

AN EXAMINATION OF THE AREAL EXTENT OF HIGH WINDS ASSOCIATED WITH MOUNTAIN WAVES ALONG THE WESTERN FOOTHILLS OF THE SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS

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Abstract

High winds associated with mountain waves have been found to occur frequently along the western foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains from November through March. When these high wind events occurred, reports of significant wind damage were normally received from two main areas in east Tennessee: the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and the Camp Creek community of southeast Greene County. It was not known whether the National Park and the Camp Creek areas were just more reliable at reporting wind damage or actually had stronger winds compared to other areas along the western foothills. Thus, a study was conducted to examine the available observations along the western foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains to determine the areal extent of these high winds during mountain-wave events. Due to the lack of Automated Surface Observation System (ASOS) and Automated Weather Observing System (AWOS) stations in the western foothills, 18 WeatherBug® and 3 Remote Automated Weather Stations (RAWS) stations were examined on the 52 dates between 1999 and 2007 when mountain-wave-induced warning-level winds were reported at Cove Mountain in the National Park. Although the Cove Mountain site was at a higher elevation than most of the other sites in the western foothills, it was concluded that the higher wind speeds at Cove Mountain were mainly due to its location in the foothills of the highest ridges on the western side of the southern Appalachian Mountains. This conclusion was made because the wind speeds at Cove Mountain were found to be even stronger than those observed at the highest elevation site at Clingmans Dome.

It was found that only the Camp Creek site also reported at least advisory-level winds on 87% of the dates that Cove Mountain reported warning-level winds. In addition, it was found that only the Camp Creek, Coker Creek, Shady Valley, and Erwin sites reported warning-level winds on a few of the Cove Mountain dates. The Camp Creek and Coker Creek sites reported warning-level winds on roughly a third of the dates that they were available, while the Shady Valley site reported warning-level winds on roughly a tenth of the dates that it was available. Composite maps of surface isobars, surface isotherms, and 850-mb isotachs from the warning-level wind dates revealed that the warning-level winds at Camp Creek, Coker Creek, and Shady Valley resulted from a stronger low pressure system with stronger 850-mb winds compared to the low that produced warning-level winds at Cove Mountain. Also, weaker cold-air damming on the eastern side of the southern Appalachian Mountains appeared to allow warning-level winds at the Coker Creek and Shady Valley sites, with the weakest cold-air damming observed during the warning-level wind dates at Shady Valley.

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1. Introduction

High winds associated with mountain waves have been found to frequently occur from November through March within a narrow area along the western foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains (Gaffin 2009). When these mountain wave events occur along the western foothills, reports of wind damage are normally received from two main areas in east Tennessee: the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (hereafter referred to as National Park) and the Camp Creek community of southeast Greene County (Fig. 1). Some of the stronger wind events have produced reports of numerous large trees down in the National Park, which closed almost all the roads in the park, while several homes were damaged and a few barns destroyed in the Camp Creek area. However, it was not known whether the National Park and the Camp Creek areas were just more reliable at reporting wind damage or actually had stronger winds compared to other areas along the western foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains.

It was previously noted in Gaffin (2009) that the location of the highest ridges in the southern Appalachian Mountain range within the National Park likely caused higher mountain-wave-induced winds in the foothills. Also, it was theorized that the frequent reports of wind damage at Camp Creek were possibly the result of its location on the other side of the mountains from the French Broad Valley where southeast winds may have accelerated up through the valley. The purposes of this study are to (1) examine the available observations in the western foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains to determine the areal extent of the high winds during mountain-wave events and (2) examine the synoptic conditions that produced warning-level winds at the different sites.

2. Data and Methodology

The National Park Service Air Resources Division maintains a network of anemometers within the National Park (Fig. 2), including sites at Cove Mountain (elevation of 4,150 ft MSL), Cades Cove (1,850 ft MSL), Look Rock (2,700 ft MSL), and Clingmans Dome (6,670 ft MSL). These anemometers are R. M. Young model Wind Monitors, which record hourly-averaged sustained

winds and peak one-second wind gusts each hour. Since the Cove Mountain observation in the National Park normally reports the highest winds during mountain-wave events, Gaffin (2009) conducted a mountain-wave-induced high wind climatology of the Cove Mountain site. High wind warnings are issued by the National Weather Service when sustained winds of at least 40 mph occur for an hour or longer, or wind gusts of at least 58 mph occur. Thus, the Gaffin (2009) climatology found those dates when southeasterly (direction between 90° and 180°) sustained winds of at least 40 mph occurred at Cove Mountain along with a stable boundary layer and a veering wind profile observed on the Atlanta sounding. This methodology likely gave a good estimate of how many warning-level wind events at Cove Mountain resulted from mountain waves, since it covered many of the necessary ingredients for mountain wave formation including a strong south to

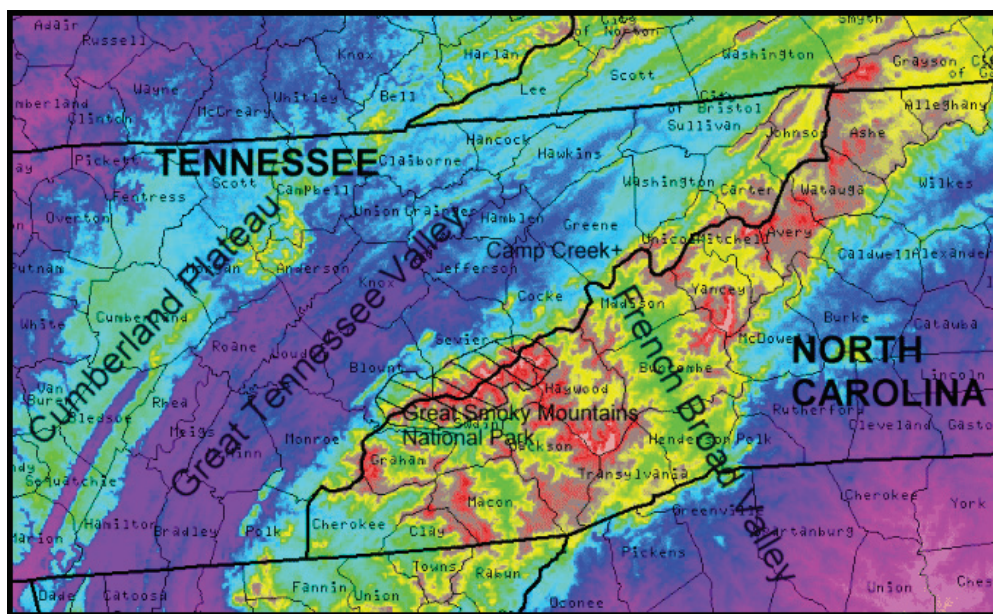


Fig. 1. Location of southern Appalachian region (shaded area) in relation to the United States (top) with relief map of the southern Appalachian region (bottom) [bold lines denote state boundaries with state names in bold capital letters; regular lines denote county boundaries with county names in small text; medium text denotes wind damage locations; large text denotes geographic features].

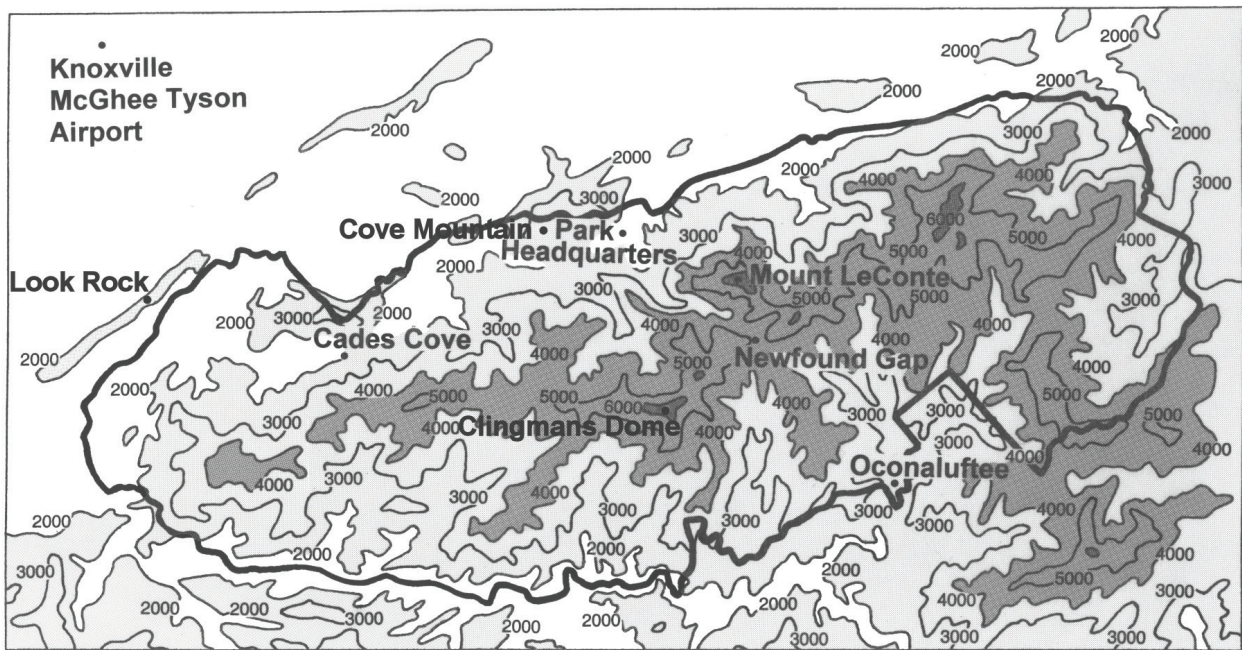


Fig. 2. Contoured elevation map of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and surrounding areas (contours in feet; bold line denotes park boundary) with the locations of the observations sites in or near the park.

southeast wind perpendicular to the mountain ridges, an upstream stable boundary layer extending above the mountain tops, and a veering wind profile that eventually produced a critical layer where the wind flow became parallel to the mountain ridges.

Because ASOS and AWOS sites are non-existent in the western foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains, 18 WeatherBug® sites near the western foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains were examined for high winds (Fig. 3; Table 1). All of the WeatherBug® sites in this study were located on the roofs of schools or buildings at around 10 ft AGL, with the anemometers located on a 10-ft mast making the total height around 20 ft AGL. WeatherBug® anemometers are fairly similar to those at ASOS and AWOS sites in that they report two-minute-averaged sustained winds with one-second wind gusts. In addition to the WeatherBug® sites, three RAWS sites maintained by the U.S. Forest Service located near the western foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains were examined: Coker Creek (CCKT1), Indian Grave (IGGT1), and Unicoi (PGVT1). RAWS anemometers are mounted on a 20 ft tower with ten-minute-averaged sustained winds and five-second-averaged wind gusts. Thus, RAWS winds are expected to be lower than WeatherBug® winds. Although many of the WeatherBug®

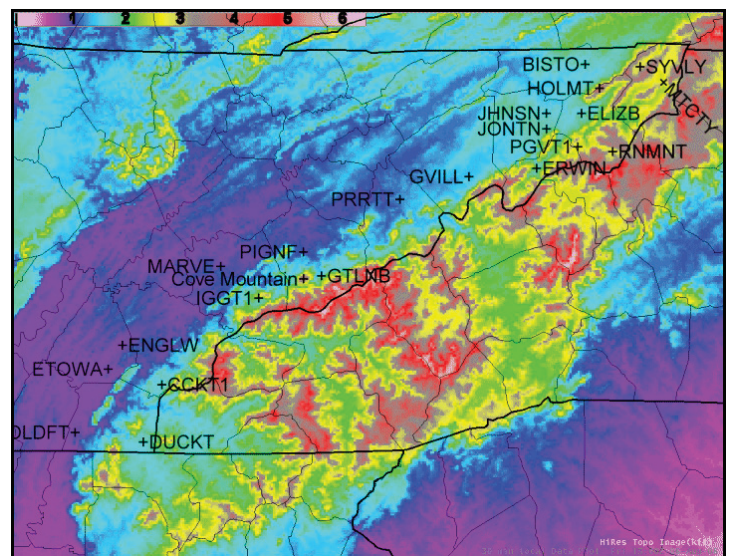


Fig. 3. Relief map of the southern Appalachian region (color legend at top left denotes elevations [ft x 1,000 MSL]) with the locations of observation sites in the foothills of east Tennessee.

*NOTE: Mention or display of a trademark, proprietary product, or firm in text or figures does not constitute an endorsement by the National Weather Service, NOAA, or the Department of Commerce, and does not imply approval to the exclusion of other suitable products or firms.

WeatherBug Stations®	Elevation (MSL)
Bristol (BISTO)	1634 feet
Ducktown (DUCKT)	1729 feet
Elizabethton (ELIZB)	1627 feet
Englewood (ENGLW)	853 feet
Erwin (ERWIN)	1857 feet
Etowah (ETOWA)	889 feet
Gatlinburg (GTLNB)	1470 feet
Camp Creek (GVILL)	1427 feet
Holston Mountain (HOLMT)	4213 feet
Johnson City (JHNSN)	1650 feet
Johnson City (JONTN)	1847 feet
Maryville (MARVE)	1027 feet
Mountain City (MTCTY)	2520 feet
Old Fort (OLDFT)	906 feet
Pigeon Forge (PIGNF)	1001 feet
Parrottsville (PRRTT)	1217 feet
Roan Mountain (RNMNT)	2769 feet
Shady Valley (SYVLY)	2822 feet

RAWS Stations	Elevation (MSL)
Coker Creek (CCKT1)	1700 feet
Indian Grave (IGGT1)	2700 feet
Unicoi (PGVT1)	2400 feet

National Park Station	Elevation (MSL)
Cove Mountain	4150 feet

Table 1. Observation sites along the western foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains.

and RAWS sites were not always available on the dates that high winds were reported at Cove Mountain, the available sites were examined to determine if sustained winds were at least 40 mph or wind gusts were above 58 mph. In addition to searching for warning-level winds, the occurrence of advisory-level winds, which are defined in this study as sustained winds of at least 25 mph, was noted as well. The other three sites in the National Park (Clingmans Dome, Look Rock, and Cades Cove) were not evaluated in this study since wind gust data were not available at these three sites. In addition, the Clingmans Dome observation was only available on a seasonal basis from May through October.

After the WeatherBug® and RAWS stations were evaluated for high winds on the same dates that produced mountain-wave-induced high winds at Cove Mountain, composite maps of mean sea level pressure, surface isotherms, and 850-mb isotachs were constructed from the dates that warning-level winds were observed at the different sites. These composite maps were constructed from the National Centers for Environmental Prediction–National Center for Atmospheric Research reanalysis dataset (Kalnay et al. 1996) on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences Climate Diagnostics Center’s Web site (<http://www.esrl.noaa.gov/psd/data/composites/hour/>).

3. Results

Of the 52 dates when mountain-wave-induced warning-level winds were reported at Cove Mountain between 1999 and 2007, there were only five sites (Erwin, Camp Creek, Holston Mountain, Shady Valley, and Coker Creek) that reported advisory-level winds or stronger during at least a third of the time that they were available (Table 2). It was found that only the Camp Creek site reported at least advisory-level winds on 87% of the dates that warning-level winds were observed at Cove Mountain. In addition, it was found that only the Camp Creek, Coker Creek, Shady Valley, and Erwin sites reported warning-level winds on a few of the Cove Mountain dates. The Camp Creek and Coker Creek sites reported warning-level winds on roughly a third of the dates that they were available, while the Shady Valley site reported warning-level winds on roughly a tenth of the dates that it was available. While the Holston Mountain site reported advisory-level winds on 60% of the dates that it was available, this finding was likely the result of its higher elevation compared to the other sites. The Cove Mountain site was also around the same elevation as Holston Mountain, but the higher wind speeds at Cove Mountain were likely due to its location in the foothills of the highest ridges on the western side of the southern Appalachian Mountains. A comparison of Cove Mountain to Clingmans Dome (which was 2,519 ft higher in elevation) on the available dates (5 May 2003,

22 September 2003, 23 September 2006, 17 October 2006, and 27 October 2006) revealed that Clingmans Dome reported weaker sustained winds on all five of these dates. In fact, the sustained winds at Clingmans Dome during four of the events were generally 15 to 20 mph less than Cove Mountain, except on 17 October 2006 when the sustained winds were only 2 to 5 mph less.

Composite maps of mean sea level pressure, surface isotherms, and 850-mb isotachs from the warning-level wind dates revealed that warning-level winds at Camp Creek were the result of a slightly stronger low pressure system with slightly stronger 850-mb winds compared to the low that produced warning-level winds at Cove Mountain (Fig. 4). Also, a low pressure system with 850-mb winds of similar intensity to the Camp Creek composite was observed in both the Coker Creek and Shady Valley composites (Fig. 5). A cold-air damming scenario (Bell and Bosart 1988) was observed on the eastern side of the southern Appalachian Mountains in all four composites of surface isotherms. While the cold-air damming in the Cove Mountain and Camp Creek composites was of a similar intensity, weaker cold-air damming was observed in the Coker Creek and Shady Valley composites with the weakest cold-air damming in the Shady Valley composite.

4. Conclusions

From the available WeatherBug® and RAWS sites in the western foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains, it was found that the Cove Mountain and Camp Creek observation sites reported the highest winds

of all the available data. It's possible that the Camp Creek site may have experienced even higher winds than were reported, since a visit to this site found that there was some potential blockage from a higher gymnasium roof to the southeast of the anemometer. The fact that Cove Mountain had the highest wind speeds of any reporting site along the western foothills was likely the result of

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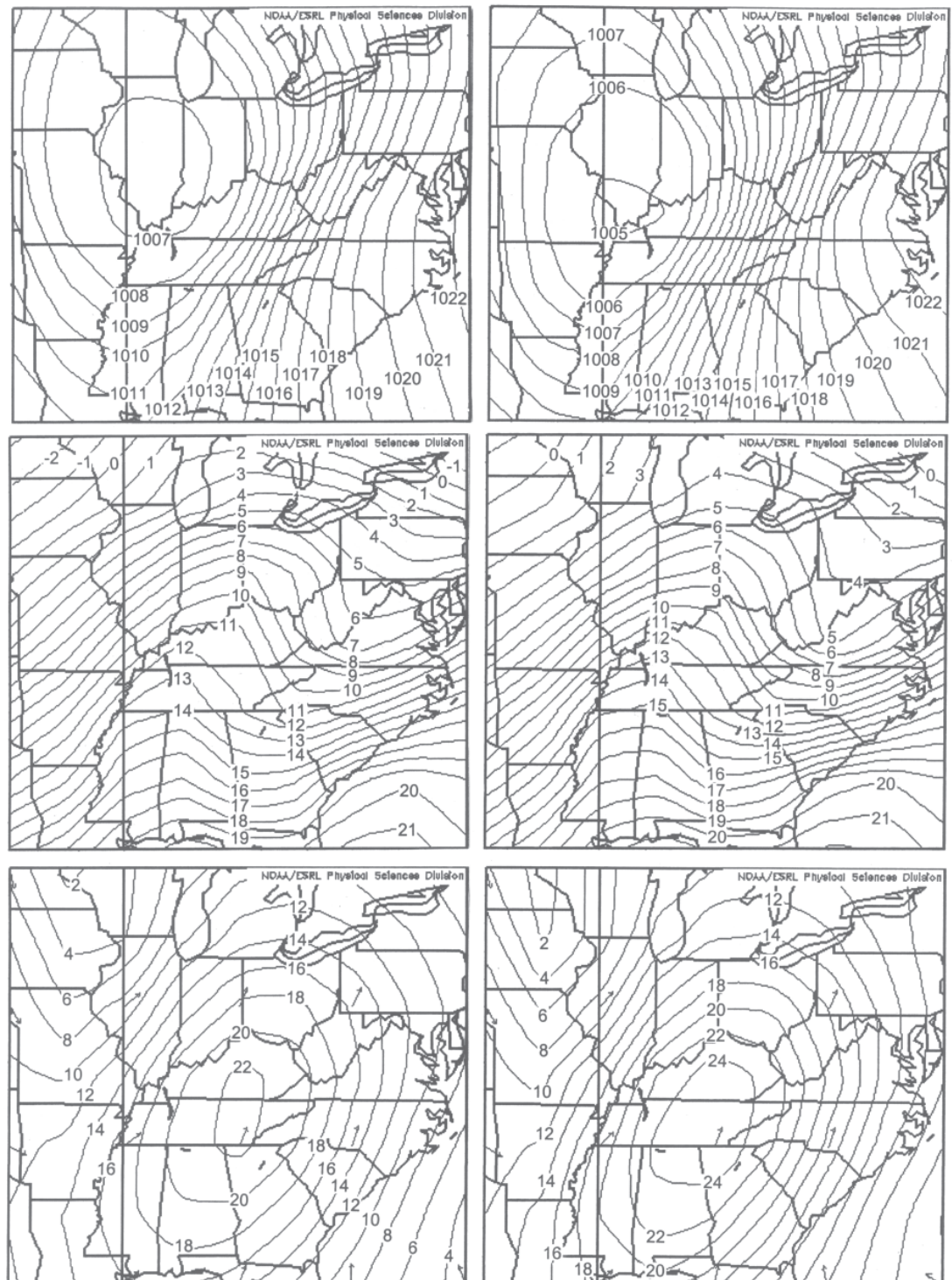


Fig. 4. Composite maps of mean sea level pressure (mb; top), surface isotherms (°C; middle), and 850-mb isotachs (m s^{-1} [$1 \text{ m s}^{-1} = 1.944 \text{ kt}$]; bottom) from warning-level wind events at Cove Mountain (left) and Camp Creek (right).

Dates of Cove Mountain Warning- Level Winds	B I S T O	D U C K T	E L I Z B	E N G L W	E R W I N	E T O W A	G T L N B	G V I L L	H O L M T	J H N S N	J O N T N	M A R V E	M T C T Y	O L D F T	P I G N F	P R R T T	R N M N T	S Y V L Y	C C K T 1	I G G T 1	P G V T 1
1/2/99	x					x	x			x		x	x	x				x	x		
1/22/99	x					x	x			x		x	x	x				x			
1/31/99	x					x	x			x		x	x	x							
3/6/99	x					x	x			x		x	x	x							
3/9/99	x					x	x			x		x	x	x							
12/10/99	x					x				x		x	x					x			
1/4/00	x					x				A			x					A			
3/20/00	x					x				x											
12/17/00							x														
1/30/01							x	A		x		A	x					x			
2/25/01							x	A		x		x	x					A			
3/12/01	x				x	x	x	A				x	x					x			
11/25/01	x	x	x	x	x	x		A					x			x		A			
12/14/01	x	x	x	A	x	x		A					x			x		x			
12/17/01	x	x	x	x	x	x		W					x			x		x			
12/23/01	x	x	x	x		x		W					x			x		A			
2/1/02	x	x	x	x	A	x		A					x			x	x	x			
2/20/02	x		x	x	A	x		A		A	x		x			x	x	A			
4/8/02		A	x	x	x	A	x	W		x	x		x			x		A			
11/5/02		x	x		x	x	x	W		x	x		x			x	x	x	x	x	x
11/10/02		x	x		x	x	x	A		x	x		x			x	x	A	x	x	x
12/19/02		x	x		A	x	x	W		x	x		x			x	x	A	A	x	x
12/24/02		x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x		x			x	x	x	x	x	x
3/19/03	x	x	x		x	x		A		x	x		x			x	x	A	A	x	x
5/5/03	x	x	x			x	x	W		x			x				x	x	x	x	x
9/22/03	x		x		x	x		A		x			x			x	x	x	x	x	x
11/18/03	x				x	x		W		x			x			x	x	A	W	x	x
11/24/03	x			x	x	x		A		x			x			x	x	A	A	x	x
12/30/03	x		x		x	x		A		x			x				x	A	A	x	x
1/25/04	x		x		x	x		W		x			x			x	x	x	x		
2/6/04	x		A		A	x		W		x			x			x	x	A			

Table 2. The availability of observation sites along the western foothills on the warning-level wind dates at Cove Mountain. An x indicates availability but no high winds observed, A indicates advisory-level winds observed, W indicates warning-level winds observed. The definitions of the five-letter station identifiers are given in Table 1. Table 2 continues on the next page.

Dates of Cove Mountain Warning- Level Winds	B I S T O	D U C K T	E L I Z B	E N G L W	E R W I N	E T O W A	G T L N B	G V I L L	H O L M T	J H N S N	J O N T N	M A R V E	M T C T Y	O L D F T	P I G N F	P R R T T	R N M T	S Y V L Y	C C K T 1	I G G T 1	P G V T 1
3/2/04	x		x		x	x		A					x			x	x	x	x	x	x
12/1/04	x		x	x		x		x	A	x			x			x	x	A	W	x	x
12/23/04	x		A	x	A	x			A	x			A			A		W	W	x	x
1/13/05	x			x	W	x			x	x			x			x	x	W	A	x	x
2/14/05	x		x		x	x			x	x			x			x	x	x	x	x	x
11/28/05	x		x	x	x	x		A	A	x			x			x	x	A	A	x	x
12/9/05	x		x	x	x	x		A	A	x			x			x	x	A	x	x	x
1/17/06	x		x	x	x	x		A	A	x			x			x	x	A	W	x	x
1/29/06	A		x	x	A	x		A	x	x			x			x	x	x		x	x
2/2/06	x		x	x	A	x		A	A	x			x			x	x	A		x	x
3/10/06	x		x	x	A	x		A	x	x			x			x	x	W			
9/23/06	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x			x			x	x	x	x	x	x
10/17/06	x		x	x	x	x		W	A	x			x			x	x	A	W	x	x
10/27/06	x		x	x	x	x			A	x			x			x	x	A	x	x	x
11/16/06	x			x	x	x		W	x	x			x			x	x	A	W	x	x
12/13/06	x			x	x	x		x	x	x			x			x	x	x	x	x	x
1/7/07	x			x	A	x		x	A	x			x			x	x	x		x	x
2/25/07	x				x	x		W	A	x			x			x	x	x		x	x
3/1/07	x				A	x		A	A	x			x			x	x	A		x	x
4/11/07	x				x	x		A	A	x	x		x			x	x	A	A	x	x
12/23/07	x		x			x		W	x	x	x		x			A	x	A	W	x	x
TOTAL	44	12	31	23	37	49	15	39	20	44	9	9	50	5	7	38	34	46	26	30	30
Advisory #	1	1	2	1	10	1	0	21	12	2	0	1	1	0	0	2	0	24	7	0	0
% of total	2	8	6	4	27	2	0	54	60	5	0	11	2	0	0	5	0	52	27	0	0
Warning #	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	13	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	7	0	0
% of total	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	33	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	27	0	0

Table 2. Continued from facing page.

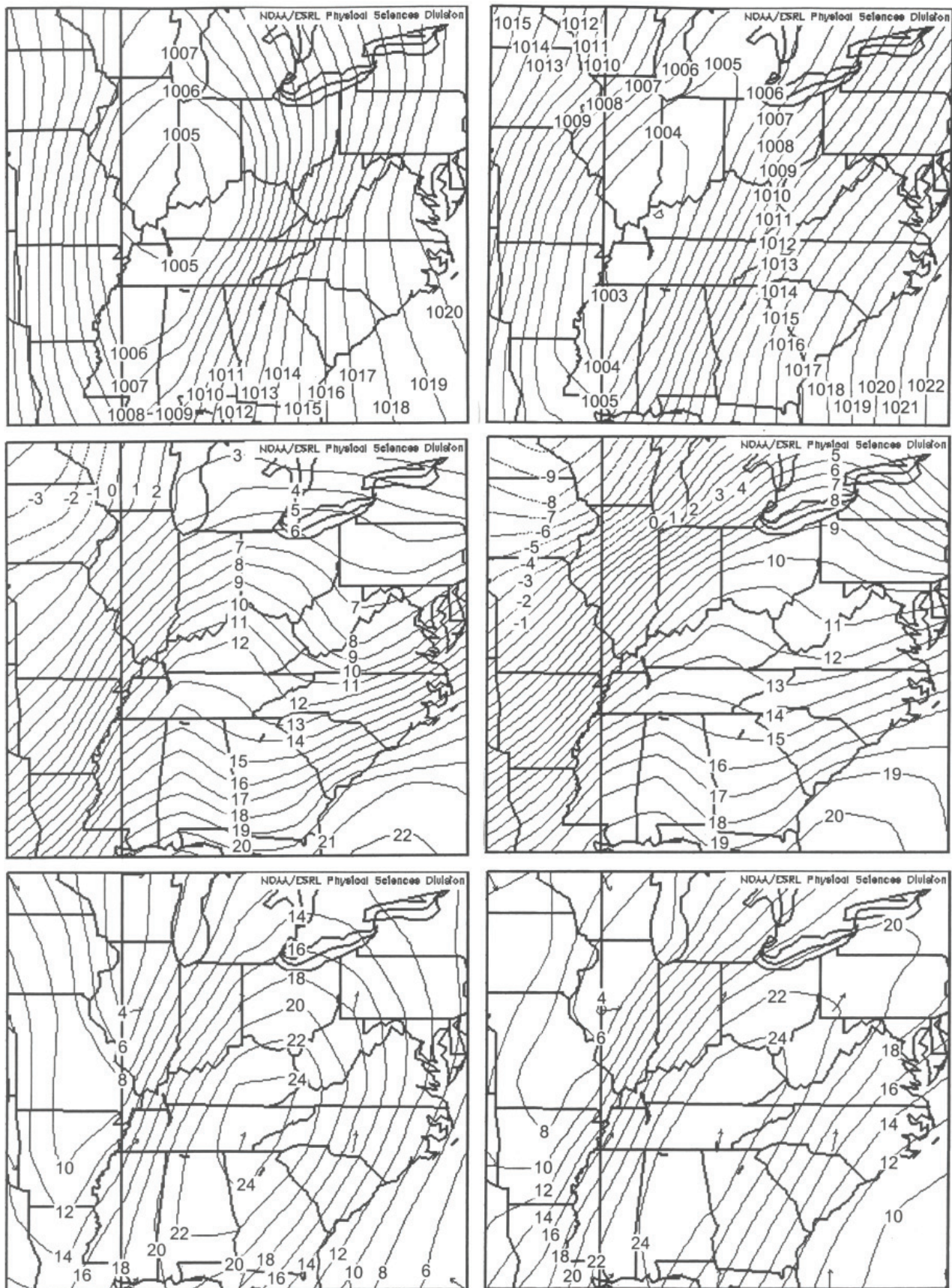


Fig. 5. Composite maps of mean sea level pressure (mb; top), surface isotherms (°C; middle), and 850-mb isotachs (m s^{-1} [1 $\text{m s}^{-1} = 1.944 \text{ kt}$]; bottom) from warning-level wind events at Coker Creek (left) and Shady Valley (right).

its location near the highest ridges of the western side of the southern Appalachian Mountains. This conclusion was made because the wind speeds at Cove Mountain were found to be even stronger than those observed at Clingmans Dome (2,519 ft higher than Cove Mountain) during the five available events. Because mountain waves normally produce high winds in a narrow area along the foothills, it's still possible that some of the sites examined in this study were not at the proper location to directly measure mountain-wave-induced high winds in their immediate vicinities. Thus, high winds due to mountain waves may be more extensive and of stronger intensities along the western foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains than can be determined in this study. However, this study should be considered a first step in confirming that the National Park and Camp Creek areas are not just reliable damage-reporting sites, but also experience some of the strongest winds during mountain-wave events along the western foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains.

After examining composites of surface isobars, surface isotherms, and 850-mb isotachs, it was found that the warning-level winds at Camp Creek, Coker Creek and Shady Valley resulted from a stronger low pressure system with stronger 850-mb winds compared to the low that produced warning-level winds at Cove Mountain. Cold-air damming was observed on the eastern side of the southern Appalachian Mountains in all four composites of surface isotherms, but weaker cold-air damming was observed in the Coker Creek and Shady Valley composites. This weaker cold-air damming likely allowed warning-level winds to develop at these sites due to less blockage of the low-level southeasterly winds. The weakest cold-air damming was observed in the Shady Valley composite, which was likely necessary to allow strong low-level southeasterly winds to penetrate further north into northeast Tennessee. It's possible that warning-level winds were still able to occur at Cove Mountain and Camp Creek despite the stronger cold-air damming, since

mountain ridges with higher elevations were located near these two sites. Thus, strong southeasterly winds at a slightly higher elevation over-riding the cold air at the surface could still produce mountain waves at these two sites, while not producing mountain waves at Coker Creek or Shady Valley where the mountain ridges are not as high, which would require strong southeasterly winds at a lower elevation. Since the Camp Creek composites cannot fully resolve the question of whether the observed cold-air damming blocked southeasterly winds in the French Broad Valley, future research with high-resolution computer models should be conducted to determine if the frequent reports of wind damage at Camp Creek were possibly the result of its location on the other side of the mountains from the French Broad Valley where southeast winds may have accelerated up through the valley.

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