



Audubon IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS

Mount Rogers/Whitetop Mountain

Grayson, Smyth, and Washington Counties

Total Size: 18,081 ha (44,679 acres)

Elevation: 923 – 1,746 m (3,028 – 5,728 ft)



IBA Criteria Met

Criterion	Species	Data	Season	Source
Species at Risk	Appalachian Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	39 individuals in 2002; 16 individuals in 2003; 6 individuals in 2004	Breeding	C. Thomas, T. Blevins, C. Croy, and W. Coffey, Playback Surveys 2002-2004
Species at Risk	Red Crossbill	9 individuals in 2002	Breeding	Whitetop Mountain Point Counts 2002
Species at Risk	Winter Wren	42 males in 2007	Breeding	Smithsonian High-elevation surveys 2007
Species at Risk	Canada Warbler	43 males in 2007	Breeding	Smithsonian High-elevation surveys 2007
Responsibility Species Assemblage - High-elevation Forest	Northern Saw-whet Owl, Appalachian Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown Creeper, Winter Wren, Blackburnian Warbler, Canada Warbler, Red Crossbill	Breeds	Breeding	References above

Description

The high-elevation landscape of the Mount Rogers and Whitetop Mountain IBA in the southern Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia contains the highest point in the state and supports many unique habitat types - many of which are ranked globally and/or state rare. Of particular importance to birds are the extensive northern hardwood and unique coniferous forest communities that make up over 40% of the IBA. The area contains the largest contiguous stretch of montane red spruce-Frasier fir habitat in Virginia, and a representative stand of red spruce over 150 years of age. Red spruce communities are generally restricted to elevations above 4300 feet while Frasier fir occurs only above

5400 feet, making these habitats especially rare. Surrounding the coniferous communities are large expanses of northern hardwood forests, dominated by mixed and pure stands of sugar maple, yellow and black birch, American beech, oaks, and eastern hemlock. Nearly 2,500 acres of grassy and shrubby balds are maintained at the highest elevations of Whitetop Mountain and Mount Rogers while lower elevations are comprised of oak forest communities. Land is used largely for wildlife conservation, timber, low-impact recreation, and low-density residential development or agriculture. Christmas tree farming is a rapidly developing industry in the area.

Conservation and Management Units

Over 86% of the IBA is managed to meet conservation objectives. The largest landowner is the U.S. Forest Service, who owns and manages the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area (NRA) within the Jefferson National Forest. Two large Wilderness areas – Lewis Creek and Little Fork – make up 38% of the National Forest Service land within the IBA. Adjacent to the NRA is Grayson Highlands State Park, a more than 4,700 acre Park owned and managed by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation.

Birds

Due to the unique high-elevation forest habitats found on Mount Rogers and White Top Mountain, the area supports a unique bird community characteristic of the northern boreal forests and not commonly found elsewhere in Virginia.

Black-capped Chickadees, Dark-eyed Juncos, Magnolia Warblers, and Red-breasted Nuthatches are all relatively common breeders. Large, intact and structurally diverse spruce-fir forests provide ideal habitat for the at-risk Winter Wren and Canada Warbler where these species are particularly abundant. A population of Appalachian Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers is also resident within the IBA. This subspecies of the more northern nominate race is restricted to elevations above 3,000 feet and migrates altitudinally rather than latitudinally. The entire known breeding distribution of Appalachian Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers is found only in the high mountainous regions of North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. Expansive northern hardwood habitats additionally support a suite of characteristic species such as the at-risk Northern Saw-whet Owl (probable breeder) and Red Crossbill (probable breeder) as well as the Hermit Thrush, Blackburnian Warbler, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Purple Finch, and Red-breasted Nuthatch. Wood Thrush are also commonly found here in the breeding season. Successional edges and grassy balds support Northern Bobwhites and Field Sparrows and may provide habitat for the Golden-winged Warbler, a high-priority species in Virginia and across much of its Appalachian range.



Winter Wren

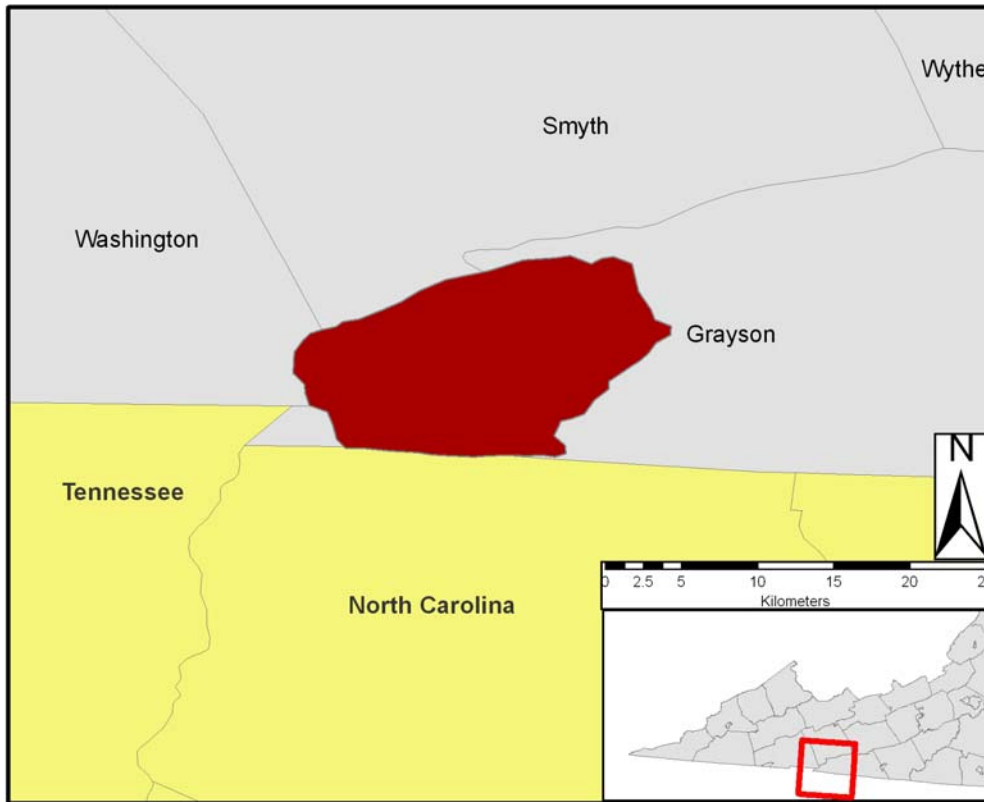
Photo by Omar Rúnolfsson

Conservation and Threats

Red spruce-Fraser fir communities are threatened by air pollution and infestations of the balsam woolly adelgid. Adelgids have infested almost all of the Fraser fir stands on several major ridges within the IBA and mortality of mature trees as well as seedlings and saplings has been extensive. On Mount Rogers, most of the mature trees are dead but saplings and seedlings are still growing. Within these areas, individual mature trees remain alive and may be resistant to the adelgid. Spruce-fir communities and other forests above 3000 feet are additionally impacted by acid deposition from air pollution. In particular, nitrates and sulfates are leaching nutrients from the soils, leading to reduced forest growth. Ozone pollution is impacting sensitive tree species such as black cherry over less sensitive species, altering competitive processes and ultimately, forest species composition.

Future plans to alleviate the adelgid threat include transplanting the apparently resistant Fraser fir seedlings from Mount Rogers genetic stock to other areas for restoration purposes and corridor plantings. In particular, the U.S. Forest Service plans to restore a link between spruce-fir forests on Cabin Ridge with those on Mt. Rogers to allow dispersal of important wildlife species. Plans are also in place to restore red spruce habitats by natural regeneration and extension down the mountain sides into northern hardwood communities. Prescribed fire is used to maintain open balds and to control invasive species. Although recent avian studies and surveys have focused on the Mount Rogers/Whitetop Mountain area, the status of many priority bird populations remains poorly understood. More research is needed to determine the status of several species and in particular, the impacts of the balsam woolly adelgid on habitat suitability.

Mt. Rogers/Whitetop Mountain Map



For more information about this and other IBAs in Virginia please visit our website at:
<http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba/virginia/>

Or contact Mary Elfner, the Virginia IBA Coordinator, at:
melfner@audubon.org or 804-788-7660

