

Wayah Bald Lookout Tower



Wayah Bald has a vantage point 5,342 feet in elevation in the Nantahala National Forest, near Franklin, North Carolina. On a clear day, you can see north to the Great Smoky Mountains in Tennessee and south into the rolling hills of Georgia. Take a short hike from the summit parking area to climb an old stone fire tower, built in 1937 by the Civilian Conservation Corps, to witness panoramic views of the southern Appalachian mountain chain.

Situated along both the Appalachian Trail and Bartram Trail, the 53-foot three-story stone lookout on Wayah Bald was decommissioned in the 1940s. Today, the tower is open except in winter when snow closes the road to the top. It was listed on the National Historic Lookout Register in 2007, and there is no admission charge. Signs atop the tower educate visitors on the surrounding mountains. There are toilets at the parking area, a welcome sight in the forest!



When built in 1937, Wayah Bald Fire Tower had an interior stairway to the second story, where an external wooden catwalk encircled a public observation level enclosed by 12 windows. The third story housed fire-detecting equipment and served as the lookout, with 16 windows providing a 360-degree view of the Nantahala National Forest. It also contained living quarters for the watchmen, including two drop-down beds attached to the wall and a wood stove for cooking and heat. These amenities allowed uninterrupted lookout service for up to two months at a time. Food, water and mail were delivered weekly by the nearby CCC camp. By the mid 1940s, cracks began to develop in the stone tower, allowing water in and damage to begin. Since there were other nearby lookouts, the fire detection service at Wayah Bald was stopped in 1945. Two years later, the forest service removed the upper levels of the tower for safety reasons.

The bald is especially beautiful in May and June when the rhododendron, azaleas, and other wildflowers bloom. Evidence of Indian use of the bald as hunting grounds dates back to 300 B.C. Wayah is a Cherokee word for “wolf” since red wolves roamed in abundance here.

Directions

To reach Wayah Bald Lookout Tower Trail from Franklin, North Carolina, travel west along US 64 (Mountain Waters Byway) for 3.7 miles and turn right at the Wayah Bald directional sign (right on Old Murphy Road/State Road 1442, then a quick left onto State Road 1310/Wayah Road). Go 9 miles, turn right onto a National Forest Road 69, at the top of the ridge at the Appalachian Trail crossing, and go 4.3 miles to the end.