

Introduction to County Highpointing in Mississippi

By Tom Owen

Rising an average of only 300' above sea level, Mississippi is a state defined by its lowland river delta from which it takes its name. Mississippi (or *misi-ziibi* in Ojibwe) means "Great River" so one can imagine it is not associated with towering mountains. Many of the state's county highpoints (cohps) are on river bluffs or have multiple points that can be hard to track down. Also, adding to the confusion are man-made Native American burial mounds such as the Jaketown Mounds in Humphreys County that are 25 feet higher than the nearby natural 120 foot contour.

The northeastern part of the state has elevation change in the foothills of the Appalachian/Cumberland Mountains. But this humble state has much to offer the highpointer.

Mississippi has 4 major geographic regions, each with its own subdivisions. From south to north, they are: the Gulf Coast, Southern Prairies, the Delta, and the Northern Highlands.

The **Gulf Coast** consists of a coastal terrace and barrier islands. The narrow terrace reaches only about 10 miles inland. The 3 Gulf Coast counties have highpoints 25 miles inland, at their northern borders, about 250' high.

The **Southern Prairies** cover the southern third of the state and consist of the Piney Woods and Central Prairie. The Piney Woods is a wide coastal plain with densely wooded low hills and cohps that range from 200' to 500'. This area was the last to be populated in Mississippi and is still rather sparse with many highpoints in off-the-beaten-path private hunting lands. Perry County's highpoint, just south of Hattiesburg, is located on the premises of Camp Shelby Training Center, where thousands of National Guardsmen practice utilizing Abrams tanks and Paladin Howitzers yearly. Permission definitely advised here! There are also prolific counties such as Amite, Covington, and Copiah, each with 20 areas of similar height to visit. The Central Prairie stretches from Alabama west to the capitol of Jackson, where one of the most interesting geological features in Mississippi is found. Lurking more than a half mile beneath the intersection of the Piney Woods, Central Prairie, and Loess Bluffs, is Jackson's own volcano. While it has been extinct for some 75 million years, the Jackson Dome proba-

bly helped push counties like Rankin and Scott over 600 feet.

The **Delta** region consists of the Yazoo River Basin along the Mississippi River and the Loess Bluffs that border it. It is in the Yazoo Basin that the highpointer must contend with multiple contour areas to visit. Counties such as Sunflower (28+) and Yazoo (32+) will be all day affairs. Many other counties in this region have 10 or more points to visit. This area also boasts the lowest highpoints in the state (Sharkey and Humphreys top 115' and 120' respectively). Washington County is home to nine 150+ foot contour areas as well as the Winterville Mound site that's largest mound stands at 165+ feet. The Loess Bluffs are found east of the Basin and were formed by wind-blown soil that formed loose, sandy hills. These bluffs are best demonstrated around Vicksburg National Military Park near the Warren County highpoints and the Tunica County highpoint located on the De Soto County line, both around 400'.

The last region, the **Northern Highlands**, includes the Red Clay Hills, the Black Prairie, Pontotoc Ridge, and Northeastern Hills. The Highlands are the most geologically diverse and boast some 700' & 800' mountains to climb.

The Red Clay Hills back up the Loess Bluffs and is an area of high rolling hills with deep, densely wooded ravines. North at the Tennessee border are 700' summits like Malone Mountain (Benton Co.). Further south, 600' peaks can be found in Panola (Terrapin Mtn), Lafayette (Thacker Mtn), Kemper, Newton, and Lauderdale. North of the Hills is the Black Prairie, an extension of the Black Belt found throughout the South that was once home to large cotton plantations. Summits over 500' are found in this region include Clay & Chickasaw Counties. Stretching south from Tennessee is the Pontotoc Ridge, home to the second highest named summit in the state, Lebanon Mountain in Prentiss County, at 780+ feet. Nearby summits of Union and Tippah counties are both over 700'. Finally, the northeast corner of the state is home to the

Northeastern Hills which are the foothills of the Appalachians. Tishomingo County is home to Woodall Mountain, the only 800-foot summit in Mississippi. For the state highpointer, this drive-up is located just a few minutes off US-72 and is now home to a boulder and plaque placed by the Highpointers Club.

Mississippi is one of the few remaining states that has virgin, unclimbed, county summits. These counties have many contour areas to visit; Amite (28), Copiah (39), Covington (20), and Yazoo (32). Others have unique sets of challenges like Issaquena's County's 17 areas that are on an island off the western bank of the Mississippi River or the handful of Sunflower County's 28 contours located on the grounds of the state penitentiary. There are 13 virgin counties left in the Magnolia State, most located in the Piney Woods and Delta regions.

So whether you just need a drive-up state highpoint, want an all day bushwhacking affair for multiple contours, enjoy Native American cultural sites, or want to claim your own first ascent, Mississippi highpointing has something for you.

