

## Highland Domes

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

### Highland Domes Geographic Area

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#### Description of area

“The land of granite walls and waterfalls,” the Highland Domes Geographic Area contains a varied landscape of broad valleys, wild rivers, 300-foot cliffs, and high granitic domes. The region’s geography encompasses peaks such as Yellow Mountain, Terrapin Mountain, Blackrock Mountain, Fodderstock Mountain, and Whiteside Mountain providing large, expansive views and the Panthertown Valley, a landscape unique to the Eastern United States.

The waters of the Highland Domes drain through dramatic rock formations and changes in elevation, with the area’s streams draining into major rivers including the Horsepasture, Chattooga, Tuckasegee, Thompson, Cullasaja, and Whitewater. The Chattooga and Cullasaja Rivers are deep gorges as they drain out of the geographic area. The area’s many waterfalls, which include the highest waterfall east of the Mississippi River, Whitewater Falls, are some of western North Carolina’s most popular attractions. Bogs and streams offer unique habitat for wildlife; trout streams bring many fisherman to the area.

This area contains several landscape features that figure most prominently in Cherokee Tribal history and have significant meaning to Tribal identities and beliefs, including the Judaculla landscape. These locations serve as some of the most important traditional and ceremonial areas of the Cherokee.

The 94,353 acres of National Forest System Land (244,897 total acres within the area) lie in the Nantahala and Pisgah Ranger Districts within the borders of Transylvania, Macon, and Jackson counties. Local population centers include Highlands, Cashiers, Sapphire, and Rosman.

Management areas within the geographic area include:

- Ellicott Rock Wilderness Area and Overflow Creek Wilderness Study Area
- Blue Valley Experimental Forest
- Inventoried Roadless Areas
- Cullasaja Gorge botanical/geological area), Ellicott Rock – Chattooga River botanical/zoological area, Bonas Defeat Gorge geological/scenic area, Cole Mountain-Shortoff Mountain botanical area, Kelsey Track botanical/zoological area, Piney Knob Fork botanical area, Scaly Mountain and Catstairs botanical area, Slick Rock botanical area, Walking Fern Cove botanical area, Whiteside Mountain geological/scenic/botanical area, Whitewater Falls scenic/botanical area, and Dismal Falls botanical/scenic area
- Chattooga River and Horsepasture River, portions of which are designated Wild and Scenic Rivers Cullasaja River, Overflow Creek, Thompson River, Tuckasegee River, and Whitewater River portions of which are newly eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers

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

- Gorges State Park

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

Prior to European and American intrusion and settlement, the lands in the Highland Domes were home to the Cherokee and Creek tribes. The region contains historical sites such as the 1949 Highlands Recreation Area and Civilian Conservation Corps constructed sites.

Almost two thirds of the geographic area is easily accessible by roads, giving visitors a chance to experience the forest in a developed and less challenging setting. Several scenic waterfalls are visible from the roadside. The area features several developed areas and campgrounds that provide opportunities to camp, picnic, fish, and view waterfalls and scenic areas. There are popular hiking trails near open roads such as the Cliffside Interpretive Trail. Hunters and sportsmen can access the forest for ruffed grouse, white tailed deer, turkey, and black bear. The region's rivers provide visitors with access to fishing, with anglers seeking brook trout especially attracted to the headwaters of the Cullasaja, Chattooga, Tuckasegee, and Whitewater Rivers.

For visitors seeking more challenge, 40 percent of the area is in remote and rugged settings, including a network of trails at Panthertown Valley that offer views of the valley's eight major waterfalls. The backcountry provides visitors with the ability to experience long-distance hiking on trails such as the Bartram Trail, horseback riding, and deer and turkey hunting bring visitors away from the roaded areas, while the Chattooga River offers unique backcountry whitewater opportunities. The large granitic domes make the area popular for rock climbers, especially at Big Green and Whiteside Mountain.

Major economic drivers for local communities are tourism, health care, agriculture, and construction. Additionally, due to the areas close proximity to Atlanta, GA and other large urban areas, the region contains many high second homes. National Forest System lands provide a wide variety of opportunities for nature-based recreation in support of tourism.

### **Enhancing and restoring resiliency**

The high elevations, rivers, and deep gorges of the Highland Domes support a unique and diverse ecology. The Panthertown area is unique occurring in a high elevation valley within a matrix of dry-mesic, mesic and acidic cove forests with a cluster of prominent granitic domes overlooking one of the region's largest southern Appalachian bogs. All ecozones within this geographic area are in need of more young forest conditions. More open forest is needed in mid to late seral stages. An overabundance of offsite white pine has impacted the area's species diversity. Peregrine falcon nesting habitat on Whiteside Mountain is critical to maintaining the recovery of the federally de-listed species. The elevations give limited but important opportunities to provide for golden-winged warblers and ruffed grouse. Additionally, this geographic area provides important opportunities to maintain and restore quality habitat for the green salamander.

Rare communities in the region include the high elevation rock outcrops of the granitic domes, which are home to federally endangered rock gnome lichen and numerous species of conservation concern plants. Montane acidic cliffs are scattered across the entire area. More spray cliffs, including Whitewater Falls, largest in the southern region, occur in this geographic area compared to all other geographic

areas. Numerous nonvascular species of conservation are associated with the numerous spray cliffs. Southern Appalachian Bogs within the geographic area support federally listed swamp pink and mountain pitcher plant as many other species of conservation concern. They are threatened by woody plant encroachment and non-native invasive plant infestations.

### **Clean and abundant water**

The region's many rivers and waterfalls provide both water and scenic value to the communities that lie within the Highland Domes Geographic Area. Approximately 400 miles of streams and rivers run through the geographic area on National Forest system lands that support native brook trout and a diversity of other fish species, crayfish and salamanders. Some of these stream and river miles are characterized by tannic water and sandy substrates that are unique to western North Carolina.

PRE-DRAFT

**Goals**

The following goals contribute to identification of management priorities in the Highland Domes 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) Reduce off-site white pine in dry mesic oak, mesic oak, and acidic cove ecozones throughout Southern escarpment.
- b) Provide woodland habitats and young forest in oak-dominated and pine-oak heath ecozones to achieve desired conditions for more early and open mid and late-seral stages. To accomplish this, reduce mesic species encroachment through prescribed burning and harvest at appropriate locations.
- c) Reduce woody plant encroachment and non-native invasive plants on Southern Appalachian bogs and swamp forest bog complexes, improving habitat for bog turtles, swamp pink, and other rare species in Panthertown Valley and Dulany Bog.
- d) Protect unique bryophyte lichen and spikemoss communities in spray cliff ecozones impacted by heavy recreation use, including canyoneering.
- e) Continue to preserve pockets of native eastern and Carolina hemlock.

**Providing clean and abundance water**

- a) Maintain and enhance unique tannic, sandy bottom stream habitat within Panthertown Creek, upper Chattooga River, and Savannah River watersheds to provide quality habitat for brook trout and other native aquatic species.
- b) Enhance brook trout populations through improving aquatic organism passage or population augmentation where habitat is suitable.
- c) In the geographic area, there are five 6th level watersheds identified as areas where the Forest Service will focus resources to improve watershed conditions and function.

**Connecting people to the land**

- a) Protect peregrine falcon nesting habitat while managing rock climbing.
- b) Emphasize interpretive means to convey unique values at Whitewater Falls, Whiteside Mountain, Dry Falls, and the Cullasaja and Whitewater rivers as they are some of the most highly visited sites in the Forests.
- c) Provide mid- to high-elevation hunting opportunities through restored forest structural and compositional diversity for white-tailed deer, wild turkey, and ruffed grouse where forest conditions are appropriate.
- d) Consult and partner with Cherokee tribes to identify and ensure preservation and protection of special tribal areas and to develop interpretation as appropriate.

**Places within the area that will be managed in consideration of their unique features**

- a) Panthertown Valley

- Manage recreation experiences with unique scenic views and trails.
  - Enhance granitic dome communities and reduce off-site white pine.
  - Restore Southern Appalachian bog and swamp forest bog complexes.
  - Reduce user created trails.
- b) Cullasaja Gorge
- Maintain scenic recreation values within the gorge for visitors engaged in hiking, driving,
  - Provide access to waterfall views from roads and trails.
  - Maintain access while sustaining visitor safety at Dry Falls and Bridal Veil Falls, especially in regards to rock falls.
  - Maintain cultural resources and historic values.
- c) Whiteside Mountain
- a. Maintain scenic recreation and traditional cultural values for visitors engaged in sightseeing, hiking, and rock climbing;
  - b. Maintain access while sustaining visitor safety.
- d) Chattooga Wild and Scenic River
- Continue to protect and conserve the outstanding resource values of the corridor and provide sustainable recreational experiences.
- e) Blue Valley
- Continue to provide high quality fishing experiences and associated primitive dispersed camping opportunities in the Overflow Wilderness Study Area and the Blue Valley Experimental Forest.

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

- a) Continue to work with local and regional chambers of commerce.
- b) Collaborate with non-government organization, such as friends groups, trail societies, conservation organizations, recreation organizations, and the state to help manage important resources and social values throughout the geographic area to support diverse use throughout the public.
- c) Continue the partnership with researchers, including the Southern Research Station in the Blue Valley Experimental Forest and the Highlands Biological Station.
- d) Continue partnership with NCWRC to enhance southern Appalachian brook trout populations and occupied range.
- e) Continue to participate in the Little Tennessee River Native Fish Conservation Partnership to the benefit of the Cullasaja River and Little Tennessee River watersheds. The rest of the Geographic Area flows to the Atlantic Slope.
- f) Work with the rock-climbing community to identify appropriate routes and new locations of rare species.