



Ocooch Sunrise - Photos by Ricki Bishop unless noted otherwise.

The Ocooch Mountains of Richland County.

The Ocooch Mountains are a place name for the Western Upland area of Wisconsin also known as the Driftless Region, meaning un-glaciated, lacking glacial drift or the Paleozoic Plateau. The lack of glaciated terrain accounts for the high hills, bluffs, and ridges.

The LaCrosse, Kickapoo, Baraboo, Lemonweir, Pine, Wisconsin, Grant, Platte and Pecatonica rivers and their tributaries created deeply eroded valleys that contrast the nearby peaks. One dramatic example is Wildcat Mountain State Park in Vernon County. The Baraboo Range anchors the east eastern edge where the Wisconsin River turns and runs through the area to the Mississippi River. The Baraboo Range in Sauk County is a monadnock, originally a Native American term for an isolated hill or a mountain that stands above the surrounding area, typically by surviving erosion. This is where Devil's Lake, a National Natural Landmark, formed 1.6 billion years ago.

The appellation "Ocooch Mountains" first use appears to have been in Edwin James' three-volume work, "An Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819, 1820... Under the Command of Maj. S.H. Long" (London, 1823)." James wrote, "The only hills worthy of particular notice, not only in this variety, but in the whole section under consideration, are the Ocooch and Smokey mountains, which are broad and elevated ridges rather than mountains. The former is situated about twelve miles north of the Wisconsin one hundred miles above its mouth..." He later says, "The third is a range of hilly and broken country, commencing on the Wisconsin near the Portage, and extending northwardly to Lake Superior. To this range we have taken the liberty to give the name of the Wisconsin Hills. The Ocooch and Smoke Mountains before mentioned are connected with this range." James's description suggests that the term Ocooch was used for the southernmost portion of the Wisconsin Western Uplands. Three years later, Maj. Stephen Long led a second expedition, this time into the upper Mississippi Valley. It was described in William Keating's "Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River" (London, 1825). In volume

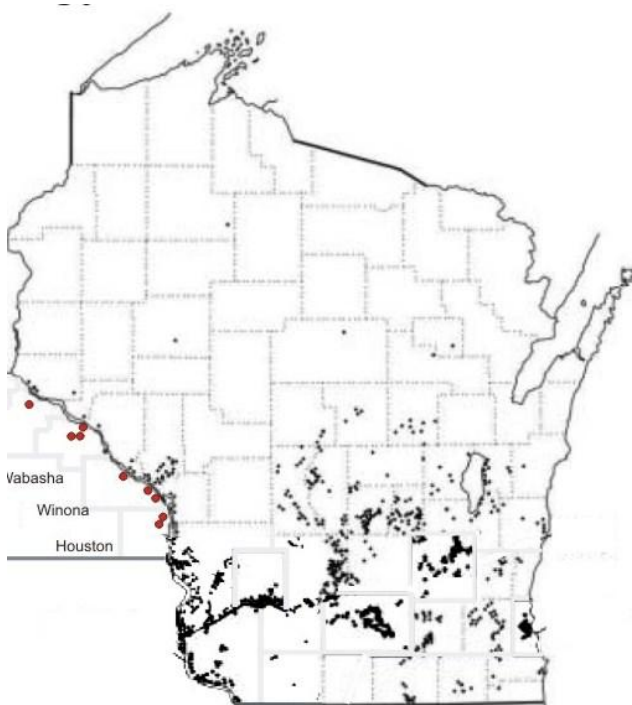


Black Hawk, from "History of the Indian Tribes of North America."

two, page 214, Keating wrote of western Wisconsin, "To this region the name of the Wisconsin Hills has been given, which are terminated on the south by the Ocooch and Smoky Mountains, whose altitude is about twelve hundred feet above the common level, or two thousand feet above tide water." The Ho Chunk, a Native American tribe, called them a name phonetically similar to Ocooch, waxoj, pronounced WAH-KOH-CH (e).

Around 700 BC, pottery, domesticated plants, and the practice of building earthen burial mounds were introduced to Wisconsin. These changes marked the beginning of the Woodland Tradition (500 BC to ca. AD 1300). Patterns of living remained relatively stable until the beginning of the Late Woodland stage, between AD 600 and AD 900. Two important innovations -- the bow and arrow and corn horticulture -- swept across the region. Within a span of only a couple centuries, a new and distinctive culture that archaeologists call "Effigy Mound" arose in Wisconsin. The culture is named for the distinctive burial mounds constructed by communities across the southern two-thirds of Wisconsin. Some effigies are recognizable as birds, animals such as bear or deer, spirit animals, or people. Other mounds are abstract, including long linear embankments or combinations of embankments

with the dome-shaped mounds favored by earlier peoples. Richland County had a high concentration of these native people living within its boundaries especially at the southernmost areas bordering the Wisconsin River and in the Pine River valley. There are many effigy mounds still in existence in the county and many are assessable to the public. During the Black Hawk War of 1832, Black Hawk's band and the pursuing military ventured into this unknown terrain of steep ridges and valleys. Following Mill Creek in Richland County, some of the band headed over these rugged hills known as the Ocooch Mountains. Along the way, many Indians died from exhaustion, starvation and battle wounds. There are two historic markers describing Blackhawk's travels in Richland County; one is located near Boaz and the other at Rockbridge on the Pine. The Rockbridge marker states Blackhawk followed the Pine River and headed west to the Kickapoo River valley just south of Rockbridge.



Map of effigy mound locations in Wisconsin.

Richland County is centrally located within the Driftless area and the northern two-thirds of the county were heavily wooded in the pioneer days while the southern one-third was interspersed with oak savannah and wetlands. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the county has a total area of 589 square miles of which 586 square miles is land and 3.1 square miles is water. Richland County's woods and wetlands host an abundance of game birds and animals. Since reforestation over the last one hundred years, it is a common occurrence to see an abundance of deer, sand hill cranes, wild turkeys and eagles. Black bear and bobcat sightings are not unusual and the many streams offer some of the finest trout fishing in North America.

The city of Richland Center is nestled in a valley carved from the surrounding hills and bluffs by the Pine River. At the time Richland Center was platted in 1851, one of its founders, Ira Haseltine, described it as "a beautiful prairie with scattering shade trees, and the whole surrounded by noble groves of thrifty timber." The historical development of Richland Center as an agricultural support community and retail trade center began as a result of the early settlers using the abundant timber and streams to

power the early economic development of the area. There was an abundance of mills situated throughout the county driving sawmills and grist mills. In fact, Mill Creek got its name for the many mills located on the flowage. The early industries of the county were farming in all its various forms; butter and cheese making; lumbering, principally hardwoods; and milling of various kinds. In these early days there were twenty grist, thirty saw, and two woolen mills within Richland County. The villages of the county included Richland Center, Lone Rock, Sextonville, Richland City, Orion, Eagle Corners, Port Andrew, Excelsior, Boaz, Viola, West Lima, Spring Valley, Woodstock, Rockbridge, Stalwart, Cazenovia, Loyd and Ithaca.



