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Blue Ridge Echo

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By R. Kelly Coffey

images/voice_uploads/BrushyMtnsCircle.gif">Stop at almost any east-facing overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway in northwestern North Carolina and you will see layers of mountains retreating into the distance. Most people assume that they are looking at the Blue Ridge Mountains. While spurs of the Blue Ridge range do taper to the east, the most prominent peaks and ridges of the Blue Ridge Mountains end at the escarpment. So, what are those ridges that make Parkway views spectacular?

Those distant mountains comprise a separate, three-segment, low-elevation range that shadows the more prominent Blue Ridge. The peaks of this range generally top-out at about 3,000 feet. Commonly known as the South Mountains, the Brushy Mountains, and the Sauratown Mountains, these distinct groups of mountains in the Piedmont- dissected by the Catawba and Yadkin Rivers- form a linear pattern that trends southwest-northeast and collectively form a range that I refer to as the Foothills Range. A significant aspect of southern Appalachian geography, the Foothills Range is rich in history, full of



geological curiosities, and offers abundant scenery and recreation.

Where it all began

The Foothills Range is the remnant of the original Appalachians. While geologists have varying interpretations of the geologic history of the southern mountains - due in part to the extreme age of the range - one simplified version is as follows.

Although the present Appalachians are no longer being built up, three mountain-building episodes (called “orogenies”) have occurred in the Appalachians’ geologic past- the Taconic, Acadian, and Alleghanian. Mountain-building occurs as various geologic forces push rock to higher elevations. A modern-day example of mountain-building can be seen on the west coast, where earthquakes and volcanoes are evidence of the still-rising Cascade and Sierra Nevada ranges. Similar forces were at work millions of years ago in the east. The African continental plate collided with the North American plate and the collision lifted up the mountains during three distinct periods. The “collision,” however, was very slow and lasted millions of years.

The first period, called the Taconic Orogeny, took place before plants and animals existed. This first range eroded, and the Piedmont is the remains of the original mountain range in eastern North America. Bits and pieces of the range contained rock that resisted erosion, with some concentrated in a single area. These leftovers can be seen in the South Mountains, the Brushy Mountains, and the Sauratown Mountains.

Following the Taconic Orogeny, the Acadian Orogeny resulted in the northern Appalachians. The southern Appalachians (west of the Blue Ridge) were built during the

following Alleghenian Orogeny. Geologically, then, the Piedmont and its low-elevation mountains are part of the Appalachian Mountains, just older than the rest.

South Mountains

The South Mountains rise a few miles to the north of the South Carolina border and extend up to the east-flowing Catawba River, just south of Morganton and Hickory. Much of this territory is encompassed by the South Mountains State Park. Today visitors to the South Mountains find numerous hiking trails and trout streams. In the 19th century the streams also contained gold. Deposits found in North Carolina and northern Georgia in the early 1800s led to what is commonly called America's first gold rush. While underground mining was characteristic in some areas, placer mining (stream panning) was the preferred method in the South Mountains. Significant amounts of gold were panned from streams in the South Mountains- enough, in fact, to prompt the construction of a private mint in Rutherford County. Even today, recreation gold hunters occasionally find nuggets and dust. Several diamonds of significant size have also been discovered in the South Mountains, which is something of a mystery, as the area contains no rock formations typically found in association with diamonds.

Brushy Mountains

The Brushy Mountains rise north of the Catawba River, and run parallel to the northeast flowing Yadkin River. The only section of the Foothills Range without a state park, the Brushy Mountains are well-known for apple production as a result of their distinctive topography. Apple trees grow best in cooler mountain climates, but the risk of growing apples in the mountains is that spring frosts frequently occur as the trees are blooming- ruining the crop. Consequently, an ideal site for an orchard is a hilltop or mountain peak where cold

(heavier) air will quickly drain downslope, leaving warmer (lighter) frostfree air near the apple trees. In other words, local elevation is just as important as absolute elevation. For example, a hilltop with an elevation of 3,500 feet will not shed cold air as readily if the nearby valley has an elevation of 3,000 feet. In the Brushies, however, the change in local elevation in relation to the surrounding Piedmont is significant, providing a perfect topographic niche for apple growing.

Like the South Mountains, the mineral wealth of the Brushies is remarkable. Various types of precious gems have been found in the low-lying hills, including some of the world's finest emeralds.

Being accessible to populated areas of the state yet rugged enough to seem remote, the Brushy Mountains, since colonial times, have attracted those needing a hiding place. During the Revolutionary War, an escaped Loyalist prisoner wrote of his experience hiding out in the Brushies. There he found others who were also on the run from the Patriots. In the Brushies he found a safe haven "where there was nothing but Indian paths". Around the end of the Civil War a notorious band of robbers took advantage of the chaotic situation in the South and used the Brushy Mountains as a base camp from which to set out from to plunder and kill with impunity. The roots of stock car racing are generally identified as being in the Brushy Mountains, as early drivers achieved their racing skills making moonshine and running from the law along the winding mountain roads.

Sauratown Mountains

The Brushies end where the Yadkin River makes a sharp turn to the south, with the Sauratown Mountains picking up the Foothills Range on the north side of the river bend.

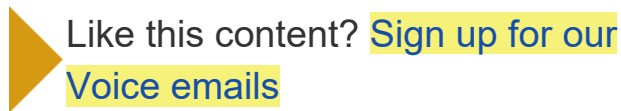
Named after a local Indian group and commonly known as “the mountains away from the mountains”, the Sauratown Mountains cover less area than the Brushies or the South Mountains; yet the most prominent and recognizable peaks are found here. Unlike the rest of the Foothills Range, where the mountains rise gently from the Piedmont, the Sauratown Mountains ascend abruptly from the surrounding landscape. As a result, some of the best views in the Foothills Range can be found here. The contrast with the relatively flat Piedmont displays a panorama different from that seen from the Blue Ridge. The tall buildings of Winston-Salem, for example, appear as a small urban island in a forested expanse. Pilot Mountain with its mesa appearance, defines the northern Piedmont. Known to Indians as “Jomeeokee” or “The Great Guide”, the peak served as a landmark for traveling Indians and early settlers. Two state parks- Pilot Mountain and Hanging Rock- are located in the Sauratown Mountains.

The mountains of the Foothills Range were the first highlands encountered by westward-moving explorers and settlers, with the names of these mountains appearing on the earliest maps of North Carolina- several years before peaks of the Blue Ridge were named. Pilot Mountain was originally called “Mt. Ararat” by white settlers, after the biblical mountain upon which Noah’s ark came to rest. Some early maps refer to the South Mountains as the “Montague Hills”. The Brushy Mountains, however, have always been known by their current name.

With few exceptions, we are unable to witness geologic change because it is generally perceptible only over thousands or millions of years. The importance of the Foothills Range is that it offers us a glimpse of the distant future of the southern Appalachians, and a reminder of the continuous erosional processes at work literally beneath our feet. The Smokies, the Blue Ridge, and other Appalachian

ranges will someday be gentle echoes of their current majesty - just as the South, Brushy, and the Sauratown Mountains are today.

For directions, recreation opportunities, and more information on South Mountains, Pilot Mountain, and Hanging Rock State Parks, visit the North Carolina State Parks website at <https://ils.unc.edu/parkproject/main/visit.html>.



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