate an additional 90,000 species may live here! How did this "freak of nature" come to be?

Somehow, the oldest mountains in the world managed to escape the glaciers and oceans that wiped out many plant and animal species in other areas, allowing for amazing biodiversity in the Smokies. It's no wonder the United Nations has designated the park an International Biosphere Reserve. The place is crawling with wildlife!

Welcome to the Neighborhood. So when you pitch your tent in the Smokies, who might your neighbors be? Certainly raccoons, squirrels, hawks, songbirds, brook trout, mushrooms, oaks and wildflowers. You'll likely see black bears and perhaps a few elk—they've been successfully reintroduced after disappearing from the scene decades ago. Overall, the numbers are impressive: some 100 species of native trees (25% old growth), 1,500 flowering plants, 200 species of birds, 66 types of mammals, 50 native fish, 39 varieties of reptiles and 43 amphibians including a rare lungless salamander that you're not likely to find anywhere else.

Conserving and Sharing. With 87% of Swain County composed of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and national forest lands, the people who live here are keenly aware of the impact that the human species can have on pristine lands. That's why, like Steve Claxton, they're engaging in green efforts to preserve the park and its surrounding wild lands. At the same time, they open their doors to visitors who wish to experience one of the truly special wilderness areas on the planet. So come paddle, bike, fish, hike or just gaze into the lush green forests. And when you're ready to depart, do so... leaving no trace.

For more information on touring the Smokies, contact the Swain County Chamber of Commerce, 210 Main Street, P.O. Box 509, Bryson City, NC 28713; chamber@greatsmokies.com; or 800.867.9246.