

# The Naturalist's Trail: John Muir and His Trek Through the Mountains of East Tennessee

*By Quentin R. Bass II*

Early in his life, the great naturalist John Muir took a walk across the South to the Gulf Coast, including a trek through the mountains of East Tennessee.

John Muir was the founder of the modern environmental movement. He was, and remains, the first and single greatest preservationist and defender of the environment. He wrote over 300 articles and 10 books on the environment and environmental preservation. His works served then, as they do today, as the base for modern conservation. His deep desire and need to see new lands unaltered by man led him to visit every place in the world he was able to go: Japan, China, Africa, Australia, Central and South America, all over North America, including Alaska, and always, always back to the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California and Yosemite.



The trailhead of the John Muir Trail at Cherokee National Forest near Reliance.

*Photo by Quentin Bass.*

But Muir was by no means just a writer and a robust traveler afflicted with life-long wanderlust. Above all, he was the world's first and greatest environmental activist. He was the founder of the first group organized to defend the environment, the Sierra Club. He was club president until his death in 1914.

His activism for preservation of natural areas extended to his aggressive courtship with industry and Congressional leaders in order to protect the nation's remaining wild places. By directly approaching President Theodore Roosevelt, Muir almost single-handedly saved the land that composes the present Yosemite National Park.

John Muir was principal in the creation of many of our nation's other unspoiled wildernesses including Mount Rainier, the Petrified Forest, Sequoia and Grand Canyon National Parks. He was directly responsible for the creation and protection of over 50 areas and 200 national monuments. He is called the "Father of the National Parks" because he was an unrelenting champion of preservation of the nation's unspoiled ecosystems.

It was Muir who first gave great voice to the idea that nature, especially the untrammelled ecosystem, was not a commodity to be exploited for commercial gain, but something to be preserved. This vision could be seen to emerge in Muir's early life.

Muir was born in the fishing village of Dunbar, Scotland, in 1838. His parents immigrated to the United States in 1849 when he was 11. They settled in Portage, Wis. Muir's father was a farmer who believed in hard work. So, John and his seven brothers and sisters toiled from dawn to dusk on the family farm, as did most Americans in the 19th century. Muir's principal solace from this drudgery was to flee to the surrounding Wisconsin woods where he developed a budding love for nature along with a rugged constitution and the legs of a goat to match.

In these harsh years Muir obtained very little formal education; his strict father believed in hard work and apparently little else. However, after much cajoling by Muir, his father reluctantly allowed him to read, in the morning before performing a full day's work on the farm. Having pried for himself this small opening for learning, Muir rose early, at one o'clock in the morning, in order to have five hours to read. To facilitate his self-imposed Spartan regime, Muir, who possessed a lifelong interest in anything mechanical, invented a wooden alarm clock and a device that would tip over his bed when the alarm went off. He won a prize for this invention at the Wisconsin State Fair in Madison in 1860.

Muir escaped the family farm and his father's stern rule and convinced the University of Wisconsin to let

him enter as a student in 1861. There he studied for three full years, supporting himself with different jobs during the school year and working on farms and harvesting crops when the university was in recess. Although his studies were directed principally at his interests, natural sciences, especially geology and botany, he also developed a good literary writing style.

While at the university, Muir engaged in increasingly longer walks and trips away from campus, wandering farther and farther afield, all the while beginning to develop a way of looking at and appreciating nature that set him apart from almost all others of his time. Finally, in the middle of the Civil War in 1863 and at the end of his third year, he chose to leave the University of Wisconsin to enter, as he called it, the "University of Wilderness." He spent the next several years of the war traveling around Canada to see its wild places while supporting himself with odd jobs. Muir was certainly ahead of his time.

After the Civil War, Muir continued to travel in the northern states. In this cycle of near-aimless wandering there appeared the first of the major preordained epiphanies that Muir would experience in his life. In 1867 while living in Indianapolis, Ind., Muir, the tinkerer Scot working as a mechanic in carriage shop, was temporarily blinded by an accident. He fully recovered his sight after one month. It is clear that the threat of total blindness spurred his commitment to his already developing, innate kinship with nature and his desire to see, experience and understand all of nature he could possibly find.

From this accident came his first exploration of nature with purpose, his first formal written work: A Thousand Mile Walk to the Sea, his record of his trek from Indianapolis to the Florida gulf in 1867 and his description of the natural world he encountered along the way.

Setting out on foot from Louisville, Ky., which he reached by train from Indianapolis, Muir walked across Kentucky. He passed through the Cumberland Mountains of eastern Kentucky and Tennessee and then across the Ridge-and-Valley of East Tennessee where he passed through the small towns of Kingston, Philadelphia and Madisonville. From Madisonville he walked southeast through the Unaka Mountains along the old Unicoi Turnpike. This is the same route the naturalist William Bartram followed, on horseback and from the South Carolina end, nearly 100 years earlier in 1776.

It is clear from his daily entries in A Thousand Mile Walk to the Sea that Muir, like Bartram, began to build and articulate to himself the natural world that he saw. But, as opposed to Bartram, Muir rendered the people he met more or less analytically, from a distance. His descriptions of nature were more passionate. It can be said that both of these viewpoints would only grow to become large parts of Muir's character through his life. Anyone who reads this work can clearly see that, while the south was not the birthplace, it was certainly a classroom and nursery for Muir's perspective of the natural world and the people in it.

The growth of Muir's perception of nature gains foot in the mountains along the Unicoi Turnpike in the vicinity of Unicoi Gap near Coker Creek. Here an elderly mountain guide that accompanied him on this segment of the trail stated "I will take you...to the highest ridge in the country, where you can see both ways. You will have a view of all the world on one side of the mountains and all creation on the other."

Having attained a mountain crest on the Unicoi Turnpike, Muir agreed with his guide:

"The scenery is far grander than any I ever before beheld. The view extends from the Cumberland Mountains on the north far into Georgia and North Carolina to the south, an area of five thousand square miles. Such an ocean of wooded, waving, swelling mountain beauty and grandeur is not to be described."

Muir then proceeded to describe it:

"Countless forest-clad hills, side by side in rows and groups, seemed to be enjoying the rich sunshine and remaining motionless only because they were so eagerly absorbing it. All were united by curves and slopes of inimitable softness and beauty. Oh, these forest gardens of our Father! What perfection, what divinity, in their architecture! What simplicity and mysterious complexity of detail. Who shall read

the teaching of these sylvan pages, the glad brotherhood of rills that sing in the valleys, and all the happy creatures that dwell in them under the tender keeping of a Father's care?"

John Muir then continued through Unicoi Gap into North Carolina through Georgia to Savannah and from there to Florida. He then went on to Cuba, and the next year, to California, the Sierra Nevadas and the love of his life, Yosemite.

Many places have been named in honor of John Muir and his work. They include monuments, beaches, glaciers, schools, colleges, parks and trails. Here in Tennessee, we honor the man and the place he trod with the John Muir National Recreation Trail located on the Cherokee National Forest. This trail is 21 miles long. Constructed in 1972, the trail courses along the north side of the beautiful Hiwassee River that Muir would recognize even today.

The western end of the trail starts at Reliance at the confluence of Childers Creek with the Hiwassee River. From here it extends upriver reaching the suspension foot bridge of Appalachia Power Plant at six miles. It continues upriver to its intersection with the Coker Creek trail, where the trail leads north to the 40 foot high Coker Creek Falls. The Muir trail moves from this trail intersection east where it passes Tennessee State Route 68 and continues on for another three miles ending near to the North Carolina/Tennessee state line.

No matter what season, there is no bad time to walk the John Muir Recreation Trail in the Cherokee National Forest. To say that this trail is beautiful, wild, and a flashing treasure, is an understatement. But, perhaps it is best to let the man say it:

"My path all to-day led me along the leafy banks of the Hiwassee, a most impressive mountain river. Its channel is very rough, as it crosses the edges of upturned rock strata, some of them standing at right angles, or glancing off obliquely to right and left. Thus a multitude of short, resounding cataracts are produced, and the river is restrained from the headlong speed due to its volume and the inclination of its bed.

"All the larger streams of uncultivated countries are mysteriously charming and beautiful, whether flowing in mountains or through swamps and plains. Their channels are interestingly sculptured, far more so than the grandest architectural works of man. The finest of the forests are usually found along their banks, and in the multitude of falls and rapids the wilderness finds a voice. Such a river is the Hiwassee, with its surface broken to a thousand sparkling gems, and its forest walls vine-draped and flowery as Eden. And how fine the songs it sings!"

-John Muir, September 19, 1867 (John Muir, A Thousand Mile Walk to the Sea, 1916).

To learn more about John Muir, visit the Web site: [www.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit](http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit). On that site you can find a wealth of information including a reprint of Bob Fulcher's article "Muir, Michaux and Gray on the Roan," that first appeared in the September/October 1998 issue of The Tennessee Conservationist.

For information on Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee, visit the Web site: [www.fs.fed.us/r8/cherokee](http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/cherokee). There you will find a printable brochure about the John Muir National Recreation Trail (#152).

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