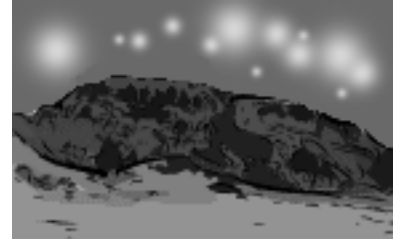


The Brown Mountain Lights

Brown Mountain in northern Burke County may be the most famous mountain in western North Carolina. Long and even crested, it isn't particularly impressive. And at 2,700 feet, it isn't very high. Its fame lies in the weird, wavering lights that have long hovered over it at night.



Called the Brown Mountain Lights, these strange phenomena capture the imagination of those who see them and were even featured in a 1999 episode of *The X-Files*. Thousands of people have witnessed the lights, but nearly every observer sees them in a different way. Some describe them as a glowing ball of fire, others as hazy orbs, and still others as bursting skyrockets. On dark nights, they pop up so thick and fast it's impossible to count them.

No provable scientific explanation has even been found for the lights' existence, although scientists from the U.S. Geological Survey, the Smithsonian Institution, and the U.S. Weather Service have investigated them, as have countless private groups. Numerous theories—burning marsh gases, reflected train or automobile lights, city lights, radium rays, seismic activity, geological glitches, even the firing of moonshine stills—have been proposed as causes of the lights. But all of them have been dismissed.

Some people have sought a more supernatural source of Brown Mountain's mysterious lights. According to Cherokee Indian legend, the lights are the spirits of Indian maidens who have continued searching for their husbands and sweethearts killed near the mountain during an ancient battle between the Cherokee and Catawba Indians. Early frontiersmen believed the lights were spirits of the Indian warriors slain in that battle.

Another legend dates back to 1850, when a woman named Belinda disappeared in the Brown Mountain area, and her husband Jim was suspected of murdering her. Everyone in the community helped search for Belinda. One night during the search, strange lights appeared over Brown Mountain. Many believed they were the spirit of the dead woman, coming back to haunt her killer. The search ended without Belinda being found, and Jim soon left the county, never to be heard of again. Many years later, under a pile of stones in a deep ravine on Brown Mountain, a woman's skeleton was found, and the lights that had been seen during the search started to appear again. And they have been seen ever since, reminding evildoers that their crimes will be revealed.

Some of the best reported places to see the Brown Mountain Lights are at the Brown Mountain Overlook on NC 181 about twenty miles north of Morganton; the Wiseman's View Overlook about five miles south of the village of Linville Falls on Kistler Memorial Highway (old NC 105); or the Lost Cove Cliffs Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway at milepost 310, about eight miles from Linville.

The lights are not always visible. Go on a night when the weather is clear and there is little or no moonlight. The most favorable times for viewing are 10 p.m. and 2 a.m. You may also catch a glimpse of some nocturnal animals.