

Like many relationships, your admiration deepens with a better understanding of the backstory. Highlands, despite its modest size of just over six square miles, is abundant in the tales it eagerly shares with visitors.

For those curious minds eager to delve into its mysteries, here are some captivating facts to consider.

1 How high is high? At 4,118 feet above sea level, Highlands is one of the highest towns east of the Mississippi River. Established in 1920, we are perched on the highest crest of the Western North Carolina plateau in the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

4,118
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2 This landscape is old. Really old. Highlands sits upon a Plateau on the southern end of the Appalachian Mountains, some of the oldest in the world. They're the remnants of a geological sequence of events that began with the formation of the supercontinent of Pangaea 480 million years ago. That's long before the time of the dinosaurs, and they once rivaled the Alps and the Rockies for an awe-inspiring spectacle.

3 The gentle waves of rolling mountains. When you view our mountains from vistas like Whiteside Mountain or the Blue Valley Overlook, you can see the remnants of those sharp and foreboding mountains. What you're witnessing are upthrusts of gneiss, which once resided within massive volcanoes. That's right, if there's a bit of poetry in your soul, you can tell yourself that you're strolling over the cold heart of a volcano.

4 A gem of a location – literally. Those millions of years of volcanic activity and the titanic forces of tectonic pressure have delivered a jeweler's dream of gold and gemstones, such as sapphire. Stroll carefully over unpaved roads after a rainstorm and keep your eyes open, you may discover a sapphire, garnet, or emerald. Or wade into the cold, cold waters of the Cullasaja River, where it's possible to discover flakes of gold. Until the California Gold Rush of 1849, this part of North Carolina was the largest gold-producing territory in the United States.

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5 When it rains, it pours. Highlands is at the center of one of two temperate rainforests in the continental U.S. (The other is the rich woodlands of Oregon and Washington). This means, we enjoy four distinct seasons and get lots of rain – typically more than 120 inches each year. The rainfall contributes to our spectacular waterfalls and biologically rich flora and fauna.

6 Waterfall wonders. You may find all of our rainfall a bit off-putting but let us share some advantages: It's given us an unparalleled collection of waterfalls. Of course, there are the Big Four of the Cullasaja Gorge, but there are so many other waterfalls to discover and enjoy, some thundering, some beguiling in their gentle presence.

7 A tale of two seas. The rain that falls here either makes its way to the Gulf of Mexico (via the Cullasaja River) or to the Atlantic Ocean. That's because the Highlands area straddles the

Continental Divide. Look for signs that mark its path along U.S. Hwy. 28 and on U.S. Hwy. 107.



8 Based on a biblical tale. All that rain also means that everyone can enjoy the little miracle of Moses Rock on the road leading into Horse Cove. Moses Rock's name harkens to the Old Testament story of the prominent figure who struck a rock and provided water for the traveling children of Israel. This little spring, shooting from a rock face on the right side of the road, has been comforting thirsty travelers for the last 150 years. The local spring appeared in the late 19th Century when Jim Henry, who was helping to transform what had been a Cherokee trail into a road that would connect Horse Cove to Highlands, struck his maddock against a rock and a steady stream of water burst forth. It's been flowing steadily and pooling in a little granite basin ever since. Over the years, someone added two feet of white PVC to extend the fountain and a ceramic angel to serve as a silent witness to this quiet miracle.

9 Salamanders are a specialty. Highlands is the Salamander Capital of the World. In fact, biologists come from all over the world to study our remarkably rich pool of these shy amphibians. Lift away a bit of the leaves, plant matter and loamy earth along our waterways and you're almost certain to glimpse them as they wiggle away (the salamanders, not the biologists).



There's another reason we take an inordinate amount of pride in these little creatures – they serve the same function as canaries in a coal mine, and their presence certifies the purity of our air and water and soil.



10 Don't forget the otters. For a couple of years, small populations of North American River Otters have made their home at Lake Ravenel, the Highlands Botanical Garden and perhaps other sites. This is worth noting because they were missing from our region since the 1930s – victims of trapping for their fur. These frolicking creatures who love to fish, swim and play are a joy to watch. We're glad they're back!

11 We're for the birds. Highlands is home to a thriving bird population. The Highlands Plateau Audubon Society's annual bird count records over 50 different species each year, including the Blackburnian Warbler, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. The endangered Peregrine Falcon, reintroduced to the area, now nests on Whiteside Mountain's cliffs. Look up and listen carefully to appreciate the avian diversity.

12 A botanical haven. 500 species of mosses, ferns, wildflowers, shrubs, and trees flourish in natural forest, wetlands and old-growth plant communities connected by a series of trails and boardwalks at the Highlands Biological Station. Highlands' unusual climate, and the fact that glaciers made this their southernmost point during the last Ice Age (delivering seeds and

500
SPECIES

soil), lets us enjoy a diversity of plant life that's unmatched anywhere else in the world.

13 Flora and forest. Highlands is surrounded by the Nantahala National Forest. That means you'll discover shadowed stands of trees and rhododendron thickets that are unchanged since the days when the Cherokee lived here. There are trails and paths for every level of hiker to explore these forested mountains.

14 Mountain bogs. Our mountain bogs, home to pitcher plants, reveal an unexpected treasure: carnivorous plants right here in Highlands. These unique habitats also support rare and threatened species like Gray's Lily, Cuthbert's Turtlehead, Swamp Pink, and the bog turtle. Protecting these small, special places is crucial.

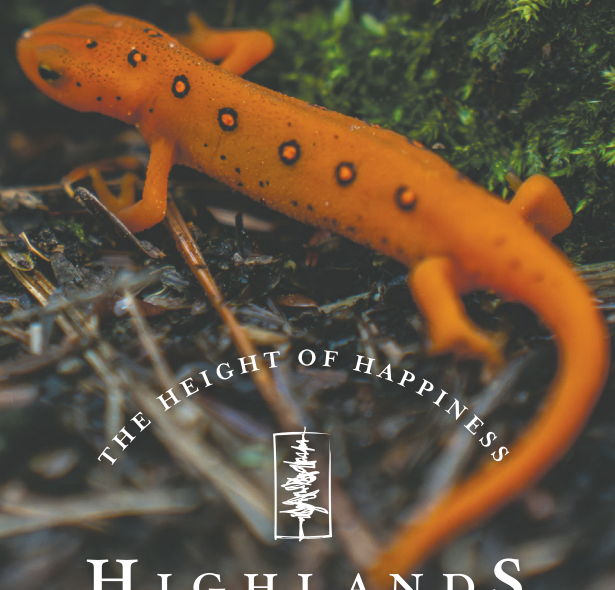
15 Mountain lore. Our forests are constantly changing due to human influences. One major example is the chestnut blight, an introduced fungus that wiped out mature American Chestnut trees over a hundred years ago. However, American Chestnuts still persist in our forests; their ancient roots send up new sprouts after the blight kills existing trees. This may explain how Yellow Mountain acquired its name, as the mature trees would have colored the mountain yellow in spring with their flowers and in fall with their leaves.

Highlands Welcome Center

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15 Magical Facts about Highlands



THE HEIGHT OF HAPPINESS



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