



Sandstone Arches



The Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area abounds in dramatic cliffs, arches, and rockshelters. The region may contain more natural arches than any other region in the eastern United States. Natural arches are found frequently in the Big South Fork at the edges of the tableland surface, there the resistant Rockcastle Conglomerate slowly succumbs to erosion. Arches form along gorge edges where the resistant sandstone is able to support its own weight when layers below erode away.

Popular Arches

Arches of varying sizes and descriptions can be found throughout the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area but only a few have hiking trails leading to them. Below is a list of easily accessible arches and their general locations.

TWIN ARCHES were formed by headward erosion along a narrow ridge. The arches are considered to be the largest arches in the Big South Fork and quite possibly in the Eastern United States. They may be reached by a number of routes, the shortest being a .7 mile hike from the Twin Arches Trailhead.

NEEDLE ARCH is a thin, delicate arch that was left standing alone when the back of the rockshelter of which it was once a part eroded. It can be reached from the Sawmill Trailhead on Fork Ridge Road.

SPLIT BOW ARCH is unusual in that a narrow finger of the bluff split away from the main bluff. When large chunks of rock fell, a high, thin bridge was all that was left. You can see the arch from an overlook or hike a 0.7 loop trail that will take you through the arch. Signs at the Bear Creek Scenic Area in Kentucky (just off KY 742) will direct you to the arch.

YAHOO ARCH is another arch formed as a result of erosion at the back of a rockshelter. It can be easily reached from the Yahoo Falls Scenic Area just off KY 700.

KOGER ARCH is a broad arch and was the result of rockshelter erosion. It is accessible from the Sheltoewe Trace and also a short trail leading up from Devils Creek Road near the Yamacraw area.

BUFFALO ARCH is also accessible from the Sheltoewe Trace near the Big South Fork/ Daniel Boone National Forest boundary on Rock Creek. Located in the Daniel Boone National Forest, it can also be reached from Hwy 1363.

GOBBLERS ARCH in the Daniel Boone National Forest provides a passageway for an alternative to the Sheltoewe Trace leading from Rock Creek to Peters Mountain Trailhead.



WAGON ARCH is located along Hwy 742 as you drive into Blue Heron. An old wagon road once crossed the top of the arch, hence its name.

Twin Arches

For convenience, the arches are called North Arch and South Arch. Both arches and associated features are capped by the same erosion-resistant unit within the Rockcastle Conglomerate and Pennsylvania age.

North Arch and South Arch are clearly “twins” and thus have a common genesis. The ridge on which they occur is a major drainage divide, and the rock that forms the lintel of the arches is the most erosion-resistant stratum in the region. Headward erosion on both sides of the drainage divide has shaped the arches. Eons in the future, continued erosion should remove enough support from the arches to cause their collapse.

In most dimensions, South Arch is the larger of the two. At one point, the deck is 103 feet (31.4 meters) high with a clearance of about 70 feet (21.3 meters). North Arch, in contrast, has a height of about 62 feet (18.9 meters) with a 51 foot (15.5 meter) clearance. Each

arch is a major topographic feature. On the north, South Arch blends into a rock shelter and a widened bedding plane. Thus, measuring the breadth of the span involves subjective judgement. The span is clearly greater than 135 feet (41.1 meters). North Arch has a more easily defined span, about 93 feet (28.3 meters). Each bridge has a near-perfect arch shape.

In the eastern United States very few bridges are as high or as broad as the South Arch. The Natural Arch of Virginia is higher but has a smaller span. (Woodward, 1936). South Arch is larger than many of the Kentucky bridges listed by Corgan and Parks (1971). Bridges in other eastern states are not well-known. If both components of Double Arches (aka Twin Arches) are regarded as parts of a single landscape feature, then very few natural bridges in the world equal Double Arches in size. (Corgan and Parks, 1970).



South Arch of the Twin Arches

Twin Arches Loop Trail

The Twin Arches Trailhead is approximately 20 miles or 35 minutes from the Bandy Creek Visitor Center. From the parking area, turn right onto the Bandy Creek Road and follow it for 2 miles to its intersection with TN Hwy. 297. (A left-hand turn on the Bandy Creek Road will take you past the Clara Sue Blevins Homesite and the Katie Blevins Cemetery; however, this portion of the road is graveled. You will emerge onto TN 297 near the West Entrance Trailhead.) Turn right on TN 297 and follow it to TN Hwy. 154. Turn right and continue on TN 154 for 1.8 miles. Turn right onto Divide Road. In 1.3 miles the road will fork, but you should remain left on Divide Road for another 2.7 miles. Turn right onto the Twin Arches Road. You will reach the Twin Arches Trailhead in 2.4 miles.

The short 0.7-mile trail down to the base of the arches begins at the parking area. You

will hike out a narrow ridge where the trail divides to form a loop. Signs will direct you to your left where two steep sets of stairs bring you to the base of the bluff. Turning right, you will follow along the bluffline until you reach the North Arch. Standing under the North Arch you may take the trail 2 miles to Jakes Place or look to your left and you will see the trail that goes over to the South Arch. While exploring the South Arch, be sure to look for the “fat man’s squeeze,” a narrow tunnel that will take you out to the end of the ridge where you may turn either left or right to return to the arch. The stairway between the two arches leads up to the top of the bluff and back across the top of the North Arch to form a small loop. Return to the trailhead by the same route that you entered. This 1.4-mile loop trail may be easily reversed.