

# The Southern Appalachians: An Azalea Paradise

By Charles Andrews—Cumming, Georgia

North America claims the majority of the world's deciduous azaleas with a current count of 17 species. Asia and Europe have only a handful combined. None are in the Southern Hemisphere. While one of the American natives is a western species, one is a cool-climate northeast species, and some are Coastal Plain species, the epicenter of our native azaleas resides in the Southern Appalachians and foothills from Virginia to Alabama. Here resides the highly praised *R. calendulaceum* (flame azalea), called by William Bartram, "this most celebrated species of Azalea ... certainly the most gay and brilliant shrub yet known." Frederick Pursh said, "It is, without exception, the handsomest shrub in north America." Joining it in the mountains and foothills are the red to orange *R. cumberlandense* (Cumberland azalea), the white *R. arborescens* (sweet azalea) and *R. viscosum* (swamp azalea), and four early blooming pinks: *R. vaseyi* (pinkshell azalea), *R. canescens* (Piedmont azalea), *R. periclymenoides* (pinxterbloom azalea) and *R. prinophyllum* (roseshell azalea).

For this reason, George McLellan and Don Hyatt, members of both the Azalea Society of America and the American Rhododendron Society (ARS) have been making annual extended spring trips to Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia to see our magnificent azaleas and other flora of this area. George has been going on this Southern Appalachian pilgrimage since the 1990s. Don has gone almost as long. Providing an itinerary and list of motels, George and Don graciously invite others to join them. Most participants are members of ASA and/or ARS. I have been going for several years. [Photos 1 and 2]

The entire trip usually extends for a week to 10 days in the middle of June, though one can pick and choose

portions. The group moves lodging from place to place to be near the next days' excursions (e.g., Mountain City, TN; Franklin, NC; Robbinsville, NC). Individuals make their own reservations. Excursions vary from mostly driving with stops along the roadway (e.g., Blue Ridge Parkway), to short walks (e.g., Hooper Bald), to long hikes (e.g., Gregory Bald).

The Azalea Chapter ARS takes many field trips every year. Most are one-day affairs in Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina, and South Carolina. A favorite is Mt. Cheaha in Alabama. Together, all these trips from Virginia to Alabama allow you to see many of our native species in the wild and see various other native plants and outstanding natural sights.

Whether you join these fun-loving groups or head out on your own, you should see our Southern Appalachian azaleas in their native locations. Often Southern Appalachian azaleas are found on balds. Southern Appalachian balds are on the tops of mountain ridges and crests below the timber line; but where you would normally expect forest growth, the bald is mostly covered in native grasses and shrubs. At 4,000 to 6,000 feet, these open balds are ideal for some of our native azaleas. The origin of these balds is uncertain, though grazing from deer and elk and later grazing animals of settlers kept the balds open. With government acquisition of most of the balds, little grazing has taken place, and the balds have slowly become overgrown and reduced in size. Only recently has the US Forest Service recognized the importance of keeping the balds open.

Presented here are some of the best locations to see Southern Appalachian native azaleas, listed roughly geographically northeast to southwest (See map on page 20). Bloom times vary depending on the species or variety. Even within a species, the peak bloom will vary from

▼ Photo 1—2017 Field Trip Group (l to r): Bud Gressman, Joe Nicholson, Jim Dezzutti, George McLellan, Rick Bauer, Jan Nicholson, Karel Bemady, Don Hyatt, Dale Berrong.



Photo Charles Andrews





Photo Rick Bauer

▲ Photo 2—Roan Mt. azaleas and J Jackson and Dale Berrong (r).

▼ Photo 3—Don Hyatt photographing a yellow azalea in Grayson Highlands State Park.

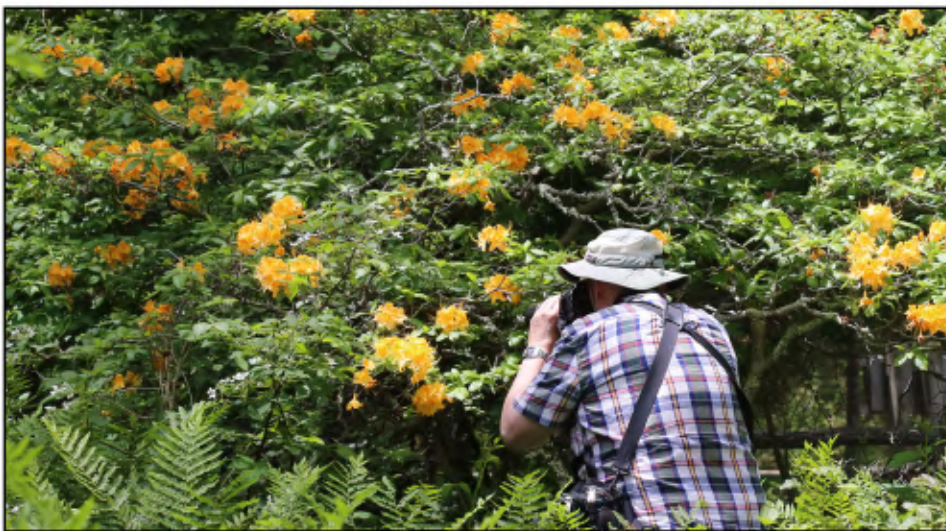


Photo Joe Nicholson

▼ Photo 4—View looking west toward Jane Bald with Roan Knob beyond.



Photo Ralf Bauer

season to season. Table 1 (see page 9) gives locations, azalea species, and approximate bloom times. Table 2 (see page 10) provides information on site elevations. In addition to the plants, the scenery and vistas are spectacular. Sites mentioned are only some of many places to see our magnificent native azaleas.

## Grayson Highlands

The Grayson Highlands are near Mt. Rogers and Whitetop Mountain, Virginia's highest peaks. The Appalachian Trail (AT) passes through Grayson Highlands State Park, and in addition to the AT many trails wander throughout the park. Most visitors go to see the famous wild ponies, but we go to see flame azaleas, *Kalmia latifolia* (mountain laurel), and *R. catawbiense* (Catawba rhododendron). Mid-June is a good time. [Photo 3]

## Elk Knob

Just inside North Carolina from Tennessee northwest of Boone is a mountain I was not familiar with until 2017. Elk Knob is now in a state park with a pleasant 1.9-mile trail to the 5,520-ft peak. Elk Knob is on a road called Meat Camp Road. I am sure there is a story about this somewhere. The lower part goes through a shady grassy understory of *Carex pensylvanica* (Pennsylvania sedge). We saw among other plants *Hydrangea arborescens* (smooth hydrangea), *Arisaema triphyllum* (Jack-in-the-pulpit), *Phlox*, *Lilium superbum* (Turk's cap lily, not yet in bloom), *Lilium grayi* (a Gray's lily, in full bloom), *Clintonia umbellulata* (speckled wood lily), and an attractive plant of *Plantanthera psycodes* (purple fringed orchid). One surprise was the fact that *Maianthemum racemosum* (Solomon's plume) was everywhere, but we did not see a single plant of *Polygonatum biflorum* (Solomon's seal). Usually we see both, often side by side.

Joe Nicholson pointed out to me *Betula alleghaniensis* (yellow birch) and *Betula lenta* (black or sweet birch). The twigs of the black birch smell and taste strongly like wintergreen. Yellow birch does too but not so strongly. Some folks make wintergreen extract from the twigs of these trees.



Near the top is a thick grove of *Crataegus* (hawthorn), all gnarled and stunted. The weather up at the top must be rough much of the time.

Almost at the top is a *Cornus alternifolia* (pagoda dogwood), in full bloom as we reached the end of our climb. The leaves look very much like dogwood, but the fragrant, upright, flat-top cyme blossoms are very different from our more common flowering dogwood. This particular plant is also stunted from the harsh conditions of the mountaintop. In an understory forest, a pagoda dogwood will send out a swirl of four or five branches every four feet or so up the trunk. The tree can become 30 feet tall and wide, with the tiered horizontal limbs sweeping down like a pagoda roof.

Most of the *R. calendulaceum* are at or near the top where the sunlight really begins to come in. Many are of the same golden to orange shades, with one or two yellows below in the woods. Near the summit is a semi-double where some of the stamens have turned into partial petals. The view at the top alone is worth the trip: mountains in the distance and azaleas directly in front of you.

## Roan Highlands

Roan is always a special treat. Many have said it is the most magnificent display of Catawba rhododendron in the United States. You get to add to that the wonderful colors of flame azaleas. In some years, the bloom of the rare Gray's lily joins the floral chorus. Some years we see *Lilium grayi* only in bud. A few of the other plants found along the way include *Vaccinium*, which is said to be spectacular in the fall with their burgundy leaves, *Veratrum viride* (false hellebore), *Houstonia caerulea* (blueets), *Aronia* sp. (chokeberry), *Abies fraseri* (Fraser fir), and *Kalmia buxifolia* (sandmyrtle). [Photo 4]

The trail begins at Carvers Gap on the Tennessee-North Carolina line at 5,512 feet and traverses over Round Bald, down to Engine Gap, up Jane Bald, down into Jane Gap, and then begins the climb toward Grassy Ridge Bald. Most of this is on the Appalachian Trail, but the AT turns to the left after the climb from Jane Gap, and that is where we continue straight out to the end of Grassy Ridge for the incredible

displays of *R. catawbiense*. The entire journey from Carvers Gap to the end of Grassy Ridge is about 3.2 miles. The highest point on Grassy Ridge is 6,189 feet. While the trail is up and down and steep in a few places, it is mostly easy walking. On a clear day, you feel you are walking on the top of the world. The views are outstanding.

Most of the azaleas are on the back side of Round Bald down toward Engine Gap. More are around Jane Gap. Thus, they are not far from the parking area at Carvers Gap. Almost all are on the south side of the trail, which runs the ridge, perhaps because of the prevailing winds and weather. Because of their exposed state, they lead a rough life and are low to medium in habit, unless they are growing in more protected pockets. Flower colors range from strong yellow to red. *R. calendulaceum* is the only native azalea species found on Roan. [Photo 5]

The best views of *R. catawbiense* are from Grassy Ridge. When you see Grassy Ridge for the first time you know immediately why it is called a heath bald. At one spot the Grassy Ridge Trail goes through a tunnel of Catawba rhododendron. Toward the end of Grassy Ridge, the trail runs along the right side of the ridge, and *Kalmia buxifolia* is growing on the rocks. This low-growing plant with tiny leaves and flowers has been found only in three disjunct populations: sand barrens in New Jersey, Carolina coastal plains, and southeastern Blue Ridge Mountains. It was once called *Leiophyllum buxifolium* but was moved to *Kalmia*. It looks nothing like mountain laurel. The common name is sandmyrtle. I have seen this plant here and on the Tanawha Trail near Grandfather Mountain. It would seem to be a great rock garden plant, though I do not know how heat tolerant the mountain variety is.

## Blue Ridge Parkway

One of the best sections for azaleas and their companions on the Blue Ridge Parkway is between Asheville (NC Hwy 191) and Beech Gap (NC Hwy 215). Most of the azalea sightings begin near Mt. Pisgah.

From the far corner of the Buck Spring Gap parking area, you can take the trail to Mt. Pisgah. Botanizing, you will

▼ Photo 5—*R. calendulaceum* in the Roan Highlands



Photo Charles Andrews

▼ Photo 6—*R. viscosum* var. *montanum* at Fryingpan Gap.



Photo Charles Andrews

find *R. minus* var. *carolinianum* (Carolina rhododendron), *R. calendulaceum*, struggling *Castanea dentata* (American chestnut), the montanum variety of *R. viscosum* (swamp azalea), *R. pilosum* (minniebush), *Lilium superbum* (turk's cap lily), and *Clethra acuminata* (mountain pepperbush).

In 1993 Dr. Kathleen Kron decided many forms of white late-blooming azaleas should be combined into a single species, even eliminating previously identified varieties like *R. viscosum* var. *montanum*, declaring them part of the natural variation of the species. While *R. viscosum* is called with some justification the swamp azalea, not much is swampy about *viscosum* var. *montanum*, which thrives on rocky, often dry, hillsides in the mountains. It is low growing, usually well under 5 feet, and highly stoloniferous, often like a thick groundcover. The winter buds are very pubescent, unlike the smooth buds of typical *viscosum*. *R. viscosum* var. *montanum* is a distinctive plant. [Photo 6]

Minniebush used to be *Menziesia pilosa* before it was transferred into the *Rhododendron* genus. The leaves are somewhat similar to our native azaleas, but the very small, bell-shaped flowers are quite different.

At the Pisgah Inn, a short trail leads from the east end of the parking lot to the south edge of the ridge. Along the trail is a fairly large American chestnut with blossoms, still trying to survive the chestnut blight. Also on the trail is *Corylus americana* (American hazelnut), *Gillenia trifoliata* (Bowman's root), and *Smilax herbacea* (carrion flower). Here you can see the highly stoloniferous *R. viscosum* var. *montanum* and the apparent natural hybridization taking place between *R. arborescens* and *R. viscosum* var. *montanum*.

Typical *viscosum* can be but is not usually stoloniferous; neither is typical *R. arborescens*, the sweet or smooth azalea. Yet we saw flowers with red pistils on a tall but stoloniferous plant at Pisgah. Here the new growth was hairy, typical of *viscosum*. A mile farther down the parkway at Fryingpan Gap is a large, completely smooth-stemmed *R. arborescens* that is highly stoloniferous. It covers perhaps 100 sq. ft, with scores of trunks coming from the ground. This plant was not yet in bloom in mid-June 2017.

▼ Photo 7—*R. vaseyi* at the Devil's Courthouse Tunnel.

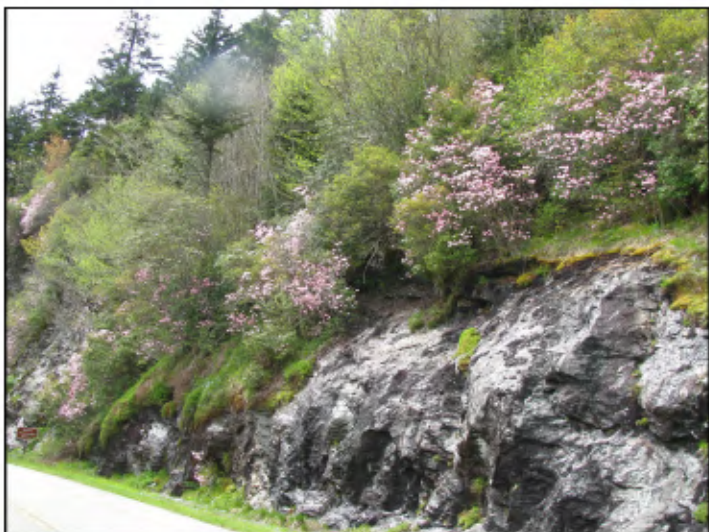


Photo Charles Andrews

At Fryingpan Gap a gated forest road goes to the fire tower at the top of Fryingpan Mountain. Next to the road, a trail leads from the gap back to Pisgah. Along this trail were Solomon's seal, Solomon's plume, carrion flower, Turk's cap lily, speckled wood lily, minniebush, *Iris verna* (dwarf iris), *Clematis viorna* (leather flower), and several uncommon plants of *Ilex longipes* (Georgia holly). *R. viscosum* var. *montanum* was everywhere, found with occasional *R. arborescens* and apparent hybrids of the two. A running *arborescens* (looks like *arborescens* but spread over 15 feet with runners) was not yet in bloom, but we saw plenty of *viscosum* var. *montanum* in bloom and a very large *calendulaceum*. Many of the *viscosum* have traits of *arborescens*.

Beyond Graveyard Fields is Devil's Courthouse Tunnel. In this section of the Blue Ridge Parkway the vistas are worth frequent stops, and *R. vaseyi* grows on the rocky hillside carved out by the construction of the parkway. One of the best spots is just east of the tunnel. Early to mid-May is the approximate time of *vaseyi* bloom here. In the vicinity are also *Pieris floribunda* (mountain fetterbush), the rare *Hypericum buckleyi* (Buckley's St. John's wort), bluets, and *R. minus* var. *carolinianum*. [Photo 7]

At Beech Gap, NC Hwy 215 crosses the parkway. Just below the gap heading south on NC 215 is a wide pull-off spot on the right with a high rock face. Growing along the base of the moist, seeping rock wall are *R. vaseyi*, *R. maximum* (rosebay rhododendron), *Lyonia* (staggerbush), mountain laurel, smooth hydrangea, and many others. Except near the rock wall and the drainage at its base, the area is mowed annually so many of the plants are severely pruned. We found a blooming mountain laurel only inches tall.

There are many other spots along the Blue Ridge Parkway to view plants, such as along Black Balsam Knob Road, where white-flowered Catawba rhododendron grow. These described above are only a few.

## Mt. Toxaway

Clarence Towe introduced me to Mt. Toxaway, an Ericaceae paradise. A winding blacktop road goes up to

▼ Photo 8—A white *R. vaseyi* on Mt. Toxaway.



Photo Charles Andrews



the communication towers on the 4,777-ft peak. The main roadside “weeds” are *R. minus* (Piedmont rhododendron), *R. maximum*, and *R. vaseyi*. Near the top, *R. calendulaceum*, *R. arborescens*, *R. viscosum* var. *montanum*, *R. pilosum*, and the *arborescens* x *viscosum* hybrids are all present. We saw some happy *Galax urceolata* (wand flower) with very large leaves in full flower. On our 2017 trip, I kept telling Dale Berrong the *R. minus* should have already bloomed, but everywhere we turned there were minus blossoms. Shows what I know. Lower down some few *R. maximum* were in bloom. One sad aspect about Mt. Toxaway is the power company had been spraying the area under the lines with herbicides and had killed many of the azaleas along the roadway. These poisoned plants were ones flourishing in the sunlight. At the top, construction for a new tower has removed several very old *calendulaceum*. This is a location that demands several trips each year: early May to see *vaseyi* in bloom, mid-June for *calendulaceum*, a little later for *arborescens* and *viscosum* var. *montanum*. Near the top walk along the road and along paths to see the plants. [Photo 8]

## Andrews Bald

Andrews Bald and Clingman’s Dome are off U.S. Hwy 441 at Newfound Gap. From the Clingman’s Dome parking lot, Clingman’s Dome is a 0.5 mile walk on asphalt, all up a steep hill. Andrews Bald is a nice 1.9-mile hike first downhill and then up. The trail has been improved. Andrews Bald is a small bald with primarily *R. calendulaceum* and *R. catawbiense*. The flame azaleas range in color from a nice golden yellow to deep orange red. On the bald and the trail are plants like *Sorbus americana* (mountain ash), *Viburnum cassinoides* (witherod viburnum), mountain laurel, speckled wood lily, and *Epigaea repens* (trailing arbutus).

## Gregory Bald

Gregory Bald (4,948 ft) is justifiably famous for its massive hybrid swarm: *R. cumberlandense* mixed with *arborescens* and *viscosum* (all diploids). At one time *calendulaceum* (tetraploid) was said to be in the mix, but triploids have yet to be found. With one exception, many

tests to date by Dr. Tom Ranney and his graduate students at North Carolina State University show plants on the bald to be diploids. George McLellan found one azalea just off the edge of the bald that turned out to be tetraploid, and a colony of *calendulaceum* is growing just below the bald where a trail to Parson Bald leaves the trail to Gregory. [Photo 9]

Most of the plants on the bald look in the main like *cumberlandense*, orange or orange red. Perhaps 10% are the pinks, whites, yellows, and multi-colors that illustrate most articles about Gregory. Typical pictures from Gregory do not accurately tell this story because people tend to take more pictures of the colorful hybrids and not the typical Gregory Cumberland azalea. [Photo 10]

On a beautiful day with low humidity, from the top you can see at least 50 miles with Cades Cove clearly in view. The bloom period is long, roughly from mid-June into early July. Most plants are in full sun. The climb is rough on this 72-year-old man. The shorter Gregory Trail from Parsons Branch Road is currently closed, so you now have to take the Gregory Ridge Trail up Forge Creek, 1.75 miles longer and 1,000 feet higher in elevation. The trick is to start early, hike slowly and steadily. For me it is about four and a half hours up and three hours down, with three hours on the top exploring and taking pictures.



Photo Charles Andrews

▲ Photo 10—A yellow azalea on Gregory Bald.

▼ Photo 9—Trekking (l to r) Ralf Bauer, George McLellan, and Ron Hooper on Gregory Bald.



Photo Charles Andrews

▼ Photo 11—Hooper Bald scene.



Photo Ralf Bauer

Gregory Bald may have been created by early burning and animal grazing. Before the Civil War, Russell Gregory used the bald in the summer for his animals. He had a cabin on the bald. The Forest Service is reclaiming some of the bald, which had shrunk to about 10 acres. The ARS donated a mower that the Forest Service hauled up on a mule and stores in a shed on the edge of the bald. The open area has now been expanded to about 18 acres. In the new part I saw

one of the reddest *cumberlandense* I have ever seen. I call it Red Red Red GB. Almost 'Midnight Flare' red.

## Hooper Bald

Hooper on the Cherohala Skyway is one of my favorites for *calendulaceum*. The Cherohala Skyway is a new roadway, completed in 1996. It passes by the edge of Huckleberry Knob, the highest point along the scenic route at 5,560 feet,

**Table 1: Southern Appalachian Azalea Locations**

Location	Where	Azaleas	When (approx)
<b>Andrews Bald</b>	In NC between Gatlinburg TN and Cherokee NC, southwest of U.S. 441 at Newfound Gap at end of Clingmans Dome Rd.	<i>R. calendulaceum</i>	mid June
<b>Blood Mountain</b>	South of Blairsville GA on AT west of Neels Gap on U.S. 19/129.	<i>R. calendulaceum</i> <i>R. cumberlandense</i> <i>R. arborescens</i> cumb x arb hybrids	early to mid June <i>calendulaceum</i> mid to late June otherwise
<b>Blue Ridge Parkway</b>	One of best sections is between Asheville (NC 191) and Balsam NC (U.S. 74)	<i>R. vaseyi</i> <i>R. calendulaceum</i> <i>R. arborescens</i> <i>R. viscosum</i> arb x vis hybrids	early May for <i>vaseyi</i> mid June <i>calendulaceum</i> mid to late June <i>arborescens</i> & <i>viscosum</i>
<b>Elk Knob</b>	State park in NC between Mountain City TN and Boone NC, west of U.S. 421 on Meat Camp Rd.	<i>R. calendulaceum</i>	mid June
<b>Grayson Highlands</b>	State park in southwestern VA near the NC border, north of U.S. 58	<i>R. calendulaceum</i>	mid June
<b>Gregory Bald</b>	On TN/NC border near Cades Cove TN	<i>R. cumberlandense</i> <i>R. viscosum</i> <i>R. arborescens</i> hybrids among the 3 <i>R. calendulaceum</i>	mid June <i>calendulaceum</i> mid June to July otherwise
<b>Hooper Bald</b>	In NC on Cherohala Skyway (NC 143) between Robbinsville NC and Tellico Plains TN	<i>R. calendulaceum</i>	mid June
<b>Mt. Cheaha</b>	State park in the Talladega Mountains south of Anniston AL	<i>R. cumberlandense</i> <i>R. canescens</i> <i>R. arborescens</i> hybrids among the 3	early to mid May <i>canescens</i> late May <i>cumberlandense</i> early June <i>arborescens</i>
<b>Mt. Toxaway</b>	On Tower Rd off U.S. 64 between Cashiers and Brevard NC	<i>R. vaseyi</i> <i>R. calendulaceum</i> <i>R. viscosum</i> <i>R. arborescens</i> arb x vis hybrids	early May for <i>vaseyi</i> mid June <i>calendulaceum</i> mid to late June <i>arborescens</i> & <i>viscosum</i>
<b>Roan Highlands</b>	On TN/NC border between of Roan Mountain TN (TN 143) and Bakersville NC (NC 261)	<i>R. calendulaceum</i>	mid June
<b>Wayah &amp; Wine Spring Balds</b>	Up Forest Service Rd 69 (Wayah Rd) off county Wayah Rd west of Franklin NC	<i>R. calendulaceum</i> <i>R. arborescens</i>	mid June <i>calendulaceum</i> mid to late June <i>arborescens</i>

and then about a mile farther by Hooper Bald, a 5,430-ft grassy bald. The trail from the parking area at Hooper to the bald is only about .25 mile in length. Like at Elk Knob, this trail leads through an attractive grassy understory of Pennsylvania sedge. [Photo 11]

Hooper Bald is known for its large and colorful *calendulaceum*. No other azalea species are there. Most are on the west side of the west-east ridge before it opens into the large grassy area. The open bald itself is filled in June with colorful yellow *Ranunculus* (buttercups), and around the edge we see witherod viburnum, and mountain ash. On the east side of the bald you get a clear view of Huckleberry Knob. [Photo 12]

Hooper is probably not a natural bald. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a man named George Moore created a fenced hunting preserve on the bald and imported exotic animals. That may have been the beginning of the open bald there. Azaleas took advantage of the sunlight and lack of competition.

From the parking area, we usually walk to the bench along the path and turn into the woods to the left along a faint trail about 10 yards before the bench. This trail leads to the lowest azalea, informally named by Don Hyatt and others. “Hooper Copper” is an extremely large-flowered azalea, sometimes with 3-inch blossoms, that open yellow and age to a copper color. From there you can wander up through many “rooms” of spectacular azaleas among Fraser fir, mountain laurel, maple, and blueberries. For several years, with the sanction of the National Forest folks, members of the Middle Atlantic Chapter ARS have led work parties to clear around the azaleas on Hooper.

Most Hooper azaleas have large flowers. Colors range from yellow to dark red, one informally named by Don and the others “Best Red”. Because of the openness, the plants are usually quite floriferous. Hooper azaleas are special.

## Wayah and Wine Spring Balds

Wayah Bald and nearby Wine Spring Bald are known for *calendulaceum* and *arborescens*. A well-maintained dirt

Table 2: Elevations		
Location	Details	Elevation
Andrews Bald	Clingmans Dome	6,643 ft (2,025 m)
	Andrews Bald	5,906 ft (1,800 m)
Blood Mountain		4,459 ft (1,359 m)
Blue Ridge Parkway	Buck Spring Gap (MP 407.6)	4,980 ft (1,518 m)
	Mt. Pisgah	5,721 ft (1,744 m)
	Mt. Pisgah Inn (MP 408.6)	approx 5,000 ft (1,524 m)
	Fryingpan Mountain	5,342 ft (1,628 m)
	Devils Courthouse (MP 422.1)	5,462 ft (1,665 m)
	Beech Gap (MP 423.3)	approx 5,070 ft (1,545 m)
Elk Knob		5,520 ft (1,682 m)
Grayson Highlands		3,698-5,069 ft (to 1,545 m)
Gregory Bald		4,948 ft (1,508 m)
Hooper Bald		5,430 ft (1,655 m)
Mt. Cheaha		2,407 ft (734 m)
Mt. Toxaway		4,777 ft (1,456 m)
Roan Highlands	Round Bald	5,826 ft (1,775 m)
	Jane Bald	5,820 ft (1,773 m)
	Grassy Ridge Bald	6,189 ft (1,886 m)
Wayah & Wine Spring Balds	Wayah Bald	5,342 ft (1,628 m)
	Wine Spring Bald	5,440 ft (1,658 m)

Forest Service road goes to the top of Wayah. The Forest Service spur road to Wine Spring Bald is now closed to vehicle traffic, so we walked up the road to the top and then walked down the power line that leads back to where our vehicles were parked. [Photo 13]

In 2017 we were all anxious to see what had happened with the large forest fire at Wayah the previous fall. The main damage was on the east and south where the wind-swept fire blasted up the steep mountainside to the tower and the picnic area. Most of the split rail fence leading to the circle at the picnic area is gone, completely burned. The wooden top of the Wayah tower burned, but the rock base seems fine. Much of the vegetation in the fire areas was burned. Large trees on the ridge top near the hill slope are dead, but we saw native azaleas and mountain laurel sprouting with vigor from their crowns everywhere. Burned *R. maximum* did not seem to be regenerating. Of course, the fire killed many azalea trunks but probably not the plants themselves. We did see some *calendulaceum* blooming

at the top but burned below. The double flame azalea on the Appalachian Trail had been burned but was in bloom. The trusses were very nice. *R. arborescens* was just beginning to bloom this year. Overall, my guess is the fire will in the long run improve the condition of the azaleas. Wayah Bald had become overgrown. [Photos 14 and 15]

The fire did not reach nearby Wine Spring Bald west of Wayah. As a precaution, the area all around the transmission and cell towers on Wine Spring was bush-hogged. This cut many especially attractive mountain laurel and several *R. arborescens* var. *richardsonii* under and around the guy wires to the towers. I suspect the severe pruning will not kill them, and they will come back in the next few years. Wine Spring is an excellent location to see *R. calendulaceum*, *R. arborescens*, and *Kalmia latifolia*. If you can catch them in a floriferous year and at peak as we did in 2016, it will be a sight you will remember forever. That year,

*Continued on Page 18*



## Continued from Page 10

I had never seen the mountain laurel so prolific in their bloom, especially on the power line back downhill. In several spots dark orange red azaleas were growing up through the pink mountain laurel. One particular *arborescens* is very interesting. The smooth stems are burgundy in color, and the flowers which were just beginning in the finger stage were infused with dark burgundy coloring. I was pleased to see a pagoda dogwood on Wine Spring. Where the Appalachian Trail crosses Wayah Road, you can park and walk up along the trail around the back side of Wine Spring Bald. This walk gives the impression that the predominant understory shrub in this area is *calendulaceum*.

In addition to azaleas, you can find *Aruncus dioicus* (goats beard), withered viburnum, *Aquilegia canadensis* (columbine), and *Heracleum lanatum* (cow parsnip) among many other interesting plants. On one stretch of road was a solid mass of Bowman's root for over 40 yards, making quite a sight.

### Blood Mountain

In Georgia a section of the Appalachian Trail crosses Blood Mountain and goes through Slaughter Gap. You can hike the trail from the Wolf Pen Gap Road (Slaughter Mountain side) or the US Hwy 129 side. George McLellan likes to call the trail from Slaughter Gap to Blood Mountain the Charles Manson Trail. From US 129 we went up the Byron Reece Trail to the AT and took the AT to Blood Mountain, continuing about one mile northwest of the mountain toward Slaughter Gap. At first along the Reece Trail, you see *R. calendulaceum* but soon that changes to *R. cumberlandense*. At higher elevations are *R. arborescens* and *cumberlandense-arborescens* hybrids. Based on plants found at nearby Vogel State Park, Walter P. Lemmon in 1942 called these hybrids a new species, *Azalea furbishii* Lemmon & McKay. David Leach conclusively demonstrated that these plants were in fact hybrids by growing seedlings from *furbishii* plants and by his own man-made crosses with *cumberlandense* and *arborescens*. [Photo 17]



Photo Charles Andrews

▲ Photo 12—Hooper Bald *R. calendulaceum*.



Photo Ralf Bauer

▲ Photo 13—*R. arborescens* on Wine Spring Bald.

▼ Photo 14—Dale Berrong and Karel Bernardy inspect fire aftermath at Wayah Bald June 16, 2017.



Photo Joe Nicholson



## Mt. Cheaha

The highest point in Alabama is Mt. Cheaha. It is below Interstate I-20 and is not the southernmost but one of the southernmost locations for *R. cumberlandense*. Situated in the Talladega Mountains, Cheaha is in the southern end of the Appalachians, not part of the Cumberland Plateau. When planning my first trip in 2011, I expected to see a few plants of this mostly high elevation species. To my surprise, the mountain has hundreds and hundreds of spectacular plants. The ground is highly rocky, with small as well as boulder-size rocks. Azaleas grow like weeds among a thick groundcover of both *Vaccinium* (blueberries) and *Gaylussacia* (huckleberries). Wand flower is also prominent. Mountain laurel scatters the hillsides. [Photo 18]

In February 2014, a strong ice and wind storm hit the mountain. On our trip the following May, we found many downed trees. The ice and wind ripped off large tops and limbs, some a foot or more in diameter, and littered the ground. Walking around and over these obstacles was difficult. The storm significantly opened the canopy and the understory is now much brighter. This has improved the azalea bloom.

Joining *cumberlandense*, the primary azalea species found on the mountain are *R. arborescens* and what we now think is *R. canescens* (Piedmont azalea). You can find a few beautiful *cumberlandense* hybrids as well. For several years we thought the earlier blooming pinks were *R. periclymenoides* (pinxterbloom azalea) but that does not appear to be the case. We are planning a trip to see these early bloomers in flower. [Photo 19]

In another little draw down the mountain, with a small spring branch flowing, *R. arborescens* grows next to the water and large quantities of *R. minus* filled the hillside. Along that small branch are Catawba rhododendron, pagoda dogwood, and *Osmundastrum cinnamomeum* (cinnamon fern) over 6-feet tall. The Catawba rhododendron is mostly a high elevation species. We wonder if these plants are indigenous to Cheaha.

To see the Cumberland azalea in bloom at Cheaha, the end of May is usually best. The Piedmont rhododendron, Catawba rhododendron, and mountain laurel are also in bloom at this time. The sweet azalea peaks several weeks later. Cheaha is an excellent location to see the large quantities of the Cumberland azalea. We like to go every year.

## Come Join Us

We are fortunate to have a treasure such as the Southern Appalachians. If you are interested in field trips to any of these places, contact Don Hyatt [don@donaldhyatt.com](mailto:don@donaldhyatt.com) or Charlie Andrews [candrews@mindspring.com](mailto:candrews@mindspring.com).

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Photo Charles Andrews

▲ Photo 15—A double-flowered *R. calendulaceum* on Wayah Bald.

▼ Photo 16—A pink-infused *R. calendulaceum* at Wine Spring Bald.



Photo Charles Andrews

▼ Photo 17—Blood Mountain *R. x furbishii*.



Photo Charles Andrews





Photo Charles Andrews

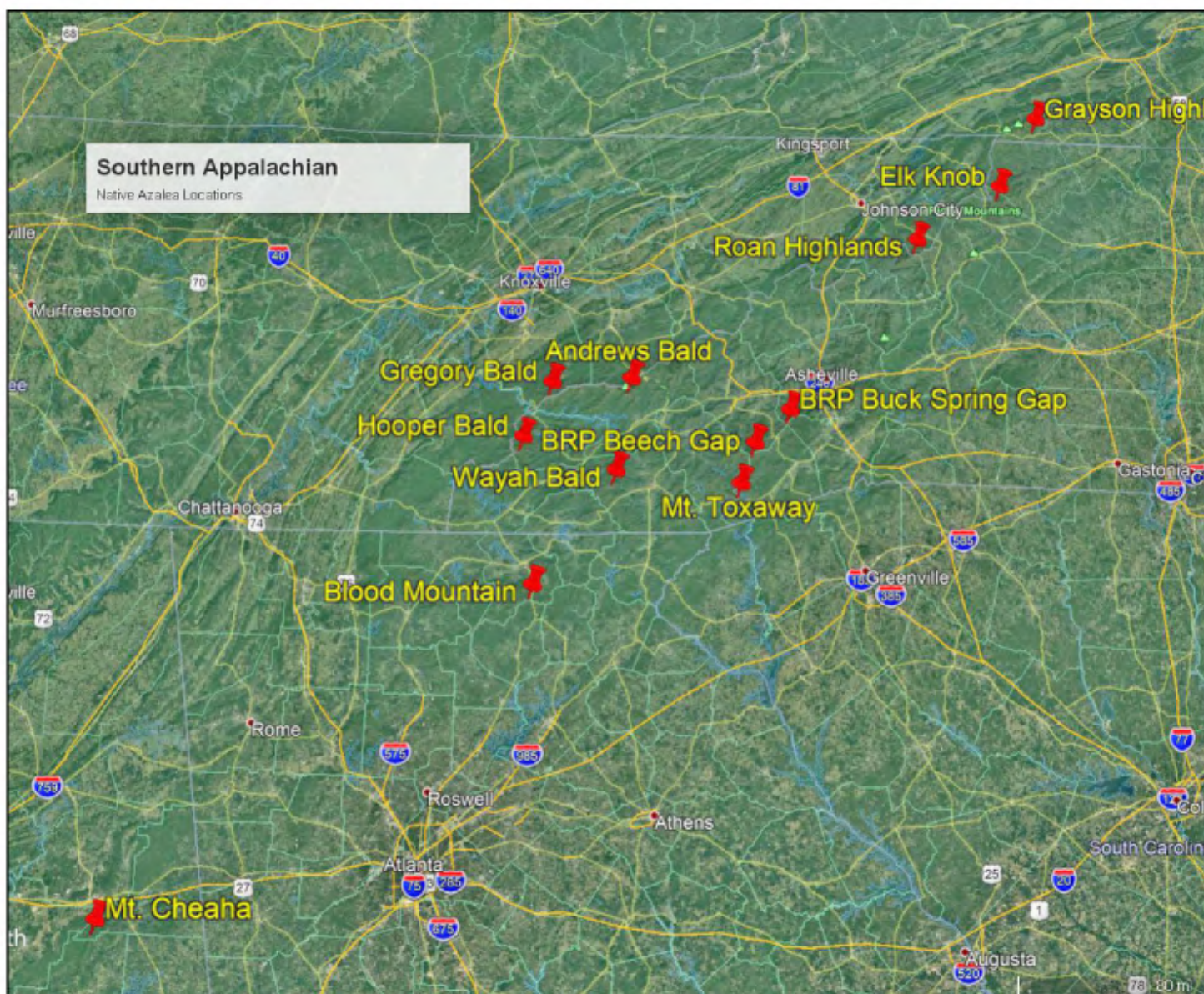
▲ Photo 18—Mt. Cheaha *R. cumberlandense* star form.



Photo Charles Andrews

▲ Photo 19—A Mt. Cheaha hybrid.

▼ Tour locations visited from NE to SW.





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Portions of this article are based on field reports by Charles Andrews published in *Azalea Blooms*, the newsletter of the Azalea Chapter ARS.

[Note: In Table 2, MP is the abbreviation for milepost number, Ed.]

Charles Andrews of Cumming, Georgia, is vice president of the ASA and a member of the Vaseyi Chapter. He is a plant lover in general, but his heart is with azaleas. He enjoys writing and speaking on azalea topics, has contributed to *The Azalean*, and serves on the journal's Editorial Advisory Board. He also serves as president of the Azalea Chapter of the ARS. He has been studying American deciduous azaleas for 35 years. He believes these plants deserve more scientific study and horticultural emphasis. Charles is working to make accurate information on the history, identification, distribution, and culture of native azaleas more available.



▲ Dr. Eugene Aromi checking one of his hybrids against color chips. Photo Mike Kittrell, from the April 4, 1997, Mobile Press Register, used by permission. (See related article p. 15-17)

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