

ROAN MOUNTAIN

a jewel of nature



Famous for its spectacular natural gardens of Catawba rhododendrons, Roan Mountain shelters a rich diversity of life, from spruce-fir forests to vast grassy balds.

USDA Forest Service
Appalachian Ranger District
Toecane Ranger Station



A FIVE-MILE RIDGE

Roan Mountain is actually not one mountain, but a high ridge about 5 miles long. It ranges from a height of 6,286 feet at Roan High Knob to a low of 5,500 feet at Carver's Gap.

No one knows the origin of the mountain's name. Some claim the name refers to the roan or reddish color of the mountain when rhododendrons bloom in June or the mountain ash berries appear in September. Others say the name comes from Daniel Boone's roan horse, because he and his horse were frequent visitors.



THE NATURAL GARDENS

Every June thousands of people flock to Roan Mountain to walk among the magnificent mounds of rhododendrons. In a good year, these dense shrubs, standing taller than a person, create a spectacular display with thousands of blooms. Each bush's round, manicured shape is a testament to severe pruning by wind and winter weather. The peak blooming time is usually around the third week of June.

Today hundreds of acres of Catawba rhododendrons (*Rhododendron catawbiense*) cover the high elevations, although in the 1930's truck-loads of rhododendrons were carried away and sold to nurseries! The primary threat to the rhododendrons today comes from trees growing too closely, shading them from the sun.

A CANADIAN FOREST



During the ice age, about 20,000 years ago, spruces and firs dominated the Southern Appalachian forest. Then as the climate warmed, the spruce-fir forests gradually retreated north to Canada, eventually remaining only on the tops of the highest southern

mountains, like Roan Mountain. Along with the red spruce and Fraser fir, other unusual plants and animals were isolated in cool, Canada-like climate above 5,000 feet.

Roan Mountain's forests were logged in the 1920's and 1930's. According to a local logger, all merchantable timber was cut by 1939. In 1941, Roan Mountain became part of the Pisgah and Cherokee National Forests and the forest returned.

In the 1950's a tiny insect, the balsam wooly adelgid, first appeared in the Southern Appalachians. The adelgid feeds on Fraser firs and eventually kills any fir that is large enough to have bark crevices.

The insect doesn't affect the young trees, so thousands of fir seedlings often form a thick "carpet" of trees under dying firs.

GRASSY BALDS



ound Bald, Jane Bald, Grassy Ridge: these large grassy balds east of Carver's Gap are rare and beautiful ecosystems. The origin of the balds is not clearly understood. In the last century, cattle and sheep, as well as goats, horses, mules, and hogs extensively grazed the mountain. Some scientists speculate that continuous grazing by prehistoric animals, followed by elk and bison, maintained the balds for millennia.



Grassy balds are regarded as natural communities, although shrubs and trees will invade the open areas if left alone. The Forest Service maintains the balds by mowing and grazing.

PAST VISITORS



The first human visitors to Roan Mountain were Indians, who lived at the base of the mountain and traveled across its gaps. The first people to study the mountain were botanists, such as Andre' Michaux, John Fraser, and Asa Gray. They described rare plant communities and discovered scores of “new” plants, including Fraser fir, Catawba rhododendron, and Grays lily.

Around 1870, General John T. Wilder bought 7,000 acres along the top and sides of Roan Mountain. It was Wilder who built the road to Carver's Gap. He also constructed a 20-room log inn near the summit of Roan High Knob in 1877, then replaced it with the luxurious Cloudland Hotel. For about 20 years guests enjoyed the “pure air, the delightful temperature, the clear, cold spring water, and the perfume-laden woodlands.” Today little evidence remains of the once grand hotel.

TRAILS: An easy, paved trail starts at the information cabin and winds through rhododendrons to an overlook. You can choose between a short, 0.3-mile loop or continue on a longer, figure-eight loop. The **Cloudland Trail** is a moderate, 1.2-mile hike from the end of the Cloudland parking area to Roan High Bluff Overlook. The **Appalachian Trail** crosses Roan Mountain on its trek from Maine to Georgia.

MAP LEGEND

Restrooms F=Flush V=Vault	Paved Road
Information	Gravel Road
Picnic Tables	Appalachian Trail
Parking	Cloudland Trail
Scenic View	Garden Trails

Information: An information cabin is staffed and open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day from Memorial Day through Labor Day and 5 days a week during April, September, and October. A variety of books and maps are sold at the cabin.

How to Get There: Take NC 261 north from Bakersville, NC, or follow TN 143 south from Roan Mountain, TN. The highway crosses Roan Mountain at Carver's Gap. The 2-mile road from Carver's Gap to the gardens is open from May until late October. Even after the road is gated, cross-country skiers and hikers are welcome to explore the winter beauty of Roan Mountain.

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