

**\*\*Disclaimer:** The specific descriptions, goals, desired conditions, and objectives only apply to the National Forest System Lands within the Black Mountains Geographic Area. However, nearby communities and surrounding lands are considered and used as context. \*

## Black Mountains Geographic Area

Updated: May 19, 2017

### Description of area

The Black Mountains Geographic Area is dominated by the Black Mountains range and the surrounding Woods, Mackey, and Big Butt Mountains. With multiple peaks exceeding 5,000 feet in elevation, the geographic area contains the highest peaks in North Carolina, creating a dramatic setting for the communities and visitors. At the center is Mount Mitchell, the highest mountain in the eastern United States at 6,684 feet. The landscapes and ecosystems in the area are shaped by the Eastern Continental Divide and the Blue Ridge escarpment with an abrupt change in elevation of about 3,000 vertical feet.

The forests in the geographic area are swept by heavy winds and an average of more than 70 inches of precipitation per year. This precipitation flows into narrow drainages to the North and South Toe, Cane, and Catawba Rivers. The rivers and streams create opportunities for recreation throughout the geographic area, including viewing the scenic Catawba, Roaring Fork, Walker Creek, Douglas, and Toms Creek waterfalls and some of the best trout fishing in western North Carolina. The area's precipitation and steep mountainsides also create landslides, rockfalls, debris flow, and flash flood hazards that can impact public safety, resources, and infrastructure on the forest or surrounding lands.

The Blue Ridge Parkway runs diagonally through the area from northeast to southwest, bringing many visitors into the geographic area for recreation opportunities in the Appalachian Ranger District and the western portion of the Grandfather Ranger District. The Parkway runs along the Eastern Continental Divide, which separates the Tennessee Valley and the Atlantic Slope. National Forest System lands within this area lie in Buncombe, Mitchell, Yancey, and McDowell counties. There are 94,421 acres of forest land in the geographic area (197,743 acres total). Communities within this geographic area include Burnsville, Spruce Pine, Marion, and Black Mountain.

Management areas within the geographic area include:

- Scenic Byway Corridors (NPS Blue Ridge Parkway)
- National Historic Trails Corridors (Overmountain Victory Trail)
- Craggy Mountain Wilderness Study Area
- Craggy Mountain scenic/botanical/zoological area, Black Mountains botanical/zoological area, North Fork Ivy Creek botanical area, and Walker Cove botanical area
- Middle Creek and Walker Cove Research Natural Areas
- Inventoried Roadless Areas
- South Toe River, portions of which are a newly eligible Wild and Scenic River

Landmarks within the geographic area that are not managed by the Forest Service include:

- Mt. Mitchell State Park – North Carolina's first state park and a major tourism destination and point of access to the Forest
- Blue Ridge Parkway (National Park Service)

### **Connecting people to the land**

Prior to European and Anglo-American intrusion and settlement, the lands in the geographic area were home to the Cherokee, Catawba, and Creek Tribes, whose traditions and culture are showcased in some of the best preserved archeological sites in the Forests. The area also contains well-preserved remnants from more recent history – the Curtis Creek Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Camp and Catawba Falls hydroelectric complex. Lands in the Curtis Creek area were the first tract acquired under the 1911 Weeks Act, setting the stage for the National Forest System in the eastern United States.

Today, community members and visitors come to the Black Mountains Geographic Area to experience two distinct settings. More than half of the area is recognized for its remote, non-motorized opportunities, giving visitors the chance to challenge themselves, experience solitude, or celebrate the therapeutic nature of the area. In this geographic area, some forest users enjoy hiking on trails such as the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, horseback riding, and mountain biking on non-motorized trails, including the Kitsuma Mountain Bike Trail, Point Lookout Trail, Mt. Mitchell Trail, and Mountains-to-Sea Trail. The limited road system provides access to this remote setting. The Black Mountains Geographic Area has a significantly lower density of open and closed roads than the other geographic areas on the Forests.

The geographic area's more easily accessible sections offer amenities and opportunities for interacting with other visitors and large groups. Developed facilities, including campgrounds and picnic sites, provide opportunities for users to experience the forest. Water and scenic views also draw people from the Blue Ridge Parkway deeper into the forest. Fishing is popular in several areas, including Curtis Creek and the South Toe River. Rock hounding occurs at Ray Mine, and rock climbing is popular at Snake Den Cliff.

Roaded access and developed, well-maintained facilities within the geographic area provide hunting opportunities in areas such as Woods Mountain for game species such as white-tailed deer and wild turkey. Most of the Black Mountains Geographic Area is within a bear sanctuary. Small game (e.g. squirrels, rabbits, etc.) are also prevalent within the geographic area and support hunting opportunities. Additionally, parts of the geographic area support some of the best ruffed grouse hunting opportunities in western North Carolina.

Major economic drivers for local communities include manufacturing, timber harvest, wood products, mineral extraction, agriculture, post-secondary education, health care, and tourism. Commercial gathering of forest products such as Galax, medicinal herbs, and shrubbery provide local jobs and National Forest System lands provide a wide variety of opportunities for nature-based recreation in support of the tourism economy.

### **Enhancing and restoring resiliency**

The high elevations found in the Black Mountains support a unique ecology, which provides opportunities for specific restoration goals. Peaks over 5,200 feet in the area contain spruce-fir ecosystems that are a restoration priority. In addition, the protected slopes and sheltered ravines support the tree diversity of acidic and rich cove ecosystems.

Rare communities in the geographic area include spray cliff communities around waterfalls, such as Douglas Falls, Catawba Falls, Middle Creek Falls, and Newberry Creek Falls. Large and small rock outcrops occur across the steeper portion of the geographic area. Both high elevation granitic domes and rocky summits support rare species within the Black and Craggy Mountains. Montane acidic cliffs are scattered across the entire area and provide an interface with Carolina Hemlock Bluffs. A high

quality Carolina hemlock – Eastern hemlock forest occurs at Briar Bottom surrounding the Black Mountain and Carolina Hemlocks Campgrounds.

Rare plant and animal species are more concentrated within the higher elevation habitats across the area, in particular the spruce-fir ecozone and its interface with northern hardwood forest. Carolina flying squirrels, spruce-fir moss spiders, mountain golden heather, and rock gnome lichens are three federally listed species occurring within these high elevation forests. Numerous species of conservation concern, including several salamanders, liverworts, and mosses are also present.

#### **Clean and abundant water**

Water is a prominent feature across the Black Mountain Geographic Area, with approximately 900 miles of streams and rivers flowing through National Forest System lands. The geographic area provides clean and abundant water to the communities for daily use and subsistence, including several municipal drinking water supplies on National Forest System lands: Mackey Creek (Marion and Old Fort), Bowlers Creek (Burnsville), Clear Creek (Marion) and Ivy River (Weaverville). The eastern portion of the geographic area drains to the Catawba River, which provides water and power for over 1.3 million downstream users.

## Goals

*The following goals contribute to identification of management priorities in the Black Mountains Geographic Area. These goals highlight key opportunities and values that will guide Forest Service management and reflect values the Forest Service has heard from the public. These goals are not inclusive of all activities that will occur within the geographic area, and do not represent all the values that are present.*

### Enhancing and restoring resiliency

- a) Emphasize restoration of spruce-fir habitat for the Carolina northern flying squirrel and to maintain the health and resiliency of this critical forest type in the face of climate change.
- b) Emphasize restoration along Iron Mountain and areas below 2,500 ft., and mid and old woodland habitat for species requiring young and open forest conditions, such as deer, turkey, pine warblers, and several species of bat.
- c) At mid elevations accessible by existing roads, emphasize restoration of structural and compositional diversity within rich cove ecozones for species such as ruffed grouse, American woodcock, bats, and many salamander species.
- d) Emphasize restoration in rare habitats, such as at Spruce Pinnacle and locations that contain the last strongholds of native Carolina hemlocks. Prioritize Carolina hemlock treatment in this geographic area.

### Connecting people to the land

- a) Direct visitors seeking opportunities for noncommercial mineral collection to the Ray Mine area.
- b) Respond to increased demand for access by a growing public interest in mountain biking, rock climbing, as well as hunting and fishing experiences.
- c) Emphasize the preservation and interpretation of two eligible historic districts on the National Register of Historic Places: Curtis Creek Civilian Conservation Corps Camp and Catawba Falls Historic Hydroelectric Complex. Include Tribes in management and interpretation within these areas.

### Places to be managed in consideration of their unique features

- a) Manage the Big Ivy area with recognition of its unique features
  - i. Improve watershed condition and function in priority watersheds at Dillingham Creek and Upper Ivy River on the Appalachian Ranger District from “functioning at risk” in the Watershed Condition Framework. Because of their location to each other, one Watershed Action Plan could be developed that focuses on supporting the quality, quantity and timing of water by focusing on:
    - a. stream channels, large woody debris, and aquatic habitat for the benefit of aquatic biota
    - b. reducing sedimentation from the road and trail network to improve water quality

- c. reducing terrestrial non-native invasive plants;
  - d. improving forest health
- ii. Maintain and enhance dispersed recreation opportunities and scenic integrity of Corner Rock/Big Ivy area.
- iii. Emphasize access for hunting and fishing during appropriate seasons through consideration of open and seasonally open roads for deer and bear hunting.

#### **Opportunities to partner with others**

- a) Coordinate with adjacent landowners, including the National Park Service Blue Ridge Parkway to address landslide and debris flow hazards, to contribute to health and safety, both on the forest and private lands in the area.
- b) Partner with Mount Mitchell State Park to ensure recreation linkages and high-quality conservation education opportunities.
- c) Continue strengthening partnerships with volunteer organizations to reduce deferred maintenance and increase sustainability of trail and developed and dispersed recreation infrastructure.
- d) Partner with interested Tribes and non-government organizations for spruce-fir restoration.