

Palmer Creek
by Rick Shelton

There are hundreds of miles of streams in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Some of the streams are wide and deep. Many you can see from your car, just yards away from the roadside. These waters are the favorite destination of thousands of laughing kids who ride inner tubes down the riffles and rapids all summer long. Other streams in the Park are smaller, though, and more remote. Far from the fumes and noises of the roadside, they splash their way through hidden forests. Palmer Creek is just such a stream.

The icy waters of Palmer Creek tumble down a lush, green mountainside in a secluded corner of the Cataloochee Valley. The crystal currents bubble and rush among ancient stones and wind through tunnels of thick rhododendron and mountain laurel. Like a diamond necklace, the stream glistens among the giant trunks of hemlocks and oaks. Its small rapids plunge over boulders worn smooth as glass and crash into pools as dark as midnight. Fish glide and flash in the eddies and pockets while the water whispers its secrets to anyone who will listen.

One of the creek's most beautiful secrets is the fish that swim in its waters. Rainbow trout are the most common. If you watch closely, you may see one flicker among the pebbles, the red slash on its silver side jabbing like ruby lightning as it darts away. Brown trout are the largest and the most shy. They live in the deep, slow currents and jam themselves under stones and fallen branches. Their yellow sides are splotched with brown and red. The rarest and most beautiful fish are the brook trout. They live far up the stream where it climbs high along the mountainside. Brook trout have been swimming in Palmer Creek for ten thousand years. Their backs are chocolate brown, and their bellies are as orange as fire azaleas in the spring. Yellow and pink and blue spots cover them from head to tail like flower petals or priceless gems.

Surrounding all these priceless wonders—pools and boulders and shimmering trout—is the forest itself. The great woods give the little stream its life. Cut down the trees and the beautiful fish would die. Take away the green canopy of leaves and the water would turn murky and hot. Dig up the spongy moss and feathery ferns and the rain would wash the whole mountainside away. The forest guards the stream, and the stream reflects its beauty.

Under the arms of poplars, hemlocks, hickories and oaks, Palmer Creek makes its way down into the valley. Along its banks, laurel blooms and goldfinches sing. If you are one of the lucky ones, maybe you will get out of your car, put on your hiking boots and go explore this hidden treasure of nature. Perhaps you, too, will listen to its ancient voice and hear the secrets the waters tell.