



Aerial photo of Gregory Bald. Photo by Aerial Surveys. ARS Middle Atlantic Chapter copyright©.

Gregory Bald:

From Species Study Group to Annual Treks, Azalea Photos, Aerial Photo, and a Mower

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Aerial photo of Gregory Bald, close-up of above photo. ARS Middle Atlantic Chapter copyright©.

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and photograph local native azaleas before starting our longer annual treks to the mountains.

Some of the mountains and scenic places we visited during our many annual treks include Mount Mitchell, Andrews Bald, Yellow Mountain, Pilot Mountain, Hooper Bald, Wayah Bald, Wine Springs Bald and Copper Bald in North Carolina; Black Mountain on the Virginia/Kentucky line; Brasstown Bald, Slaughter Mountain, Tray Mountain, Providence Canyon, and Blood Mountain in Georgia; the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia and North Carolina; the Mountain to Sea Trail in North Carolina; Cherohala Parkway in North Carolina and Tennessee; part of Mount LeConte in Tennessee; Gregory Bald, Parson's Bald, and the Highlands of Roan (Roan Mountain, Jane Bald, Round Bald and Grassy Ridge) on the Tennessee/North Carolina border; Dolly Sods in West Virginia; and Mount Rogers and Grayson Highlands in Virginia.

Sandra and Ken McDonald had first taken a trip to Gregory Bald on June 23, 1979, with Joan Winter, a member of the now disbanded Tidewater Chapter ARS and after that the Middle Atlantic Chapter. In talking to our Species Study Group, Sandra mentioned that she would like to visit Gregory Bald again before she died since it was such a beautiful place. Our group then planned to make a trip to Townsend, Tennessee, and the Great Smoky Mountain National Park and to hike up to Gregory Bald. Townsend is the usual base camp for non-locals when making this long hike. After spending the night in Townsend, it doesn't take long to drive to Cades Cove in the park which is the starting point. Cades Cove, an 11-mile one-way loop road in the park is closed to motor traffic until 10:00 a.m. two mornings per week, Wednesday and Saturday mornings, to allow bicyclists and hikers to enjoy the road from May to September. It opens for motor vehicles at 10 a.m. on those days and at sunup on other mornings.

We made our first Species Study Group trip to the mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee the week of June

17th, 1995, and hiked Gregory Bald on June 21, 1995. Present on this first trip were David and Debby Sauer, Bill Bedwell, George McLellan, Don Hyatt and Ken and Sandra McDonald. We made the mistake of not learning about bicycle access only and arrived early on a Wednesday morning and had to start our hike late.

Gregory Bald is a 4,949-foot bald mountain with a wonderful natural stand or swarm of native azaleas hybrids on it. The hike is 5.5 miles to the top on the trail most in use now for a round-trip total of 11 miles. Our first trip was even longer because we had to walk a couple miles on the road instead of driving because of problems with the bridge.

Our group changed over the years with various members and visitors joining us in some years and dropping out in others. Some of the participants over the years include a German film crew headed by Dr. Hartwig Schepker of "Botanika," a biodiversity project in the Botanic Garden and Rhododendron Park Bremen, Germany, along with a couple of porters to carry the heavy camera equipment (June 20, 2002); Anita and Doug Burke of Canada who are associate members of MAC (several trips); Tijs Huisman from the Netherlands (June 2006); Buddy Lee from Louisiana, Karel Bernady from Pennsylvania, Tom Nuccio from California, Brent Heath and Mike Andruczyk from Virginia, and Neil Jorgensen from Maine.

On one of our trips one of the group climbed a tree to get a better view of Gregory Bald and when Jim Brant saw him up there he said we needed to get an aerial photo of the bald. We searched to see if there was an existing aerial photograph of the bald. Don Hyatt located on Microsoft's Terra Server a black and white image from USGS taken in March of 1992, and it was the only aerial photograph the Park Service had to do maintenance work up on the bald.

Our study group started putting together a possible project with the goal of studying the azaleas on the mountain, preserving them on film, and eventually describing what we could. The information

At one of our Middle Atlantic Chapter (MAC) meetings in 1989 the late Terry Sheuchenko mentioned she and several others of us were interested in studying the species of rhododendrons, and that we should form a MAC species study group. Our chapter liked the idea, and we had the first meeting of our MAC Species Study Group on January 20, 1990, after a MAC board meeting in Charlottesville, Virginia.

George McLellan became chairman of the MAC Species Study Group. He obtained some material for botanical study of rhododendrons that also included 8 units of slides (600 slides) from the Rhododendron Species Foundation for study over an approximately two-year period. We also put together material of our own for the study of plant taxonomy, biosystematics, distributional history, propagation, and other topics related to the botany of rhododendrons. We usually had eight to twelve people attending our meetings which also included luncheons. At the first meetings we went through the classroom material, and then at later meetings we went through the batches of slide trays and found that the trays did not contain much on East Coast native azaleas, and those particular slides were not up to our expectations. We decided to explore for ourselves the species throughout the East Coast and photograph and make slides of the natives for a slide presentation that could be given to our chapter and other ARS meetings.

One of our early study group meetings was at David and Debby Sauer's home in Chester, Virginia, and afterwards George McLellan and Ken and Sandra McDonald visited stands of *Rhododendron atlanticum* in southeastern Virginia on the way home. We visited a few other local sites to see

was to be used for educational purposes, presentations to ARS chapters and other groups, using the Special Collections of ARS archives at the University of Virginia Library as a repository for information obtained, studying some selected azaleas, getting GPS descriptions and descriptive data, naming and registering some plants, perhaps creating a web site, getting an aerial photo (possibly several over a period of years), and making a video to show individuals who could not make the trip.

The aerial photo seemed like the next step since we had been observing and studying some plants on an annual basis already. Jim Brant got in touch with Continental Aerial Surveys in Alcoa, Tennessee. After several contacts with them to see if they could take an aerial photo of Gregory Bald, and get prices for it, we went to the MAC board to get funding for the project which included a large 30x40-inch color print, one set of contact prints, one AutoCad mapping file on CDROM, and scanned images of negatives on CDROM, and six sets of 35 mm negatives of 6 frames. The MAC board agreed to the funding and we were off and running.

Once the funding was approved it took us three years of climbing the mountain to get Continental Aerial Surveys to take the photograph at the proper time. The first year the bloom was terrible, and Jim had to run down the mountain to make a call (since cell phones don't work up there) to cancel the flyover with Continental. The second year it was too foggy for the plane to fly over the mountain. The third year on June 25, 2005, between 11:05 a.m. and 11:14 a.m. at 800 feet above the mountain top the picture was finally taken.

We then looked at the photographs, selected the one we wanted and had prints made for sale at the approximate cost of reproduction to anyone interested. The approximately 22x30-inch prints are still available with a CD for \$30. (Contact Jim Brant at jandpbrant@verizon.net) The CD contains a jpg file of the bald and a slide show.

The original photograph was 30x40 inches and was placed in the Rhodo-

dendron Manuscripts archives at Special Collections at the University of Virginia Library. The first copy we had made of this was presented to Dale A. Ditmanson, Superintendent of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park Service, for use in the park. The framed picture that we donated will be hung in Sugarland's Visitor's Center in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Kris Johnson, Ken Culbertson, and Steve Shaper of the National Park Service have also been helpful in our work on this project.

According to National Park Service information the bald was first measured in 1944 at 15.7 acres surrounded by open forest dominated by northern red oak trees with scattered old azaleas in the understory. By 1975 the grassy area of the bald was down to approximately 7.9 acres. By 1983 it was down to approximately 7 acres. At that time Park Service started the clearing of trees and other woody vegetation off the bald. The first year employees and volunteers put in over 1,000 hours of work clearing trees and about 8 acres were restored to the bald as a result of these efforts, pushing back to the old boundaries. Encroaching trees and shrubs were blueberry, hawthorn trees, blackberry, and various other hardwood trees species including northern red oak, red maple, sourwood, and service berry. Each year tree seedlings must be cut out of the existing shrubby areas and new seedlings in the grassy areas moved down annually. After settlement the bald was kept open by livestock grazing, but before that the history is unclear.

In the spring of 2005 on our annual trip to the mountains we found by talking to the Park Service personnel that they were cutting the approximately 15 acres of the bald with weed eaters. That is a lot of weed eating! In a discussion with them, Jim Brant found that a field and brush mower would be a tremendous help to them.

In recent years the Park Service had been maintaining only two balds in the mountains, one of which was Gregory Bald. All the mountains in the Smokies are below tree line so it takes special effort to maintain a bald and keep back encroaching

brush and trees. The Park Service personnel and volunteers couldn't use the previous mower they had to do the job because it was purchased in 1990 and was in such poor condition that it was unsafe to use. Our group went to the MAC board and to see if they would approve of us writing a grant proposal for the ARS Endowment Fund to try get a suitable brush cutter for the upkeep of Gregory Bald. We drew up a proposal in December 2005 and presented it to the ARS Endowment Fund Committee which approved it and forwarded it to the ARS Board of Directors who gave their approval at the meeting in Rockville, Maryland, in May 2006.

The mower was quickly shipped to Gregory Bald where it was used in the summer of 2006 to help clear the weeds and brush from the bald to the joy of the workers who maintain the bald.

Our Study Group has put together several presentations on various aspects of the native azaleas. Several of us have given talks and slide presentations or video presentations about these trips. Some of the slides from these trips have ended up on Web sites at the University of Virginia at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/collections/projects/rhodo/skinner/photographs.html> which contains the digital transcription of Dr. Henry Skinner's diaries of his famous trip searching for native azaleas throughout the Southeast. Some photographs are also on a Web site Don Hyatt maintains at <http://www.tjhsst.edu/~dhyatt/azaleas/>. We are now looking at different projects our group might undertake to help preserve this bald.

Sandra McDonald and Jim Brant are members of the Middle Atlantic Chapter. Sandra, a recent ARS Gold Medal recipient, is chair of the Archives Committee and the Editorial Committee.



Neil Jorgensen, Tom Nuccio, Sandra McDonald, George McLellan, Ken McDonald, Jim Brant. Photo courtesy of Sandra McDonald.



Pink azaleas and blueberries on Gregory Bald. Photo by Sandra McDonald.



White azalea, flushed pink, with yellow blotch on Gregory Bald. Photo by Sandra McDonald.



Sandra McDonald and Tom Nuccio on Gregory Bald. Photo by Ken McDonald, Jr.



Andreas Bäurle and Enno Born setting up filming equipment on Gregory Bald. Photo by Ken McDonald, Jr.



Cream azalea from Gregory Bald swarm. Photo by Ken McDonald, Jr.



Red azalea from Gregory Bald swarm. Photo by Sandra McDonald.



Steven Shaper mowing on Gregory Bald with new mower MAC obtained through ARS Endowment Fund grant. Photo by Mike Zumwalt.