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Blue Ridge Parkway Viewshed Assessments:

Excerpts from a Summary Report of the 2026 Gary E. Everhardt Park Break Program

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[Ed. note: This article contains the full Summary Report except for participant biographies, the appendices, and all but the first four outlook descriptions, which are included as examples. The full report is available at [Clemson University's Park Break website](#).]

INTRODUCTION

With over 16.5 million visitors annually, the Blue Ridge Parkway showcases scenic mountain views along its 469-mile length and is the gateway to many unique cultural attractions. To maintain the scenic views and to reduce the possibility of development negatively impacting the quality and beauty of these viewsheds, organizations including the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, through initiatives such as Blue Ridge Rising, have partnered with the National Park Service, local communities, and other community organizations to establish a baseline qualitative assessment for all viewsheds along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

With support from the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, the Clemson University Institute for Parks in partnership with the George Wright Society and the School of Natural Resources at the University of Tennessee has coordinated the 2026 Gary E. Everhardt Park Break Program to assist in this effort. The Gary E. Everhardt Park Break Program is a fully supported leadership and service-learning program for graduate students. This year eight Gary E. Everhardt Park Break Fellows, representing eight unique universities, traveled to the Blue Ridge Parkway for one week to conduct baseline qualitative assessments of 59 viewsheds between milepost 202 and milepost 317.5 (Table 1). These qualitative viewshed assessments will assist the Blue Ridge Parkway and partners in identifying the most unique and highest priority viewsheds for future voluntary conservation. In addition, the qualitative descriptions and photographs of each viewshed may be used to develop site narratives and promotional materials of underutilized destinations to assist in distributing visitation more evenly across the Blue Ridge Parkway.

GARY E. EVERHARDT PARK BREAK AND RESEARCH TEAM

The Gary E. Everhardt Park Break is a seven-to-ten-day park-based leadership and service-learning program for graduate students from various backgrounds (for more information see <https://www.clemson.edu/centers-institutes/parks/leadership-training/everhardt.html>). Applications are solicited



Mile	Outlook Name	Mile	Outlook Name
202.8	Granite Quarry Parking Overlook	266.8	Mt. Jefferson
203.9	Piedmont Overlook	267.8	Betseys Rock Falls
203.9	Piedmont Overlook Agriculture scene	270.2	Lewis Fork Overlook
213.0	Blue Ridge Music Center Amphitheater	272.0	Cascades Parking Area
217.5	Cumberland Knob Picnic Area	274.3	Elk Mountain Overlook
218.6	Fox Hunter's Paradise Parking Overlook	277.3	Stoney Fork Overlook
218.6	Fox Hunter's Paradise Trail Viewpoint	277.9	Osborne Mountain
230.1	Little Glade Mill Pond	277.9	Deep Gap View
232.5	Stone Mountain Overlook	278.3	Carroll Gap Overlook
233.7	Bullhead Mountain Overlook	289.5	Raven Rocks Overlook
235.0	Mahogany Rock Overlook	289.8	Yadkin Valley Overlook
235.7	Devil's Garden Park Overlook	290.4	Thunder Hill Overlook
236.9	Air Bellows Overlook	294.0	Moses Cone Carriage Barn
238.5	Brinegar Cabin	294.0	Flat Top Manor Front Porch
240.6	Low Notch Overlook (aka No Name Parking Area)	294.6	Bass Lake (off Shoals Mill Rd to US 321)
240.6	Low Notch Overlook-North (aka No Name Parking Area)	295.3	Sims Creek Overlook
241.1	Doughton Park – Picnic Area (picnic area road closed as of 5/6)	295.9	Sims Pond Overlook
241.1	Wildcat Rocks Overlook	296.4	Price Picnic Area
242.4	Alligator Back Parking Area Viewpoint	296.7	Price Lake Overlook
242.4	Alligator Back Parking Area View Back Across Parkway	297.1	Lakeview Overlook (boat rental parking area)
243.4	Bluff Mountain	303.9	Yonahlossee Overlook
244.7	Basin Cove Overlook NNE	305.2	Beacon Heights Parking Area
244.7	Basin Cove Overlook SE	305.2	Beacon Heights SW
252.8	Sheets Gap Parking Area SE	305.2	Beacon Heights SE
252.8	Sheets Gap Parking Area SW	305.2	Beacon Heights NE Grandfather
260.3	Jumpinoff Rocks Parking Area	306.6	Grandfather Mountain Parking Overlook
260.3	Jumpinoff Rocks Trail Viewpoint	307.6	Little Bald Overlook
264.4	The Lump Overlook	308.3	Flat Rock Parking Area
264.4	On Top of the Lump	310	Lost Cove Cliffs Parking Overlook
		N/A	Erwin's Viewpoint of Linville Falls

TABLE 1. Outlook names and mileage markers.

prior to the program. Between seven and ten graduate students considering careers in park and cultural site management are selected for participation. Upon arrival, the selected students investigate a topic of importance to the host park in order to provide valuable information to inform decision-making. The program is focused on providing graduate students with leadership development programming as well as opportunities to interact with park researchers, natural and cultural resource managers, and policy-makers, and is the only graduate-level service, science, and stewardship program that focuses on scientific and other scholarly inquiry in parks and protected areas managed by the National Park Service (NPS) and other federal land management agencies. Since 2008, more than 200 students have participated in the program which is coordinated by the Clemson University Institute for Parks in partnership with the George Wright Society.

METHODS

The Blue Ridge Parkway showcases scenic mountain views along its 469-mile length and is the gateway to many unique cultural attractions. To maintain the scenic views and to reduce the possibility of development negatively impacting the quality and beauty of these viewsheds, organizations including the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, through initiatives such as Blue Ridge Rising, have partnered with the National Park Service, local communities, and other community organizations to establish baseline qualitative viewshed assessments and to identify and prioritize viewsheds for management action and future voluntary conservation efforts (e.g., Anderson and Rex 2019). The Gary E. Everhart Park Break program conducted baseline viewshed assessments between milepost 202 and milepost 317.5. Based on past research and literature review, we adapted viewshed evaluation criteria and methods based on Miller et al. (2024) and the NPS Visual Resource Inventory (Peters et al. 2018; Sullivan and Meyer 2016; Meyer et al. 2024). For each viewshed, a combination of quantitative scoring and qualitative descriptors helped to distinguish the overall quality of each designated viewshed.

Selection of Sites

Along the 469 miles of the Blue Ridge Parkway, there are approximately 280 designated overlooks that focus on historic resources, unique natural features, and/or picturesque views. Each designated overlook provides parking so that visitors may disembark from their vehicles and directly engage with the recreational opportunity. However, not every designated overlook has a scenic view, and not every scenic view along the Parkway is found at an official parking lot, such as views from rock outcrops seen along a trail. Between milepost 202 and milepost 317.5, the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation identified 59 viewsheds for evaluation (Table 1).

Viewshed Assessments and Evaluation Criteria

For the purposes of this report, a viewshed can be defined as the view that a person can see from a specific point (e.g., Miller et al. 2024). A viewshed can be characterized and described by a range of geographic characteristics, such as viewpoint location, view direction, and view width and distance, as well as aesthetic characteristics, such as the perceived visual variety and complexity, coherence and legibility, ephemeral qualities, uniqueness, resource quality, incongruence of land use, and vividness (e.g., Kaplan, Kaplan, and Ryan 1998; Meyer, Taylor, and Palmer 2021; Meyer et al. 2024; Miller et al. 2024). Based on past research and literature review, we adapted viewshed evaluation criteria and methods based on Miller et al. (2024) and the NPS Visual Resource Inventory (Peters et al. 2018; Sullivan and Meyer 2016). These methods were intended to measure the geographic characteristics and the aesthetic qualities of the viewshed (Appendix A, omitted here) and were measured through observation by members of the research team at each viewshed/viewpoint using both quantitative measures as well as qualitative notes. Quantitative measures included the following:

Viewshed size reflects both the relative width (degrees) and the number of depth zones (foreground, middle ground, and background) associated with the viewshed (Miller et al. 2024). This variable is measured on a three-point scale: 2=Panoramic view (180 degrees or greater) that is unobstructed and includes all distance zones (foreground, middle ground, and background); 1=Approximately 90 degrees wide view with only foreground and middle ground depths represented; 0=Very narrow view with only foreground depth.

Variety and visual complexity reflect the variation in the visual characteristics of the landscape including patterns, color, form, line, textures, and vegetation (e.g., Kaplan, Kaplan, and Ryan 1998; Meyer, Taylor, and Palmer 2021; Meyer, et al. 2024; Miller et al. 2024). Variety and visual complexity were measured on a three-point scale: 2= High levels of patterns, forms, ridges, lines, textures and a sense of depth; 1= Moderate level of patterns, forms, ridges, lines, textures, and depth; and 0= Low levels of variety and visual complexity.

Harmony/organization (Legibility and coherence) of a viewshed pertains to the visual composition, spatial relationships, and scale relationships that reflect the framing of the view, the presence of a focal point, and degree of harmonious land uses associated with natural and traditional pastoral views. **Coherence** refers to how well a view is visually organized, structured, and makes sense, allowing for immediate understanding (Kaplan,

Kaplan, and Ryan 1998; Meyer, Taylor, and Palmer 2021; Meyer et al. 2024; Miller et al. 2024). Key elements of coherence include repetition of elements, structural order, and harmony. **Legibility** refers to how easy it is to visually navigate the landscape with landmarks, a focal point, and edges/framing (Kaplan, Kaplan, and Ryan 1998; Meyer, Taylor, and Palmer 2021; Miller et al. 2024). These criteria are measured on a three-point scale: 2=High levels of visual composition, including framing or edges that define and focus the view, a focal point, and the land use being harmonious with the surroundings and understandable (e.g., a valley view defined by two ridges that orient the eye and provide a focal point towards the head of the valley); 1=May contain framing or a focal point but is more diffused (i.e., visual composition provides some coherence and legibility); 0=No visual focal point, landmarks, or framing (i.e., difficult to assess spatial relationships and scale).

Ephemeral qualities refer to features in the foreground and middle ground such as seasonal elements including fall foliage colors, wildflower blooms, and pastoral variations such as crops and livestock (Miller et al. 2024). Scoring followed recommendations by Miller et al. (2024) and used a 3-point scale: 2=Frequent/predictable; 1=Infrequent but predictable; 0=Unpredictable.

Positive human-influenced content in the viewshed includes traditional and historic land uses that complement the natural landscape (Meyer, Taylor, and Palmer 2021; Miller et al. 2024). This concept was measured using a 3-point scale: 2=Striking and visually appealing that is harmonious with the natural and historic character; 1=Noticeable but not visually striking, and somewhat appealing and harmonious with the natural and historic character; 0=Not visible.

Incongruent or distracting content in a viewshed include human infrastructure and land uses such as powerlines, mines, and junkyards that distract from or degrade the traditional and natural views and generally occur in the foreground or middle ground (Meyer, Taylor, and Palmer 2021; Miller et al. 2024). This was measured on a three-point scale (-5=Highly visible and large in scale with the potential of multiple discordant land uses; -3=Visible discordant content or land use but small in scale; 0=Not visible) that was more heavily weighted because of the theoretical negative impact that discordant content in a viewshed can have on the visitor experience.

Uniqueness reflects the relative and comparative distinctness of the viewshed as compared to all other viewsheds available in a geographic area. This was measured on a three-point scale: 2=Completely unique or a one-of-a-kind

view; 1=Similar to other views but has a unique perspective or element; 0=Common or similar to other views.

Quality and condition measures both the perceived health of the natural elements and the perceived condition of built landscape elements (Meyer, Taylor, and Palmer 2021). This was measured using a three-point scale: 2=Most elements are of high quality and in good/healthy condition and free of debris; 1=Most elements are in fair condition with some natural elements appearing unhealthy or with some damage, or debris; 0=Most elements are in poor condition, natural elements look unhealthy, damaged, or in poor condition, and the built environment, if applicable, is poorly maintained (debris/trash etc.) and/or is in an advanced state of disrepair.

Estimated duration of viewing reflects the estimated time that visitors will view, engage, or utilize the viewshed (Miller et al. 2024). This was measured on a three-point scale: 2=Greater than 3 minutes; 1=1–3 minutes; and 0=less than 1 minute.

Vividness is an overall ranking and reflects the viewshed's "wow factor." Considerations include the scoring related to the size, variety and complexity, harmony and organization, uniqueness, and ephemeral qualities, as well as quality and condition of landscape elements (Meyer, Taylor, and Palmer 2021; Miller et al. 2024). Vividness was measured on a three-point scale: 2=Vivid, high scores on four of six of the characteristics listed; 1=Somewhat vivid, high scores on two of the characteristics; 0=No wow at all, forgettable, and/or a good place to let the trees grow up and block the view.

The research team also recorded **qualitative notes** about each viewshed pertaining to distinctive natural features, positive humanmade features, ephemeral features, and incongruent or distracting features.

Pilot Testing and Training of Evaluation Team

We developed and refined all observational techniques and data collection procedures through extensive pilot testing. Over a series of Zoom meetings, we first reviewed all procedures and defined all viewshed characteristics to ensure a comprehensive assessment as well as comparability with the Scenic Virginia Viewshed Evaluation Form and the NPS Visual Resource Inventory Quality Assessment Form (Meyer, Taylor, and Palmer 2021; Miller et al. 2024).

Following revisions based on iterative feedback from the research team and the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, the assessment/evaluation form was finalized for use in the study. During the initial day of data collection (e.g., viewshed assessment), all 11 members of the research team

(eight field researchers and three supervisors) scored four viewsheds as individuals before debriefing as a team to compare and discuss at length any discrepancies in scoring. This discussion allowed the team to clarify the operational definitions and/or measurement of each viewshed element under consideration and strengthened the consistency of scoring across the team. On all other days of data collection, we repeated this process on the first viewshed evaluation of the day. We used these processes to develop consistent, reliable, and valid scoring of all observations across the eight field researchers.

Data Collection

The viewshed assessment tool was uploaded into Survey 123 in ARCGIS and the team utilized tablets to collect all qualitative and quantitative data, as well as to take landscape pictures from each viewshed location. Four pairs of researchers visited and collected data at 59 viewsheds.

Upon arrival at a viewshed, the pair stood at the view-point to assess the viewshed on the designated criteria. Completion of the form took approximately 20–30

minutes per viewshed and quantitative scores measuring the viewshed attributes listed above were recorded. All researchers also recorded qualitative notes describing the viewshed and surrounding setting, which would inform the narrative for each location. Finally, to increase internal consistency and validity, we collected all data in pairs and rotated the pairings daily.

Data Cleaning Procedures

Data from the 59 viewshed observation sheets were entered into Microsoft Excel for screening and analysis. First, after completing 37 viewshed assessments during the first two days, the research team reviewed all scoring of each viewshed to ensure an accurate assessment.

Evaluating the aesthetic qualities of a viewshed is a somewhat comparative process, and this review resulted in the adjustment of a small number of scores. This process also allowed us to screen for any missing data and to update the qualitative notes to more closely reflect the viewshed experience.

BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY OUTLOOK DESCRIPTIONS

Park Break Fellows described and evaluated 59 viewsheds, which are listed above in Table 1. [Ed. note: as noted at the beginning of this article, only the first 4 of the 59 descriptions are presented here, as examples.]

Granite Quarry Overlook

Description: The *Granite Quarry Overlook* is a grassy pasture-framed panoramic stop overlooking a view of a natural resource. An interpretive sign at the parking lot identifies the natural and cultural features visible from the overlook, which offers a dispersed panoramic view of a semi-developed Blue Ridge landscape with distant ridgelines in the background. The signage indicates that one of the largest granite quarries is visible in the background; however, it was difficult to spot. The quality and condition of the resource was high, but in the foreground, the trees partially covered the view of the overlook, and it did lack some coherence regarding the direction of the view. A nearby powerline and noticeable highway noise also impacted and detracted from the viewing experience. Overall, this was ranked to be a relatively common view that shows elevation changes as one gets closer to the Virginia border.



Criteria	Viewshed Score
Viewshed Size	2
Variety/Visual Complexity	1
Harmony/Organization	1
Ephemeral qualities	1
Positive human-influenced content	1
Incongruent/Distracting	-5
Uniqueness	0
Quality/Condition	2
Vividness	1
Est. duration of viewing	0
Total Score	4

Piedmont Overlook

Description: The *Piedmont Overlook* view consists of an overlapping foreground, middle ground, and background, which reduces the dimension and depth within the scene. This disruption affects the continuity and picturesque qualities one looks for when choosing an overlook. The visible landscape consists of several background ridges, with the primary focus centered on a valley within the midground. Key visual aspects within this view include ridges, forests, valleys, pastures, hardwood and pine stands, and grassy knolls. The foreground obstruction reduces visibility, depth perception, and the overall quality of the viewshed. If management within this viewshed continues to be limited, the restriction of the view will continue.



Criteria	Viewshed Score
Viewshed Size	1
Variety/Visual Complexity	2
Harmony/Organization	1
Ephemeral qualities	1
Positive human-influenced content	1
Incongruent/Distracting	0
Uniqueness	1
Quality/Condition	2
Vividness	1
Est. duration of viewing	1
Total Score	11

Piedmont Overlook, Agricultural Scene

Description: This Piedmont Overlook provides a close-range perspective of agricultural development. Comprised of multiple agricultural residential properties, the composition is defined by working-landscape elements such as cultivated fields, crops, livestock enclosures, agricultural structures, and an unpaved rural road. These elements convey an active, lived-in Appalachian countryside and the ongoing evolution of rural life. Traditional elements such as barns, fence lines, and dirt roads coexist with modern housing and updated agricultural practices, illustrating the region's progression through time. The blend of past and present enriches the character of the view, offering a unique perspective not found elsewhere along the Parkway.



Criteria	Viewshed Score
Viewshed Size	1
Variety/Visual Complexity	2
Harmony/Organization	0
Ephemeral qualities	2
Positive human-influenced content	1
Incongruent/Distracting	-3
Uniqueness	2
Quality/Condition	2
Vividness	1
Est. duration of viewing	1
Total Score	9

Blue Ridge Music Center Amphitheater Overlook

Description: The *Blue Ridge Music Center Amphitheater* seating offers a completely unique view. This overlook is a short walk from the visitor center, which is a must-see stop for visitors that highlights the history of music and artists in Virginia and North Carolina. The surrounding ridges are heavily forested, with a blend of coniferous and deciduous trees, creating a soothing and pleasant frame for the viewer. While the overall view is not the most vivid or complex, it should remain a high-priority location for conservation efforts to ensure concert goers enjoy the natural backdrop as opposed to developed land behind the stage. The middle ground and background feature several heavily forested ridges which will provide opportunities for beautiful fall foliage viewing.



Criteria	Viewshed Score
Viewshed Size	2
Variety/Visual Complexity	2
Harmony/Organization	1
Ephemeral qualities	1
Positive human-influenced content	0
Incongruent/Distracting	0
Uniqueness	1
Quality/Condition	2
Vividness	1
Est. duration of viewing	2
Total Score	12

SUMMARY

In conclusion, over five days, the 2026 Gary E. Everhart Park Break Fellows and affiliated faculty conducted 59 viewshed analyses along a 116-mile segment of the Blue Ridge Parkway between mile markers 202 and 317.5. Viewshed evaluation criteria and methods were collaboratively adapted in conjunction with the primary community partner, Blue Ridge Foundation, based on Miller et al. (2024) and the NPS Visual Resource Inventory (Peters et al. 2018; Sullivan and Meyer 2016; Meyer et al. 2024). For each viewshed, a combination of quantitative scoring and qualitative descriptors helped to distinguish the overall quality of each designated viewshed, with a final “ranked order” of each assessed viewshed (Appendix B and C; omitted here). Three photos of each viewshed were captured, alongside a final descriptive write-up and a site-specific scoring table, intending to assist the community partner with viewshed maintenance prioritization and dispersion of visitors along the parkway. The final viewshed database was shared with community partners, alongside recommendations on how to perform the analysis independently.

The Park Break team concluded that the adapted viewshed assessment tool was a user-friendly, appropriate tool for both managers and researchers alike. This tool can help to bolster and leverage aesthetic qualities of parks and protected areas in an objective manner, adding unique elements to existing biological, ecological, or cultural assessments currently used by managers. While the tool may be used to support the protection of areas

from incongruent development or deforestation, it can also help managers of viewsheds prioritize and disperse visitors to “less appreciated” views, or to decide where to place existing maintenance resources.

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