

High Peaks of the Black Mountains

The Black Mountains of Yancey County include not only Mt. Mitchell - the highest peak in Eastern North America at 6,684 feet - but also the East's greatest concentration of peaks over 6,000 feet. The 15-mile-long, J-shaped crest of the Black Mountains contains 17 peaks over 6,000 feet and several others just under that elevation. One would need to travel to South Dakota or Colorado to find mountains taller than Mount Mitchell.



The main range of the Black Mountains from NC High Peaks' webcam on Seven Mile Ridge (February 2019)

The identification of North Carolina's highest peak was made in the mid-1800s by Elisha Mitchell, a professor at UNC Chapel Hill. He was dispatched on a geological survey by the state, and hoped to determine the height of several peaks due to questions about the assumption that Grandfather Mountain was the tallest in the state. In 1835 he measured Grandfather, the Roan Highlands, and the Black Mountains with a barometer. The result of his study was that a peak known as the Black Dome in the Black Mountains was not only higher than Grandfather, but also higher than Mt. Washington in New Hampshire, which was then considered the tallest peak of the Appalachian mountain chain.



Elisha Mitchell [Public Domain]

Mitchell returned to the Black Dome in 1838, 1844 and finally in 1857 to confirm his measurements. Tragically, this was his final trip to the Black Dome, as upon his evening return to the Cane River Valley he slipped and fell off a cliff at a waterfall. His body was found by the legendary mountain guide Thomas "Big Tom" Wilson. In 1882, the US Geological Survey accepted Mitchell's measurements and renamed the Black Dome as Mount Mitchell in his honor.



Tomb of Elisha Mitchell [Public Domain]



Main Range of the Blacks from Little Butt

The high vegetation that Mitchell and others traveled through in the Black Mountains prior to the 1900's was an old growth spruce-fir forest, one of several islands of cold-hardy plant life that remained at high elevations in the Southern U.S. after the last ice age receded 16,000 years ago. This forest, noticeably darker to the eye than the lighter-colored hardwoods at lower elevation, gave the Black Mountains their name. It was the old growth hardwood and spruce-fir forests that first attracted timber barons to the Black Mountains, with many moving South after cutting most of the timber in New England and the Upper Midwest.

Unfortunately, there was no such thing as sustainable logging in those days, only clear cutting. As the forests gracing the slopes of the Blacks were steadily decimated in the early 1900s, Governor Locke Craig, State Forester John Simcox Holmes and local residents grew alarmed by the abusive logging practices. The governor encouraged the logging companies to leave the spruce-fir forests at the tops of the peaks, but he also lobbied the NC Legislature to preserve Mount Mitchell and adjacent high peaks as a state park. After initial reluctance, in 1915 lawmakers finally approved the purchase of an area between Stepps Gap and the summit of what is now Big Tom. It was named Mount Mitchell State Park and became one of the nation's first state parks. Since that time the Park has been expanded to include the area north to Cattail Peak and south nearly to Balsam Gap on the Blue Ridge Parkway.



[Photo by Kevin Bischof, Used with Permission]

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Ten Years of Trail Maintenance by NC High Peaks

Ten years ago the founders of High Peaks recognized that no one was taking care of the hiking trails in the Black Mountains and elsewhere in Yancey County. For decades the US Forest Service had provided



this service but due to budget and staff cuts they were no longer able to do so. The Carolina Mountain Club (CMC) was already maintaining trails in the Asheville area including the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (MST) from the Smoky Mountains to Black Mountain Campground. Many of us got our start working on CMC trail crews. We decided to provide a similar service for Forest Service trails in the Blacks.

With tools donated by the Forest Service we formed a weekly trail crew that goes out every Monday, weather permitting. The crew is made up of local men and women who want to “give back” to the trails in recognition of the pleasure we take from hiking in these beautiful mountains.



Before and After Photos of Tree Removal and Step Construction

We do our best to keep the trails clear and safe by removing fallen trees blocking the trail, weed-eating annual growth to prevent the trail from closing in and doing various forms of “tread work”. Tread work includes widening the tread where needed, installing and maintaining waterbars to divert rain off the trail, installing steps to prevent further erosion where the water cannot be channeled off the trail and,



Before and After Weed-Eating Thick Growth on the Big Butt Trail

when necessary, relocating the trail. The latter are called “relos” and may be just a simple shift of the trail a few feet or a totally new route. The objective of a relo is to build a more sustainable trail that will require less maintenance. Relos require a lot of planning and permitting so as not to compromise the ecology and historical character of the area. These reviews are done by the US Forest Service.

Over the years we have built partnerships with many organizations. Our primary land management agency partner is the US Forest Service-Appalachian Ranger District headquartered in Mars Hill. They have provided us with tools and materials over the years as well as encouragement and guidance. Early on we

became the Friends of Mount Mitchell State Park and through that association we have supported their trail maintenance activities and other programs. A few years ago we became the Crabtree Falls Chapter of the Friends of the Blue Ridge Parkway. As a Parkway Partner we maintain Parkway trails including Crabtree Falls Loop and the Blue Ridge Pinnacle Trail. Over the years we have done special trail projects with Mountain Heritage High School and Mayland Community College at their Star Park.



Removing Debris at Linville Falls

We have leveraged our efforts through the Recreational Trails Program by applying for and receiving three major grants. Using the grants we have hired a local trail contractor to work on the Mount Mitchell trail both in the park and on Forest Service land. This was the subject of the June Newsletter.

Why do volunteer crew members come out week after week to do hard physical labor? As one crew member said “you couldn’t pay me enough to do this work but I’ll do it as a volunteer”! First of all we get a good physical workout each week. Secondly, we enjoy the company of like-minded individuals working to a common goal. And of course we have the spectacular scenery of the Black Mountains! In winter there are magnificent views through leafless trees, in spring we enjoy following the succession of wildflowers. In summer we can work in the cooler temperatures of the highest elevations in lush green forests. And who doesn’t love the colors of fall? On almost every trail there is a breath-taking view or an interesting environment of trees, plants, flowers, rock formations, insects, etc.

We hope to continue giving back to the trails in the Black Mountains of Yancey County for many years to come! If you would like to join us on a Monday just e-mail trails@nchighpeaks.org

