

# Where to see the colors of fall foliage as higher elevations peak

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Fall color is getting perky across Western North Carolina. While Hurricane Irma did do a bit of damage at the higher elevations, the fall foliage is still worth a drive.

"The winds from the storm did knock off leaves up high, but didn't do widespread damage," said Beverly Collins, professor of biology at Western Carolina University.

She said areas above 4,500 feet elevation are where leaves are beginning to change color. The earliest tree species are turning, such as the deep red sourwoods, tulip poplar, black walnut, which despite its name turns yellow, and black gum, whose leaves turn orange and red.

"Color slowed with the recent warm weather, but now that it's getting cool again at night, we're on track to a typical fall season in both leaf color and timing," Collins said.

Where to go Sunday and early this week to see the fall splendor?

Great Smoky Mountains National Park is a good place to start. The highest elevations in the park on the North Carolina-Tennessee border climb to over 6,000 feet. These peaks, including Clingman's Dome (6,643 feet), Mount LeConte (6,593 feet), and Andrew Bald (in the Clingman's Dome area) and Gregory Bald, in the Cades Cove area on the Tennessee side, are showing great color right now, said park spokeswoman Jamie Sanders.

Mountain ash, beech and birch trees

are turning yellow, and along with the orange and red leaves of witch hobble are the main colors along the drive along Clingmans Dome Road, she said.

Clingmans Dome Road can be accessed off Newfound Gap Road/U.S. 441 in Cherokee. Stop in at the Oconaluftee Visitor Center there for more information on drives and trails.

"It's predominantly green through much of the rest of the elevation ranges, but there are good dispersed pockets of color. But pretty much anywhere in the park you'll see some nice color," she said.

Some nice scenic weekend drives in the park are the Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, Rich Mountain Road, Newfound Gap Road and Clingmans Dome Road. Note that Clingmans Dome Tower is closed throughout October for renovations.

In addition to the leaves, fall wildflowers such as cardinal flower, black-eyed Susans and a variety of asters are now at their showiest. It is also the perfect time to visit Cataloochee to see elk, which are at the height of the mating season, Sanders said.

High elevations along the Blue Ridge Parkway are also good places for autumn driving. Kat Rice, a ranger on the parkway, said the sourwoods are blushing red at Craggy Gardens, about 20 miles north of Asheville, and over 5,000 feet in elevation.

"A lot of leaves have blown off, but there is still a lot of green, so they should be turning in the next week or so," Rice said.



Newfound Gap Road in Great Smoky Mountains National Park is one of many scenic fall color drives in Western North Carolina. COURTESY OF KRISTINA PLAAS

Further north on the parkway, near Rough Ridge (Milepost 302) and the Boone Fork area at Milepost 300, which has access to Grandfather Mountain State Park, are also colorful right now.

South of Asheville, the parkway climbs again to elevations above 5,000 feet in the Graveyard Fields (MP 418) and Watrock Knob (MP 451) areas, where color is just about to peak. There is a visitor center at Watrock Knob, which has sweeping views as far as the Smokies, and a 1.2-mile trail to the top of

the peak.

At the Grandfather Mountain attraction (a private park with an entrance fee), the huckleberry bushes are bright right now near the Mile High Swinging Bridge, said Frank Ruggiero with the Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation, which runs the park.

He said with the cooler temperatures predicted for the next several days, the fall color could peak soon at elevations between 5,000 and 6,000 feet.