

Appalachia

Volume 69
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2018: Role Reversal in
the Mountains*

Article 2

2021

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Recommended Citation

Woodside, Christine (2021) "The Long Way Home: Encounter with a Hare," *Appalachia*: Vol. 69 : No. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol69/iss2/2>

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Encounter with a Hare

PAST MIDNIGHT I AWAKENED AND CREPT BEHIND THE MOUNTAIN shelter, over dry leaves behind the back wall. Wind rustled from the open ridge of Vermont's Mount Tom toward the spruces. I wore my improvised headlamp, a flashlight on a nylon cord tied around my head. The light wagged back and forth over dead leaves. I teetered unsteadily on my left hand while peeing. I always felt calm and safe doing my business in the woods, but why?

Something off to the left rustled. I turned my head. My flashlight on its cord swung out, then crashed into my forehead. I grabbed the flashlight and pointed it at the largest rabbit I'd ever seen. It stood like a post in my obnoxious light and seemed to stare at me. How could it do that? Rabbits can't look forward. Yet I stared back. My companions slept. I felt alone with the creature. I did not smile, something I might do with a person nearby. All pretension vanished. I saw that this creature and I did not understand each other. The creature, the edge of the flashlight's beam, each individual moldering leaf near my squatting spot brightened into sharp focus.

I moved my light back and gathered up my long johns. I stood and trained the light back out into the dark. The rabbit had gone.

For years I remembered this moment but did not know what I'd seen. It was a snowshoe hare, *Lepus americanus*. It lives in dense forests, mostly in far-northern woods. It favors thickets. Its fur grows brown until the winter, then turns white. It has no interest in meeting me. It does not need me. The hare's babies stop nursing and hop off to their own lives within one month of birth. Hares spend most of their time avoiding danger. Because it had come close, my encounter left me in awe.

YEARS LATER I SAW MY SECOND ONE. I'M CERTAIN THAT MANY DOZENS of hares have watched me walk by without showing themselves. Now I walked alone down off the forgotten side of Carter Dome in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. I descended off a trodden route onto a path few walkers go. I crossed into the federal Wilderness area and saw moose droppings every few feet. I sensed that animals hid just off my trail, waiting for me to move on.

I walked three miles down into a desolate campsite. Perkins Notch, once bustling, had gone back in time and become a ghostly opening in the woods, really just a signpost. The Wilderness Act specified that humans must interact as little as possible with this area now called the Wild River Wilderness. A year or so before I got there, U.S. Forest Service employees had dismantled a shelter but piled the lumber by the trail. Graded areas for tents now resembled rutted gravel squares. I seemed to be the only human for miles. Forecasters had predicted rain. I wandered about looking for a good tentsite—not the abandoned gravel tent pads; they’d funnel moisture toward my sleeping pad. I settled on a flat spot below a stand of saplings. But here, I felt uneasy. Something 50 yards away caught my glance: Someone had built (out of the pieces of the old shelter) a crude A-frame shack. I shuddered. “I’m not going in there,” I said to no one.

The stream ran back by the way I’d come in, so at dusk I returned there with my cooking pot and water bottle. There sat the pile of lumber from the old shelter. There leaned a rotting signpost. It pointed to lonely, little traveled trails deeper in the wilds.

The stream rushed, interrupting my loneliness. And then I saw the first animal of my evening. A snowshoe hare, in summer brown fur, stood. Posed. Stared. I stared back. I thought for a second that I had made eye contact—one eye. This animal barely noticed me. Or didn’t see me. I didn’t fear it. I feared what it knew that I didn’t know. A natural cycle in which I have absolutely no part was playing out in Perkins Notch. The hare had emerged at dusk looking for plants it could eat in safety. An owl could swoop in and grab it. Most hares die violently, actually. That’s why they breed like rabbits.

AT TIMES NEW ENGLAND WILDLIFE MANAGERS HAVE TRANSPORTED snowshoe hares from Maine to states where too many had been hunted. Moving hares also saves Canada lynxes because the only thing a lynx will eat is a hare. I did not realize at that moment I met the hare that a much larger animal might be lurking. I thought the hare looked wise and that it somehow embraced nature’s cycles—find food, live a while, then die—with more grace than I accept those cycles. This hare, of course, thought nothing of life’s stages. It lived in a constant state of fear. I have never known such fear.

Martin Laird writes in *Into the Silent Land* (Darton, 2006), a short book about Christian contemplation: “Fear itself becomes a vehicle of deeper silence,” and, “Be still in the midst of fear.” He tells us that the Eskimo word

for polar bear is *tornarvsuk*, “the one who gives power.” Eskimos confront the bear to grapple with their fear of it. In doing this, they “receive the gift from the bear.”

I had come seeking something like peace. Instead I confronted the gift from the snowshoe hare. I had run right into a creature that didn’t know enough to fear me.

I knelt clumsily at the stream with my pot, water pump, and bottle. I could find no level ground or rock on which to prop the pump, so I lugged the pot of stream water and the rest of the stuff back to the campsite. Dusk had moved in. I could see very little. Was that movement over by the A-frame shanty? No. What was that crackling? The whirr, the whish? I was out of place and would always return to such spots trying not to be.

—*Christine Woodside*
Editor-in-Chief