

Southern 5,000-footers: Peakbagging's Loneliest List

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In a land of boiled peanuts, Civil War memorabilia, pickup trucks, and strange accents lives a unique list of mountains with names like Yellow Face, Shining Rock, Graveyard Ridge, and Big Butt. Too tall to fit in with the 4,000-foot peaks of the Northeast and too short to stand with the 14,000-foot peaks of the West, the 5,000-foot peaks of the South, all 198 of them, have an identity crisis. Like a mediocre high school athlete, a kid who's good enough to be on the team yet not good enough to be a starter, the mountains on this south-of-the-Mason-Dixon Line list don't know what to do with themselves. But I knew what to do with them. I had to climb them. During my decade-long project to summit every Southern peak above 5,000 feet, a list that bottoms out at 5,010-foot Boteler Peak and reaches up to 6,684-foot Mount Mitchell, I saw the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The good includes a feature unique to the South, which is the grassy bald. At times surpassing the dimensions of city blocks, grassy balds void of trees (hence "bald") and carpeted with grasses. They're found high on high summits and ridgelines. The views from these perches are nearly unsurpassed. In Southern fashion, ridgeline upon ridgeline is stacked one behind the other, at times seeming one stacked on top of the other. Such views stretch to the horizon all around, as far as the eye can see. It's quite the sight.

The bad includes a feature also unique to the South, which is the rhododendron thicket. Accurately nicknamed "hells," these thickets appear to be out of place in American mountains, looking like they belong to the jungles of the Congo, the Amazon Basin, or Vietnam. With each rhododendron growing close to its neighbor, at times a hiker cannot force his way through a hell no matter how much he may push, shove, and swear. Sprinkled within these thickets are stands of stunted mountain laurel, the little sister to rhododendron. Greenbrier vines, which look like barbed wire, hang from the canopy and expand a bushwhacker's foul-mouthed repertoire.

And the ugly? My pursuit of the 5,000-footers actually wasn't that ugly. When it wasn't raining and when the thermometer wasn't stuck below freezing, when the ground hornets' nests were not stirred up and when the 4,000-vertical-foot climbs eased near the summits, it was actually quite enjoyable and pretty. Blooming azaleas, cardinal flowers, bluets, trilliums, and

lilies speckled mountainsides while forests that contain more species of trees than all of Europe combined gently shaded them from a hot Southern sun. White-tailed deer, elk, black bears, and songbirds added to a feeling of being in Eden.

The lonely ones are often the unpopular ones. Despite hundreds of people climbing the forty Southern peaks above 6,000 feet, only three people, including me, have tackled the additional 158 peaks to reach all 198. This is for good reason. To hike this list you have to trek more than 700 miles, climb more than 250,000 vertical feet, and access the most remote regions of North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. But the harder you work for something, the greater the reward. So when I reached peak number 198 this summer, I surely felt rewarded. It felt good to become a friend of the 5,000-footers. Now they'll be lonely until a fourth person climbs them all.