

## Wesser Bald

6,642 acres

The Wesser Bald area is located in Swain and Macon Counties on the Nantahala Ranger District of the Nantahala National Forest. NC1365 and a powerline corridor separate the Wesser Bald area from the Tellico Bald area to the south. The Wesser Bald area has steep terrain with high-elevation ridgelines that descend into deep coves and valleys. The most prominent feature is Wesser Bald, which at 4,627 feet, and is the highest point found in the area. This bald is a continuation of the string of high peaks of the Nantahala Mountains that extend south towards Tellico Bald. A broad range of ecozones are represented in the area, including northern hardwood, high elevation red oak, acidic cove, rich cove, mesic oak, dry-mesic oak, dry oak, and pine-oak/heath.

### What's at stake for this area?

The Forest Service does not plan to analyze the Wesser Bald Area in any of the draft alternatives, meaning that the area will inevitably be excluded from recommendation for wilderness, and it could go unprotected.

### Highlights from this evaluation

- The Forest Service acknowledged that much of the area appears natural, but neglected to mention the existence of 1,339 acres of old growth forest.
- As it has throughout all of the evaluations, the Forest Service highlights sights and sounds of civilization in the Wesser Bald area, but they are not supposed to according to the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act of 1975.
- Despite acknowledging that much of the area appears natural and offers opportunities for solitude, the Forest Service concluded that this area "does not have wilderness characteristics."
  - The evaluation overemphasizes sights and sounds of civilization, irregular boundaries, an inholding, and powerline right-of-way
  - The evaluation de-emphasizes the ecological and recreational values of the Wesser Bald Area.

### Evaluation of Wilderness Characteristics and Corresponding Talking Points

Use any first-hand experience that you have to talk about the trails that you have used in this area. Talk about how you recreate in the area. Emphasize the opportunities for solitude and recreation that it provides.

USFS Evaluation	How to Comment	TWS Response
Apparent Naturalness		
Much of the Wesser Bald area, especially portions that are located in the Inventoried Roadless Area and backcountry area, have no evidence of management activities within the last 40 years that would affect the naturalness of the area. There is a lookout tower on top of Wesser Bald that is accessible	<p>*Tell the Forest Service about how the Wesser Bald area appears natural.</p> <p>*Remind the Forest Service that the area contains 1,339 acres of old growth forest.</p> <p>*Tell the Forest Service that the fire tower and shelters</p>	The Wesser Bald area contains recovering forest in good condition with 1,339 acres of existing old growth. The firetower is an historic feature that adds an interesting dimension to those hiking the AT, as the views of the surrounding landscape and the park to the north are spectacular, and reveal the incredible amount of forestland and wild country that the area is

<p>by way of the Appalachian Trail. A powerline corridor runs a straight line between NC1365 and the lookout tower. There are current wildlife openings on the western edge and periphery of the area, near vegetation treatments that occurred in the last 21 to 40 years. There are two shelters along this section of the Appalachian Trail.</p>	<p>along the Appalachian Trail have a negligible effect on the area's apparent naturalness.</p> <p>*Remind the Forest Service that the powerline corridor should not be considered against apparent naturalness.</p>	<p>situated within.</p> <p>The powerline corridor to the south of the area is invisible after going a short distance into the area, does not affect criteria for apparent naturalness, and should not be considered a consideration for apparent naturalness.</p> <p>The wildlife openings are minor in any effects on current apparent naturalness of the area as a whole.</p> <p>The shelters have some effect to apparent naturalness, but are apparent only when one is in the neighborhood of the shelters, and do not affect the area as a whole to a great extent. The shelters are consistent with other structures within designated wilderness areas.</p>
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**Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive & Unconfined Recreation**

<p>Opportunities for solitude exist across much of the area, although the Appalachian Trail is heavily used in the spring and summer months and encounters with other forest visitors is likely during those months, especially in the southern portion of the area near Wesser Bald and at the lookout tower.</p> <p>Sights and sounds of civilization are evident in the northernmost portion of the boundary, a large protrusion, near US19E and the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad; the eastern edge of the area near the Little Tennessee River and NC1114; and the southern boundary near NC1365. There are two established trails that offer primitive and unconfined recreation in the area, and the majority of the length of these trails are within</p>	<p>*Tell the Forest Service that encountering other hikers on the Appalachian Trail during peak summer months does not detract from overall opportunities for solitude within the area.</p> <p>* The View from the Wesser Bald firetower is one of the best in the region, and one gets the sense of just how vast the public land base of the area is.</p> <p>*Remind the Forest Service that they are not supposed to consider sights and sounds of civilization when evaluating an area's wilderness characteristics.</p>	<p>Many people hike the Appalachian trail for what they perceive as solitude, and would consider the experience of hiking through Wesser one that meets their criteria. Hikers coming to the area during the least busy months would experience very few visitors. The View from the Wesser Bald firetower is one of the best in the region, and one gets the sense of just how vast the public land base of the area is. The Great Smokies are to the north, and the appearance of an unfragmented forested landscape to the west is profound.</p> <p>Vegetation screening filters out most sights and sounds outside the area. From some locations, e.g. Wesser Bald, sights of distant civilization can be seen. However, the sights of surrounding forested mountains and slopes dominate over views of the valleys where most of the sights of</p>
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<p>the Inventoried Roadless Area.</p>		<p>civilization occur.</p> <p>This area is a key recreational point for primitive recreation, providing access to the Appalachian Trail from the Nantahala River Corridor and a loop hike utilizing the AT and the Wesser Creek Trail..</p>
<p>Other Values - Unique or Outstanding Qualities</p>		
<p>Wesser Bald is part of the high-elevation ridgeline spine of the Nantahala Mountains, a scenic attraction for visitors. The Trail of Tears is present in the area.</p>	<p>*Ask the Forest Service to stop de-emphasizing the biological values of Wilderness Inventory Areas. There are 1,339 acres of old growth forest in the Wesser Bald Area, which the Forest Service neglects to mention.</p> <p>*The Wesser Bald area is regionally significant for its natural heritage. Adding this area to the Wilderness Preservation System would increase under-represented ecological types.</p>	<p>This area contains 1,339 acres of Old-Growth forest, and one State Natural Heritage Area:</p> <p>Wesser Bald. NCNHP Representational rating for this natural area is “moderate” (R4); its Collective rating is “moderate” (C4). Under the old NCNHP significance ranking, this area was rated as Regional significant – a site with one of the best element occurrences within a given priority region of the state.</p> <p>Opportunities to increase the ecological representation of ecological types that are currently under-represented in the Wilderness Preservation system include a variety of ecological types especially Appalachian Montane Oak, Appalachian Cove Hardwood, Appalachian Hemlock-Hardwood; Appalachian Oak, Appalachian Oak – xeric; and Small Stream and Riparian.</p>
<p>Size &amp; Manageability</p>		
<p>The core of the area (4,021 acres) is within the Wesser Bald Inventoried Roadless Area, and currently managed for backcountry recreation. Area boundaries are highly irregular, with several large protrusions and many smaller protrusions adjacent to private lands. This</p>	<p>*Remind the Forest Service that they have a duty to protect our last remaining roadless areas.</p> <p>*Tell the Forest Service that you support the boundaries outlined by the Nantahala Hiking Club, which proposes</p>	<p>As part of the Appalachian Trail corridor as well as an important piece of the connective corridor along the ridge of the Nantahala Mountains, this area requires a protective designation that would assure that roadless and wilderness characteristics are preserved. The area provides an accessible and needed wilderness</p>

<p>fragmented ownership would make manageability for wilderness difficult in areas outside of the core area. There is one private inholding located within the area and approximately 45 acres of the area have outstanding or reserved subsurface mineral rights.</p>	<p>that wilderness boundaries begin just north of the old Wesser fire tower and end at the inventoried roadless boundary northeast of Paint Mountain.</p>	<p>experience that fits with management for the AT as well. To minimize manageability issues, Nantahala Hiking Club, which is the AT maintenance club in this area, proposes that wilderness boundaries begin just north of the old Wesser fire tower and end at the inventoried roadless boundary northeast of Paint Mountain.</p>
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**Conclusion**

<p>Overall, the Wesser Bald Area does not have wilderness characteristics. While the core area is within the Wesser Bald Inventoried Roadless Area, the boundary is highly irregular and fragmented with private ownership along most of the boundary, and an interior inholding. The lookout tower, developments and the cleared powerline corridor all detract from naturalness in the area. Sights and sounds from adjacent lands have negative impacts on solitude and primitive recreation in the area.</p>	<p>*The Forest Service is simply wrong to claim that the Wesser Bald Area does not have wilderness characteristics.</p>	<p>Conclusions in the evaluations that judge areas to have no wilderness characteristics are both factually wrong and procedurally inappropriate. All wilderness inventory areas have wilderness characteristics on a spectrum. Under the planning directives it is the task of the evaluation to “evaluate the degree to which” areas possess these wilderness characteristics. When the evaluation concludes that an area or a portion of an area “does not possess wilderness characteristics” this conclusion is false because all of these areas have demonstrable wilderness characteristics to some degree. It also avoids the task laid out by the directives for the evaluation to “evaluate the degree to which” areas possess these wilderness characteristics. Furthermore, this conclusion is being used as a decision point about which areas to take forward in analysis in at least one alternative. Deciding which areas have sufficient wilderness characteristics to take forward into analysis is the task of subsequent steps. This is clear from the Forest Plan directives as well as other guidance around Chapter 70. To conflate the evaluation process with the selection of areas to take forward in alternatives is a fundamental error in</p>
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		<p>the process outlined in the directives.</p> <p>The lookout tower, outside developments and the cleared powerline corridor do not generally detract from naturalness of the area. Using the criteria in the directives, the powerline corridor and other developments outside the area do not affect apparent naturalness. The Nantahala Hiking Club, which maintains the trails in the area, has proposed boundaries that exclude the fire tower. We support these boundaries for consideration.</p> <p>Nearby sights and sounds, as well as private land, should not disqualify an area from Wilderness recommendation. Reasonable standards for wilderness criteria were reaffirmed by the 1975 Eastern Wilderness Areas Act.</p>
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