WINTER OFFERS VIEWS FOR MILES AND MILES

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Contributor

Sometimes for the mountains to come to life you have to see them in the dead of winter.

Sassafras Mountain, the state's tallest mountain at 3,560 feet, is a prime example. The heavily wooded slopes only give a decent view in a few places during spring, summer and fall. All of those views are man-made.

Go there in the winter and that all changes. From Foothills Trail it is possible to get a crystal clear view of Caesars Head, more than 14 miles away.

Starting a hike on Sassafras it is 9.8 miles to Table Rock State Park, along the way hikers will encounter relics left behind by early settlers and ancient Native Americans. This is arguably one of the most intriguing hikes in all of the Carolinas.

First to be encountered are the ruins of the old Cantrell home site, an old settlers cabin about two miles in.

Cross onto Hickorynut Mountain and you will be crossing the second highest peak in the state at 3,483 feet. This is a gentler mountain until you drop down into Emery Gap and the remains of the old Emery Gap Toll road used by settlers as a passage to North Carolina.



Hikers who reach the summit of Sassafras can see to Caesar's Head on a clear day. CHARLES SOWELL/CONTRIBUTED

From here, things get interesting in a hurry. Climbing out of Emery Gap and starting the long upward pull up Pinnacle Mountain, 3,425 feet – the third tallest mountain in the state, hikers will encounter a small unnamed tributary of Emery Creek. It is marked with a footbridge that sits directly above the Bear Cave.

Caution is urged if you decide to explore this site. The Bear Cave has been noted as a place where bears like to den in the winter.

About a mile away is a rock formation known as the Castle, or the Lighthouse Cave. It is a steep scramble up to this spot where coon hunters used to set up a blaze to stay warm.

Travel to the point where Foothills Trail takes a sharp turn to the left and you will notice an old logging road leading off to the right. The road leads past the Petroglyph Site where prehistoric Native Americans carved hundreds of small circles in the tough rock using stone tools.

Take Highway 11 to the intersection of U.S. 178 and turn right. Follow 178 to Rocky Bottom and turn right onto Sassafras Mountain Road and follow it to the top.