

A Writer on the Mountain

Meet Deirdre Conroy, winner of the Virginia Outdoor Writers Association/Cooperative Living Collegiate Writing Award.

It's not easy to describe the wonder of standing at the summit of a mountain, gazing out into the clouds that wreath its peak. The view is majestic, a sea of rippled peaks unfurled in waves across the horizon.

Northern Virginia's Deirdre Conroy has experienced this feeling many times, on multiple mountains. But it was her experience on Old Rag Mountain, a great mass of exposed granite east of the Blue Ridge crest in Virginia's Shenandoah National Park, that inspired her to transform her wonder into words.

Conroy, 19, is the winner of this year's Cooperative Living Collegiate Undergraduate Writing Award (for best Virginia-specific essay), part of the Virginia Outdoor Writers Association's (VOWA) annual writing contest. Conroy vividly describes her arduous 13-mile hike up Old Rag Mountain in her winning essay, "That Old Mountain." Judges selected her essay from among dozens of entries written by students at Virginia colleges and universities.

The Old Rag Mountain hike is one of the most popular hikes in the mid-Atlantic region, with many breathtaking panoramic views and one of the most challenging rock scrambles in the Shenandoah National Park. Old Rag Mountain soars 3,284 feet above sea level, and over 100,000 people visit the park's most popular peak each year.

"We're pleased that Deirdre Conroy enjoyed her hiking experience on Old Rag Mountain, and we encourage other outdoor enthusiasts to explore all that our park has to offer," says Claire Comer with the U.S. National Park Service.



LAURA EMERY PHOTO

Deirdre Conroy

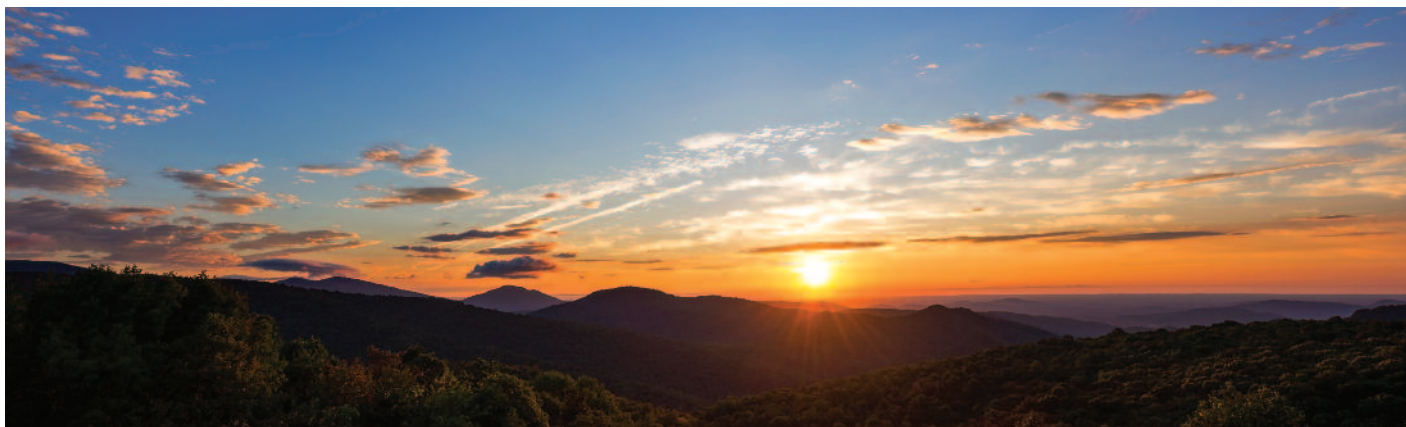
'In becoming a caver, I have gained new knowledge about myself and my limits, and have acquired a new appreciation for Virginia,' she says.

A sophomore at Virginia Tech, Conroy is pursuing a double major in Wildlife Conservation and Literature. With career aspirations of becoming a field scientist, Conroy hopes to combine her love of writing and outdoor recreation through wildlife conservation research and writing of grants and research proposals.

Conroy is vivacious and full of passion for the outdoors. She works part-time for Venture Out, a resource center for outdoor excursions at Virginia Tech. Her outdoor recreational interests include horseback riding, kayaking, rock climbing, trail running, caving and backpacking. "In becoming a caver, I have gained new knowledge about myself and my limits, and have acquired a new appreciation for Virginia," she says.

The Virginia Outdoor Writers Association is a coalition of writers, photographers and video/film producers who strive to increase knowledge and understanding of the outdoors through their craft. "The writing was very enjoyable. It came pretty naturally because I was just writing about why I enjoy outdoor recreation so much," Conroy explains. She expresses appreciation to Cooperative Living magazine and VOWA for the opportunity to share her passion with others through her writing.

If you're a high school or college student and would like to enter the 2016-2017 VOWA writing contest, visit the website at www.vowa.org and click on contests.



That Old Mountain

by Deirdre Conroy

There is a melancholy in the fields of the Virginia countryside in the morning, a feeling almost bittersweet in its familiar ache.

As the cover of night inches away, the grass changes from an aqua back into deep green as the sun burns off the morning fog.

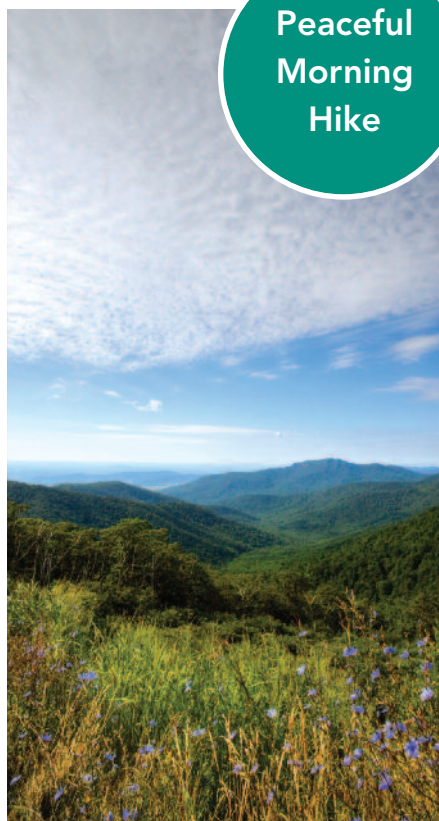
It must have been around 4 a.m. when we set off, coffee mugs clutched in our palms, trying to slow the early October chill from sucking all of the feeling out of our fingers. The car ride began sleepily, heads supported by spaghetti-weak forearms, but gradually we grew more buoyant and excited as we flew down empty stretches of highway. We howled into the milky morning sky.

Part of me always longs for the beauty of twilight to stay, although my love for the richness of the morning coloring in autumn battles that longing. The contrast between the spiraling reds off the trees against the stark, dewy green of the grass is enough to make one blink to steady the focus, and swoon in the vibrancy of the late-year shades.

We set off into the dark. I imagined how we looked from a distance — the little orbs of light from our headlamps bobbing away into the trees. As it was my first time up this particular trail, we were careful as we picked our way

among the boulders. There was a quiet in the woods, a feeling that we were up even before the birds. I struggled between staring up to the glowing pinpoints of stars in the sky, seeing them as a map of sorts through the darkened woods, and watching my footing along the technical single-track path.

Peaceful Morning Hike



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHENANDOAH NATIONAL PARK

There is a unique peace and stillness earned by an early morning hike, different from the regular hustle and bustle of the forest by daylight. In the rosy dim, we reverted into a primitive, natural state of movement. Instead of words, we used body language to communicate twists in the trail. The only thing to break our focus was the steady crunch of leather boots on the gravel underfoot.

I had thought getting up quite that early would be a rough start, but the movement in the crisp air had a feeling of rightness to it. My mind felt sharp, my legs strong, the weight of my pack nonexistent. We followed one switchback after another, until my heart rapped against my ribcage.

We stopped to catch our breath at a small, unassuming break in the trees, only to be astounded by the view in front of us. It was a ruddy, gorgeous impressionist painting smeared across the backdrop of the Blue Ridge Mountains. In that moment, I could truly imagine their magnitude in the years when they gave the Himalayas a run for their money. I could sense the amazement of the first Anglo settlers setting eyes on these mountains for the first time. I could see the history of Appalachia steeped in the folds of their ridgelines.

The awe ripped goosebumps across my skin. My friend sensed my amazement, having felt it herself on her first trip up the mountain. Hiking up the trail in the dark was enjoyable and challenging enough, but following the top of that ridge, climbing across the boulders and canyoning between them was another experience entirely. Boulders the size of Mack trucks and crevasses as wide as football fields have a way of making a person feel insignificant.

Counteracting that was the glory of the breathtaking views earned after scaling rock faces and traversing canyons. By the time we scrambled to the summit, my hands were chalky and scratched, my knees were tired from the extensive uphill, and I was hungry, but I felt the deep and grounding satisfaction that only challenging and extremely rewarding outdoor ventures can render.

As I gazed over the valleys of Shenandoah, I was struck with the realization that hundreds had stood in the same place before me, and many would follow. The magnitude of the environment, as well as the humbling nature of the experience was enough to inspire me to seek out others that would challenge and impress me in the same way. That morning evoked in me enough passion to last a lifetime of adventure.

The mountains have that effect on a person. They will tear you up, riddle you with countless numbers of switchbacks and steep climbs until you are about ready to quit, and then quietly reward you with epic

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panoramas of the timeless valleys of Appalachia. Old Rag is not unique in this effect. White Oak Canyon is relentless in elevation gain, but stunning with its waterfall-carved canyons paralleling the trail. Angels Rest is not a casual climb, but the overlook at the summit lives up to its impressive title. Dragon's Tooth truly exemplifies the dignified ferocity of some saber-toothed beast.

The memories built on these trails are the ones that the little nagging voice in the back of the brain wakes up for, urging consciousness into awareness. They are the ones that build personal assuredness and a comfort in the land. They work their way into your

heart and psyche, inspiring a passion for the wise, wild places out there.

I hold in myself the tribulations and successes of hikes, rafting trips, and campouts in the comforting groves and secret hideaways of one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world. At the end of my days, it will not be financial triumphs or business awards that I will remember as the important moments, but I will recall standing at the summit of Old Rag, or whooping off cliffs into the deep waters of Cedar Creek, of laughing alongside the campfire with friends in the heart of Hazel country.

In the same way that those old rugged mountains hold the stories of my coming of age, I am now equally connected and present in the book of stories contained in the Shenandoah's age-old landscape. ■

Shenandoah National Park

With over 200,000 acres of stunning wilderness, rolling mountains, cascading waterfalls, shady forests and quiet hollows, Shenandoah National Park is a haven for hikers and outdoor enthusiasts. The park features more than 500 miles of trails, including 100 miles of the Appalachian Trail. Take a hike, meander along Skyline Drive, or picnic with the family.

In August, the National Park Service celebrated its 100th birthday. The centennial celebration helped kick off a second century of stewardship of America's national parks and engaging communities through recreation, conservation and historic-preservation programs.

www.nps.gov/shen/index.htm

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