

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

## **Unicoi Mountains Geographic Area**

Updated: June 1, 2017

### **Description of area**

Located at the westernmost edge of the Nantahala National Forest on the border of North Carolina and Tennessee, the Unicoi Mountains Geographic Area stretches from the Unicoi Mountains in the west through the Snowbird Mountains to the edge of the Nantahala Gorge in the east. This area of Western North Carolina contains dozens of creeks, miles of rugged wilderness, and preserved stands of old growth cove forest, including the woods of the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. With a national scenic byway traversing the region, diverse types of visitors can appreciate the region's stretches of forested mountainsides and deep narrow valleys.

Prior to European and Anglo-American settlement along with westward expansion, the Unicoi Mountains GA 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 are important traditional and ceremonial areas for the Cherokee.

The waters of the Unicoi Mountains drain into the Tellico River and Cheoah River, tributaries of the Little Tennessee River; and, at the southern end of the geographic area, into the Valley River, a tributary of the Hiwassee River. The many creeks, including Santeetlah and Snowbird Creeks, on the slopes of the two mountain ranges flow east into the Santeetlah Lake basin. The steep descents of the region's geography create numerous waterfalls and rapids that make the area a popular spot for hiking, trout fishing, and hunting. The area has experienced significant improvements in scenic visibility with reduced air pollution in the region. Air quality is likely to continue to improve toward the goal of natural background visibility by 2064.

Communities within this geographic area include the Snowbird Cherokee Community, Robbinsville, Stecoah, and Andrews. These communities and others nearby rely on the 119,802 acres of forest land in the geographic area (225,031 acres total). The region is within the Cheoah and Tusquitee Ranger Districts. National Forest System lands within this area lie in Graham and Cherokee counties.

Management areas within the geographic area include:

- Joyce Kilmer-Slick Rock Wilderness
- The Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest botanical/zoological/scenic area and Santeetlah Creek Bluffs botanical area
- Appalachian National Scenic Trail Corridor
- Cherohala Skyway National Scenic Byway
- National Historic Trails Corridor (Trail of Tears National Historic Trail)
- Snowbird Wilderness Study Area
- Snowbird Creek and Tellico River, portions of which are eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers, and Santeetlah Creek, portions of which is a newly eligible Wild and Scenic River
- Inventoried Roadless Areas

## **Connecting people to the land**

Cherokee and Creek traditions and culture are showcased in archeological sites in the forest. The region contains a section of the Trail of Tears Historic Trail, which marks the passage of the Cherokee and Creek Tribes who were removed from their lands by the federal government in 1838. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the region was home to several logging and hunting communities, whose presence is preserved in several spots in the forest including the 19<sup>th</sup> century Stewart Cabin near Santeetlah Creek. The geographic area also includes the Junaluska Museum in Robbinsville.

The modern Cherokee Snowbird Community makes its home in the Snowbird Mountains. This community preserves traditional Cherokee lifeways and makes use of the forest to meet cultural needs.

This geographic area provides solitude sought by hikers and backpackers escaping urban centers to find challenging trails and streams of Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness and Snowbird Wilderness Study Area. Local and out-of-state visitors also enjoy Poplar Cove in Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, which is a destination for tourists to the Southern Appalachian region. The Cherohala Skyway, connecting Tellico Plains TN with Robbinsville NC, draws many thousands of visitors each year to the natural beauty of the Nantahala and Cherokee National Forest's Unicoi Mountains, which serve as its scenic backdrop. Rattler Ford Group Camp and Horse Cove Campground provide developed camping for groups, wilderness visitors, and anglers; and just outside the wilderness boundary sits the primitive Swan Cabin which can be reserved for overnight stays. Long-distance hikers enjoy the Benton MacKaye Trail, which passes through Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness; and the Bartram National Recreation Trail and Appalachian National Scenic Trail, both of which traverse Cheoah Bald roadless area.

The undeveloped character of many locations within the geographic area provides undisturbed habitats with abundant populations of game and non-game wildlife which is popular with hunters and bird watchers. The Forest Service maintains a shooting range at Atoah and dispersed camping along Santeetlah Creek and Snowbird Creek which are frequently utilized by hunters and anglers.

Forest products and tourism are economic drivers for the local communities. National Forest System lands provide a wide variety of opportunities in support of both. Additionally, the geographic area is popular for commercial and personal medicinal herb collection as well as ramp collection. The area is important for collection of traditional plants.

## **Enhancing and restoring resiliency**

The geographic area contains some of the region's best examples of old growth cove and mesic and dry mesic oak temperate forests. This geographic area also includes highly impacted eastern hemlock stands, particularly in the Santeetlah Creek watershed. The loss of eastern hemlock in northern hardwood forest potentially impacts long term conifer cover for the endangered Carolina northern flying squirrel, and habitat for range-limited and rare species such as the Junaluska salamander, and golden-winged and cerulean warblers. The geographic area also contains several unique geological features, such as Santeetlah Bluffs.

Rare habitats within the geographic area include boulderfields, heath balds, seeps, and montane cliffs. High elevation openings along the Cherohala Skyway have created grass dominated balds since they

were created over 100 years ago. All these habitats support numerous plant and lichen species of conservation concern.

### **Clean and abundant water**

High mountain seeps and springs feed the public water supply for Robbinsville and Andrews. Many streams and the Tellico River provide habitat for trout, making it a prime destination for fly fishing before they feed into the Tennessee Valley Authority reservoirs at Santeetlah and Fontana Lakes in the Fontana Lake Geographic Area.

Approximately 600 miles of creeks and rivers run through the geographic area on National Forest System lands. Streams within this area provide habitat for numerous populations of southern brook trout and the eastern hellbender.

The geographic area contains geology with high concentrations of sulfide minerals. When exposed by excavation or landslides, these acid-producing rocks can degrade water quality in the immediate area and downstream via runoff, or if the rocks are used in embankments or stockpiled in waste areas.

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## Goals

### Enhancing and restoring resiliency

- a) Focus restoration efforts on increasing the breeding and foraging habitat for golden-winged warblers.
- b) Increase variable size openings in rich cove, mesic oak, northern hardwoods, and high elevation red oak forests to restore natural range of variation, including providing habitat for golden-winged warblers and cerulean warblers within their respective priority areas.
- c) Enhance, restore, and augment native ginseng populations. Manage permitted collection of American ginseng at sustainable levels.
- d) Maintaining and increasing the Carolina northern flying squirrel population through active restoration and habitat enhancement, planting red spruce, in northern hardwood forests within the headwaters of Santeetlah creek and along the Cherohala skyway.
- e) Maintain and restore historic balds.

### Providing clean and abundant water

- a) Maintain water quality in the watersheds that supply water to Andrews and Robbinsville.
- b) Enhance southern Appalachian brook trout where habitat is suitable.
- c) Enhance populations of sicklefin redhorse where habitat is suitable
- d) Minimize acidification of surface waters due to disturbance of acid-producing geology.
- e) There are four 6<sup>th</sup> level priority watersheds targeted for restoration efforts within this geographical area.

### Connecting people to the land

- a) Manage and restore traditional plant species important both for tribal arts and culture and for local communities, including food and medicinal plants, where possible and practical.
- b) Contribute to the economic vitality of the area's forest products industry by meeting forest health and restoration goals.
- c) Respond to demand for a variety of outdoor recreation experiences by continuing to provide developed camping, dispersed camping, and day use sites; with an emphasis on sites supporting tourism and access to regional and national attractions such as the Cherohala Skyway, Appalachian Trail, Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness, and Snowbird backcountry area.
- d) Maintain hike-only trail systems in wilderness and backcountry areas, and continue to provide horseback riding in areas with concentrations of gated NFS roads to augment riding opportunities for equestrian groups and wagon trains.
- e) Respond to demand for hunting opportunities for ruffed grouse, wild turkey, white tailed deer, and black bear by maintaining and enhancing habitat, both alone and in partnership with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.

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

- a) Appalachian Trail and Bartram Trail for their nationally recognized values

- b) Trail of Tears for its historic significance
- c) Cherohala Skyway and its many scenic vistas for its nationally recognized values
- d) Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, for forest health and public enjoyment of the old growth poplar grove
- e) Cheoah Bald, Bob Bald, Hooper's Bald, and other high-elevation heath and grass balds for their historic and botanical significance
- f) Santeetlah Bluffs for continued management to conserve old growth characteristics

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

- a) Continue partnership with trail associations on the Appalachian Trail, Bartram Trail, and Benton MacKaye Trail for improvement and maintenance of these long-distance trails.
- b) Continue partnerships with trail clubs, friends groups, and wilderness advocacy groups to help manage the hike-only trail systems, and maintain or enhance wilderness character in wilderness and wilderness study areas.
- c) Partner with Cherokee National Forest and N.C. Department of Transportation in ongoing maintenance of the Cherohala Skyway, its day-use sites, and vista openings.
- d) Work with the Southern Research Station, universities, and others to facilitate biological and social research tied to Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness.
- e) Partner with Cherokee and Creek Tribes and the National Park Service to manage the Trail of Tears corridor.
- f) Partner with Snowbird Cherokee to manage and restore traditional plant species important for tribal traditions, culture and arts.
- g) Partner with Junaluska Museum to implement Cherokee Tribal interpretation as appropriate.
- h) Continue partnership with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission to maintain and improve the wildlife openings in the geographic area and to maintain and improve the Atoah Shooting Range.
- i) Expand opportunities with the NCWRC for brook trout distribution enhancement.
- j) Work with local government and tourism organizations to support additional access in winter months to extend the recreation season.