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Winter 1999

John Muir and Roan Mountain

— Bob Fulcher

After Asa Gray, the great Harvard botanist, visited Roan Mountain in 1841, it seemed every botanist in the East had to put it on their itinerary. It isn't surprising, then, that two of America's most distinguished plant personages, Charles Sprague Sargent of Harvard, and William Canby of Philadelphia showed the place to their friend, John Muir. The surprising thing is that everyone forgot about it.

John Muir went to Roan Mountain, and he loved it. From the Cloudland Hotel on September 28, 1898, he wrote a letter to wife, Louie, vividly describing his ascent of the mountain, and the mysterious grassy bald on too. With this imagination he pictured the glory of the rhododendron in bloom. It was just a short letter, but still a wonderful revelation for all who love Roan Mountain and Muir.

The letter turned up during preliminary research for the development of permanent exhibits at Roan Mountain State Park. So many great botanists had made their pilgrimage to Roan, I felt that I had to check every biographical sketch I could find for leads about Roan field trips. Several of Muir's biographers mentioned an anecdote which recalled a trip he had made to Grandfather Mountain in 1898. The long Eastern trip, otherwise, was of little interest to his biographers.

But it seemed impossible that Muir, traveling as he was with Sargent and Canby, would visit Grandfather Mountain without stopping at the Cloudland Hotel on Roan Mountain, where Canby and Sargent had already spent some of their finest hours in the field. A series of phone inquiries led to the Muir papers, held at the

University of the Pacific in Stockton, California.

Luckily, the Muir family trust had just funded a search for Muir papers, and had some 50,000 pieces organized by date, on microfilm. God bless microfilm and interlibrary loan. In just a few days, I was able to scroll through Muir's letters to his family and friends as he undertook his last great tour of the East. When the Cloudland Hotel stationary scrolled into view, Roan Mountain became, for me, an even grander place.

Muir's 1898 tour came about at the suggestion of Sargent and Canby. Sargent, who was writing the definitive book series on American trees, had depended on Muir to send him specimens of rare western conifers, as Muir was rambling in quite a few out-of-the-way places. In 1897, Muir guided Sargent and Canby through Alaska. They suggested that he allow them to return the favor.

Muir traveled on a smoky, rumbling train through Wisconsin, where he spent boyhood, and then to Boston to meet Sargent. By that time, he had become quite sick, but Muir was not a complainer, and he pressed onward. They rode on to Philadelphia to pick up Canby, and began covering ground by train and carriage. Canby initially intended to take Muir to some of his favorite botanizing grounds in Virginia, but finding Muir sick, he must have decided they should go straight to Roan Mountain. After a couple of rainy days at an inn at Cranberry, North Carolina, they rode, probably by carriage, to the top of the Roan. On the morning of September 25, 1898, from the Cloudland Hotel he wrote:



(self portrait)

Dear Louie,

We drove here from Cranberry yesterday, a distance of about 18 miles through the most beautiful deciduous forest I ever saw. All the landscapes in every direction are made up of mountains, a billowing sea of them without bounds as far as one can look, and every mountain hill & ridge & hollow is densely forested with so many kinds of trees their mere names would fill this sheet. & now they are beginning to put on their purple & gold. *Liriodendron*. *Nyssa*. *Sassafras*. *Oxydendron* Mountain ash. *Tilia* birch beech hickory ash *Magnolia* 3 species. Chestnut etc. & maples. I wish I could hand you a bouquet of these leaves their beauty is perfectly enchanting.

After lunch yesterday we walked 5 miles along the mountain top to where the storms of winter prevent trees from growing here.

The open broad ridge top for miles is covered with rhododendron about 5 ft. high which in flower must make a glorious show. Around the base of the rhododendron clumps there is a rich bossy growth of *Leiophyllum buxifolia* a charming heathwort. The temp is distinctly alpine & for the first time since leaving home feel like my old self. I have been quite miserable but this air has healed me...

Wanda Helen love to all-

From your loving husband

John Muir

That afternoon, Muir went to Grandfather Mountain, later traveling to Asheville, North Carolina, Knoxville, Chattanooga, Georgia, Alabama, and ending up in Florida. There he met one of the women who had taken him in 30 years earlier on his famous "thousand mile walk to the Gulf" in 1868. Muir went back up the East Coast to meet his New York publishers, and got back home to his wife and two daughters in good shape.

Exactly one hundred years after the September morning that Muir awoke on top of Roan Mountain, a long column of conservation professionals, scientists, and conservation volunteers filed up to the top of Round Bald to commemorate the great labor and devotion that has been necessary to protect Roan Mountain. Over 100 assembled, representing a few dozen federal and state agencies, and non-profit organizations.

Arriving that morning by private airplane, Edward St. John of Morrison, Tennessee, set up a photograph with the group encircled along the Appalachian trail. His vintage "Cirkut" camera rotated on its base in the center of the circle, pulling

a negative along in some magical way, while St. John commanded the subjects to "be still!" The result was a wonderful illusion, a 3-foot long panoramic photograph in which everyone appears to be standing in a straight line.

Why does Muir's visit to Roan mean anything at all? America has never had a greater, wilder, more eloquent proponent of wilderness than John Muir. Over and over, Muir said he found vitality and peace only in wilderness. On the Roan he found wilderness, was healed by it, gloried in it. In the West, his eyes had met with gigantic pieces of nature, wonders that he called incomparable. But this relatively small piece of mountain top also overtook him. No matter that it was served by a carriage road and hotel, there had been left a piece of American wilderness with enough beauty and power to heal John Muir's homesick body and soul.

If a subject's strength of beauty is measured by the number or character of its admirers, we can add one more good name, that of John Muir, to Roan Mountain's list.

Bob Fulcher is Regional Interpretive Specialist for Tennessee State Parks.

A more complete, illustrated article regarding the botanical exploration of Roan Mountain was authored by Fulcher for the September/October 1998 issue of the Tennessee Conservationist magazine.

Endangered Spruce-fir Moss Spider Recently Discovered on Roan Mountain

The spruce-fir moss spider, one of only two spider species on the federal list of endangered species, was recently found on Roan Mountain by Dr. Fred Coyle, a biology professor at Western Carolina University. This remarkable spider, *Microhexura montivaga*, is a relative of the large funnel-web tarantulas that live mostly in the tropics, but it is tiny - less than 4 mm (1/8 inch) long - and it lives only in Canadian-like spruce-fir forest high atop a few peaks in the southern Appalachians. Until its recent discovery on Roan, it was known from only five other peaks, Clingmans Dome, Mt. Collins, Mt. LeConte, Mt. Mitchell, and Grandfather Mountain.

The spider was first discovered on Mount Mitchell in the early 1920's by a couple of arachnologists from Cornell University. In the 1980's the species suffered a drastic population decline due to the decrease of its primary microhabitat,

certain types of moss mats growing on rock outcrops and boulders. This microhabitat change was chiefly caused by the widespread death of mature Fraser fir trees and the resultant opening of the forest canopy, which allowed the sun to dry up and destroy the mosses.

Arachnologists knew that the habitat on Roan Mountain seemed favorable for the spruce-fir moss spider, but brief searches in the summer of 1991 failed to find it. Fearing that various activities on Roan Mountain (harvesting fir trees, collecting fir seed, rerouting trails, etc.) might be harming undiscovered populations of *M. montivaga*, the U. S. Forest Service commissioned Coyle to conduct a more intensive search. Early on September 25, 1998, the first day of that search, Coyle and his field assistant were guided by botanist Jamey Donaldson to a promising rock outcrop

that harbored some rare plants. Only a few minutes later an excited Coyle yelled "They're here!" as he peeled away from a sheltered rock surface a small mat of moss and saw one of the spiders in its thin tubular web on the underside of the mat. The reason Coyle and the others were so excited is that the discovery of another population of this endangered species increases the chances that it may be saved from extinction.

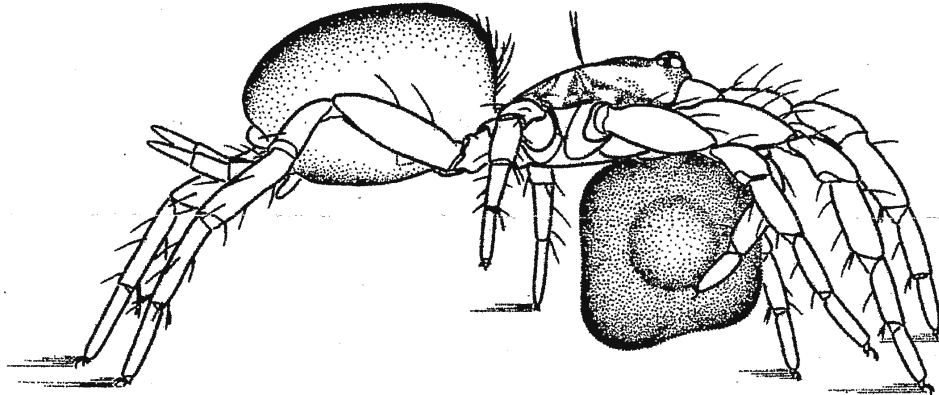
This spider's long life cycle (two or three years from hatching to reproductive maturity - unusually long for such a tiny spider) probably has something to do with the relatively cold climate of the fir zone. The short cool summers simply slow the metabolism and growth rate. Mated adult females lay their seven or so eggs in June, shrink-wrap them together with a few thin layers of white silk, and guard this egg sac for about three months until the spiderlings

hatch and then emerge from the sac to wander off and start life on their own. Males mature in September and October, when they search for adult females, court, and mate. Like all spider males, spruce-fir moss spider males die soon after the mating season, but females not only survive to produce eggs the following June, they are probably able

to survive, mate, and reproduce for one or more additional years.

During the course of Coyle's six-day survey on Roan, a total of 31 spruce-fir moss spiders were found at several places, none of which receive heavy visitor traffic. More field work will be needed to produce a more complete picture of the distribution of this

species on Roan Mountain and an accurate assessment of its population density and age structure. These kinds of information are needed to help judge the viability of the Roan Mountain population and to guide the decisions of resource managers.



Microhexura montivaga Crosby & Bishop

This female of the endangered spruce-fir spider is carrying her egg sac. Although this primitive spider is related to tarantulas, it is tiny (only as long as this exclamation mark!) and lives only in cool moist fir forests on a few southern Appalachian peaks. The female of this species protects the 7-9 eggs in her egg sac for the two months it takes them to develop to spiderlings big enough to "go it alone."
(Drawing by F. Coyle.)

Fred Coyle is Professor of Biology at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, NC.

Additional information on the spruce-fir moss spider is available at two internet web sites : www.bio.ornl.gov/~harp/status
www.geocities.com/RainForest/9081/casestudy

Spring Naturalists' Rally Set for May 8 and 9, 1999

A lot has certainly been taking place in Roan Mountain State Park since the Fall of 1998. The staff has been working diligently readying the park for the coming tourist season and preparing for the openings of our new administrative offices, convention center, and the now operating, water treatment facility.

As mentioned during the fall rally, we had hoped for the convention center to be ready in time for our spring get together. But, as construction projects go, it appears that it will now be mid summer before the building is ready for public use. You will be able to get a good look at what the finished project will be like when you come up in the spring. Therefore, we will be meeting for the spring rally down at Cloudland Elementary School in the village of Roan Mountain for the Naturalists' Rally scheduled for May 8 and 9, 1999.

After spending the end of the 1998 school year at the Elk Park, North Carolina school in extremely crowded conditions, the administrators decided that they needed to add a little learning space for the students, until the new school was built. One end of the original school was cleaned up and trailers were added to accommodate Headstart, Kindergarten, and 1st through 3rd grade. In addition, the gym floor was covered with linoleum, the walls were repainted, and it now serves as a cafeteria, gym, and meeting place. The old cafeteria was converted into three classrooms. Lunch is bused in, as the kitchen was destroyed beyond repair; the librarian has created two small libraries at each school, the old kindergarten and Headstart trailers have been removed; and all are fairing quite well, considering the situation. Of course, they are anxiously awaiting a new and larger facility for which they will be breaking ground next month.

The Naturalists' Rally has been held traditionally at Cloudland Elementary School for many years. After the flood, it seemed as though no one would ever be able to use this facility again. The students, the sports teams, ourselves, and many others, had been quite abruptly removed from a building which had served the community for a long period of time. Though we have been looking forward to the using the convention center

at the State Park, it will be nice to gather one last time at the original site of the Roan Mountain Naturalists' Rally.

If you have special memories of events that have taken place at Cloudland, I would like to ask you to write them down, and send them to me by mid April. I would like to take a few moments before the program on Saturday night, so we can all take time to remember the many fond memories we have acquired from attending the rallies at Cloudland. Myself, and I'm sure all of you who have attended for many years or a few years, would enjoy and appreciate hearing about moments that we may have forgotten over time. Thank you for any thoughts you might share.

This years' speakers are from the Tennessee Division of Natural Heritage in Nashville, Tennessee. Smoot Major, Carl Nordstrom, and David Withers will be sharing current information on Tennessee's biodiversity, our rare and endangered plants, and information on their division and its' work on Roan Mountain. We will also be enjoying frogging field trips and, for the first time, a special Saturday afternoon workshop led by Pete Wyatt of Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. The brochures are almost complete, so more information will soon be following in your mailboxes!

Other activities in the works for this year include the Junior Trout Tournament set for May 15; the Rhododendron Festival on June 19 and 20; the Fireworks Jamboree on July 3; a Game Show Weekend on July 9 and 10; our first Young Naturalists' Workshops on August 12 through 14; the Fall Naturalist's Rally on September 10 through 12; and the Fall Festival planned for September 18 and 19.

Look forward to seeing you all in the spring.

Jennifer Laughlin
Roan Mountain State Park
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Roan Mountain, TN 37687
(1-800-250-8620)

**FRIENDS
OF ROAN
MOUNTAIN**

MEETING NOTICE

2:00 p.m.
February 21, 1999

First Presbyterian Church
119 West F Street
Elizabethton, TN

**MAHONEY'S
OUTFITTERS**

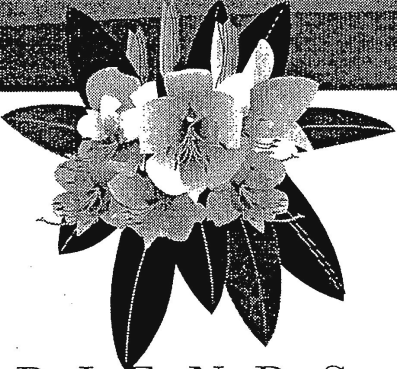
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