



Photo by Steven Stiefel

LITTLE RIVER CANYON

GRAND CANYON *of the South*

One of the world's most unusual geographic formations is emerging as an epicenter for a wealth of recreational opportunities.

by OLIVIA GRIDER

A 12-MILE-LONG, THREE-QUARTER-MILE-WIDE, 600-FOOT-deep canyon that looks like it was plucked from the desert mountain West and plunged into the deep South, tearing an abrupt, rocky gash through dense forest, doesn't seem like an easy thing to keep secret.

But Little River Canyon (don't let the name fool you; there's nothing little about it) in northeast Alabama has managed to maintain its obscurity – even though it's been "discovered" more than once.

According to legend, when a group of Union soldiers led by Gen. Andrew May were crossing Lookout Mountain in 1864 on their way to join Gen. William Sherman on his infamous March to the Sea, they were startled to encounter the vast canyon obstructing their path. Despite being within a day's journey of Sherman's camp in northwest Georgia, May's men never made it there. They failed to find a route across the long, steep-sided gorge and were ambushed by pursuing Confederate troops. May survived and proudly referred to the canyon later as "May's Gulf" – a name that stuck well into the 1960s and is still used by some locals.

More recent discoveries have occurred, too. During a Little River ecology hike led by Jacksonville State University professors last summer, a woman from Gadsden, Ala. – a mere 30 miles from the canyon's terminus – admitted stumbling upon the scenic gorge the previous weekend, when she and her husband rode their motorcycles across Lookout Mountain on Hwy. 35.

Growing up near Birmingham, I never heard about Little River Canyon. Even when, as a pre-teen, I took a notion that my family should explore Alabama parks on weekends and began dragging my parents and younger sister to the far corners of the state, we didn't find it. We got close once, ending up at DeSoto State Park instead of at a Native American Festival at DeSoto Caverns near Childersburg, Ala. (A teacher told me about the festival, but the only "DeSoto" on our family's massive folding map was near Fort Payne; after the argument subsided, we enjoyed our day nonetheless.)

It wasn't until I married a man from the area that I finally saw Little River Canyon, in 1998. When my husband was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, Little River Canyon was a place where people dumped junk cars

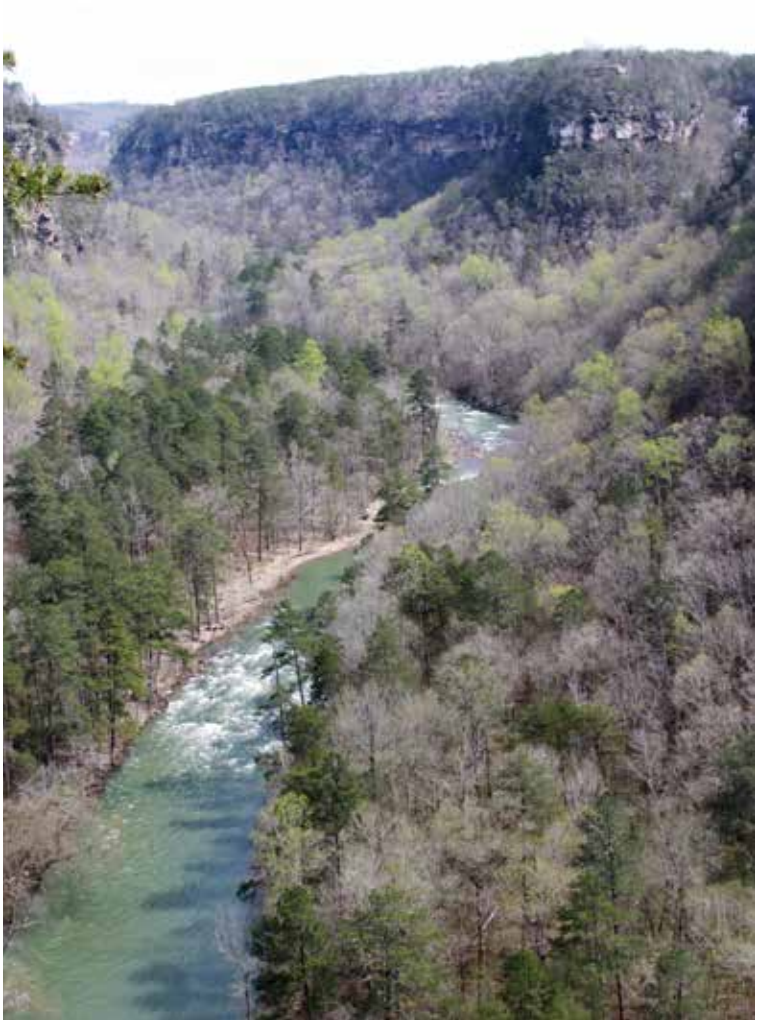


Photo by John Dersham

and foolish, fearless teenagers jumped from waterfalls and soaring cliffs into cool, sparkling pools, unaware their backyard stomping ground was a natural wonder (OK, so if you've been there you know the jumping part still happens in some places; it's discouraged, though).

By an act of Congress, 14,000 acres surrounding the canyon became Alabama's only national preserve in 1992. Much has been done in the two decades since – and particularly in the past five years – to open the area for a wide variety of recreation activities as well as to nature lovers and scientists drawn by the unique geology and ecology of the canyon and river.

LITTLE RIVER is the only waterway in the nation that forms and flows almost its entire length atop a mountain. It has carved a massive canyon more than 600 feet deep.

Now sporting a majestic nickname – "The Grand Canyon of the South" – Little River Canyon and the area encompassed by Little River Canyon National Preserve offer hiking, handicap-accessible overlooks, hunting, fishing, rock climbing, rappelling, swimming, geocaching, kayaking, canoeing, bird watching, horseback riding and primitive camping.

The area has been on the maps of highly skilled rock climbers and kayakers for some time. "We're worldwide known," says Larry Beane, interpretive park ranger for the national preserve. "We get climbers from out West and up North during the wintertime. They don't want to deal with the snow and ice so they come here. We have the best rock climbing in the Southeast, but you need to be good to do it. The kayaking and the rock climbing in the canyon are technically challenging."

The canyon contains Class III-VI rapids, with one 3-mile section called the Suicide Run, and the National Park Service suggests a kayaking skill level of expert. Most rock-climbing routes are expert level as well, with less than 1 percent under 5.11.

But you don't have to be an extreme-outdoor-sports enthusiast to enjoy Little River Canyon.

"A lot of visitors stop at Little River Falls [a 45-foot waterfall marking the beginning of the canyon], then drive around the canyon and stop at the overlooks," Beane says.

Numerous hiking trails are present as well. See page 49 for details on different ways to access the canyon for various recreational activities.

If you join an experienced group, you can even rock climb, rappel or canoe safely in the area (if not in the canyon), regardless of skill level. Little River Canyon National Preserve (nps.gov/liri), DeSoto State Park (alapark.com/DeSotoResort), Jacksonville State University (jsu.edu/epic/canyoncenter) and local outfitters including True Adventure Sports (www.trueadventuresports.com) and One World Adventure (oneworldadventureco.com; see story page 30) offer guided excursions.

Jacksonville State University opened the Little River Canyon Center in 2009, and the 23,000-square-foot facility serves as a visitors' center for the canyon, houses National Park Service offices, features an HD movie theater, gift



LITTLE RIVER FALLS, a 45-foot waterfall near Alabama Hwy. 35, marks the beginning of Little River Canyon. *Photo by John Dersham*





LORI TOLLEY-JORDAN, a JSU biology professor, leads a Little River ecology hike and presents a mussel scooped from the water. Alabama leads the nation in freshwater mussel diversity, with approximately 180 species – 60 percent of the nation's mussels – living here.

shop, natural history library, exhibits, classrooms, meeting rooms and an outdoor amphitheater. JSU hosts a plethora of educational and arts and crafts workshops, hikes, lectures, nature programs for children and families and other activities at the Canyon Center.

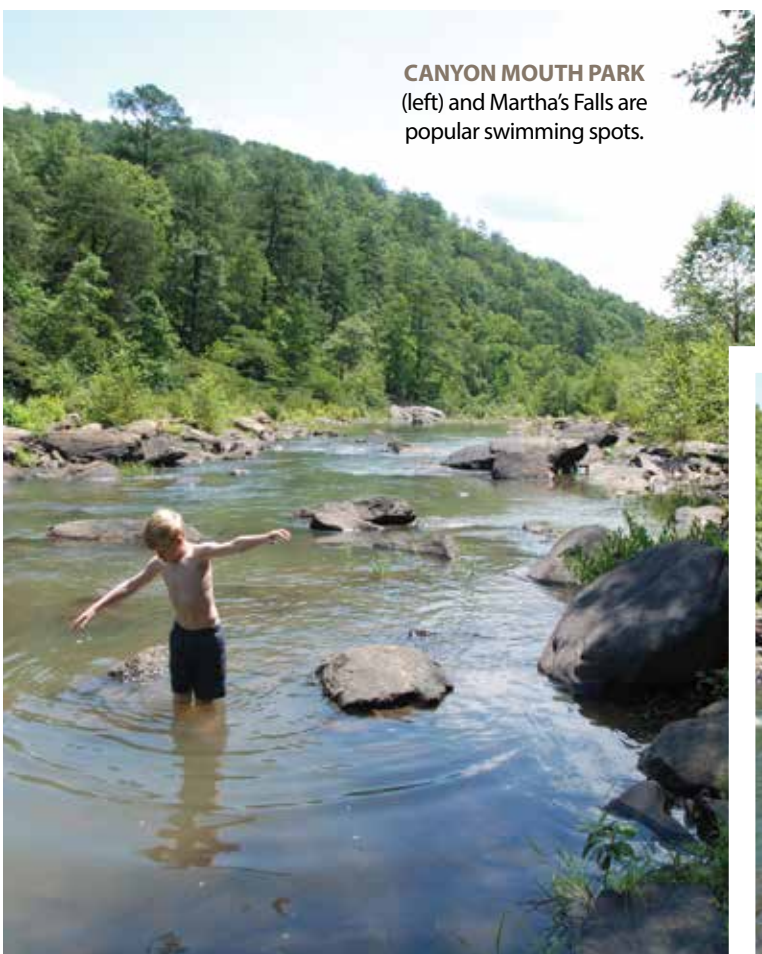
The university's faculty and students conduct research in the canyon and often partner with the national preserve and DeSoto State Park to lead programs for the public.

Little River is the only waterway in the country that forms and flows almost its entire length atop a plateau (Lookout Mountain, part of the Appalachian chain that extends from Alabama to Canada). It carved one of the deepest canyons east of the Mississippi River and created rare environments that support a diverse range of plant and animal life, some not found anywhere else in the world.

"Little River Canyon doesn't look like it should be here," Lori Tolley-Jordan, a JSU biology professor, tells a group of about 30 people who have gathered for a hike alongside the river. "It's a western stream system in the East," she says, noting the rocks that line the canyon and the cacti growing on its rim contribute to the "deserty" feel. "A stream this size [in the East] is usually enclosed with thick tree canopy and dense vegetation. This is an open system, like the Grand Canyon. When it rains, the water level rises swiftly because there's not much vegetation to slow it down. That's why the river is able to pick up and move large boulders downstream, like in the West."

It's a harsh place to live. Organisms have to stand up to the stress of change – powerful tides of high, rushing water juxtaposed with periods of dry heat in summer, when portions of the river are reduced to a few shallow pools.

Still, nature has adapted. Beane says more than 100 rare plants and



CANYON MOUTH PARK (left) and Martha's Falls are popular swimming spots.





LARRY BEANE, interpretive park ranger at Little River Canyon National Preserve for 18 years, is often found at Little River Falls, sharing his knowledge and love for the area with visitors. It's not unusual for Beane and the park service's more than 60 other staff members and volunteers to work on their off days.



A CLUSTER OF ELF OPINE, tiny flowering succulents that survive in vernal pools and depressions on granite rock. This rare plant grows in only six U.S. states and only four counties in Alabama, according to the USDA.

Photo by Larry Beane

animals thrive in the canyon. Seven species of caddisflies, moth-like insects with aquatic larvae, were discovered at Little River and only one has been located anywhere else in the world. Kral's Water Plantain, an aquatic herb, was only recently discovered living in two other locations. Some carnivorous plants grow in few other places. The most recognized is the green pitcher plant; half the known patches of it in the world are located inside the national preserve.

The ankle- to waist-high plant needs shallow, boggy, acidic soil and sunlight – conditions plentiful around the canyon. Green pitcher plants eat mainly insects, but Beane says scientists have found frogs, salamanders, lizards and grasshoppers trapped within their long, pitcher-like tubes. A sweet-smelling liquid at the bottom of the pitcher attracts victims, and stiff, downward-pointing hairs make getting into the plant easy, but crawling out impossible.

Threatened or endangered animals found in or near the canyon include the blue shiner (a fish), gray bat and bald eagle. You might see green salamanders and mountain dusky salamanders, which are species of concern in Alabama.

Occasional black bear sightings take place as well. Black bears aren't a threatened species, but they were extinct in the Lookout Mountain area from 1910 to the late 1980s. Development in the southern Appalachian region has been pushing them back south, Beane says, and sightings are on the rise. "They've run out of territory there because of construction," he says. "They're settling for a 'yes, there are people here but we can hide from them' kind of attitude."

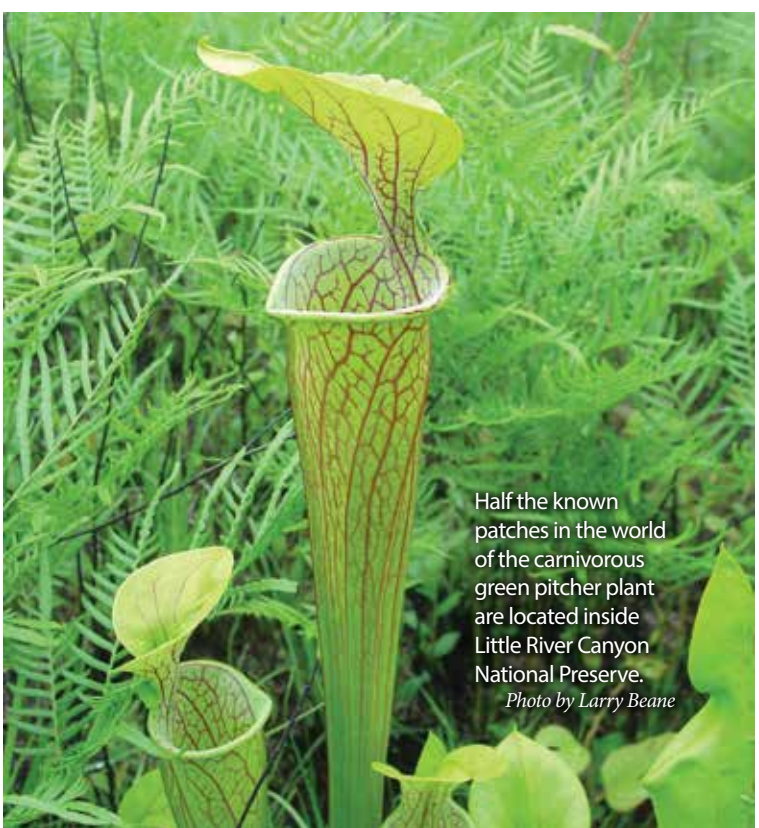
As this implies, black bears typically avoid confronting humans whenever possible. Don't be alarmed if you spot one, but don't approach it either.

The geology of the canyon is just as striking as its plant and animal life. The river flows over numerous waterfalls as it makes its way to the edge of the plateau, and the river and canyon are lined with ancient stone, enormous rock outcroppings and massive sandstone bluffs. Fascinating fossils swarm the surfaces of rocks along the riverbed.

From the Pennsylvanian Period, the fossils are 280 to 310 million years old and chronicle a time when the land was a beachfront or delta area of sand dunes. Beane's daughter found a starfish fossil at the bottom of the canyon. Two visitors to Little River Falls rushed up to the park ranger one day, certain they had found evidence of a giant, prehistoric snake, but it turned out to be a fossil of a Lepidodendron, a tree with scale-like bark.

New boardwalk trails, larger parking lots and improved overlooks, swimming and picnicking areas make accessing the canyon and river easier than ever. And with increased marketing of the region, more people are discovering it. The National Park Service tabulates an approximate number of visitors by counting cars in the parking lots for Little River Falls and Canyon Mouth Park. In 2005, about 200,000 visitors were recorded. By 2011 the number had risen to 225,549.

While you aren't likely to encounter a crowd anywhere in the area (a good thing, we think), it looks like this latest discovery might stick.



Half the known patches in the world of the carnivorous green pitcher plant are located inside Little River Canyon National Preserve.

Photo by Larry Beane

IF YOU GO

Ways to access the canyon and river

By Car

From Alabama Hwy. 35, take Alabama Hwy. 176 along the western rim of the canyon. This 11-mile scenic drive offers a series of overlooks with pull-off parking and picnic areas. ***nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/scenic-drive.htm***

Park in the Little River Falls parking lot, also off Hwy. 35, on the east side of the canyon, and take the short, handicap-accessible boardwalk to view the falls. From this parking area, you also can cross the Hwy. 35 bridge over Little River and then take the walkway under the bridge. A trail continues on to Little River Canyon Center. ***nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/little-river-falls.htm***

For Hiking

Note: Trails are generally primitive and unmaintained.

Little River Falls to Martha's Falls ***(0.6 miles, moderate)***
From the Little River Falls parking lot, take the dirt trail near the picnic area.

Martha's Falls Trail ***(0.22, moderate)***
Go east of Little River Falls on Hwy. 35 and park in the gravel lot (you'll see a Martha's Falls sign). The trail leads from there to the upper portion of the canyon and a small waterfall. It's also a popular swimming spot.

Eberhart Trail ***(0.75 miles, difficult)***
Located on Hwy. 176, 11 miles from Hwy. 35, this switchback dirt trail leads to the bottom of the canyon. You can return the way you came or, if the river is low, hike south along the water's edge and exit the canyon on Powell Trail.

Lower Two-Mile Trail ***(0.10 miles, difficult)***
This very steep dirt trail into the canyon starts just past Mushroom Rock (you'll know it when you see it) off Hwy. 176.

Powell Trail ***(0.75 miles, difficult)***
Rugged and steep, this trail begins on County Road 275 several miles past Eberhart Point. You can hike north along the river bank and come out of the canyon on Eberhart Trail.

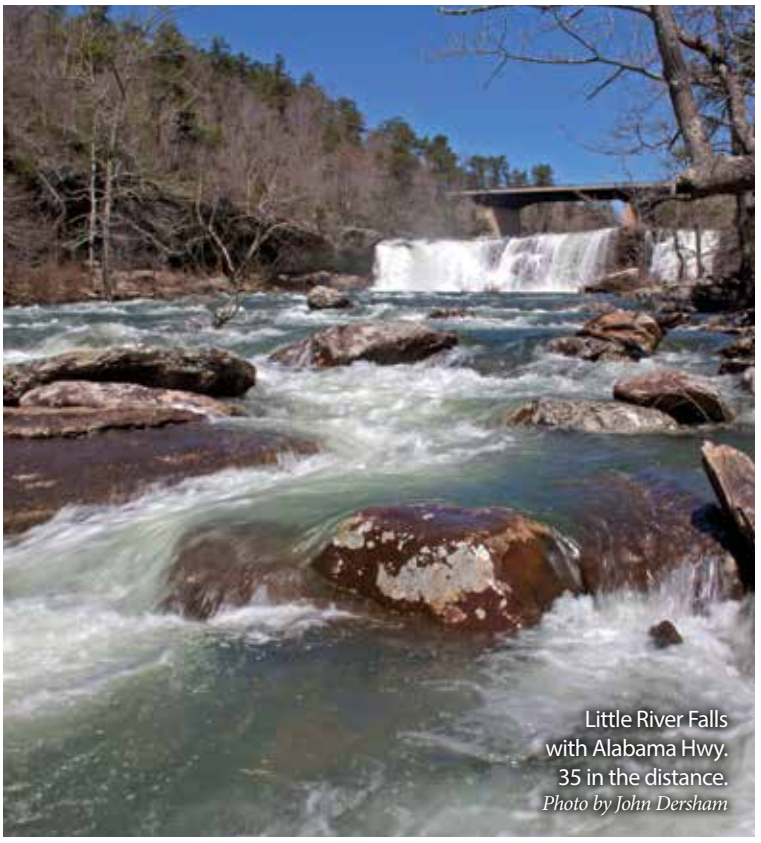
Canyon Mouth Park ***(2 miles to end and back, easy)***
This recently renovated, generally level trail takes you through the forest alongside Little River and opens to a rocky, beach-like area at one point. Take Hwy. 35 west (you'll go off the mountain), turn right onto Hwy. 273, then right onto County Road 275. There's a $3 user fee per vehicle; this is the only part of the preserve you have to pay to access.

For Swimming

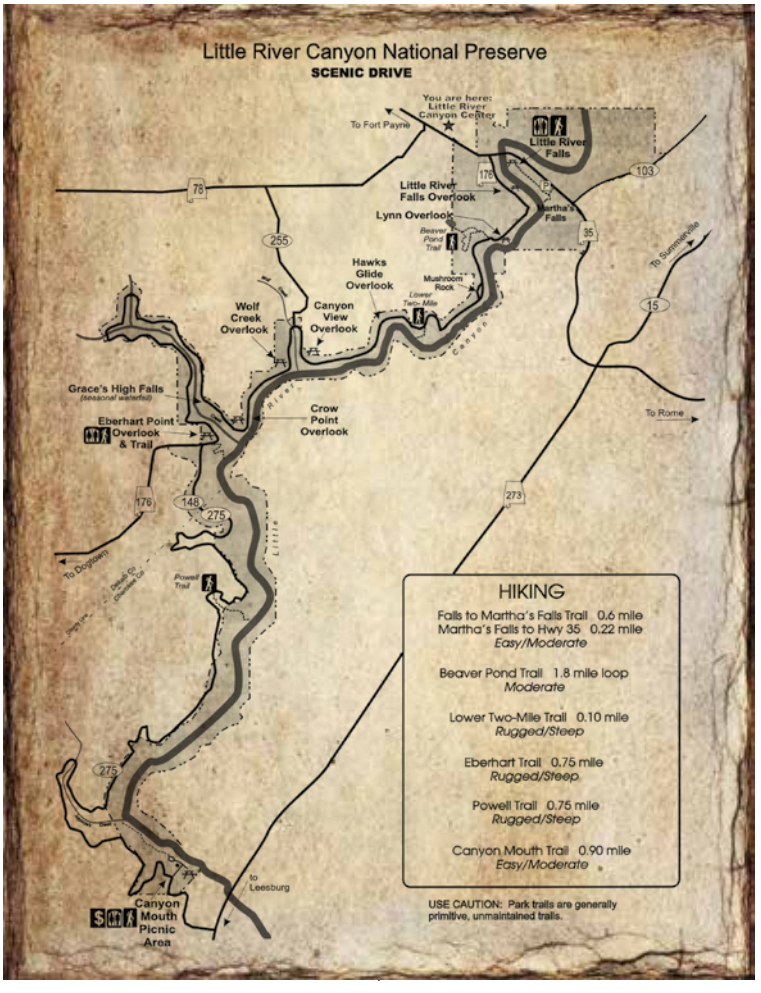
While you're free to swim anywhere you'd like in the preserve, park ranger Larry Beane warns to be cautious near waterfalls and any time the water level is up. "The cliffs and swift water are unforgiving," he says. "If you make a mistake, it could be your last." He recommends Canyon Mouth Park and the Blue Hole as safe places to swim.

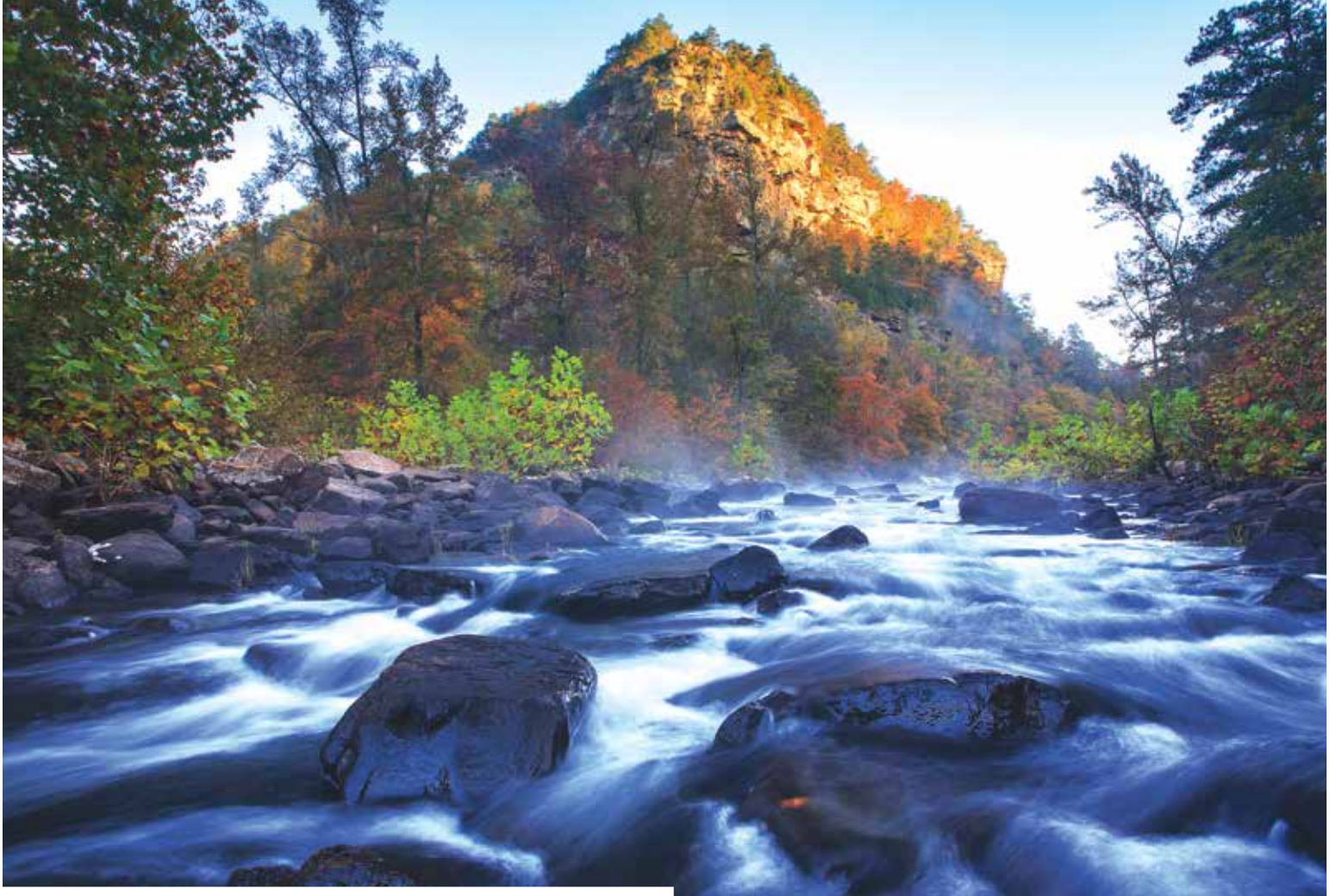
Canyon Mouth Park
See directions in hiking section.

Blue Hole
After you pass Little River Falls going west on Hwy. 35, a pull-off for accessing the Blue Hole will be on your left almost immediately. If you get to County Road 861, you've gone too far.

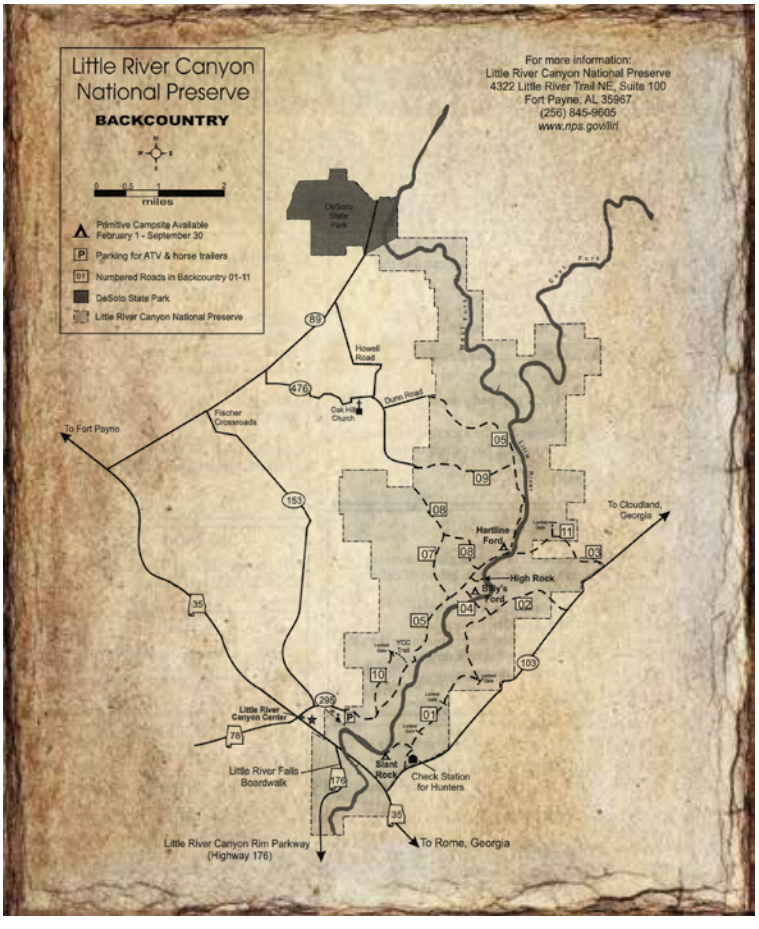


Little River Falls with Alabama Hwy. 35 in the distance.
Photo by John Dersham





Morning light at Eberhart Point in the canyon.
Photo by Keith Bozeman



Martha's Falls
This has been a popular swimming spot for generations. ***See hiking section above and nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/marthas-falls.htm.***

For Rock Climbing

There are no published climbing routes, but rock climbers commonly use the areas surrounding the scenic overlooks on Hwy. 176. Remember, most climbing in the canyon is considered expert level, and permits are required for installation or replacement of permanent hardware. Lots of existing bolts are available, though, and a 200-foot rope will rig most points.

CLIMBING POINT DEPTHS
Lynn Overlook – 100 feet
Canyon View North End – 99 feet
Canyon View South End – 54 feet
Wolf Creek North End – 113 feet
Wolf Creek Mid Point – 87 feet
Wolf Creek South End – 73 feet
Crow's Point – 250 feet
Grace's High Falls – 113 feet

For Fishing

With a valid state fishing license, you can fish anywhere along Little River within the park boundaries. Those under 16 or over 65 do not need a license. The best location for fly fishing is the Canyon Mouth Day Use Area. The Rainbow City Auction & Fly Shop provides guided fly fishing trips on the river. ***rainbowcityauction.com***

For Canoeing

The most popular section of the preserve for canoeing is the "Back-

country Area," located north of Little River Falls and the start of the canyon (see map). Required skill levels depend on water levels, but in general, canoeing in the canyon is for experts and the Backcountry is intermediate level.

Several dirt roads provide access to Little River in the Backcountry. You'll need a vehicle with high clearance, though, and four-wheel drive is recommended. ***Check water levels at waterdata.usgs.gov/al/nwis/uv?site_no=02399200 or 1-800-525-3711.***

For Kayaking

Suggested skill level is expert, as the river has many hairpin curves, drop-offs and dangerous hydraulics. Check water levels. The river is divided into three sections:

Suicide Section ***(3 miles; 2-3 hours)***
Beginning at Hwy. 35 and Little River Falls, this section is the most difficult, containing Class IV-VI rapids.

Upper Two Section
(2.5 miles; 1.5-2 hours)
With Class III-IV rapids, this section runs from the Lower Two-Mile Trail to Eberhart Point.

The Chairlift ***(6 miles; 3-4 hours)***
The bottom section contains Class III-IV rapids and carries you off the mountain, running from Eberhart Point to Canyon Mouth Picnic Area.

For Horseback Riding

The Backcountry contains 23 miles of roads (numbered 01-11) for horseback riding. Parking is located at the check station on County Road 103 and on County Road 295. ***See Backcountry map and nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/horseback-riding.htm***

For Bird Watching

Almost 150 species of birds can be found at Little River Canyon National Preserve. You might spot bald eagles as well as brightly colored birds including the red Scarlet Tanager, blue Indigo Bunting and the yellow Prothonotary Warbler. ***More at nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/bird-watching.htm.***

For Hunting

Little River Canyon National Preserve works in cooperation with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources to manage the Backcountry Area for hunting. Deer, turkey and other wildlife are plentiful. A hunting license and permit (free at the County Road 103 check station) are required. ***More at nps.gov/liri/planyourvisit/hunting.htm.***

For Camping

Camping is allowed only at three primitive campsites in the Backcountry. Sites are open Feb. 1-Sept. 30 (closed during hunting season), and no registration is required; just get there first. ***See Backcountry map.***

Slant Rock
From the hunters' check station on County Road 103, take Road 01, then your first left.

Billy's Ford
Turn off Hwy. 35 onto County Road 295, then take Road 05 and the first right.

Hartline Ford
From Road 05 off County Road 295, pass Road 08 and the campsite will be on your left up on the hill.



Alabama's highest waterfall, Grace's High Falls, is seasonal and plunges 133 feet off the cliffs.
Photo by Keith Bozeman

