

A Chapter Field Trip to Roan Mountain and Gregory Bald

by Donald W. Hyatt, Potomac Valley Chapter ARS

For at least a decade, the members of the Species Study Group in the Middle Atlantic Chapter ARS have been traveling to remote spots in the eastern United States to observe native azaleas and rhododendrons in the wild. As an Associate Member of their chapter, I have been on many of those excursions. Eventually, members of my own Potomac Valley Chapter ARS expressed interest in our chapter organizing a field trip too.

Two favorite areas that I visit almost every year are Roan Mountain and Gregory Bald so I thought these would be appropriate for our first chapter trip. Both regions are located in the Southern Appalachian Mountains on the border of North Carolina and Tennessee. Since that region is a good day's drive south of our Washington D.C. area, such a field trip would have to extend over several days.

The beautiful rhododendrons and native azaleas in the Southern Appalachians are quite famous but timing for peak bloom is not always easy. In a typical year, the peak occurs somewhere around the third week in June, with Roan Mountain being slightly ahead of Gregory Bald. However, peak conditions can happen anywhere from mid June to early July depending upon the season. Weekends can become busy since motels fill up quickly, and parking areas, roads, and even trails can become crowded. For our trip, we decided to go during the middle of the week, from Sunday through Friday, June 16 - 21, 2002. People would make their own reservations and travel plans, and then join us for whatever portion they desired.



Rhododendron catawbiense in the Roan Highlands

Long ago I abandoned overnight backpacking trips, preferring to hike during the day but then return to a comfortable motel that evening. Also, I don't like hiking during inclement weather so I try to have alternative plans if thunderstorms are imminent. For one reason, I am not anxious to become a lightning rod along some remote trail while photographing wildflowers from beneath my umbrella. Another problem is that in unsettled weather, thick clouds usually grip the higher peaks and visibility can drop to less than 20 feet very quickly. It is difficult to follow trails in dense fog and impossible to see the wonderful mountain views.

Our first destination would be the Appalachian Trail near Roan Mountain. On past trips, I have used either Spruce Pine in North Carolina or Elizabethton in Tennessee as a base for operations since motels in those locations are only 45 minutes from Roan. Alternative activities in the event of bad weather are many including sightseeing along Blue Ridge Parkway. After Roan, we planned to head south to the Great Smoky Mountain National Park using either Gatlinburg or Townsend in Tennessee as our next base so we could hike up Gregory Bald.

I selected dates and motels for our field trip and published the details in our chapter newsletter. At chapter meetings, I made a few recommendations such as being sure to break in those hiking boots well in advance of our trip. I explained the importance of dressing in layers to accommodate temperature changes at different elevations and praised the use of plastic bags for keeping things dry in the event of rain. I encouraged people to carry plenty of fluids on the longer hikes to prevent dehydration and pack

trail snacks that would not attract the bears. I also suggested wearing hats and taking extra sun block to avoid getting sunburned. That can happen easily at those higher elevations even on cloudy days.

On Sunday evening, June 16th, fourteen people from our Potomac Valley Chapter converged at our first motel in Elizabethton and two more would arrive on Monday. Their ages ranged from 6 to 83 years old. Since the forecast was for clear weather, we decided to hike the Appalachian Trail in the Roan Highlands the very next day.



Potomac Valley members on the Roan Highlands Hike

Our first stop Monday morning was the famous Roan Rhododendron Gardens located on Roan Mountain, elevation 6285 feet (1916 m). This is not a formal garden but a natural area well known for large stands of the native lavender pink *R. catawbiense* that cover much of the mountaintop. This park combines relatively unspoiled beauty with ease of access. One can admire the lovely Catawba rhododendrons from paved walkways that are even wheel chair accessible and the views overlooking the acres of rhododendrons and distant mountains made a perfect prelude for the day to come. The park also has restroom facilities, which is good to know for anyone spending a long day in the region.

Roan Mountain has been a favorite tourist spot for at least the past century. In 1885, Civil War General John T. Wilder built the Cloudland Hotel at the Roan Rhododendron Gardens, which he intended to develop into a major resort [2]. The hotel got its name because clouds often form on those high ridges, even on days when skies are relatively clear elsewhere. Fortunately for those of us who appreciate unspoiled natural beauty, that hotel was never a financial success and no longer exists. I suspect its demise was not related to persistent clouds but the fact that the hotel had 256 guest rooms and only one bathroom! The nonprofit Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy (www.appalachian.org) established in 1974 now works cooperatively with the National Forest Service to acquire adjacent lands so they can forever protect the Highlands of Roan from commercial development. They also conduct hikes to very special spots in the region as part of their annual meeting each year.

After our group spent an hour or more at the Roan Rhododendron Gardens, we headed back to a nearby parking area at Carver's Gap, elevation 5512 feet (1680 m). The main road, Tennessee Route 143, crosses the state line there and becomes Route 216 as it enters North Carolina. The Appalachian Trail crosses the road at Carver's Gap too and that is where we would begin our hike northeast through the Roan Highlands.

I must admit that I have only hiked a few sections of the famous 2167-mile (3486 km) Appalachian Trail but the stretch near Roan must surely be one of the most beautiful. For miles, the trail winds through open balds and rocky ridges at elevations from 5000 to more than 6000 feet (1500 to 1900 m). These are among the highest mountains in the eastern United States and some of the oldest on earth too. Geologists estimate that those peaks were probably as high as the Himalayas, a mere 650 million years ago.

Originally, the Appalachian Trail from Carver's Gap went past a large yellow flame azalea, *R. calendulaceum*, and then straight up the mountain at a steep angle to the top of Round Bald, elevation 5826 feet (1776 m). It was not an easy ascent since one had to climb over hundreds of large logs placed across the trail to help stop erosion. Recently, those log steps were removed and the trail was rerouted to

better fit the contours of the mountain. The new path is a bit longer but much more scenic. It winds through islands of *R. catawbiense*, briefly enters an evergreen forest of red spruce (*Picea rubens*) and Fraser fir (*Abies fraseri*), and then opens up again on the grassy bald as it continues to the summit.

People are not sure what caused the balds but there is absolutely no debate about their beauty. The area reminds me of the opening scene in the movie "The Sound of Music" except Julie Andrews didn't have rhododendrons and azaleas around her when she sang that title song. On a clear day, the 360-degree views from the Roan Highlands are breathtaking regardless of the season. There is something truly spiritual about being up there and I am overcome with an indescribable sense of peace and reverence as I look out on nature's perfection. Surely the first Native Americans who lived among those mountains, or the many famous explorers who botanized there like Andre Mischeaux, John Fraser, Asa Gray, and John Muir, or the countless hikers who have traveled the Appalachian Trail there must have felt that same way.



Gray's Lily

In summer, the long grasses on the balds are filled with lovely wildflowers while distant mountain ranges fade to smoky blue as they extend in all directions to five different states. In late June and early July, scattered clumps of the rare Grays lily (*Lilium grayi*) open their nodding, freckled bells of orange and scarlet. Clumps of sand myrtle (*Leiophyllum buxifolium*), delicate saxifrages, and other rare wildflowers are tucked in crevices of huge granite boulders and slabs of billion year old gneiss. From the broadest perspective to the tiniest detail, it is the most perfect of natural rock gardens.

By late September, the grasses turn pale straw yellow and the changing foliage on those distant mountains shifts their color from shades of blue to purple tones instead. Large patches of vaccinium on the bald that may have gone unnoticed earlier in the year suddenly erupt in orange and scarlet, accentuating the other autumn leaves of yellow, gold, red, rust, and bronze. The bright fall colors contrast so beautifully with the gray rock outcroppings and deep green foliage of the rhododendrons and evergreens.



Vaccinium and rhododendrons, late September

In late spring though, when the native azaleas and rhododendrons are in full bloom, the beauty defies description. The first big show is just over the crest of Round Bald at Engine Gap, an area that sports one of the most spectacular displays of *R. calendulaceum* anywhere. This is the beginning of a large and quite diverse population of azaleas that continues northeast for several miles, especially along the North Carolina edge of the bald. I cannot imagine a more perfect natural landscape with masses of brilliant native azaleas and rhododendrons framing those panoramic views.



Calendulaceum, late June

The flowers on *calendulaceum* in this region are medium to large in size for the species and come in the full color range from clear yellow, through gold and apricot, to glowing orange and deep orange-red. There are wide variations in plant habit from tall, to spreading, to dwarf. The time of bloom for specific clones varies too, so the window of opportunity for seeing azaleas in flower lasts almost a month.



Diverse calendulaceum forms at Engine Gap

I usually partition my hike in the Roan Highlands into three segments and will attempt as much I can, depending upon the time available and the weather conditions. The first portion is the relatively short, 30-minute hike from the parking area at Carver's Gap to Round Bald and Engine Gap. I can easily spend the whole day right there at Engine Gap since it is like one enormous flower show surrounded by those fantastic mountain views. Time passes so quickly as I stroll among the beautiful native azaleas, photographing them, and taking notes as I try to decide which are the very best forms.

The second leg continues from Engine Gap out to Jane Bald, elevation 5807 feet (1770 m), and takes perhaps another 30 minutes one way. That stretch is slightly more difficult because the Appalachian Trail ascends through a narrow, rocky passage where one must climb over a number of large boulders through thickets of *catawbiense* and *calendulaceum* on both sides of the trail. The late Dr. August Kehr, past ARS President and Gold Medal recipient, spoke of seeing a double *calendulaceum* near Jane Bald. Our Species Study Group has yet to locate that plant although we look for it each time we pass.



Appalachian Trail to Jane Bald

One of my favorite *calendulaceum* selections is located on Jane Bald at the edge of a steep slope where it stands so proudly against the mountains in the distance. We call it 'Roan Molten Lava' because of its fiery orange color. I admit my fascination is due in part to its extremely photogenic setting, but the floral characteristics of this azalea would make it a winner anywhere. The flowers are heavy textured and relatively large, usually measuring around 2 1/2 inches (6.5 cm) in diameter, and the wide petals are nicely ruffled. The corolla is a rich golden orange and it has a broad gold blotch. The plant habit is dense with deep green foliage that is much darker than usual for the species. It blooms later than most of the flame azaleas on Roan so it is often still glowing brightly when the Gray's lily reaches its peak.



Calendulaceum 'Roan Molten Lava'

The third segment of the hike begins beyond Jane Bald at a point where the Appalachian Trail descends to the left down the mountain. Instead, I always take the side trail to the right that continues up the mountain to a rock outcropping on Grassy Ridge Bald and eventually out to Grassy Ridge Point, elevation 6180 feet (1885 m). That leg will take perhaps 45 minutes one way and goes through more narrow rocky passages and thickets of *catawbiense*. It is definitely worth the effort though, especially during rhododendron season.



Hikers admire rhododendrons on Grassy Ridge Bald



Grassy Ridge Point, elevation 6180 ft.



Catawbiense along the trail

On a clear day when the rhododendrons are in bloom, the entire mountain from Grassy Ridge Bald to Grassy Ridge Point turns lavender pink creating one of the most spectacular vistas anywhere, especially for a rhododendron enthusiast. The window for peak bloom is much shorter though, perhaps a week to ten days, and it took me several years before I saw the big show. The trail eventually stops at an overlook at Grassy Ridge Point so there is little chance of getting lost. The only option is to return via the same trail, enjoying the views from a different perspective all the way back to the car.

We spent our first full day on Roan, so the next day we took a more leisurely sightseeing trip south along the Blue Ridge Parkway from Boone, NC, (milepost 290) to Asheville (milepost 377). Although traveling less than 90 miles on the Parkway, which has a speed limit of 45 mph, it was still a very long day. We made numerous stops at scenic overlooks to admire the views. We purchased crafts at Moses Cone Manor and took a few short hikes, such as the trail to Linville Falls where we also found some fragrant white native azaleas, *R. arborescens*, blooming along the riverbank. We climbed out on the wooden decks of the Tanawha Trail to get a better view of Grandfather Mountain and ate an early supper at a steak house in Spruce Pine, NC. Then we continued south to Mount Mitchell, the highest peak in the eastern US at elevation 6684 feet (2037 m) where from the observation tower we watched the mountains cast long shadows in distant valleys as the sun began to set.

The next morning, we packed up and headed back to Asheville to continue south on the Blue Ridge Parkway. Some people needed to replenish supplies so we did not try

to travel as a caravan but planned to rendezvous at the Mount Pisgah Visitor's Center on the Parkway. Some of us stopped by the University of North Carolina Arboretum in Asheville to see the National Native Azalea Repository and admire their other lovely plantings. Unfortunately, a recent rockslide had closed a section of the Parkway just south of Asheville so in order to meet up with our group again we all had to take a long detour. On future field trips, we decided it would be better if everyone had cell phones so we could adjust travel plans more easily.



Tanawha Trail near Grandfather Mountain



Vaseyi on the Blue Ridge Parkway, early May

The stretch of the Parkway from Mount Pisgah (milepost 408) down to Beech Gap (milepost 423) is another very special place. During early May, that area is the one of the best places to see the delicate pink native azalea, *R. vaseyi*, that grows between 3000 to 5000 feet (900 to 1500 m) in that region. Some of the ridges near Mt. Pisgah including Pilot Mountain develop a pink haze when the *vaseyi* is in bloom. The mountains are studded with white dogwoods, *Cornus florida*, and there are places where entire hillsides appear frosted with the delicate white blossoms and downy new leaves of the shadblow or serviceberry, *Amelanchier arborea*. Now six weeks later,

the same southern stretch of the Parkway all the way to its end at milepost 469 was ablaze with *calendulaceum* and *catawbiense*. Depending upon the elevation, we also saw stands of the fragrant white *R. arborescens* and pink to white mountain laurel, *Kalmia latifolia*, in bloom.

After leaving the Parkway, we had intended to continue southwest for a quick drive up to the top of Wayah Bald, NC, where we could admire a large colony of the compact *R. arborescens* var. 'Richardsonii' on that summit. We have identified many excellent forms of *calendulaceum* near Wayah as well, including several that have double flowers. Unfortunately, the detour cost us time so we decided to cross over the Smokies on Route 441 and head directly to our next motel in Townsend, TN.

For the entire week of our trip, the weather was flawless and so we planned to hike up Gregory Bald the next day, Thursday, June 20th. Everyone rose early so we could leave at 6:00 AM for nearby Cades Cove in the Smokies since we wanted to be there at dawn when the National Park opens the gates. There are two trails to Gregory Bald, both of which begin on the other side of Cades Cove. I usually allow 3 to 4 hours each way on that hike so an early start means there will be more time to leisurely stroll among the azaleas on the bald and still be able to get back down the mountain before evening.

There was a rather large crowd of native azalea enthusiasts on the Gregory hike that day. Even though some of our original people from the Potomac Valley Chapter had headed home after Roan, others joined us in Townsend so we were back to 13 hikers. In addition to our group, we met up with a similar number from the Middle Atlantic Chapter Species Study Group, plus many other ARS and ASA friends from around the country. Dr. Hartwig Schepker from a botanical garden in Bremen Germany had flown in the previous day so he and a documentary film crew could record the wonders on Gregory Bald.



Many groups converge on Gregory Bald



View of Cades Cove from Gregory Bald

There have already been two Journal articles about the native azaleas on Gregory Bald [1][3] so I will not elaborate too much here. What makes Gregory so different from other native azalea stands is not only the size of the population which extends to a dozen or more acres, but also the color range in that hybrid swarm. Almost every shade I have seen in a deciduous azalea is up there. Admittedly, the majority of the plants are in the orange to red range because *R. cumberlandense* is the predominant species.

However, *arborescens*, *viscosum*, and *calendulaceum* have apparently hybridized with *cumberlandense* to produce azaleas in every shade from white, to cream, pale pink, rose, deep pink, lavender, purple, fuchsia, cherry, scarlet, coral, salmon, gold, and yellow. Many of the varieties have contrasting blotches of yellow or gold and there are wonderful blends and pastels too. Some of the hybrids are delightfully fragrant, likely due to the *arborescens* and *viscosum* inheritance.



Hybrid variation on Gregory Bald

Everyone was exhausted when we got back to the motel that evening and since my car now needed brake repairs, we decided to disband the next day and head for home. There are many other wonderful sights near the Smokies, such as Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest with its virgin forests, the Cherohala Skyway with some very large flowered *calendulaceum* selections at Hooper Bald, Fontana Lake, Laurel Falls, Chimney Tops, Clingman's Dome, and more. However, we decided to save those places for another year.

Our first chapter field trip was a grand success. Since then we have organized similar activities including a two-day trip in Virginia to see the Delp and Haag rhododendrons in the lovely hillside garden of Paul James. On that trip we explored a different stretch of the Blue Ridge Parkway from Roanoke to Peaks of Otter and observed diverse color forms of *R. catawbiense*, more native azaleas such as *calendulaceum*, *prinophyllum*, and *periclymenoides*, and rare wildflowers including the pink form of our native white trillium, *T. grandiflorum* var. *roseum*. We are planning a similar trip as a post convention tour when our District 9 chapters host the joint ARS/ASA National Convention in May of 2006.

I encourage other ARS chapters to organize field trips for your members. You can visit local or distant gardens, native plants in the wild, or even a public arboretum. You can make the trip a day event or a weeklong excursion. Believe me, seeing rhododendrons is much more enjoyable when sharing the experience with good friends.

Perhaps one day we will meet your group along the trails in the Southern Appalachian Highlands. I must warn you, though. See those rhododendrons and native azaleas in bloom in that natural setting just once and you will likely be drawn back again and again. For many of us, the rest of the year is nothing more than preparation for yet another trip to Roan Mountain and Gregory Bald.

Bibliography:

- [1] Hyatt, Donald W., "Return to Gregory Bald", Journal of the American Rhododendron Society, Volume 52, Number 3, Summer 1998.
- [2] Laughlin, Jennifer Bauer, Roan Mountain: A Passage of Time, Second Edition, Overmountain Press, 1999.
- [3] McLellan, George K. and McDonald, Sandra, "Magic on the Mountain: An Azalea Heaven on Gregory Bald", Journal of the American Rhododendron Society, Volume 50, Number 2, Spring 1996.