

## Mountain Balds



Those peculiar Blue Ridge habitats known as mountain balds have received much speculation and lore in the settlement history of this region. The fact that there were "bald" areas on some ridges and mountain tops in this region before the European whites settled here is not disputed, yet the origins of these sites are often contested. Theories relating their presence to Indian burning, animal browsing, fires, and prehistoric forest destructions of some other kind have all been included in the origin speculations. Likely no one factor caused all of the Appalachian balds to form the same way in every location, yet we know that forest regeneration in the southern Appalachians is always successional, and no open area devoid of trees will remain open without some influence to keep the forest from returning.

The Indians often referred to these balds as "naked places", and open balds were obviously encountered by early white settlers when they first arrived here. These balds were used by the settlers to graze livestock, hunt game, and were allowed to burn naturally or deliberately. Some were burned inadvertently during the logging phase of cutting timber in the mountains, when fires started from such operations. In a few cases, new balds were formed by catastrophic fires which burned away forests or most of the organic material in logged forest soils. By the 1930's, fire control was a prime directive of regional land management, and exclusion of fire and other disturbances to the high balds meant that forests marched back into the habitats. The abundance of "bald" place names seen on any topographic USGS map of the region suggests a much higher incidence of these habitats once existed. Today, most of these sites have returned to forest. Only where managed by grazing, mowing, or burning, the early-successional habit of balds can be retained. This management style is now being done for several major balds on Federal Lands in the Blue Ridge region, since there is a keen interest in the historic, scientific, and aesthetic interests in these open places.

A southern Appalachian bald is not easily typified, as the character of the bald depends upon the stage of succession. A site devoid of all trees and with scant shrubs is usually termed a grassy bald. These sites are characterized by herbaceous plants—grasses, sedges, and forbs which constitute a meadow that waves and flows in the breezes of the high mountains. Some of the Blue Ridge region's most rare plant species occur in balds, or vicinity of bald-like areas (such as rock outcrops), since many of these plants need sunlight to survive and regenerate, and upon a return to shrubs or trees, their habitat is lost.

A shrub bald has seen the encroachment of woody shrubs and small trees to the extent that at least half of the ground surface of the bald is shaded by woody growth. Shrub balds can be dominated by rhododendron, mountain laurel, blueberry, blackberry, alder, bush-honeysuckle, or other thicket-forming shrubs. Depending upon elevation of the bald, one might find in a shrub bald other woody species like yellow birch, beech, northern red oak, buckeye, mountain-ash, mountain maple, serviceberry, black chokeberry, maleberry, mountain fetterbush, Fraser fir, witch-hazel, American chestnut, hawthorn, alternate-leaf dogwood, and minniebush.

A rocky outcrop is a natural community which is dependent upon the open expanses afforded by the scant availability of soil. This is similar to conditions of a grassy bald, often with the same plant species supported. Often, balds include rocky outcrops, or rocky outcrops with patches of soil are inclusive of grassy bald or shrub bald communities.

