Appalachia

Volume 74
Number 2 Summer/Fall 2023: Risks and Adventure

2022

Books and Media

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Books and Media

By Ken MacGray and Steven D. Smith
Appalachian Mountain Club, 2022, 720 pages.
(paperback in slipcase with six maps).

One hundred and sixteen years ago, the Appalachian Mountain Club published a slim volume titled AMC’s Guide to the Paths and Camps in the White Mountains Part I, which described hiking routes in areas ranging from Mount Washington to “Jackson and vicinity.” The book also included two folded topographical maps tucked in a pocket inside the front cover.

That was the first edition of what has evolved into a venerable and trusted White Mountain Guide, regularly updated. The book’s size and scope have expanded over the decades, but the mission remains the same: Provide hikers with a reliable reference for navigating trails that wind throughout the peaks in New Hampshire’s White Mountain National Forest.

The 31st edition contains information that could not have been imagined in 1907. Six full-color, GIS-based, pull-out topographic maps show trail segment mileage and the stops of the AMC hiker shuttle bus. The maps used lidar (light detection and ranging) topography that includes updated summit elevations and contours. The book includes statistics for every trail in the WMNF: more than 500 routes that cover more than 1,400 miles. The book charts cumulative distances, elevations, and estimated time to hike the trails. The paths range “from easy waterfall strolls to strenuous ridge traverses.”

In an era when most people—hikers and non-hikers alike—rely increasingly on digital information that cannot always be verified in the field, MacGray and Smith’s masterful job underscores the value of a rigorously field-checked resource in print. One can’t always rely on cell service in the mountains. Of course, no hiker will lug the box containing this 720-page book on a multiday backpacking expedition. But the maps are lightweight
and portable. One suggestion: Study the book carefully when planning a hike, leave it home, and pack a map. Some hikers photocopy the trail description pages to take into the backcountry.

The guide contains more than just trail descriptions. It includes the latest information about geography, camping, and safety that reflect the evolving practice of handling medical emergencies in the mountains. Printed advice on how to handle medical emergencies has evolved a great deal over the 31 editions of this guide. For example, the 1922 guide contains several pages on how to deal with convulsions, hernias, frostbite, digestive problems, and even insomnia—“It does no harm to lie awake unless you let it get your goat!” By comparison, the 2022 edition limits advice to helpful descriptions of the symptoms of hypothermia, heat exhaustion, and what to do if someone falls. It also discusses finding and filtering water for drinking, crossing brooks, and what to do if you are lost.

Steven D. Smith is a longtime editor of AMC trail guides. He lives in Lincoln, New Hampshire, where he operates the Mountain Wanderer bookstore. Ken MacGray of Concord, New Hampshire, is a writer and hiker who has hiked extensively in the White Mountains. Smith and MacGray are also co-editors of AMC’s Southern New Hampshire Trail Guide. The authors note, “It is our hope that the users of this book will safely enjoy many days of outdoor pleasure and healthful exercise in the beautiful White Mountains.”

—Steve Fagin

By Herman Shugart, Peter White, Sassan Saatchi, and Jérôme Chave

“Forest have an ancientness that conjures up images of nature lost and beauty changed by progress and of the passage of human history. Taming the forest wilderness was once synonymous with human progress; restoring the wilderness may prove our hope for the future,” write the authors of this comprehensive, informative, and lavish new volume that traces the long, complex relationship between trees and people.
The authors combine their diverse fields of expertise to make the compelling case for forest preservation to save all life on the planet. Shugart is the W. W. Corcoran Professor of Natural History emeritus at the University of Virginia. White is emeritus professor of biology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Saatchi is senior scientist at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory at the California Institute of Technology and adjunct professor at UCLA’s Institute of the Environment and Sustainability. Chave is director of research at the National Center for Scientific Research in Toulouse, France.

Enhanced by stunning photographs, charts, and diagrams, the oversized atlas covers a lot of ground, ranging from tropical rain forests to the boreal taiga. The authors assess the impact of climate change and describe new technologies that help us understand how forests grow.

Although some of the wording may read like a college textbook (for instance, “nutrients and moisture patterns in the Cerrado”), enlightening and occasionally entertaining narratives make it very accessible to the everyday reader. Some interesting facts: In the Middle Ages, swineherds used long sticks to knock acorns from trees to feed their pigs in the forest, a practice called pannage. Also, lumberjacks chopped down trees with axes until the mid-eighteenth century, when they started using saws. Most switched to chain saws in the 1950s.

Today, forests make up about a third of the earth’s terrestrial surface. The authors note that this percentage holds great significance. “The carbon currently stored in our forests’ living plants and soils is crucial to planetary function, so when forests are altered, global systems and climate respond.”

—Steve Fagin

Conversations with Birds
By Priyanka Kumar
Milkweed Editions, 2022, 296 pages.

As a landscape ecologist and ornithologist who knows birds and their vocalizations, I was immediately lured in by the title and cover illustration that included a western tanager. Back in 2003, I was elated when a western tanager appeared at
my Connecticut bird feeder, attracting birders from around New England to my yard. It stayed for over a month, and by the time it moved on, had started to acquire what Kumar calls its “sublime coloration of yellow-gold, crimson, raven black, and mango . . . (a) flashing little jewel.” Indeed, it was “a glad-dening, if aleatoric experience.”

For Kumar, the western tanager serves as a beacon appearing at critical times in significant ways, a bird to which she owes a debt of gratitude. During the physical challenges, pain, and mental anguish of an arduous hike, she initially felt removed and out of place in the landscape. Birds, starting with the tanager, helped bridge a physical-spiritual gap and connect her to the world that they inhabit. She is continually healed by birds on her life journey, and her empathy and environmental awareness deepens the more she learns about them. The old adage “don’t judge a book by its cover” applies here, as the title does not capture the book’s depth and breadth, which goes way beyond birding.

While Kumar learns the Latin names, songs, and behaviors of each species she encounters, her collection of essays confirms that nature offers something meaningful to anyone who is open to receive it. Knowing about other living things that share our world enriches our life experience and deepens the path to ecological consciousness. Nurturing personal connections with nature offers hope for the future of our environment.

Kumar’s writing, and overall message, offers something for anyone with an interest in nature. It is less about conversing with birds and more about watching, listening, and paying attention—to birds, animals, sounds, movements, light, and nature’s subtleties. “Are animal sightings simply more available to those who make it a habit to keep looking?” she asks.

Like me—and many other birders, naturalists, hikers, and scientists I know—Kumar is spiritually invigorated by her encounters with birds. In our busy digital world, the importance of a spiritual connection is often overlooked. Kumar, who was born in northern India, relates it to nasa, the Sanskrit term for “juice” (sentiments or life force), the Zen Buddhism concept of instant enlightenment. With birds as the main thread, she braids mythology and life experiences together in her explorations of the western American landscape, alone and shared with her family, in what becomes a transformative experience. Through her searches and explorations of places where different species breed and raise young, the big picture becomes increasingly clear as she observes firsthand and comes to know a few of the animals that are struggling in our human-dominated landscape.

Clear-cutting for lumber, cattle, and mining continue to exploit natural resources and our national forests, while the needs of birds and other animals,
including our own human survival, are completely ignored. One of my favorite images is a round window through which she views backyard nature, like a mandala, that becomes symbolic—the circle of life, an orb like our planet.

I turned down dozens of pages with passages that moved me. Her personal bobcat observations truly resonated, as I have had several recent bobcat encounters in my own backyard, including one with a mother whose three young kittens scampered behind her. It is disturbing how many people fear wild animals and put up fences, physically and emotionally, instead of welcoming nature into their backyards. As wild areas shrink, wildlife encounters and concerns increase—whether a raptor or songbird, cottontail, coyote, opossum, fox, or deer.

Kumar vividly and eloquently describes her own encounters, sharing them in ways that encourage readers to simply pay more attention. Nature is talking to us, if only we would listen. In a search for goshawks, for example, she finds the land surrounding their nesting site has been clear-cut. And she writes of the curlew, one of dozens of animals that require grassland habitat. In her search, she learns that people shoot them “for fun.”

In her explorations and searches for birds, she discovers more about herself and her own relationship with nature, and the interconnectedness of all living things. In a detailed, compelling, but not preachy way, Kumar shares her own heightened awareness of the destructive, ongoing, and in some cases irreversible impacts of human activities.

—Margarett Jones

Hidden Mountains: Survival and Reckoning
After a Climb Gone Wrong
By Michael Wejchert
Ecco, 2023, 256 pages.

Hidden Mountains starts as a simple story of two Boston couples—John Gassel and Alissa Doherty, Emmett Lyman and Lauren Weber (a pseudonym)—falling into climbing and falling in love. Five chapters in, the book takes a surprising turn when they meet David Roberts, a famous mountaineer and author or co-author of more than 30 books about climbing and mountaineering.
In his early 70s, Roberts pushes the younger climbers to break away from guidebooks and explore new peaks, as he had once done. At his relentless urging, in 2018 the couples embark on a climbing expedition to Alaska’s “unexplored and remote” Hidden Mountains. They barely made it out alive.

Woven into that narrative is still another story: how author Michael Wejchert, also under the tutelage of Roberts (who died in 2021), intersected with those couples as he evolved from Connecticut suburbanite to international mountaineer and chair of New Hampshire’s storied Mountain Rescue Service. In an exciting narrative that stretches from North Conway’s International Mountain Climbing School to Alaska’s aptly named Hidden Mountains, “one of the most difficult to get to ranges on the planet,” Wejchert explores the mentor-mentee relationship in mountaineering while giving a clear-eyed look at the hard-nosed logistics and contentious ethics around search-and-rescue operations. (Roberts and Wejchert have each contributed to Appalachia, and Wejchert is on the Committee on Appalachia, this journal’s editorial committee.)

“The Hidden Mountains were something unique in modern climbing, or even Alaska climbing, a holdover from that era when alpinism shared more DNA with polar exploration than CrossFit gym culture,” writes Wejchert. “Instead of a well-documented mountain, here existed mile after mile of mountains that no one had stood on top of.”

Getting there from Anchorage required flying in two bush planes, then slogging six miles through thick brush with 500 pounds of gear. Along with a shotgun to ward off grizzly bears, the couples carried two DeLorme inReach satellite phones—a crucial decision. In bringing those inReaches, the climbers were subtly rebuking their mentor’s black-and-white approach to cell phones and other gadgets, which Roberts had called “get-out-of-jail-free cards.” Such technology allowed people to be “rescued from their own incompetence” while putting the lives of rescuers at risk, as Roberts wrote in the New York Times in 2012. In this journal, I’ve written about my own opposition to taking such technology into the backcountry (“Do Cell Phones Belong in the Mountains?” Summer/Fall 2022).

But when the couples’ expedition goes awry, Roberts is forced to question whether he pushed the young climbers too hard. The expedition leaves one person quadriplegic, and worse would surely have happened if the team hadn’t brought along the rescue communications technology that Roberts had condemned. The book subtly asks, When pushing protégés to seek greater challenges, how much should a mentor warn of the associated dangers? If that mentor comes from a pre–cell phone era when going into the wilderness...
meant going off-line and being entirely self-reliant, how can followers reconcile their own use of civilization-anchoring and potentially lifesaving communications technology?

Wejchert balances his enthusiasm for the outdoors with his own sobering experience in search and rescue. He notes how, on a trip to Denali National Park, while “grappling with a dangerous, rotten ice pitch on a peak called the Eye Tooth,” his own inReach began chirping madly when his fiancé, back in New Hampshire, wanted to know where to find a spare printer ink cartridge. He mentions how, while on assignment for the magazine *Rock and Ice* to the Karakoram mountains in 2018, he discovered that one-third of professional alpine expeditions in Pakistan were calling for rescue, suggesting that many mountaineers were too quickly reaching for those “get-out-of-jail-free” cards.

And yet, Wejchert also cites ample examples—including the Hidden Mountains expedition—of when a simple communication device expedited rescue missions and saved lives. The debate should not be around whether to bring such technology into the mountains, he says, but rather about how to pay for the rising costs of expensive rescue missions.

“Like it or not, someone’s going to try and get you if you’re injured or stranded in the mountains,” writes Wejchert, who is also a contributor to *Alpinist*, the *American Alpine Journal*, and the *New York Times*, and who co-authored the updated edition of *Yankee Rock and Ice* (Stackpole Books, 2018) that Guy and Laura Waterman first published in 1993. “The era of total, mandatory seclusion is long gone. Gone, too, is any ethical argument about communication. Instead, it’s time to talk about how to better improve a rescue system that will, if trends continue, be strained to a breaking point.”

—Stephen Kurczy

**Lost in the Valley of Death: A Story of Obsession and Danger in the Himalayas**

*By Harley Rustad*

*Harper, 2022, 304 pages.*


In 2016, an American disappeared while hiking in the Himalayan foothills of northern India. This in itself was unremarkable. Police had tallied the names of at least two-dozen foreigners who
had gone missing in the Parvati Valley during two decades, contributing to the region’s moniker as the Valley of Death.

But this American, Justin Alexander Shetler, was a minor travel star who had tens of thousands of followers across Instagram, Facebook, and his blog called Adventures of Justin. One website had dubbed him “World’s Coolest World Traveler,” and another had named him one of “13 Inspiring Travelers to Watch in 2016.” Even Jonathan Goldsmith, the actor who appeared in “The Most Interesting Man in the World” commercials for Dos Equis beer, had once told Shetler, “I think you might actually be the most interesting man in the world.”

So when the 35-year-old vanished, it set off a yearslong investigation that rose to the level of the U.S. Embassy and India’s external affairs ministry—and sparked the interest of Canadian journalist Harley Rustad, whose meticulously researched retracing of Shetler’s steps serves as both a colorful travelogue and a cautionary tale.

Shetler was the one traveler who should have been able to get himself out of any scrape. A lifelong outdoors enthusiast, he had dropped out of high school to study survival skills and ecology at the Wilderness Awareness School in Duvall, Washington, and then at Tom Brown Jr.’s Tracker School in New Jersey. “People around him often likened him to Tarzan for his independence, Rambo for his fearlessness, or He-Man for his strength,” Rustad writes. Shetler also connected deeply with Hermann Hesse’s 1922 novel Siddhartha about the life of a wandering ascetic during the time of the Buddha, and he came to believe “that ‘pushing the edge’ of ability and comfort would spark greater understanding of the world.”

Given those interests, “vagabonding” was a natural path. In 2013, at 32, Shetler quit a high-paying job with a tech startup in Miami so he could travel full time. Soon he was posting online about motorcycling across the United States, living with a Mentawai tribe in Indonesia, trekking into Nepal’s remote Mustang Valley, and bicycling Bolivia’s dangerous Yungas Road.

“Armed with an iPhone, an eye for photography, an alluring story, and a will to explore, he played the social media game well,” Rustad writes.

But those who personally knew Shetler questioned if his life was as satisfying as he portrayed online. One said it seemed Shetler was “desperately trying to fabricate a grand narrative for his life.”

The temptation to embellish his online persona likely pushed Shetler to take greater risks. In 2016, bedecked with a new tattoo of an eagle across his背部...
chest, Shetler embarked on a solo trek to live for three weeks in a cave near the holy site of Kheerganga.

There Shetler met a self-proclaimed holy man who invited him on a week-long pilgrimage to Mantalai Lake, the source of the Parvati River. Shetler went, despite the explicit warning from Lonely Planet’s India guidebook that backpackers in the Parvati Valley “avoid walking alone, and be cautious about befriending sadhus (holy people) or others wandering in the woods.” This is where Shetler disappeared.

Through hundreds of interviews and two reporting trips to the Parvati Valley, Rustad wrestles with what might have become of Shetler. Did he slip and fall into the raging gorge? Was he robbed and murdered? Was he another victim of the rumored serial killer who has lurked in those forested hills for decades? Was his disappearance somehow linked to the drug trade in a valley known for some of the world’s best hashish? Did Shetler overdose on another local drug, datura seeds, which can cause weeks-long delirium and psychosis?

Or, as some of Shetler’s online followers believed, did he purposefully disappear in an effort to shed his ego and embrace a new level of spirituality and oneness with nature? Rustad gives arguments to each theory, turning Lost in the Valley of Death into a kind of choose-your-own-adventure Rorschach test.

“Maybe in a year’s time he’ll come back down,” one friend tells Rustad. “Why not leave that little window open?”

—Stephen Kurczy

Wolfish: Wolf, Self, and the Stories We Tell About Fear

By Erica Berry


“The wolf is a piece of cultural taxidermy . . . howling first and foremost in our heads.” So writes Erica Berry in this eloquent book.

By the mid-twentieth century, wolves had been exterminated in America. To be clear, actual death by wolf attack is vanishingly rare, and yet this blunt-snouted, coarse-haired carnivore has remained an icon for threat and fear. To be even clearer, this leaves confusion about who should fear whom.
Berry writes that “the wolf in the forest . . . is haunted—hunted, even—by that shadow wolf in the hunter’s head.”

Berry explores the haunting from every angle: cultural, historical, fictional, mythologic, metaphoric. At the same time, she explores the hauntings and huntings that occurred in her own life. Human and *canis lupus* had in common that the hunters were men.

The scholarly portions of *Wolfish* are filled with specialists: a psychoanalyst, a Chinese poet, a Brazilian anthropologist, an art critic, a fairy tale scholar, botanists, geographers, conservationists, an ecofeminist, and even one “killologist.” To take the measurements from every angle, Berry roams a lot of land.

So does OR-7, the wolf she comes to know without ever having met. In 2012, OR-7 was tagged, collared with a radio transmitter, and tracked as he roamed back and forth between Oregon and California. He was the first confirmed wild wolf in Oregon since 1947 and the first in California since 1924. Interest grew so pervasive that eventually he acquired his own webpage, bumper sticker and Twitter account (“hobbies: wandering”). He traveled 3,000 miles in only a few years (wolves can roam up to 40 miles a day and swim up to 8 miles at a time), found a mate and sired several litters. At the 4,000-mile mark, his satellite collar gave out.

Erica roamed, too: to the UK Wolf Conservation Trust in Berkshire, England; to a forensic lab for wolf necropsies; to a cooking school in Sicily; and an isolated midwestern cabin on a writing fellowship. Fears, and sometimes outright dangers, dogged her. She never lost her fascination with wolves.

Roaming for OR-7 led eventually, as it will for us all, to death sometime in 2020. He was 11, unusually old for a wolf, and unaware of the mark he had left on history. For Berry, it led back to Oregon, where she was born and where her pack waited for her. After a tremendous amount of literary reflection and work, it also led her on the journey that became this eloquent book.

—*Elissa Ely*
“I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features.” —Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

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