

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

## Great Balsam Geographic Area

Updated: June 1, 2017

### Description of area

The broad valleys of the region and summits of the Great Balsam Mountains support a diverse range of mid and high elevation forests and high elevation balds that provide habitat for a diversity of species.

The Great Balsam Geographic Area borders the Cherokee Qualla Boundary, marking the modern home of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. The geographic area contains sites connected to the Creek and Cherokee tribes (the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina and the Cherokee Nation and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians). Prior to European and Anglo-American intrusions and settlement along with westward expansion, the Great Balsam Geographic Area was home to the Cherokee and Creek tribes. This area contains several landscape features that figure most prominently in Tribal history and have significant meaning to Tribal identities and beliefs. These locations serve as some of the most important traditional and ceremonial areas of the Cherokee, including the Judaculla and Cowee landscapes.

The Blue Ridge Parkway borders most of the upper reaches of the Great Balsam Mountains, and the geographic area includes the Parkway's highest point at Richland Balsam (6,053 feet). The forest offers backpackers and backcountry hikers an opportunity to experience the region's mountains and waterfalls in solitude. The Moss Knob Shooting Range and the Wayehutta Off-Highway Vehicle use area provide specialized recreation experiences.

Communities within this geographic area include Sylva, Cullowhee, Whittier, and Dillsboro. Cullowhee is the home of Western Carolina University, a public university with an enrollment of over 10,000 students. These communities and others nearby rely on the 66,342 acres of forest land in the geographic area (290,812 acres total). The geographic area is within the Nantahala Ranger District and National Forest System lands within this area lie in Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties.

Management areas within the geographic area include:

- Blue Ridge Parkway corridor
- Mountains-to-Sea National Recreation Trail
- Bryson Branch botanical area
- Inventoried Roadless Areas

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

- Blue Ridge Parkway (National Park Service)

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

The geographic area has great historic significance to the Cherokee and Creek peoples, and the region contains numerous sites connected to community identity. Bordering the Qualla Boundary, the present day home of Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the geographic area provides tribal members with close access to traditional sites and resource collection areas. The Cowee Bald Lookout Tower is located in this geographic area.

The region provides opportunities for scenic driving, day use picnicking, and accessible fishing at Balsam Lake Lodge. Other recreation sites include lake access camps on Bear, Tanasee, and Wolf Lakes and an interpretive trail at a red spruce bog in the Cowee Range.

This geographic area is popular with deer, grouse, turkey, and bear hunters. Additionally, streams and rivers within this geographic area provide anglers high quality trout fishing opportunities.

Tourism, higher education, and health care are all major economic drivers for the local communities. National Forest System lands provide a wide variety of opportunities for nature-based recreation in support of tourism, and both commercial and personal medicinal herb collections all contribute to the local economy.

### **Enhancing and restoring resiliency**

Alongside the Southern Appalachian spruce-fir forests, the area contains a blend of productive cove and oak forests, including stands of high elevation red oaks and northern hardwoods. The area contains high elevation forest communities (high elevation red oak forest, northern hardwood and spruce-fir forest), as well as the special plant communities and wildlife they support. In mid-elevation forests, more regular fire regimes support the diversity of the region's native species. Structurally, the geographic area has more late closed forest than meets desired conditions. The Roy Taylor portion of this area was heavily managed prior to acquisition by the Forest Service in the 1980s. Efforts since have focused on improving forest structure, composition and area streams. Habitat enhancement efforts focus on developing ecosystems that support the deer, bear, golden-winged warbler and ruffed grouse.

Rare habitats in the ecosystem beyond southern Appalachian spruce-fir forest include a red spruce bog, boulderfields, and beech gaps. Rich cove forests are productive with a diverse herb layer, including many medicinal plant species. The Great Balsam Geographic Area's heath balds provide habitat for several species of rhododendron, as well as mountain fetterbush.

### **Clean and abundant water**

The geographic area supports approximately 200 miles of streams and rivers, including the East and West Forks of the Tuckasegee River, and the Tuckasegee River mainstem. The geographic area has several small mountain reservoirs at higher elevations.

Dams on the West Fork and East Fork of the Tuckasegee River provides hydroelectric power, and the West Fork mainstem Tuckasegee Rivers are used for municipal water supplies.

## Goals

### Enhancing and restoring resiliency

- a) Conserve and improve high elevation red oak forests, northern hardwood forests, and spruce-fir forests.
- b) Reduce off-site white pine and restore hardwood stands.
- c) Restore degraded lands and conduct mid- and late-seral composition, structural, and habitat management at Roy Taylor.
- d) Red spruce bog preservation in Alarka Laurel and Roy Taylor.
- a) Enhance, restore, and augment native ginseng populations. Manage permitted collection of American ginseng at sustainable levels.
- e) Enhance structural conditions for ruffed grouse, deer, and turkey by providing more young forest.
- f) Maintain open habitats on Old Bald and Sugar Creek Fields to improve habitat for open area-associated species such as golden-winged warbler and ruffed grouse.

### Providing clean and abundant water

- a) Repair damage to area streams in the Roy Taylor area from practices that occurred prior to Forest Service acquisition.
- b) Provide clean and abundant water to enhance populations of sicklefin redhorse occurring downstream of National Forest System lands.
- c) Enhance brook trout where habitat is suitable through restored aquatic organism passage and population augmentation.

### Connecting people to the land (recreation opportunities, cultural resources, lands, etc)

- a) Provide for through-hike opportunities on the Foothills and Mountains to the Sea Trails
- b) Maintain accessible stream and lake fishing opportunities at Balsam Lake.
- c) Enhance hunter access to this area by maintaining and improving existing infrastructure such as parking areas, access roads, trails, and trailheads.
- d) Provide for sustainable OHV opportunities at the Wayehutta OHV Area.

### Opportunities to partner with others

- a) NCWRC
- b) Partner with off-highway vehicle users and user groups to manage Wayehutta OHV area.
- c) Maintain existing Lake Access Camping Areas
- d) Partner with hunting and fishing organizations and groups to assist with access management efforts.
- e) National Park Service – Blue Ridge Parkway
- f) Partner with Tribes to restore traditional plant species important for tribal arts and culture, where possible and practical.
- g) Consult and partner with Cherokee tribes to identify and preserve special tribal areas and natural resources.
- h) Trail and hiking associations and groups. Continue to participate in the Sicklefin Redhorse Conservation Committee and the Little Tennessee River Native Fish Conservation Partnership to achieve goals tied to clean and abundant water.