

FROM THE EDITOR



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The Long Hunters' Wildernesses

Not everyone's earliest recollections of life on Earth will include the advent of color television and the Daniel Boone melodrama starring Fess Parker that flickered from it for most of the 1960s. I'm sure I knew all of the lyrics for Boone's theme song well into my late twenties. Such starched-white teleplay, resplendent in stunningly perfect buckskins, the first of the \$100 Hollywood haircuts and its sun-splashed locations—plus a few reverent words about the real Boone from my grandfather—seemed enough information to hold me for what will probably go down as most of my adult life. After the TV show played out, I felt the superheroes who'd market-hunted deep into the frontier wildernesses of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Missouri had been fantastically overshadowed by the star power of the mountain men of the Rockies and the exploits of rangers among the outlaws, the daring outcasts and the pipe-handled tomahawkers of the Old West.

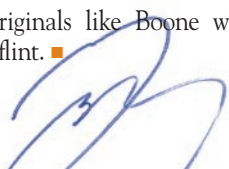
But beginning with the Eastern forests, I now accept that I'd overlooked and underestimated the whole long-hunter event of Boone's American experience. In my current state of reconciliation, I've recently begun to acquaint myself with pieces of what has become of the mountain wilderness of Boone's life and times, and I can project that the country in those bygone days was as formidable as a 2,100-mile-long rock crusher. Running almost the depth of the eastern continent, the hump-backed Appalachian Mountains, the oldest terrestrial wall on the planet, hosted a dizzying array of dangers, from white-faced hornets to Cherokee warlords. It was really difficult to see trouble stalking you in there, too, because the thickets of mountain laurel and rhododendron, the stands of giant chestnut, hemlock and spruce, personified suffocation. The cover of the dust jacket for a first edition of James Dickey's masterpiece, *Deliverance*, the modernized Iliad, which was set in southern Appalachia some 250 years after Boone blazed the Cumberland Trail, is almost as unforgettable as Dickey's prose. Designed by Paul Bacon Studios, there in the center of a small, leafy green hole tunneling the Erebus glistens the unblinking human eye.

The Appalachians today are not without magnificent swaths of "wilderness," national forests and wildlife management areas. But except for the Great Smoky there's a real dearth of National Parks in the East. Kentucky held its first elk hunt in 2001, and just this year, for the first time in a century and a half, elk hunting returned on a hyper-limited basis to the flanks of Appalachia in Tennessee.

My most intimate trip to the edges of Boone country occurred earlier this year when I led a team of tender-footed family adventurers into the 37,000-acre Cohutta Wilderness Area of northern Georgia. We dropped into the heart of it from east to west at Dally Gap off Tumbling Creek Road. The idea was to camp, fly fish, and visit the falls on the Jacks River, which runs north along the front of Cohutta Mountain, very near the absolute gate of the 2,100-mile Appalachian Trail, before it snakes southwest and mixes with crystalline flow of the Conasauga. The forest is dominated by ancient and towering hemlock trees that are being quietly decimated by a microscopic parasite from Asia, according to our team's survival expert and regional native—my cousin—Doug Tinsley, the Eagle Scout.

Guide books report 41 streambed crossings along the Jacks River Trail. Had they also noted that the best fishing of early summer was near the falls I wouldn't have taken us into the valley using the Bear Creek Trail so far to the south. By the time we made the head of the falls in the warm afternoon of our second day, it was standing-room only on the flat rocks at highest plunge pool. We watched men and boys in micro-fiber swim trunks and gold chains leap whooping into the boiling basin of deep green water, then ate our lunch and immediately began a fairly serious race with sunset back to our campsite. It rained in the night.

Limping back to the Dally Gap parking lot at noon the next day, bruised, blistered, and bloodied from a weekend in a wilderness mapped by satellite imagery and surrounded by civilization, it occurred to me that I had not known the actual meaning of the term "long hunter" until only recently, which is an embarrassing public confession now. I'd thought it referenced the primary tool of Boone's kind, the Kentucky rifle, when, in fact, it actually defines all Paleo- and Neo-Americans, the originals like Boone who were made of pure flint. ■



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