

BLACK MOUNTAIN CREST TRAIL

Old friends take a hike. 10-03-05

By Ed Kelley ©2005

A little over twenty-five years ago, I spent fourteen months about as close to heaven as you can get here in Western North Carolina. And I mean that literally and figuratively. I was working at Mount Mitchell State Park in Yancey County, off of the Blue Ridge Parkway. At 6,684 feet above sea level, Mt. Mitchell is the highest peak east of the Black Hills of South Dakota. And, as a young man who couldn't get enough of nature and mountains and wilderness, I was in "hog heaven" in those environs!

Mount Mitchell is also the highest point in the Black Mountain Range. The Blacks got their name from the dark shawl of spruce and fir forest that drapes the ridge tops. The whole range forms a horseshoe-shaped watershed, the headwaters of the Cane River. The main crest of six thousand feet runs almost perfectly north-south, so it is broadside to the severe weather that can come from the east but usually comes from the west. It is a rugged area, not only because of the steepness of the slopes, but also the tangles of blackberry and raspberry thickets and the fallen corpses of wind-thrown trees. I can only imagine how difficult travel might have been for Dr. Elisha Mitchell as he worked to determine the true elevation in the mid-1800's. The highest peak was known as Black Dome in those days, and later was Mitchell's High Peak. Dr. Mitchell came within 21 feet of the actual elevation in his 1835 measurements.

Over the past 25 years, I have visited Mt. Mitchell many times. The Park has changed some, with many new facilities and facelifts to the structures there. The current tower is due to be replaced by a new one in the near future. I have also watched the spruce-fir forest change. When I worked there in 1979-80, there was a section of forest with some very large trees that had apparently escaped or survived the attack of the balsam wooly adelgid, an imported insect pest akin to the hemlock wooly adelgid that is currently ravaging WNC. Back then there was much discussion and research about the effects of acid rain and other pollutants on the high mountain ecosystem. The Fraser Firs were dying and their weathered skeletons were everywhere. However, there were also stands of healthy new firs so thick it took considerable effort to push your way through them. Well, the large old trees are gone thanks to an ice storm in the 1990's, but there seems to be younger, healthy trees everywhere. I agree that pollution, acid rain, introduced insects, and even climatic changes have taken their toll, but my observation is that much of the apparent damage is merely cyclical, as even old etchings show wind throws and dead firs, though I expect that these trees will never be able to attain the age and size of their ancestors.

I have reached that point in my life where a lot of my good friends are reaching the ripe old age of fifty. My long-time friend Joe was having his celebration, but I could not be a part of it. So I called him up and made arrangements for a commemorative hiking trip, an activity that had cemented our friendship many years ago. I say "hiking" but it was more than that. We backpacked into remote areas and went off-trail many times, rarely using a compass, but most of the time reading the contour lines on maps (forget GPS—it didn't exist!) The little brown lines on a contour map can show you mountaintops, ridges, and gaps, and give you an idea of the degree of steepness on mountainsides. This was our sport, going where few people went, seeking wilderness, bushwhacking. We got ourselves into some rough spots, but we were never lost.

Joe and I agreed to think about where to hike over the weekend and make a decision when we met. It really didn't surprise us too much when we found that we had both settled on the same hike without even discussing it further. The hike would be the Black Mountain Crest Trail. As we drove north from Asheville along the Parkway, we spotted a young black bear. It seemed skinny and we wondered if the young bruin would make it through the winter. We eventually turned onto NC 128, toward the trailhead near the top of Mt. Mitchell. The weather was perfect with a little wind, lots of sunshine and a few mists swirling up and around the high peaks. As we walked up the trail and ascended the tower, we talked of those glorious days of early manhood when we both worked at the Park. Those were the days of Ranger Clyde "Hoppy" Hopson, a true mountain man, yet thoroughly a

gentleman, and quite a character. Joe and I both worked for him and had a few stories about him. The subjects of our reminiscing ran from the folks we worked with and for, to the work we did. On the tower, we smiled as we overheard conversations that echoed the same comments and questions we had heard so many years ago as park employees. To the north, where we were headed, the omnipresent ravens were performing their ancient wind dances over the crest of the ridge.

We picked up our packs and headed down the Crest Trail. Instead of the weekend, we had chosen a Monday, feeling that we would experience a bit more privacy on the trail. It wasn't crowded, but we did pass a couple of groups going in both directions. The Crest Trail has needed little improvement over the years; it's basically the rock spine of the ridge in many places and the soil is too shallow for much erosion. There were new signs, some showing the way, but others warning of potential damage to the fragile ecosystem that exists on the rock outcroppings along the ridge. Of course these promontories are where the views are, too. The trail only dips below 6000' at Deep Gap, almost 4 miles from Mt. Mitchell. The air is less dense up here and a breath will not contain as many oxygen molecules as it does in the surrounding valleys. It's easier to get winded on an uphill stretch. Today, the humidity was low and the thin air flowed in and out of my lungs easily. I was totally happy breathing it as you could see a distinct line of nasty dark haze on the horizon with other high peaks rising above it in the distance. We were above that layer of tainted air! It was clear enough to see rows of mountains all the way west to the Great Smoky Mountains and north to Roan and Grandfather Mountains, but, the valleys were filled with stale air made dense by humidity and who knows what else, all most likely held in place by a temperature inversion. Can you say "smog?"

The process of life and its changes so evident here on the mountain was common to our lives as well, and as we hiked, Joe and I did a lot of catching up. Although we have taken different courses, we both appreciate the fact that our friendship and our Southern Appalachian adventures significantly altered our paths for the good. I've heard it said that talking while hiking will double your distance, and if so, we walked nearly 14 miles that day! We had a bite to eat on Mt. Craig, the second highest peak in the east, and then cruised over Big Tom and Balsam Cone to Cattail Peak. The views along this stretch of trail are numerous and spectacular. You can even see Charlotte on a very clear day, not to mention most of the mountain ranges in the state except those to the southwest, beyond the Balsams in Haywood County. Potato Hill is the last high knob before the steep descent to Deep Gap and a good turnaround point at around 3.5 miles. Our continuous conversation was interrupted only by the breathtaking views we encountered as we backtracked and the scenery was even better in the late afternoon light. The ravens were still practicing their aerial pirouettes and a bit of fall color was showing on the flanks of the mountain. After seven miles of trail, we were pleasantly tired. As we drove down through the park and back home, we knew that this was another day to commit to memory for a future time when we are no longer able to climb the mountains and get their glad tidings.