



## Mount Sterling – Great Smoky Mountains National Park, NC

Length	Difficulty	Streams	Views	Solitude	Camping
5.5 mls	3	N/A	5	3	4
<b>Hiking Time:</b> 3 hours and 30 minutes with 1 hour of breaks <b>Elev. Gain:</b> 1,955 ft <b>Parking:</b> Park at the pullouts on either side of Mount Sterling Rd. 35.70031, -83.09749					

[Click Here For Detailed Location](#)

By Trail Contributor: Zach Robbins



Mount Sterling is home to the highest elevation true fire tower remaining in the eastern United States. In the lonely northeast corner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the tower receives less traffic than other towers in the park and is typically included in longer backpacking trips from Big Creek or Cataloochee Valley. There are three ways to reach the tower, this hike is the shortest beginning at Mount Sterling Gap. Even though a round-trip of 5.5 miles is relatively short, you will gain nearly 2,000 feet during the 2.7-mile climb from the trailhead. The forests

abruptly change on your trek from mountain laurel and hardwoods to Fraser fir and red spruce when you approach the high-elevation Mount Sterling Ridge. The 60-foot steel Aermotor tower stands at the summit of Mount Sterling (5,842 feet) and is open to the public. Views from the stairs include Mount Guyot, Mount Cammerer, Max Patch, the Newfound Mountains, the Plott Balsam Mountains, Cataloochee Divide, and Big Cataloochee Mountain. For a long trip, consider camping at backcountry campsite #38 beside the summit. This area of the park features many long, connecting trails and is perfect for multi-day trips.

Mile	Summary and Highlights
0.0	Follow Mount Sterling Trail from Mount Sterling Gap
0.5	T-junction with Long Bunk Trail
2.4	Y-junction with Mount Sterling Ridge Trail
2.8	Mount Sterling summit (5,842 feet) and 60-foot lookout tower

- ▶ **Mile 0.0** – At Mount Sterling Gap, park at pullouts on either side of Mount Sterling Rd. The Mount Sterling Trail begins on the west side of the gap. Mount Sterling Rd was a historically important connector between the remote valleys of the Great Smokies. Formerly known as the Cataloochee Turnpike, the road was completed in 1860 and was a route used by Union and Confederate soldiers during the Civil War to move between North Carolina and Tennessee.

The Mount Sterling Trail is still maintained as a service road by the national park for tower and transmission maintenance. Although it climbs 1,800 feet in 2.4 miles, the trail is not as difficult as the elevation change per mile indicates.

- ▶ **Mile 0.5** – T-junction with the Long Bunk Trail on the left.
- ▶ **Mile 1.4** – Northwest view from the trail of Mount Sterling Ridge. Shortly beyond this point the trail climbs above 5,000 feet and is lined with Fraser fir and red spruce.
- ▶ **Mile 2.4** – The Mount Sterling Trail intersects the Mount Sterling Ridge Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail at a Y-junction. Turn right following the Mount Sterling Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail on the final approach to the summit through dense conifer forests.
- ▶ **Mile 2.8** – The trail passes hitching posts for horses then turns right towards the Mount Sterling lookout tower in a clearing. On the left side of the trail is backcountry campsite #38. The trail passes beside the lookout tower and continues as the Baxter Creek Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail down the mountain towards the Big Creek Campground. The 60-foot steel Aermotor lookout tower stands at the summit of Mount Sterling (5,842 feet) in a small clearing. The tower, originally built in 1935, is still actively used as a radio communications tower by the National Park Service. Until recently, a powerline provided electricity to the tower from the east side. In 2017, a solar microgrid was installed beside the tower to be self-sufficient and allow removal of the powerlines from the mountainside.

The tower and the top cab is open to the public. Almost all of the windows inside the cab remain intact, so you will get the best views from the stairs just below the cab. Mount Cammerer, home to another lookout tower, is the abrupt peak northwest across the Big Creek watershed. Due west, the tallest peak is Mount Guyot, the second tallest mountain in the national park. Mount Sterling Ridge continues southwest, culminating in Big Cataloochee Mountain. The expansive Balsam Mountain transverse chain lies behind Big Cataloochee Mountain. The Cataloochee Divide rises south above the remote Cataloochee Valley. The highest peak on the divide is Hemphill Bald, whose massive bald summit should be discernable. Further south to the left of Hemphill Bald are the Plott Balsam Mountains. In the distance southeast are the Great Balsam Mountains. The Newfound Mountains rise east above the Pigeon River. On clear days you should be able to see the dominant crest of the Black Mountains. The Bald Mountains rise north and northeast above the Pigeon River Gorge, with Max Patch the most recognizable peak in the northeast.

- ▶ **Mile 3.2** – Turn left on the Mount Sterling Trail.
- ▶ **Mile 5.5** – Hike ends at Mount Sterling Rd.