



Ode to Mt. Mitchell **Jennifer Pharr Davis**

I've hiked tens of thousands of miles around the world, on every continent but Antarctica. Walked through the jungles of Western Australia, the lofty summits of the Swiss Alps, the Pyrenees in Spain, and Cotahuasi Canyon to Macchu Picchu in Peru. I've stood on top of Mt. Kilimanjaro and in volcano craters in Hawaii and Iceland. I've hiked from Mexico to Canada on the Pacific Crest Trail, Georgia to Maine on the Appalachian Trail (three times!) and five hundred miles across the Rockies in Colorado.

That's a laundry list of trail experiences and adventures. But I'm not sharing it all to brag. I'm sharing it to prove a point. When I give talks I often get asked, "Where's your favorite place to hike." And I've hiked a lot of places. But for me the answer to that question is easy and it's right here in Western North Carolina, in good old Yancey County on a 6,684-foot mountain called Mitchell, which happens to be the tallest point east of the Mississippi River.

Why do I love Mt. Mitchell? For starters, I love the history of it- the rivalry between Elisha Mitchell, Geology professor at UNC, and his upstart pupil, Colonel Clingman, who argued that *his* peak in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was taller. He was wrong, of course. We know that now. But the argument between the two was fascinating, as is the debate of whether Professor Mitchell even labeled the correct mountain as the tallest. And oh by the way, Elisha mysteriously (or inevitably) fell to his death on an ice patch beside a waterfall, only to be found days later by a bear hunter named Big Tom Wilson. I'm not making this up.

I love that Mt. Mitchell was our very first state park. I love that the Blue Ridge Parkway hugs up against it, that when I drive up and see those old buildings I get all tingly and excited inside, knowing that I'm about to have a grand adventure. I love that the park houses my very favorite trail on earth, the Black Mountain Crest Trail. Nowhere else on the east coast can you cross so many 6,000 foot mountains in such a short amount of time. Talk about bang for your buck.

I love that the flora and fauna there have more in common with *Canada* than with the Carolinas. That you walk into those balsam woods and they are so dark and dramatic and there are pine needles littered everywhere and the exposed granite is

covered in chartreuse moss and grey-green lichen that has been living for who knows how many moon cycles and it just looks and *feels* ancient.

I love how you pop out onto the sidewalk and see all the good people from the Old North State and farther afield- Ohio and Kentucky, Georgia and Michigan and Arizona- who have made the trek to look in every direction and to know that, for thousands of miles across half a continent and an *ocean* for goodness sake, there is *nothing* above you except the calling crows and the scudding clouds and God Himself.

I love that you do not go up there in winter unless you *really* know what you're doing. How many places in the south are truly off limits? And I'm not counting South Florida in July because, you know, we have air conditioning now. Unless you want to turn into a human popsicle, you had better have some serious alpine experience if you're going to brave Mt. Mitchell's elements in February.

I love that in summer, Mt. Mitchell is 12-15 degrees cooler than the surrounding valleys. And that *those* valleys are 12-15 degrees cooler than the Piedmont or- heaven forbid- the eastern part of the state where we're talking triple digits on Emerald Isle, people. Bless their hearts.

You know what I love most though? You're gonna think I'm crazy but... I love the *smell*. Do you know the one I'm talking about? You only get it way up high, above five thousand feet I would say. It's the smell of absolute fecundity, of life turning into death turning into life again. Of things breaking down and giving themselves up (but not without a fight!) so other things can go on living because that's how the world works and you better believe they know it on Mitchell.

It's the smell of moss on balsam bark, of logs rotting into loam and the abundance of mushrooms and lichen that grows on them as they decompose. It's the smell of bear scat- or was that a bobcat that just passed by a minute ago? Of a misty rain drizzling down on gnarled pine roots and shards of granite and soil that sponges up as step on it. It's the smell of adventure and of something- dare I say it- *epic*.

Nothing draws you in and calls you to pay close attention as much as Mt. Mitchell does. That's why I love it. Everywhere you look, there's something fascinating, even miraculous, to see. If you give it the attention it deserves, you're rewarded with nothing less than an awakening. Leaves jingling gently in an August breeze. A wooly booger laboring across a muddy footprint in the trail. A grey junco landing on a limb just above your head, the same way its kind have been doing since the dawn of life. Rhododendron everywhere you look, Jack in the Pulpit, Trillium. The smallest wild flower waiting patiently for perhaps *only one person* to see it during the course of its brief showy life. Why does it even exist? I know. But I'm not telling. You'll have to go up there and find the answer for yourself.

Jennifer Pharr Davis is a long-distance hiker, author, speaker, National Geographic Adventurer of the Year, and Ambassador for the American Hiking Society. She has hiked over 14,000 miles on six different continents. Pharr Davis lives in Asheville, NC with her husband Brew, their daughter Charley, and son Gus.