

South Mountains State Park ^[1]

South Mountains State Park

North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation, 2015; Revised by Jared Dease, Government and Heritage Library, January 2023

<https://www.ncparks.gov/> ^[2]

Established: 1978

GPS Coordinates: [35.5963,-81.6](#) ^[3]

Size: 18,627 acres

See also: [Exploring North Carolina: North Carolina State Parks, Trails, Lakes, Rivers & Natural Areas](#)^[4]

Park Area History

The South Mountains, carved out of the Blue Ridge by erosion, are a broad belt of peaks and knobs rising abruptly from a deep valley. These steep, rugged mountains encompass 100,000 acres in Burke, Cleveland and Rutherford counties.

The Catawba Valley and the gaps across the mountain ranges to the west were once major travel routes. The South Mountains served as a buffer zone between the Cherokee and the Catawba Indians, and the first European settlers in the area farmed the fertile land along the Catawba River.

In 1828, gold was discovered at Brindle Creek. Legend holds that gold flakes and grains were first discovered in the mud used to seal a log cabin. The ensuing gold rush attracted immigrants, mining companies and enslavers. Gold was mined into the early 20th century, but activity in the gold mines eventually declined.



Photograph of Camp Dyer, a Civilian Conservation Corps Camp, near Morganton, N.C., ca. 1930. The development of the land that is now South Mountains State Park began at Camp Dyer in the 1930s. From the collection of North Carolina State Parks. Development of land in what is now South Mountains State Park began in the 1930s when Camp Dyer, a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp, was established at Enola. Those employed at the camp constructed forest service roads, cleaned stream beds and built a forest observation tower. The Lower and Upper CCC roads are still in use as trails at the park today.

Establishment of the State Park

The park was established as a result of recommendations made by a National Park Service study conducted in coordination with the state of North Carolina. Though proposals for the park began in the 1940s, it was not until 1974 that funds were appropriated to purchase the land. The first land acquisition totaled 5,779 acres. Additional land has since been added, bringing the park to its present size of approximately 18,000 acres.

Park Geology and Ecology

While most of the high points average approximately 2,000 feet in elevation, Buzzard's Roost towers some 3,000 feet above the surrounding landscape. Elevations within the park itself range from less than 1,200 feet at points along Jacob's Fork River to 3,000 feet on Buzzard's Roost along the park's western boundary.

Water winding through the park to the Catawba River cuts deep into the terrain, forming rugged and steep slopes. The most spectacular feature in the park is High Shoals Falls on Jacob's Fork River. Here, a torrent of water drops 80 feet over a cliff face of bare rock. In addition, Chestnut Knob offers tranquility and a view of surrounding peaks and ridges.

South Mountains contains a number of different forest types within the park's boundaries, including pure conifer, mixed conifer, hardwood and climax hardwood forests. The relatively undeveloped park area includes ecologies from the upper piedmont to the mountains. Oak, hickory and a variety of pines are the predominant species in the park.

The park contains numerous streams where wildflowers can be found, including Jack-in-the-pulpit, lady slipper and foam flowers. Mountain laurel and rhododendron are also present.

Wildlife is abundant in the forests of South Mountains, though many of the animals stay unseen by human visitors. Salamanders, frogs and toads reside in the moist areas of the park. Common reptiles include eastern fence lizards, skinks and a variety of small snakes. Though most of the snakes in the park are harmless and rarely encountered, the venomous copperhead and timber rattlesnake are present, and hikers should exercise caution.

More than 60 species of birds are known to nest at South Mountains. While most species found in the park are typical of the western piedmont, other common species include the ruffed grouse, black-throated green warbler and rose-breasted grosbeak. Other species include Acadian flycatchers, common crows, Carolina chickadees, wood thrushes, red-eyed vireos, oven birds, hooded warblers, indigo buntings and Eastern towhees. Common ravens have also nested on rock ledges near High Shoals Falls.

White-tailed deer, black bears and many smaller mammals also call the park home. Woodchucks may be seen along grassy roadsides, and chipmunks inhabit the forests along with their larger cousin, the gray squirrel. Raccoons and Virginia opossums forage along the streams. Also, several species of small rodents, shrews and eastern moles are South Mountains forest inhabitants seldom encountered by park visitors.

References:

North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation. South Mountains State Park.<https://www.ncparks.gov/state-parks/south-mountains-state-park> [5] (accessed October 25, 2023).

Additional Resources:

North Carolina. 1994. South Mountains State Park. [Raleigh, NC]: The Division.

North Carolina. 1993. General management plan for South Mountains State Park. [Raleigh, N.C.]: Dept. of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources, Division of Parks and Recreation, Planning and Development Section.
<https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/general-management-plan-for-s...> [6]

North Carolina. 1979. South Mountains State Park master plan: Burke & Cleveland counties, N.C. [Raleigh]: The Division.
<https://archive.org/details/southmountainsst79unse> [7]

North Carolina. 2007. South Mountains State Park. Raleigh, NC: Division of Parks and Recreation.
<https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/south-mountains-state-park-ma...> [8]

Image Credits:

[Camp Dyer, Enola, N.C.]. Photograph. ca. 1930. Collection of North Carolina State Parks.

Subjects:

[Natural resources](#) [9]

[Parks](#) [10]

[Places](#) [11]

Origin - location:

[Burke County](#) [12]

From:

[NC Division of Parks and Recreation, NC Dept. of Natural and Cultural Resources](#) [13]

20 November 2015

Source URL: <https://ncpedia.org/south-mountains-state-park>

Links

[1] <https://ncpedia.org/south-mountains-state-park> [2] <https://www.ncparks.gov/> [3] <https://www.google.com/maps/@35.595234,-81.6108376,15z> [4] <https://ncpedia.org/exploring-north-carolina-north-0> [5] <https://www.ncparks.gov/state-parks/south-mountains-state-park> [6] <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/general-management-plan-for-south-mountains-state-park/3708818> [7] <https://archive.org/details/southmountainsst79unse> [8] <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/south-mountains-state-park-master-plan-burke-county-nc/3708819> [9] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/natural-resources> [10] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/parks> [11] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/places> [12] <https://ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/mountain-17> [13] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/nc-division>