

Black Mountain, KY, 4,139 ft. – October 5, 2019, HP #28: Hollowed-out Coal Veins

The morning of October 5, I pulled out of Abram's Creek Campground located on the Tennessee side of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. My destination was the highpoint of Kentucky – my fourth highpoint of the Southern Six Pack.

The 130 miles to Harlan KY took three hours as the way often twisted and turned through mountain passes. Harlan is a railroad shipping town, servicing the coal mining industry. Its history includes many violent labor disputes between miners and miner owners, and it seemed economically depressed.

From Harlan, the directions I had put me on Highway 38 heading east toward Virginia. I was looking for an "Old Hwy 38" branching off from Highway 38, but I never found it. Instead, I ended up in Keokee VA. Along the way Highway 38 passed through several dilapidated coal mining communities, which further unmistakably revealed the poverty of the area.

At Keokee I asked for directions to Black Mountain and was sent southwest to Highway 421. Before reaching the intersection of Highways 606 and 421, I realized I had been sent in the wrong direction. To solve the problem, I turned to my Road Atlas and plotted a course to Big Stone Gap, and on to Inman. It was a fun seven-mile drive from Inman up the east side of Black Mountain. Highway 160 known as the "Trail of the Lonesome Pine" zigzagged its way through numerous tight bends to where Virginia meets Kentucky. A green reflective highway sign at the state line announced the "Highest Point in KY" and incorrectly labeled Black Mountain's elevation as 4,145 feet. Actually, the crest of the highway at the intersection of the two states is well under 4,000 feet.

Across the highway from the incorrect sign was a parking area. Leading south out of the parking area was the eastern terminus of Black Mountain Ridge Road. With care, I was able to drive the low-clearance Toyota Corolla south and then west along Black Mountain Ridge Road, gaining elevation toward the summit.

Arriving at the Radar Tower I discovered a man and a woman eating a late lunch, the time was after 2:00 p.m. The man was kind enough to take a photo of me in front of the Radar Tower.

The Corolla made it up the hill behind the Radar Tower, where the road deteriorated to more than it could handle. I walked the remaining 200 yards to an abandoned tower on the peak of the mountain. Unfortunately, the derelict tower was missing its lower ladder, meaning there was no feasible means to climb it to get above the trees for a long-range view. Not far from the tower I located a summit plaque on a rock, as well as a survey monument, confirming I was at Kentucky's highest point. Scattered between my parking spot and the deserted tower were a few other dilapidated structures.



Perhaps it was a good thing no spur roads off Highway 38 were labeled "Old Hwy 38." Because, as I walked back to the Corolla, I noticed a locked and shut gate on Black Mountain Ridge Road preventing

the mountain from being traversed. Had the Corolla been able make it up from the Highway 38 side, backtracking would have been the only way down. Returning to the mountain's southside would not have been ideal for my plans.

The chronicle of Black Mountain is strongly tied to coaling mining. In fact, at the crest of Highway 160 the view to the southeast is of a large open pit mine. Furthermore, inside Black Mountain lie many hollowed-out coal veins which conspiracists claim may one day cause the summit to cave in. Perhaps the color of coal is what gives "Black" Mountain its name?

Being private property, and possibly spurred by the cave-in conspiracy, at the time I visited Black Mountain visitors were asked to mail in a signed waiver prior to their outing. I have since heard the Commonwealth of Kentucky has obtained ownership of the summit and they do not require a waiver.

As I backtracked down the weed infested and intermittently washed-out Black Mountain Ridge Road, I encountered a pick-up truck coming up. With care, the vehicles managed to pass each other without the low clearance Corolla scraping. It was just after 3:00 p.m. when I joined back with Highway 160 and enjoyed the twisty descent back to Inman. From there I headed to Mount Rogers VA, 110 miles to the east.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/5kTQ44qyDZgTioMM7>