

Hike of the month: Brushy Mountain

Hike to heath bald offers expansive views

By Morgan Simmons
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GATLINBURG - Brushy Mountain may not be the tallest peak in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, but it offers some of the best views.

At an elevation of 4,900 feet, Brushy Mountain is overshadowed by its neighbor to the south, Mount LeConte, which rises to 6,593 feet. Porter Creek Valley is to the east, and off in the distance toward the Tennessee-North Carolina divide are Porters Mountain, Woolly Tops Mountain, the rocky face of Greenbrier Pinnacle and Mount Guyot.

There are two hiking trails leading to Brushy Mountain. One starts at the end of the Greenbrier Road and makes for a 10.8-mile round trip.

A shorter route to Brushy Mountain is the Trillium Gap Trail, which starts at the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail near Gatlinburg. After 2.9 miles the trail arrives at a junction. Go left, and it's less than half a mile to Brushy Mountain.

Continue up the mountains, and the Trillium Gap Trails takes you another 3.6 miles to the top of Mount LeConte.

Brushy Mountain's midelevation perspective isn't the only thing that makes it an exceptional viewing platform. The mountaintop is covered by one of the largest heath balds in the Smokies. Because of their harsh soil conditions, heath balds are dominated by low-growing shrubs. Instead of trees, you have an impenetrable cover of rhododendron, mountain laurel, sand myrtle and blueberry.

The Smokies have an estimated 300 heath balds totaling approximately 7,300 acres. They appear in the distance as dark green streaks running down the narrow ridges and, unlike grassy balds, which park managers have to clear periodically to prevent forest encroachment, heath balds are self-sustaining because of the high acid content of their soil.

In 2005 researchers from Western Carolina University completed radiocarbon dating on soils dug from 12 heath balds in the park. The soils were deeper than expected - nearly two feet deep - and some of the bottom layers proved to be nearly 3,000 years old.

The research showed that heath balds, unlike the park's grassy balds, are too old to be linked to man-made forces such as livestock grazing and logging. The study also found evidence of charcoal in the lowest layers of most of the balds, suggesting they originated

from lightning strikes along the exposed, knife-edge ridges, perhaps during dry climate cycles.

Radiocarbon tests showed the soils on Brushy Mountain to be 1,600 years old - about half the age of the heath balds on Mount Sterling, and along the Alum Cave Trail. Rob Young, professor of geology at Western Carolina University, said some of the soils sampled in the study were as young as 100 years old, indicating that heath bald formation is an ongoing process.

"The only thing that grows in the heaths are acid-loving plants like laurel and blueberry," Young said. "The soil is basically toxic. It looks wonderful, but if you planted pansies in it, they'd be dead in a few days."

On a recent visit to Brushy Mountain via the Trillium Trail, Grotto Falls, 1.5 miles into the hike, was in all its glory thanks to the wet weather. When we reached Brushy Mountain, the sand myrtle was in full bloom. The mountain laurel should be blooming on the mountain about now, and the Catawba rhododendron should be flowering in a couple of weeks.

To reach the Trillium Gap trail head, turn left at light 8 onto Historic Nature Trail/Airport Road in Gatlinburg, and bear right onto Cherokee Orchard Road. After about three miles the one-way road turns into the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail. The Trillium Gap trail to Brushy Mountain (and Mount LeConte) is about 1.4 miles on the right.

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