Linville Gorge

Wiseman's View

"Did You See That?"

By Karen Ott Mayer | Photography courtesy of Burke County Tourism

North Carolina's Brown Mountain Lights have been a source of intrigue for more than a century.

Mystery surrounds North Carolina's Brown Mountain located in Burke County. For more than 100 years, an unexplained phenomenon called the Brown Mountain Lights has mystified locals, visitors, and scientists with orb-like illuminations that occur at irregular intervals.

When talking with locals who have grown up with the legends and stories, their responses can be rather nonchalant. "It's just always happened," they say about the lights in the night sky. The legend grew even more when songwriter Scotty Wiseman wrote "The Legend of the Brown Mountain Lights" in the 1950s and Tommy Faile of Valdese, North Carolina, later recorded the song.

Theories abound as to the origin of the lights because capturing a solid image of the lights has been a challenge. In the early 1990s, however, a local photographer and private pilot Charles Braswell managed to change that reality.

"I couldn't find any pictures so I decided to start studying the area," he says. Highly experienced at taking nighttime and trail photos, Braswell made more than 30 trips to the mountain, setting up at dusk and sometimes staying all night.

"I first spent a lot of time figuring out what was normal up there. As a pilot, I could discern plane lights as well as other lights," he continues. It was about his 38th trip

when he caught something unusual. "I started videotaping and photographing the lights."

The result was one of the best images available today.

In the recent past, the Burke County Tourism Development Authority held the Brown Mountain Lights Symposium in 2011, and the response was overwhelming.

"We sold 125 seats at the Morgantown City Hall and the event was attended by more than a dozen media who were granted standing room only space," says Ed Phillips, director of tourism for Burke County. Speakers included experts from the scientific and paranormal communities. Media spread the information worldwide and placed Morgantown, North Carolina, at the epicenter of the story.

In 2012, Phillips and his team held a second symposium focused on eyewitness accounts and those witnesses who were deemed highly credible. Titled "What Does Our Government Really Know?", the symposium brought in retired U.S. Forest Service law enforcement officers who had spent their careers around Brown Mountain and the Linville Gorge. Military exercises or other evidence of scientific exploration were basically off limits for discussion.

So, what exactly do observers see on the Mountain? "Some people report streaking lights that move straight up out of the ground and disappear into the night. Others report seeing glowing orbs about 4-to-5 feet in diameter that hover and move through the forest as if they have some level of intelligence," says Phillips.

One of North Carolina's earliest paranormal renegades and national expert, Joshua P. Warren, founded "Haunted Asheville Ghost Tours." He has spent more than 15 years camping in the area with scientists and instruments and believes the lights are a plasma similar to ball lightning that forms due to special geologic and atmospheric conditions.

Warren believes one of the amazing things about Brown Mountain is the variety of phenomena people report. He likens it to a miniature Bermuda Triangle.

"In addition to the lights, we have stories of ghosts, UFOs, aliens, time slips, and weird creatures in the area. I feel places on earth that naturally conduct high amounts of electrical energy are "portals." So even though the lights themselves are probably similar to ball lightning, the amount of energy at Brown Mountain produces a phantasmagoria of strange side effects. It's a place where we might find inter-dimensional ripples."

Braswell notes another interesting fact about the Brown Mountain Lights phenomenon. "You meet the most interesting people up here and I like to visit and hear their stories."

Warren believes a little mystery can connect even strangers.

"The unknown is a blank slate upon which each person can project his or her ideas and fantasies. No one can claim unknown territory, so it's an exciting stimulus for the imagination."

In a world filled with instant information and answers, maybe the real attraction is simply found in the ability to revel in the unknown while gazing skyward.

Where to See the Lights

Tourism director Ed Phillips suggests two different vantage points that afford the best opportunity to view the lights.

Brown Mountain Overlook – Located 22 miles north of Morganton on NC Highway 181. A large parking area has a direct view of Brown Mountain 2.5 miles away.

Wiseman's View – Located on Old NC highway 105 near Linville Falls. This overlook requires a short walk down a paved path to rock pulpits that overlook the 1,500-foot deep Linville Gorge (where the lights are also seen.) Here, one can see into the Linville Gorge and also five miles across to Brown Mountain which is perfectly framed between Table Rock and Hawksbill Mountains.

To learn more about the Brown Mountain Lights, and other spooky tales and history of Western North Carolina, consider investigating Joshua P. Warren's "Haunted Asheville Ghost Tours."

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