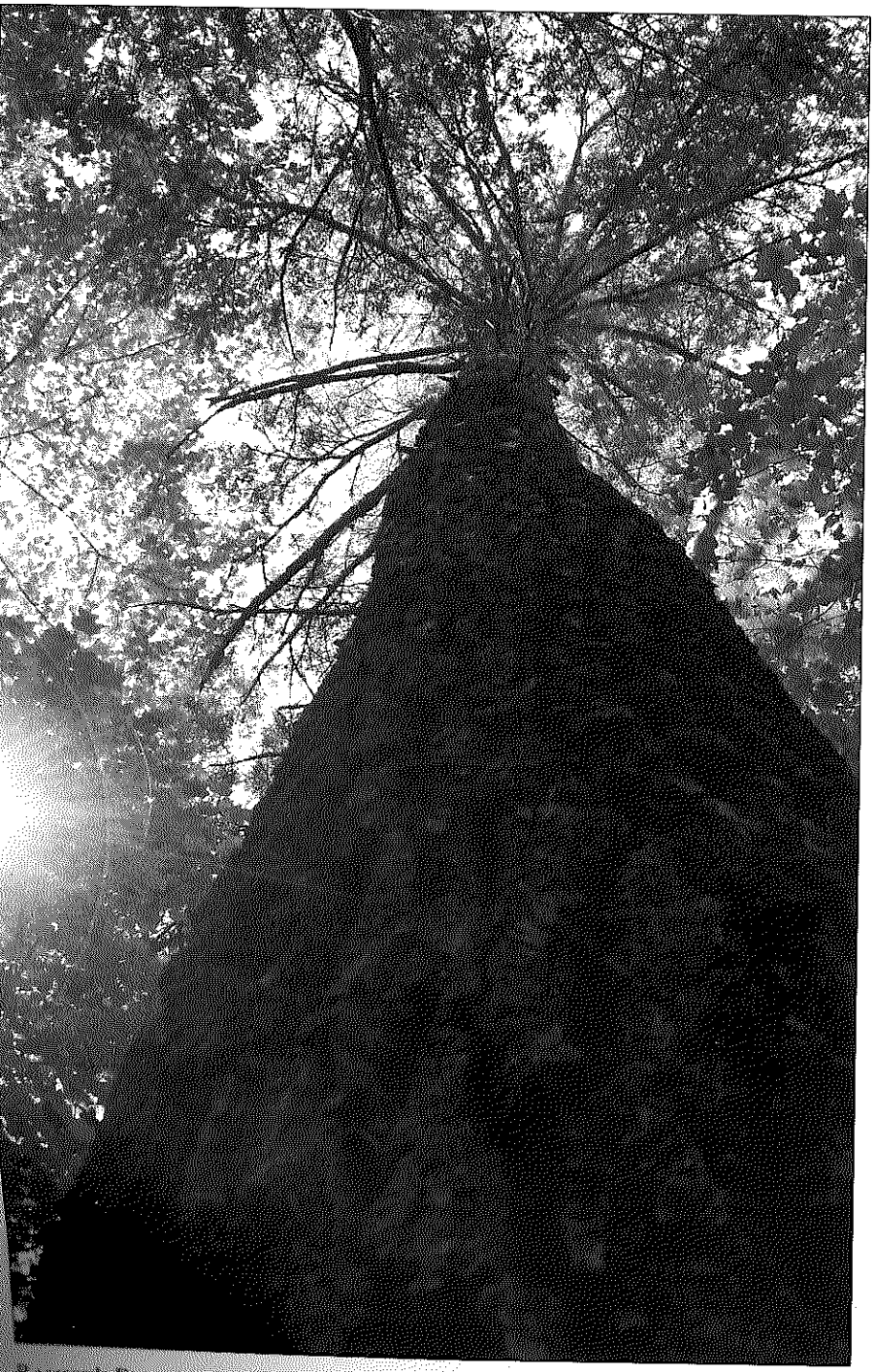


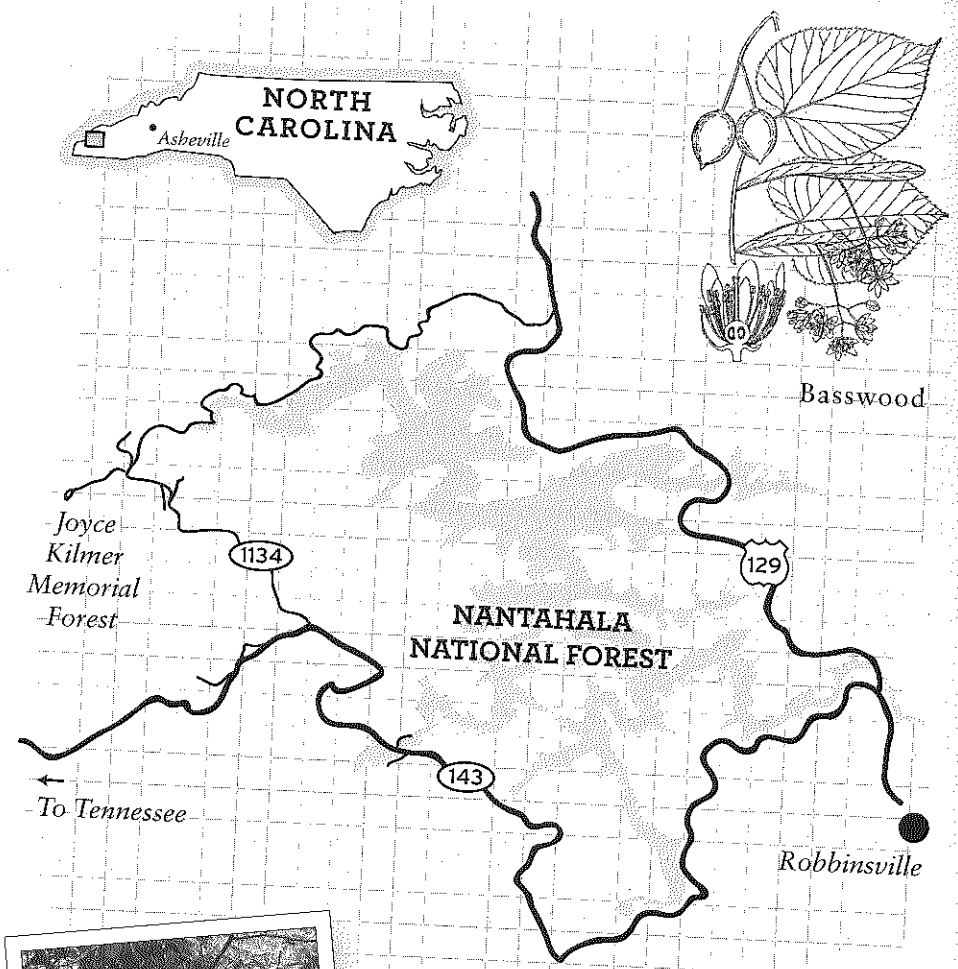
Ramsey's Draft, Virginia

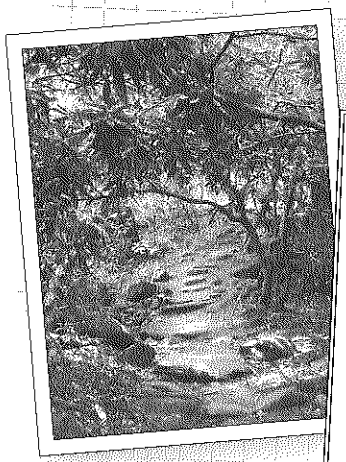
Among the Ancients

Adventures in the Eastern Old-Growth Forests

Joan Maloof

Ruka Press
Washington, DC





TRAVEL DIRECTIONS

Western part of state, Graham County. Closest town: Robbinsville. From Robbinsville, take Route 143 west. In about twelve miles, turn right onto SR 1134 (Joyce Kilmer Road). Go two miles and turn left into the forest. It is well marked.

If coming from Tellico Plains, Tennessee, take Route 165, which becomes Route 143 after you cross the North Carolina border. In a few more miles, you will see signs directing you to the forest. There is a forest service campground very close to the forest.

North Carolina

Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest

Burials...Children...Tulip poplar trees...Ravenel's Woods

My approach to the trailhead at Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest felt like the final steps of a long pilgrimage. This was the first eastern old-growth forest I planned a special trip to visit. The idea for this book had not even been born yet, but it was spring and I was being drawn toward the forest. I had had enough of the academic life, with its computers, books, and grading; I wanted towering trees and clear streams tumbling over cracked rocks. I wanted ferns and moss and trillium—and maybe even bears. I longed to wander through the forest breathing, touching, listening. I wanted to sit, perhaps sleep, under the rare towering giants.

I loaded all my supplies into my little pickup truck. The forest, although a twelve-hour drive from my house, was less than two hours from my father's house. I planned to visit with him for a few days before I spent time with the trees.

But my father was not well and my two-day visit with him turned into a week. My hiking boots went unworn, the mattress in my truck unused. The time scale of an old-growth forest is nothing like our own, I told myself. The Joyce Kilmer forest would have to wait.

* * *

I DIDN'T GET to the Joyce Kilmer forest that year, or the next year when I tried again. On my third visit to Dad's, I didn't even bother bringing my boots. I flew down and rented a car. Dad was in a hospital bed in his living room. He knew who I was, but I wasn't sure he remembered my name and I didn't want to ask him. I no longer had to worry about him forgetting his medications or burning down the house; he couldn't get out of bed.

AT DAD'S FUNERAL, my daughter took the opportunity to ask about *my* arrangements. I didn't have a good answer for her. It's not that I am trying to avoid the issue; it's just that what I prefer used to be the easiest, oldest way of dealing with a body, but in this era, in this place, it has become the most difficult. I want to be buried in the ground, preferably healthy ground full of microorganisms. No embalming of the body, no vault, and, if possible, not even a casket. (How many trees are cut for those anyway?) Just wrap me in linen, or burlap, and put me in a hole in the ground where I will feed the soil organisms, and in time the trees, and eventually the birds (with nuts and berries from the trees). Perhaps a natural stone for a marker, no inscription necessary.

As William Faulkner describes a woodland grave in his novel *The Bear:*

> ...not held fast in earth but free in earth and not in earth but of earth, myriad yet undiffused of every myriad part, leaf and twig and particle, air and sun and rain and dew and night, acorn oak and leaf and acorn again, dark and dawn and dark and dawn again in their immutable progression and, being myriad, one.

But what a burden I would put on my daughter if I told her that.

"Just do what's easiest honey," I answered.

THESE DAYS, EASIEST is to send the nutrients into the sky with flames. But some people are using death to save forests. The current natural-burial movement was started in England. There they have an Association of Natural Burial Grounds, which has developed approved procedures and standards. Members of the association even lobby government agencies to change existing regulations so natural burial will be easier. The first natural-burial site in the United Kingdom was opened in 1993, and just thirteen years later there were 215 natural-burial grounds there. Some of them are operated for profit, but many of them are nonprofit organizations. Around the world people are trying to protect forests, and making them burial sites is one way to do so. In an effort to let one forest return to old growth, a group of friends in Wales joined together to buy eight acres of formerly logged forest. This is their vision:

> As time passes, the burial ground will become a more diverse nature reserve, where the bereaved experience the peace of the trees as they remember those they have lost. The unobtrusive graves, marked by natural stone, wooden memorials and specifically planted trees, will, over decades, fade into the forest background without becoming lost. By being buried in this way, we can continue even after death to help preserve the wonder of life in all its diversity. It is never too late to contribute to the environment.

It is the intention of the original investors that the land never be sold, the bodies never be moved, and the trees never again be cut. This small forest is not only for burials; besides being a haven for wildlife, it is also open to anyone who would just like to take a walk in the woods.

In the United States, the natural-burial movement is much younger and much smaller. Here it is usually called "green burial." The first green-burial cemetery site in the United States opened in 1998. By 2006 six states had them, and by 2009 a dozen states had green-burial sites. Land trusts and other conservation organizations are beginning to pay attention and to consider offering green burials as a way to both preserve natural land and to provide a service for their members.

DAD REQUESTED CREMATION. He wasn't a very green guy anyway. He was one of those who thought that Rachel Carson, responsible for the banning of DDT, should have minded her own business. You can imagine that he was somewhat conflicted about my view of the world. I accepted his

choice. We should all have choices. I prefer an end for my body that will be part of the Earth's recovery process. I dedicate this flesh to beauty and diversity. But make it as easy for yourself as possible. Life is for the living.

AND HERE I was living it. I was finally, finally here! And there really were towering trees and clear streams tumbling over cracked rocks, and ferns and moss and trillium and rhododendron. Perhaps if my trip hadn't been delayed for years, this writing project would not have had the time to germinate and take root in me as it did.

The moist grove was absolutely lovely, but I was not the only one here. The parking lot was humming with motorcycles, cars, and people. Just as I started up the trail, a group of fifteen children of assorted ages, accompanied by chaperones, started up the trail, too. Some visitors might have been disappointed by all the people, but after visiting many empty old-growth forests I was pleased to see this one being appreciated. As we entered the forest, a girl at the end of the string of children, who appeared to be about eleven years old, said to the adult accompanying her: "This is just like I remembered it in my dreams."

I was looking at every little thing, as usual, and the children got ahead of me on the trail. Later I passed them when they stopped for a water break.

"This is *fun*," I heard one little girl say.

"Look, we're halfway up the side of a mountain already!" said another child.

One of the chaperones addressed me as I walked by: "Excuse me, ma'am, we're almost to the forest, right?"

What do you think you're standing in? I wanted to say, but I held my tongue and reassured him that he was almost there.

Ahead there was a plaque dedicating the forest to the poet Joyce Kilmer, "until time shall be no more." Kilmer is famous for his *Tree* poem, which many school children, including me, were required to memorize: "I think that I shall never see/A poem lovely as a tree..." Unfortunately, Kilmer never got to see his forest. He was killed in World War I. I assume it was this plaque the chaperone was heading for.

The loop trail was not long, but it contained the most remarkable collection of giant tulip poplar trees I had ever seen. Although the trees were

easy to see from the trail, everyone seemed drawn to walk right up to touch them. The result was that each massive tree had a small path to its base. I worried that these trees were being loved to death—many feet compacting the soil and damaging the roots. Even though I know better, I, too, was drawn to the base of more than one. There is an inexplicable energy shared between humans and trees when physical contact is made. It is possible to feel it with small trees, too, but in my experience, the older the tree, the stronger the feeling.

I am using words like "gigantic" and "massive," but when scientists compare forests they use the measure of "basal area," the area covered by the trees' trunks. The same researchers who measured and documented the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest also measured another forest, Ravenel's Woods, described as "a virgin hemlock forest near Highlands, North

Carolina." The local people called it the Primeval Forest. Bob Zahner, a friend and forester who visited the forest as a young boy, tells its story in his book, *The Mountain at the End of the Trail.*

The Primeval Forest originally "belonged" to the Cherokee Indians, but in 1819 a treaty took a vast area of land away from the Cherokee and gave title to the state of North Carolina. From the 1840s to the 1860s, the state awarded land grants to various white settlers. In the 1880s, the Ravenel family began to buy up land all around Highlands, including the Primeval Forest. Their son, Prioleau, continued to buy land when he came of age, and eventually he owned more than fifteen hundred acres. By 1913, most of the other private forest lands in North Carolina were a chopped-down mess, but the Primeval Forest remained intact.

Around this time, the federal government began buying forest land to create the national forests. The Primeval Forest was considered for purchase, but Prioleau Ravenel did not want to sell. Perhaps he had an emotional attachment to his forest. He generously let others use it and study it. In 1939, researchers from Duke University and the University of Nevada documented the impressive old-growth forest, but there were no land trusts or Nature Conservancies then, and Ravenel did nothing to protect the forest beyond his lifetime.

He remarried late in life, and when he died, in 1940 at the age of seventy-two, the land became the property of his second wife, Beatrice. They lived in Charleston then, and she was not interested in spending time in the forest at Highlands. After Prioleau Ravenel's death, she moved to Florida. In 1942, just after the U.S. became involved in World War II, the Powell Lumber Company approached Beatrice Ravenel and urged her to sell her timber for the sake of the war effort. (There were soon to be many military contracts for pulp and timber products.) Beatrice was never going back to Highlands, and she never really cared about that forest anyway. She sold it.

Citizens and scientists alike were outraged by the deal that had been made hundreds of miles away, but all energy and resources were going toward the war effort. Fathers and sons of Highlands' citizens were headed off to war. No federal money was being spent on forests now. The loss of the precious forest seemed a *fait accompli.*

Ironically, the wood was never used for military contracts. Logging began in 1946, after the war was over. Zahner visited the site with the chief

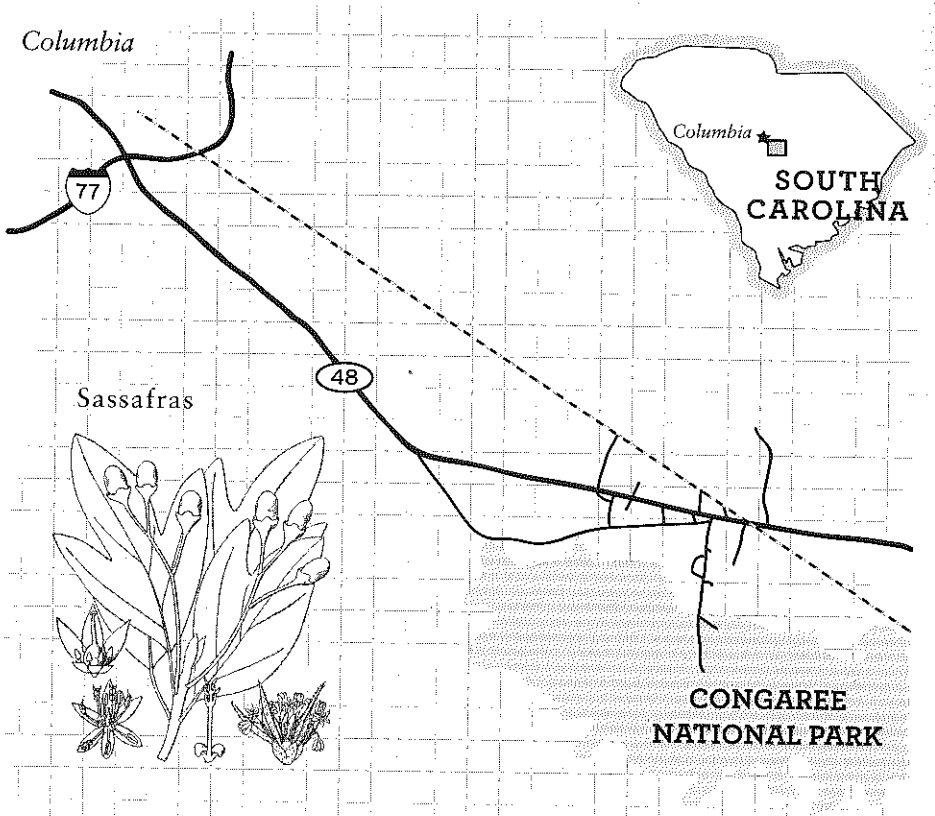
forester for the mill just before logging operations started. I will let Zahner tell it:

> He told me that although he recognized the intrinsic value of preserving such an ancient forest, his company could not cancel the logging contract....Their chief forester explained to me, a naive young man about to embark on a career in forestry myself, that Champion had preserved enough forest in other locations, and that the Primeval Forest here "will grow back" in time. I believe it was on that day that I understood the difference between a conservation ethic and a business ethic.
>
> I have since learned much from that statement, "the forest will grow back," a golden rule of forestry still used today to cover the many ills of clearcutting....Certainly, trees grow back, and in a few hundred years we may have the outward appearance of a forest. However, we now know that a thousand years or more is required for the biota of such an ancient forest community to be restored in all of its diversity, integrity, and beauty.

When I compared the data for the Joyce Kilmer forest and Ravenel's Woods, I was shocked to see that the average basal area of the trees in Ravenel's Woods was greater than the average for those in the Joyce Kilmer forest. It was difficult for me to imagine a collection of trees in the East with girths larger than those I had witnessed in the Joyce Kilmer forest.

Zahner eventually left his tenured professorship in forestry at the University of Michigan to have more time to live close to the land, to spend time with his family, and to battle clear-cutting and advocate for old growth. He worked tirelessly to protect forests and to educate others. Perhaps he was always trying to make up for missing the opportunity to save the Primeval Forest.

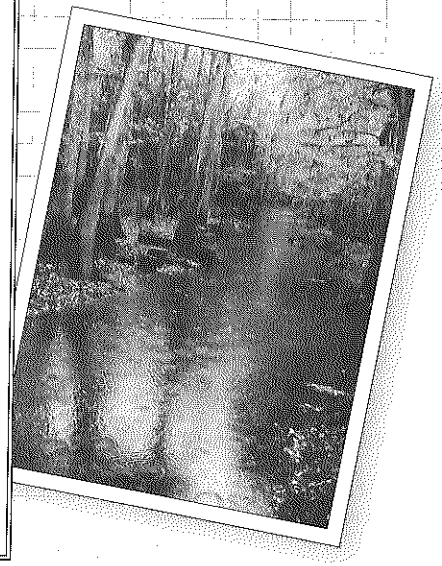
I SAT AMONG the massive trees to write, and the echo of children's laughter could be heard throughout the forest. I was thinking about my father: *Dad, your generation is leaving us; my generation is next; but today this wonderful forest is filled with the cheerful noise of the next generation. And that is as it should be.*



TRAVEL DIRECTIONS

Central part of state, Richland County. Closest town: Columbia. From the city of Columbia, or Interstate 77 just south of town, take Route 48 (Bluff Road) south. You will see signs on Route 48 directing you to the park, which is nineteen miles from Columbia and about fifteen miles from I-77 (exit 5).

There are two primitive camping areas in the park and many nice hotels in Columbia. The visitor center is open every day from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. The first section of the trail is a wheelchair-accessible boardwalk. If the weather has been very rainy for very long, call ahead to check on conditions: (803) 776-4396.



South Carolina

Congaree National Park

Rain...A floodplain forest...Woodpeckers

Chance of rain: 100 percent. It had been the driest summer on record in the eastern United States. In forest after forest, I had been greeted by cheerful blue skies, and I felt lucky. But as the months went by with no soaking rains, even the trees seemed a bit tired of perfect weather. Some leaves couldn't hold on—they turned brown and fell before they had a chance to feel autumn's cool air. By the end of October, I was no longer hoping for clear skies. I was hoping for rain. On the day I visited Congaree I was not disappointed.

I pulled into the parking area very early in the morning as a gentle, pittering rain was starting. I was prepared with head-to-toe rain gear: jacket, pants, and waterproof boots. I pulled it all on in the drizzle and headed for the trail. But after only a few steps I turned and went back to the car—not to avoid the rain, but because I wanted to *hear* the rain. I wanted to experience the forest with all my senses, and my hood was interfering. I grabbed an old umbrella out of the trunk.

Setting out again with my umbrella overhead, I started down the sturdy boardwalk that began just steps from the parking lot at the visitor center. Being first on the trail, the early morning drizzle, and the tall, tall trees all put a happy spring in my step. Wet leaves of all kinds were flattened on

the boardwalk, and as I walked I recognized old friends. If I had dropped through a wormhole to this spot, I would have known I was in the South. Here were my friends the sweet gum and sassafras, and oaks of all kinds: the sharp narrow leaves of the southern red oaks contrasted with the wide scalloped edges of the swamp chestnut oaks. Of course, there were beech and black gum, too. My list could go on and on and on—there were more than seventy different species here—and what I loved was how they shared the space with each other. The bald cypress were up to seven hundred years old. The only evergreens were the giant, widely spaced southern pines, the loblolly pines. These few loblollies came from very lucky seeds that happened to land on a small piece of sunny forest floor and then held their ground—for centuries. Some of the loblollies are more than two hundred years old, and they are proudly holding their own among the oaks, maples, and hickories.

In a work plan for the large publicly owned forest near my Maryland home, there was a section describing the forest and noting that it is "rare

to find a loblolly pine older than eighty years." Well, yes, it is rare to find one older than that, not because they all succumb to a natural death before then, but because we cut them before they reach old age. The Congaree pines show us what can be—pines two to three hundred years old and still the tallest trees in the forest. Congaree has a pine 15 feet in circumference and 167 feet tall, the largest loblolly pine in the United States (today at least). Some of Congaree's trees are as tall as a seventeen-story building.

When I tilted my umbrella back and looked up toward the top of the giant trees, I saw drops falling, as if in slow motion, toward my face. One very large drop landed directly in my eye, but even that brought me pleasure and a laugh. I felt like the whole forest was celebrating with me. Rain at last!

This is a floodplain forest, a place shaped by water, a place that welcomes water. The boardwalk trail was designed to raise visitors above the mud, but, despite the day's droplets, the ground was dry. The "buttressed" (wide-based) bald cypress trunks and the strange aerial roots called "knees," which evolved to rise above the water and the muck, were rising instead from solid ground. Yes indeed, it had been a long, dry summer.

Surrounded by the beauty, the rain, and the shared strength of so many outstanding specimens, I practically bounced down the trail. Although it was the last weekend in October, the only fall colors were the few crimson leaves sprinkled through the black gum canopy, and the small pawpaw trees in which about a third of the leaves had turned a pure yellow. As I walked through the grove-like patches of pawpaw, the light got brighter—the result of the yellow all around, even under my feet. The sunshine captured in the leaves seemed to be liberated again on this dark, gray day.

A few miles down the trail, the rain fell harder. The drops hitting millions of leaves created the sound of polite applause, and I walked along under the lofty canopy to the sound of the forest appreciating the rain and, in my imagination, perhaps even my presence. Mile after mile the applause did not die down; in fact it built to a standing ovation, the drops were hitting so hard and so fast.

It was so wet now that my fingertips began to wrinkle. The moss and lichens were fresh and plump, and after a few hours I began to feel as if I could grow some moss myself. But I was still warm under my protective clothing, and still warm and happy deep in my heart. I walked through the

thunderous applause with a big smile on my face. No human audience could show such enthusiasm for so long.

SIGNS OF WOODPECKERS were everywhere—there are seven species of woodpecker here—but because of the rain I never saw a single one. When there was a report of ivory-billed woodpeckers being rediscovered in Arkansas in 2005, a team was formed to search for them in Congaree as well. So far they haven't found any, but if they were anywhere in South Carolina they would be here. Passenger pigeons and Carolina parakeets used to be here, too. No doubt the species of woodpeckers that have survived were keeping dry on a bed of wood chips in a space they had hollowed inside the giant, old trunks. Perhaps they saw me, crazy human, grinning wildly in the pouring rain. This forest is said to be taller than any other deciduous forest on Earth, and the lofty canopy had brightened my day despite the dark clouds.

I HAD BEEN hiking for four hours, but I had seen only a small portion of the eleven thousand acres of old growth in the park. Although that seems large, this forest is only a small remnant of the bottomland ecosystem that used to cover fifty-two *million* acres. When I crossed Cedar Creek, which was lined by elegant, old cypress trees with buttressed bases, I noted how similar it looked to the creek in Delaware where I searched for the largest bald cypress in that state. Indeed, that forest and this one are of the same type and serve the same ecological function. In a way, they were once connected, part of the same web of water that flows from the land toward the Atlantic Ocean, part of the same ecological cloth. Here in the Congaree, I understood what Delaware used to be, but I was in the Deep South now and a few of the species here, like Spanish moss, dwarf palmettos, and, reportedly, alligators, I would never see in Delaware.

SOMETHING THE FORESTS do have in common are the plans loggers made for them. The cutters and carvers had their eyes on this South Carolina bottomland. In fact, the cutting had already begun; the first wave of logging

lasted from 1895 until 1915. In those days, the huge, old bald cypress were first girdled by cutting a strip all the way around the base, and they weren't cut down until after they died and dried out. After being dried and cut, the logs were pushed into the creeks and rivers and floated downstream. But in the Congaree, more of the cypress sank than floated—perhaps they had not dried out enough—and the unprofitable logging operation was halted.

The owners then leased the forest out to sportsmen. One of those men, Harry Hampton, wrote an outdoor column in the local paper. "The reason I ceased letting well enough alone," wrote Hampton, "was that people after people kept saying 'This place ought to be preserved.'" His idea was to hold a central five thousand acres as a sanctuary. He invited a group of influential men to tour the property, "feeling a little like Judas Iscariot, for my fellow hunters lacked all hell of wanting to give up the place."

In the 1950s, hundreds of locals were in support of protecting the forest, as were the Nature Conservancy and the National Park Service, but there was confusion about deciding who should make the offer to the owners, and at what price. So the forest stayed in private hands, unprotected, and in the 1970s logging began again. Finally, in 1976, Congress established the Congaree Swamp National Monument, and in 2003 it became one of our newest National Parks.

After hours of thunderous rain, I witnessed the depressions and seeps, which were dry that morning, filling up with water. This floodplain was doing its job.

I hope to return to Congaree someday when the sky is a clear blue, but I would not trade that rainy day for any other.

(Washington, DC: Island Press, 1996), 31.

For a western forest viewpoint on our inability to agree on what old growth is, how much exists, or how much existed in the past, see: Mickey Ross, "Old Growth: Failures of the Past and Hope for the Future," *Old Growth in a New World* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2009), 158-167.

ALABAMA

Date of visit: October 12-13, 2007

For Gosse quote, see: Philip Henry Gosse, *Letters from Alabama: Chiefly Relating to Natural History* (1859; repr. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 117-118.

For Rumi quote, see: Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi* (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1997), 36.

TENNESSEE

Date of visit: August 16, 2007

For information on the heat wave, see: B. Rucker, "Scorching Temps in South, Midwest Kill 37," *The Daily Times* (Salisbury, MD), August 18, 2007.

For Muir quote, see: John Muir, *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 38.

For information on yellow buckeye trees, see: Edward Clebsch and Richard T. Busing, "Secondary Succession, Gap Dynamics, and Community Structure in a Southern Appalachian Cove Forest," *Ecology* 70 (1989): 728-735; and the *Silvics Manual* available online at http://na.fs.fed.us/spfo/silvics_manual/volume_2/aesculus/octandra.htm. Age estimates courtesy of Neil Pederson, Eastern Kentucky University, pers. comm. with author, August, 21, 2007.

For Douglas quote, see: William O. Douglas, *My Wilderness: East to Katahdin* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 161.

Natural History Notes

The white snakeroot flowers are *Eupatorium rugosum*.

The buckeyes are *Aeseulus octandra*.

NORTH CAROLINA

Date of visit: August 16, 2007

For Faulkner quote, see: William Faulkner, "The Bear," in *Go Down, Moses* (New York: Random House, 1942; New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

For green burial quote, see: Woodland Services website, site updated August 7, 2007, accessed August 23, 2007, http://www.eternalforest.org.

For information on basal area in the forest, see: Henry Oosting and P. Bordeau, "Virgin Hemlock Forest Segregates in the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest of Western North Carolina," *Botanical Gazette* 116 (1955): 340-359.

For information about Ravenel's Woods, see: Robert Zahner, *The Mountain at the End of the Trail* (Highlands, NC: privately printed, 1994) 72-73; and Henry Oosting and W. D. Billings, "Edapho-Vegetational Relation's in Ravenel's Woods, A Virgin Hemlock Forest near Highlands, North Carolina," *American Midland Naturalist* 22 (1939): 333-350.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Date of visit: October 26, 2007

For Hampton quotes, see: Harry Hampton, *Woods and Waters and Some Asides* (Columbia: State Printing, 1979), 294.

FLORIDA

Date of visit: December 3, 2007

For Wilson quotes, see: Edward O. Wilson, *Naturalist* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994), 268-281.

For Cushing quote, see: Frank Cushing, "Exploration of Ancient Key Dwellers' Remains on the Gulf Coast of Florida," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 35 (1896): 329-448.

Natural History Notes

The lignumvitae tree is *Guaiacum sanctum*.

The Florida purple wing butterfly is *Eunica tatila*.

The poisonwood tree is *Metopium toxiferum*.

The family of the poisonwood and poison ivy is Anacardiaceae.

The gumbo limbo is *Bursea simaruba*.