

Southern Appalachian Spring

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Modesty and Change

The mountains of South Carolina are humble things. Not particularly impressive by the lofty standards of the Rockies, they possess a different and endearing grandeur that has been molded by time. With few towering spires to pierce the misty heavens they are ancient mounds of rounded rises bisected by deep crevasses and gorges that are yet being carved by streams running cold and swift. Long ago rendered meek by the persistence of water and weather, they covered their stony nakedness with forests of chestnut, oak and hickory across their shoulders and tulip poplar, basswood and hemlocks covering the deeper, darker reaches. Hidden in the moist coves and on the dry ridges, a wonderfully diverse community of plants and animals has evolved to fill the nooks and crannies. Niches here, like those in other areas of extreme diversity, have been partitioned to accommodate the myriad roles played out by every living thing. Survivors and prolific or persistent producers contribute to successive generations. The losers meet abrupt ends — maybe for forever.

Scenic calendars with picturesque landscapes of fog — shrouded vistas and blooming rhododendron provide a certain comfort and serenity that do not accurately portray the hard truth. Certainly, there are some changes we accept, like those that shock the verdant slopes from the tired green of September to the riotous kaleidoscope of October. These changes are welcome, timeless and what we perceive should be. But look more deeply. Even where ancient forests reside, change will come. But in days or decades, human perception is too often duped into the false sense of static sameness that mountains and forests sit in stolid silence like aged men with gnarled limbs, furrowed brows and little to change

them. The post card picture paints life in some idyllic state of suspended animation; the fallen autumn leaf forever suspended in the stream's swirl or the ruffed grouse cock drumming, regal and unthreatened by predatory breath on a mossy log that will never decay. Oh, but for a little patience and perspective, one begins to understand that only change is constant in nature! Birth and renewal, senescence and death cycle and recycle plants through animals and back again. Life in all forms being transitory and the passage of time and the changes it brings are the only certainties the mountains promise.

Winter to Spring

Relentless forces — water and wind — by trickle and tornado, work to change forests — and mountains — over time. By imperceptible degree or by sudden violence, flash floods sweep away the signs of the last high water in the bottoms to establish new marks while storms punch holes in the coves or lay waste to the ridges. Meanwhile, the cycles of freeze and thaw work the cracks to cleave the mountains apart. Cliffs decay to boulders to rocks and finally to the soil that ultimately supports plant life and all other living things. All of the changes, the dynamics that mold South Carolina's modest mountainous places — the Blue Wall, Jocassee Gorges and Eastatoe, Horse Pasture and Table Rock, Caesar's Head and Buzzard Roost, Cane Creek and Jones Gap. These are the chests that hold the region's rich treasure of diversity. But for now it is winter, and the trees stand bare-boned except for the evergreen hemlocks deep in the coves and the chalky white pines scattered throughout. The stark stillness deceives the unfocused eye. The impatient step passes by many a miracle waiting to happen. Except for the twisted chuckling croaks of frigid wood frogs holding consort in chilly puddles, it would be easy to assume that life hangs by the thinnest of strings or maybe has broken clean way. But locked in sluggish slumber in tip-up

mound dens and river rock lairs, black bears and black-bellied salamanders await the warm-up. Beneath the musty leaf litter; encased in silky chrysalis and cramped crevices; locked in expectant buds and beneath decaying logs, life in innumerable and wondrous forms holds on. Each day, slowly but surely the sun delays its rest below the horizon and winter gives way to new green. As Spring creeps up from the flat and soggy coastal plain blushing maple buds and gilding yellow jasmine, through the rolling piedmont's purple explosion of blooming redbuds and flowering dogwood's blossom blizzard, finally reaching the mountains — first on the drier southern exposure where the sunlight and warmth linger. Where the chestnuts once flowered in snowy profusion, flame azalea and rosebay ignite the April woods beneath oaks and hickories, appropriately celebrating the miracle of another resurrection.

Up and over the ridge, the north slopes are cool and dark and deep. Here, even in the midst of spring's rebirth, sunrise is tardy and sunset always precocious. Here basswood and cucumber tree, silver bell and striped maple, brighten the gloomy caverns. *Sanguinaria*, *Trillium* and *Shortia* grace the floor. A drowsy black bear sow, awake now with the next ursine generation — tumbling twins underfoot — emerges to taste the southern Appalachian New Year — crunchy sweet Indian cucumber root and buttery fat sawyer grubs. The black bellied salamander's cold-blooded pulse quickens to a flash to match the torrent where it lurks. The shallow woodland pools, now warming, are punctuated with the wood frog's comma-like progeny. And then, unexpectedly, on a day still too cool to think about anything remotely tropical, the sweet declaration of “zee-zee-zee-zoo-zee!” a flash of gold and green in the budding canopy and a Black-throated Green warbler is home again after a winter sojourn in equatorial warmth. Soon, rainbow legions of paruline kindred, Chestnut-sided, Cerulean, Black-throated Blue, Louisiana Waterthrush, Blackburnian, Redstart, Hooded, Ovenbird, Yellow-throated, Parula, Swainson's and Worm-eating, trickle

through at first. Then, the misty morning after a warm night's storm — fallout — and the ridges and coves, slopes and bottoms fill with buzzes and trills, whistles and chips and even a few warbles. Somewhere high, a musical, metallic “*chip-burr!-chip-burr!*” and then a meteoric streak, red and black through the still furled greenery, marks the near earth passage of a scarlet tanager's feathered brilliance. And low, from the holler's depths, a strutting gobbler's rising sap and rumbling proclamation confirms that life has indeed come full circle. The litany of sounds claiming territory or simply notice of passage defines, has for ages defined, the Southern highlands — Appalachian Spring — a vernal festival of return, re-growth and rebirth.

What Hath Man Wrought?

For all the changes, season through season, many are as obvious and natural as high water flotsam in *Leucothoe* — movement and migration, flowers and fallout. Nature tells the annual story of change. Not for better or for worse in her terms but just because. An acceptable proposition; a deal struck eons ago and held true between hunter and hunted, flower and pollinator, water and rock, wind and forest. But somehow, for some reason, changes subtle and not so subtle, wrought by a different force, have strained the deal. With seemingly fewer singers in the dawn chorus, the changes brought on by storm and flood, lie blameless. So on whom or what does the blame fall, human kind? Certainly the aboriginals hunted here, fished here, lived and died in and among these special places. Burning, clearing, planting, killing and changing things to suit a hunter-gatherer existence. However, the scale of change wrought by hand tools and controlled burning while not negligible, probably did not wipe flocks of passenger pigeons from the sky or drive bugling wapiti from the rich valleys. *Homo sapiens* has long been and will probably for the foreseeable future continue to be an influential

component — a necessary cog in Aldo’s natural machine. But rather than meshing seamlessly with the other gears, we have proven our inability to effectively tinker and thrown away or damaged many of the parts. As aboriginal respect and reverence gave way to a different set of values, the scale of change began to reflect an inability — or indifference — to live in harmony with the wild things that had always held up their end of the bargain. We reneged.

So ultimately, the blame lies in large part with “progress”; our drive to possess more — to have it all now on our terms. So now high-end houses and golf courses sit where forests and glades should be. A diesel earthmover moves the mountain a little more efficiently than a shell hoe or an oxen team. Again, progress. In the end there is less room for the winged worm-eaters and more trouble for curious, hungry bears. Subtlety not being the human animal’s calling card, the rate of change, making forest non-forest, converting creeks into lakes and mountains into subdivisions, frequently outstrips nature’s ability to compensate and the change progress brings comes with a terrible price which we shall all pay dearly for.

And so as the next spring burgeons fresh and green, pregnant with the possibility of warblers and new growth, will the dry ridge where last year the first ovenbird enthusiastically “teacher-ed” remain cloistered in oaks and huckleberries or provide stunning views from the master bedroom? Can the hooded warblers in the shrinking cove raise little cloaked songsters instead of cowbirds this year? Whither the whip-poor-will; a singing stage on the valley floor or a par 5 dogleg and bent grass greens?

The sow and her cubs find sweet and easy fare in vineyards and backyards. The exclusive gated community’s wilderness moniker would suggest an appreciation for the inclusion of nature, the bear family’s picnics included. Instead inconvenience more than intrigue seems to be the norm of those seeking wildness written into a very restrictive neighborhood covenant. Nuisance soon

becomes the bear's middle name yet we have moved in, uninvited in our selfish drive to be closer to "nature". One questions to what or whom the true role of pest should fall.

The wood frogs unique adaptive antifreeze for coping with the deep cold of Appalachian winters has been tried more by human indiscretion — chemicals, wetlands loss, habitat destruction, climate warming — than by any natural challenge. Here in South Carolina, these amphibians, wearing the black masks of miniature bandits, are already severely restricted in the modest mountains. Our carelessness may mean even fewer raspy quacking croaks filtering through the late winter woods as *sylvatica* follows many of its ravid brethren into the uncertain realm of decline and disappearance.

Even the giants are not immune. Towering hemlocks that have stood against centuries of natural challenges in the coves and along the creeks are suddenly growing weak as they succumb to foreign invaders; six-legged sap suckers. Once a dominant component of sheltered mountain forests throughout the Appalachians, evergreen boughs now hold tell tale signs of white — not of snow or frost but the cloaks of the persistent, invasive hemlock woolly adelgid. Already, slopes northward in the mountains sheltering Shenandoah and the Nantahala lie barren or dying as another invader pushes a species towards farewell. So many living dominos — eastern cougar, woodland bison, eastern elk — all fell to the same disease; human progress. Following the cascade of extinction, will the hemlock be the next domino to fall? What others will follow? Can the Appalachian Swainson's warblers adapt and find other dark and dank places for their bulky leafy nests? Will the exposed streams warm beyond comfort for the brook trout? What about green salamanders, smooth coneflowers and small-whorled pogonia? Can the rarest of them all survive the onslaught or will they too become even rarer, spiraling toward the inevitable end?

As the rocky knobs of the Southern Appalachians have weathered over thousands of years to harbor some of this earth's richest natural treasures, threats from storms, floods, fires and the harshest nature deals will continue to simmer the ancient cauldron's stew of flora and fauna: salamanders, Solomon's Seal, Yellow Buckeye, black bear, dog hobble, ruffed grouse, striped maple and Oconee Bells, to name a few. But what does the future hold? Already in the span of living humans' memories, American chestnut flourished and then vanished from the mountain slopes. Preceded in extinction by "infinite" hordes of passenger pigeons and wheeling, whirling flocks of raucous Carolina Parakeets, neither crystal balls nor psychics could have foretold such a sad fate. But now we know the story, have the advantage of perfect hindsight but somehow, in spite of ourselves and best intentions, history and the same old stories find themselves opened to us again. We continue to consult the same sins; selfishness, greed, carelessness . . . with the same result — unnatural change and wanton destruction. But this time, maybe we will wise up; seek a wiser more reliable oracle; the one that lies beating within the chest of the human animal and holds the spirit of renewal and respect. Maybe this time our hearts' whispers will convince us to deny disdain and destruction and encourage us to embrace the wonder of it all. And then future generations of flora, fauna and maybe a wiser humankind can tell the tales of southern Appalachian springs past and look forward to those yet to come.