

REDBIRD RENDEZVOUS

Little Flat Creek Self-Guided Hike Narrative and Waypoints + Coordinates

In the upper headwaters of Little Flat Creek in Clay County, along the divide with the Left Fork of Big Double Creek, one can still find a rare remnant of Kentucky's original old-growth forests. Most of the site's oldest trees consist of twisted, gnarly chestnut oaks (*Quercus montana*), mixed with some old pitch pine (*Pinus rigida*) and other species, growing on the dry ridges. Though not huge, many of these trees are over 200 years old, with some confirmed to be over 300 years old.

Contrasting with these slower-growing trees is the lovely grove of rich old-growth forest that includes two massive red hickory (*Carya ovalis*) trees which are the largest trees of this species documented anywhere in the world. In addition to these massive red hickories, old-growth shagbark hickory (*Carya ovata*), tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), and other species shelter a rich understory flora. Unfortunately, this old-growth forest has been approved for logging by the U.S. Forest Service, with the timber conveyed to the Ruffed Grouse Society to manage the sale. While not all of the old trees will be cut, the approved harvest plans include cutting of most of the site's trees with large skid roads (in some cases up to 20 ft. wide) bulldozed across the slopes to remove the logs.

We've put together this self-guided tour so that more people can see, and learn from, this wonderful forest and its trees before they are lost.

Disclaimer:

Any person using this guide and the information provided here assumes all risks and liabilities associated with their use. Road conditions may change and vary from **any** descriptions provided here. Being out in the woods inherently exposes one to a variety of potential hazards and harms. Be aware that cell phone coverage may be limited or unavailable, so plan accordingly. (Pro-tip: there is *no cell service*.)

Getting there:

From Manchester, take the Hal Rogers Parkway/KY-9006 east for approximately 16 miles to the community of Big Creek. Exit the Parkway (on your left) and follow signs for KY-66 as you take a right at the Dollar General. Follow KY-66 under the Parkway until it T's off at KY-421. Turn right and go a short distance past the Redbird River to where KY-66 splits from KY-421 and heads south along the river. Turn left to stay on KY-66. After you pass the Peabody Trailhead for the Redbird Crest Trail (on your left) and Forest Service Ranger Station (on your right) you'll see a sign for the Big Double Picnic Area. Turn right at the sign on to Big Double Road.

Drive down Big Double Road past the [Big Double Picnic Area](#) until you get to Forest Road 1501C, which is on the left. This road is not shown on all maps (and not on Google Maps), and on some maps is named "Trace Branch Rd." **If you do not have at least moderately high clearance on your vehicle we do not recommend driving this road.** Our experience has been that 4WD is not necessary,

and clearance on a typical mid-sized SUV is plenty to get up the road. However, road conditions continually change, and we can make *no guarantees*. Also be aware that opportunities to turn around are limited and questionable until you reach the intersection of 1501C and the Redbird Crest Trail. While it will make the hike much longer, you can park along 1501C immediately south of Big Double Road where it crosses Big Double Creek.

General hike description:

The general hike described (from the gate at Location 4 to the Location 21) is about 4 miles round-trip (2 miles each way). The main route (pink dotted line) includes about 1.7 miles along an old road that serves as the Redbird Crest Trail and 0.3 miles off-trail (green dotted line: this is where the Champion Red Hickory lives). The optional off-trail Ridge Route (yellow dotted line) is about 1 mile.

Note that green areas on the maps are Daniel Boone National Forest, with areas approved for logging in red. Most of the trees in these areas are approved for cutting and are marked with blue paint. The “doubled” red lines through the map denote “variable density harvest” areas along haul roads where only some of the trees have been marked for cutting. Gray areas on the map represent private land.

Location 1

83.5960644°W 37.0931039°N

This is where Forest Road 1501C (Trace Branch Road) crosses Big Double Creek. The creek here is designated “Critical Habitat” for the federally-threatened Kentucky arrow darter (*Etheostoma spilotum*). It will take around 1,500 to 2,000 log trucks in and out through Trace Branch Road to remove the 4,774 CCF of timber sold in the Little Flat Creek sale area.

Location 2

83.5931118°W 37.0928537°N

Along Trace Branch Road are some uncommon but unprotected plant species, including butternut trees (*Juglans cinerea*) and Guyandotte beauty (*Synandra hispidula*). Butternuts, also known as white walnut, are declining due to a non-native fungal blight. Guyandotte beauty is an uncommon wildflower in the mint family that is highly sensitive to disturbances including logging and fire.

Location 3

83.5896105°W 37.0868153°N

Here you can see where off-road vehicles regularly take a shortcut up a right-of-way used for a natural gas gathering line, increasing erosion and exposing the pipe. Poorly maintained oil and gas infrastructure,

including leaking wells, can be found throughout the Redbird District of the Daniel Boone National Forest.

Location 4

83.5903812°W 37.0860420°N

At this location Trace Branch Road, the Redbird Crest Trail, and unmapped oil and gas roads come together. The Redbird Crest Trail continues south past the gate along the road. The Forest Service has approved moving the Redbird Crest Trail off of this grade, which will be used as the haul road for the Little Flat Creek sale. Do not drive past this point, and do not block any of the roads or trail when leaving your vehicle. As always, do not leave valuables in your vehicle. If you must, out of sight is best.

Location 5

83.5952439°W 37.0849943°N

Here you can continue walking south along the road or take a more adventurous route up and then south along the spine of the ridge. This ridge route begins with an animal trail heading straight up to the ridgeline. While the ridge route is lovely, with great views and some wonderful old-growth trees (including trees marked for harvest), please use caution. Some sections are clear and relatively easy walking, but you will also encounter patches of tangled briars and will have to navigate some down trees. The route shown on the map is a general, suggested route and not a trail. Also note that the Forest Service plans to bulldoze a road around to, and along, the east side of the ridge to haul timber.

Location 6

83.5961564°W 37.0824939°N

The forest you've been walking through was logged in 1992. Below you will see the remnants of a landslide that occurred after it was cut. While now revegetated, the lumpy and slumped terrain shows the history. Trees with curved bases can indicate ongoing instability. Landslides are common in Redbird, especially in the years after timber harvest. Highly erodible soils, steep slopes, and the particular hydrology of the various seams of coal all predispose these mountain slopes to "mass wasting." It is well documented that building roads and cutting the timber can dramatically increase the probability of a landslide occurring. Evidence of past landslides can be found throughout the area, especially in forests cut in the 1980s and 1990s.

Location 7

83.5980797°W 37.0820527°N

Here you will start noticing changes in the forest, with larger and more twisty, gnarly looking trees. Most of these trees are Chestnut oak (*Quercus montana*), which are most common along dry ridges and upper slopes. A chestnut oak here was dated using tree coring techniques and found to be nearly 200 years old. As you continue walking south along the road you'll encounter many more, and older, trees.

Location 8

83.5982417°W 37.0810072°N

(RIDGE ROUTE)

Along this ridge there are a good number of old-growth trees, mostly chestnut oaks. Several trees here have been dated using core sampling techniques to be over 200 years old, with one confirmed to be near 300 years old.

Location 9

83.6000813°W 37.0799952°N

Black walnut (*Juglans nigra*), like the large tree here marked for harvest, is infrequent in this forest. But the logs can bring a very high price at the mill. Most black walnut trees in approved harvest areas of South Red Bird have been marked for cutting.

Location 10

83.6015643°W 37.0813805°N

Chestnut oaks here have been dated to be over 200 years old, with one at least 330 years old. Here you can see where two of these old-growth trees have been marked for harvest with blue paint.

Location 11

83.6036604°W 37.0796714°N

The root systems of mature trees and forest are crucial for holding the highly-erodible soils in these steep, landslide-prone mountains. Notice the large Chestnut oak marked for harvest just below the road grade. After harvest, the roots will decompose and after around 5 to 7 years will no longer be able to stabilize the slope. Research shows that this timeframe is when landslides are most likely to happen following logging.

Location 12

83.6030563°W 37.0790008°N

Note the lovely, twisty forms of the trees here. Several trees along this ridge have been dated using tree core sampling techniques to be over 250 years old. A pitch pine (*Pinus rigida*) here was found to be at least 342 years old.

Location 13

83.6038423°W 37.0773281°N

Tree core sampling has shown that many of the chestnut oaks here are over 200 years old, with some more than 300 years old. You may see a cut, fallen chestnut oak log along the road. While not that large, one can still count around 240 growth rings where the log was cut, roughly 20 feet up the trunk. This tree was probably over 300 years old. Looking at rings in logs cut along roads and trails can help provide insight into the surrounding forest.

Location 14

83.6023459°W 37.0770587°N

The forest here likely had a great deal of American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) prior to the chestnut blight arriving sometime around the 1930s or 1940s. There are many American chestnut saplings around this knob, sprouting from the still-living root systems of the old chestnuts. The base of a large American chestnut, a fairly rot-resistant wood, is still evident. It can be differentiated from oaks by the lack of rays.

Location 15

83.6058212°W 37.0758212°N

At this location you'll enter the forest and be off trail. The route generally follows the pink flagging which marks where the Forest Service plans to bulldoze a large logging road to remove the timber from this location and several other sections of forest further out. At this point you are in a "shelterwood" unit where nearly all of the trees have been marked for harvest with blue paint. Many of the remaining trees will likely be damaged by skid road construction and hauling out timber.

Location 16 - *The Champion Red Hickory*

83.6078310°W 37.0748009°N

At this location you can see the largest documented red hickory (*Carya ovalis*) in the world. The most recent measurements have the tree with a circumference of nearly 15 feet and standing at 175 feet tall, making it possibly the tallest tree in Kentucky. While not marked for cutting, most of the trees around it are. The Forest Service has also flagged the route for a logging road to be bulldozed through the tree's root zone. Across other logging operations in the Redbird District, like the Bear Creek and Granny's Branch sales, which followed the same management prescriptions as the Little Flat Creek sale, left nearly

all of the trees adjacent to these logging roads severely damaged and compromised, with torn and crushed roots, buried trunks, broken canopies, and stripped bark. The Forest Service has rejected any additional measures to protect this Champion Tree.

Location 17

83.6073650°W 37.0739233°N

A shagbark hickory (*Caray ovata*) at this location was core sampled and dated back to 1727 (297 years old). Two tulip poplars (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) across the ravine are around 170 years old. Other old trees can be found throughout the stand. In contrast, in 2017, the Forest Service dated just two tulip poplars which they determined to be 67 and 79 years. They decided that the stand dated to 1904 (120 years old) based on older data, and therefore did not qualify as old-growth. However, part of what makes the forest here “old-growth” is its mixed-age composition. Unlike typical second-growth forests where most of the trees are about the same age, in old-growth forests of this type the trees represent a range of ages having developed with only small- and intermediate-scale disturbances.

Location 18

83.6070202°W 37.0745230°N

Another shagbark hickory (*Carya ovata*) at this location was found to be more than 260 years old, having been dated to at least 1764. Shagbarks and red hickories are among the species that the Forest Service is required retain because they are considered important habitat for endangered Indiana bats (*Myotis sodalis*) which may roost under the shaggy bark.

Location 19 - 2nd largest Red Hickory in the world

83.6071664°W 37.0740526°N

If not for the Big Hickory up the slope, the red hickory (*Carya ovalis*) at this location would be the largest known in the world. Having the world’s two largest red hickories in the same stand is truly remarkable.

Location 20

Here you can see the effects of natural disturbance on the forest. In this case, wind (likely exacerbated by rain-saturated soils) caused a large group of trees to come down. Openings in the canopy like this one allow more light to reach the forest floor, with changes in understory vegetation and the “regeneration” of a new, patch-sized cohort of trees within an otherwise mature forest matrix. While not typically large (usually about ½ acre to 2 acres in size), these openings provide patches of brushy “early seral habitat” that provide important cover and forage for a variety of wildlife species. It should also be noted that bigger trees, when they fall, typically result in bigger openings in the canopy. Because of this, older mature and old-growth forests can actually provide more early seral habitat than mid-aged forests. In

the Redbird District, with its steep slopes and highly erodible soils, blowdowns of this type and size are fairly common across the landscape.

Location 21

Up this ravine you can see a variety of large trees, including some really nice American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*). Across the Redbird District, many of the older stands of trees are dominated by American beech trees that survived previous logging, likely on account of being hollow. A thin-barked, fire-sensitive species, it's fairly common for large American beech trees exhibit old fire wounds and resulting decay. While these hollow trees provide excellent habitat for many species, they are often weak and prone to falling or collapse. American beech trees are now threatened by two different non-native diseases – beech bark disease and beech leaf disease. Both diseases have so far proven to be devastating in states to the north and east, though have not yet been identified in Kentucky.

Happy Adventuring!

Any Questions? Email whitney@kyheartwood.org