

## Black Mountains Magic

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*(reprinted from The Beacon)*

Anyone driving along the A465, from Herefordshire towards Gwent (or Monmouthshire at it is now known), cannot fail to notice a long black ridge on the right. For many visitors to the Brecon Beacons National Park, this view of the Hatterrall ridge is their first sight of these mountains and the reason for their descriptive name is self-evident.

From a distance, except when the sun is shining strongly on the foreground ridge, they really do look black. On dull days in particular, they appear as a large dark-hued wedge silhouetted against the grey of the sky. Some say that it was the Saxons who provided the name for they always saw these mountains from the eastern side of the Wye.

But when seen from a closer viewpoint the colours may vary from green in summer sunlight, to purple in late summer, changing to russet when the bracken is dying in late Autumn, but brilliant white in Winter, if snow has fallen.

The writer, A.G. Bradley in 1911, described the ridges and valleys of the Black Mountains as "... eighty square miles of complete, uncompromising solitude." This may well have been so in his day, but even though still less visited than many other mountain areas in Wales, the 'Blacks' have certainly grown in popularity.

On weekdays it is still possible to complete a route, taking in two ridges, without encountering another walker, but on weekends one can perhaps a line of pony trekkers moving Red Indian fashion along the skyline.

P. Thorseby Jones' description of these mountains, written in 1938, is certainly still applicable: "The Black Mountains of the Welsh-English Border are a singularly unspoilt group of long lofty ridges separated by valleys of undiversified charm, descending steeply towards the Wye on the northern side, and on the southern side less abruptly towards the Usk."



The four main ridges average 87.6 km (11 miles) in length and 600m (2,000 ft) in height. Waun Fach at 811m(2,660 ft) is the highest summit, but its neighbour, Pen y Gadair Fawr 800m (2,624 ft) is a more attractive peak and even looks higher. At the north end of the four main parallel ridges is an abrupt escarpment which overlooks the Wye Valley.

The best way of remembering the layout of the Black Mountains is to imagine your right hand placed flat on a table with the fingers spread apart. Your thumb is Crib y Garth, or 'Cat's Back: Your first finger is Hatterrall, your second finger is Ffawyddog, with Bal-mawr at the knuckle.

Your third finger is the Gader ridge. Your little finger is Allt-mawr and the nail is Crug Hywel, which gives its name to the town of Crickhowell directly below. On the back of your hand are Y Das, Rhos Dirion, Twmpa and Hay Bluff.

The middle of the Hatterrall ridge marks the border of England and Wales and by following it one can walk with one foot in Wales and the other in England. It also provides a high level section of Offa's Dyke Path, a 268 km (168 miles) National Trail connecting Sedbury, near Chepstow with Prestatyn on the North Wales coast. From this ridge the view east extends to the Shropshire Long Mynd, Cleve Hills, Malvern Hills, Graig Syfryddin and the Forest of Dean.

An interesting feature on the Ffawyddog ridge is Dialgarreg, a stone about 1 metre high set into the ground beside the track. Also known as the 'Stone of Revenge' it marks the spot where in 1135, Richard de Clare, a Norman knight (brother of the founder of Tintern Abbey) was ambushed and murdered by a band of Welshmen led by Morgan ap Owen.

Further to the north along this ridge is the prominent cairn of Garn Wen. This fine tall, circular cairn has been constructed with the tender care of a craftsman's skill and it is a useful landmark.

Rhos Dirion on the edge of the north escarpment is marked by a trig' point

(713m), from which impressive views across the Wye Valley may be obtained. Looking west, one may see the Carmarthen Fans while in the near distance stand the Brecon Beacons, with the table-top summit of Pen-y-Fan being most distinctive. Looking north one can see a vast expanse of hill country including the heights of Radnor Forest.

In my opinion the finest viewpoint in the Black Mountains is the summit of Pen y Gadair Fawr (Top of the Great Chair), which is marked by a heap of stones (800m). It most certainly surpasses the neighbouring Waun Fach (Small Bog) which at 811m metres is surprisingly higher. The summit here is marked by the base of a trig' point (usually surrounded by a peaty pool). The concrete pillar was removed many years ago and this featureless summit can be difficult to locate on a misty day.

Pen Twyn Glas (645m) is an interesting summit for it is marked by two upright inscribed stones. No - they are not gravestones as some people imagine - but 19th century boundary markers which bear the names of local landowners - (Mrs Macnamara 1811 and Sir J. Bailey Bart 1847) - whose estates met at this point.

Pen Cerrig calch (701m) is an interesting summit for it is the only area of Carboniferous limestone in the Black Mountains, and was once part of the Llangattock escarpment, before the Usk Valley was formed.

There are also two minor ridges of special interest which deserve a mention. On the eastern side of the Olchon Valley is the previously mentioned 'Cats' Back' which provides an exhilarating narrow and rocky ascent to Black Hill. The other

distinctive ridge is Y Grib, which is popularly known as the 'Dragon's Back'. It rises from Pengenffordd (above the A479) in a series of humps and is a popular route, via Pen Manllwyn to the summit of Waun Fach.

Someone once said to me that he always finds a day in the Black Mountains rather boring. I bit my lip and shook my head; then felt sorry for him and argued with passion that in my opinion, this compact group of ridges and valleys is really quite fascinating, particularly if one knows something about the history of the area and can tune in to its very special atmosphere.

If you have an interest in archaeology or historic buildings then there are numerous points of interest to include on your walks. Iron Age hill forts such as Crug Hywel (Table Mountain), Castell Dinas or Twyn-y-Gaer make superb viewpoints, while Maen Llwyd, at an altitude of 1,880 feet on the western slopes of Pen y Gader Fawr is the highest prehistoric standing stone in South Wales. Of interest in the valley below is the remote Grwyne Fawr Reservoir, once the highest in Britain and the story of its construction covers a period of 20 years.

Secluded little churches such as Llanelieu and Partrishow with their

amazing rood screens, the famous leaning church of Cwmyoy or the whitewashed chapel at Capely-ffin are gems that can be visited time and time again. There are also the two ruined priories of Craswall and Llanthony, the latter having the added attraction of a vaulted cellar bar, where time seems to have stood still and the real ale makes the perfect ending to your walk.

Constantly, one comes across the crumbling remains of long deserted farmhouses or shepherds' cottages and I have often wished that stones could talk and tell me of the people who have lived and worked in these Black Mountains through the passing centuries.

No! the Black Mountains are certainly not boring and this compact and unique range of narrow parallel ridges and attractive valleys offer the hill walker plenty of scope for circular and linear routes with summits of over 2,000 feet providing panoramic views.

I leave the last word to P. Thoresby Jones, writing in 1938:

"Here the confirmed ridge-walker can indulge to the full his strange predilection: he can ridge-walk all day every day for a week and still find unfamiliar spurs to traverse."