

Appalachia

Volume 73
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2022: Cataclysms in
the Catskills and Taconics*

Article 2

2022

The Long Way Home: Lessons from the Chuckwalla

Christine Woodside

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Woodside, Christine (2022) "The Long Way Home: Lessons from the Chuckwalla," *Appalachia*: Vol. 73: No. 1, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol73/iss1/2>

This Editor's Column is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

Lessons from the Chuckwalla

LAST JUNE 6, THE MORNING AFTER MY DAUGHTER'S WEDDING IN Las Vegas, five of our newly blended family gathered for a short walk. We walked through soft sand and rock formations in a state park called the Valley of Fire. We're easterners. Everything there in the Mojave Desert—heat, birds, sheep, cacti, spindly bushes—amazed us. Before we left, we wanted to see a bit more of it. It was already almost too hot to hike, so we had to keep it short. Just after 10 A.M., the air felt like a bake oven. The orange rocks glowed.

Our feet sank in the fine sand. Pushing through it reminded me of walking on a beach in New Jersey or Connecticut, and that was the only aspect of nature in Nevada that seemed familiar. I had no instincts for this land where life forms spent most of their time avoiding shriveling up. This is where tarantulas thrive, and bighorn sheep trot up steep cliffs in blistering heat.

We stepped our way along the sand tunnel, surrounded by orange rocks. Soon I paused. Something made me turn around. Twenty yards behind and off to the left, a large, fat, gray lizard with a long tail stood very still on a flat rock. It stared at something, or perhaps it was just thinking. A chuckwalla, *Sauromalus ater*. It looked so calm, so at home in this place where we were clearly not at home. The lizard was a light gray so, I later learned, a female.

She stood still like a stone. I told myself she didn't notice us. But she might actually have noticed us. She might have been very upset. This posing might have been her way of hoping we would miss her presence and go away. I wanted to move closer for a better look, but I didn't. It just seemed unfair. I was already worried about her. Lately I have felt melancholy wash over me whenever I watch a wild animal. It could be a rabbit in my yard, or a woodpecker lying dead in the road. It could be a fox running up a hill into the trees or a common loon showing its one surviving baby how to dive for fish. First I'll think how beautiful and perfect each creature looks, each so very different from the next. I'll admire the startling efficiency of a world that can create so many kinds of animals. Then I'll start worrying that someone—maybe

I—will harm it or kill it with the carelessness only humans seem to know. Or, I'll mourn what tragedy has struck it down. We humans are so very self-involved. Perhaps we can pay attention to wild creatures only by studying them, giving them genus and species names. Or by stealing, eating, or selling them. When we need animals, we pay attention. When we just let them be, that's a whole different realm.

Four years ago, the state of Nevada outlawed collecting reptiles such as that chuckwalla for either selling or keeping. This chuckwalla's mother and grandmother already had taught her not to trust humans. She didn't know Nevada had a law or that I was not one of those collecting humans. If I had gotten closer, she would have skittered into a crevice



The chuckwalla knows how to survive, and that doesn't include me. LEYO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

and blown up her body to wedge in there. She was not interested in me at all because my presence leads her away from thriving.

She gets most of her water from plants that miraculously grow in the glowing sand. I see that the chuckwalla understands instinctively how to survive, but that it is not easy to do so.

My daughter Annie, the bride, lives out there now. She went through a period of many years where she had to work very hard to overcome struggles. She sometimes felt she had to pretend about who she was and that she couldn't tell others what difficulties she was going through. She had to leave the place that she loved and move to an alien environment. She had found a loving wife. They were making their place, forging a life in which they know where to find the water and how to stay away from danger.

The rest of us returned to the hotel. My shoes were filled with orange sand. I poured it into a plastic bag and stared at this accidentally collected sample of an alien environment.

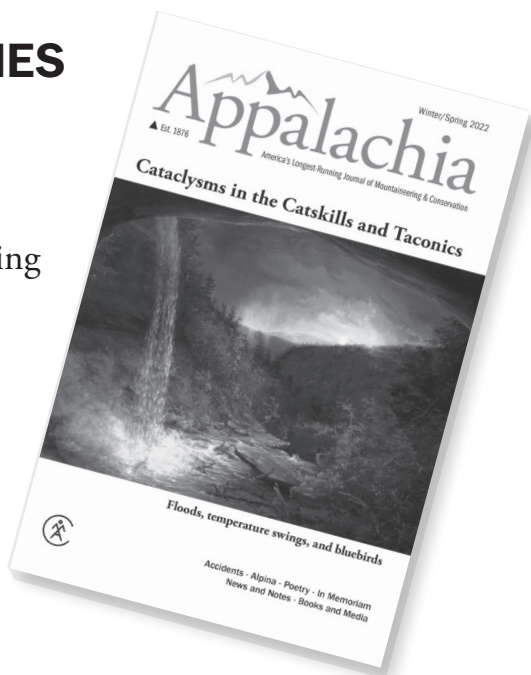
—Christine Woodside
Editor-in-Chief

"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit **outdoors.org/appalachia** for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at **outdoors.org/appalachia** or call 800-372-1758.



Subscription prices valid as of September 2021. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date info, visit outdoors.org.