

April

The Great White Way

In the Upper Piedmont and Blue Ridge Foothills of South Carolina, early April is adorned with white and pink patches and splotches of flowering dogwood and redbud. These pearls are nature's botanical harbingers of spring. The delicate purity of their colors gracefully usher the spring, this crescendo of new life, new beginnings, this annual revival of hope and belief in the wonder of natural beauty.

In this month, the buds of the hardwoods are rapidly swelling, then bursting in the warm sunlight that showers them almost daily. Finally, by late April they are in full-leaf.

Toward the end of the month, other less noticeable buds are swelling, progressing towards a burst of beauty. Dull bud scales seem to be straining to contain an expanding treasure that will not be denied its place in the spring sun. These are the buds of the mountain laurel growing almost secretly on the banks of Upper Piedmont streams flowing over bedrock at the bottoms of steeply sloping hills. As one moves westward across the landscape and into the higher elevations of the foothills and mountains, mountain laurel becomes more common until it is a major feature of the coves, creeksides, and shorelines of the river.

The river is the Chattooga (our interpretation of the Cherokee word meaning *rocky waters*). It provides a political service as the western boundary between South Carolina and Georgia. It serves a conservation purpose as a designated National Wild and Scenic River. But those functions become mundane in late April when the Chattooga becomes the *Great White Way* adorned with millions of mountain laurel blooms radiantly smiling down on cold waters rushing over rugged shoals, through troughs just wide enough to accommodate a canoe and through narrows and over falls that challenge skilled kayakers. The trails that weave up and down in elevation from the shorelines to high points on the upper slopes provide opportunities that

vary from those for close viewing of the intricacies of individual flowers to panoramas of the great river cloaked in its robe of mountain laurel white. When adorned thusly, the river becomes *The Great White Way*.

The flowers of the mountain laurel occur in clusters with multiple clusters per bush. The bud scales break and fall away to reveal petite “flowerlets” colored in shades of creamy white and soft pinks. They look like tiny pastries lovingly crafted with great artistic care. The beauty of these flowerlets tease imagination and heighten anticipation for what is to come.

Within a few days these botanical debutantes leave behind their adolescence and step into the full beauty of their adulthood characterized by delicate, radiant beauty. Seemingly carefully, systematically placed beauty marks of hot pink compliment the virginal white petals. Eight long, slender, white stamens rise from the base of the pistol at the center of the flower, then seem to shyly turn away and hide their pollen-laden heads, called anthers, in the crevices of the petals. The single stalk rising from the pistol shows no such reticence. It rises bravely and with impunity to reach out to the world and invite its challenges as well as its rewards.

By the end of April, the Chattooga is fully adorned in its great white cloak, the fabric of which must be closely examined for an appreciation of its full beauty. Along some stretches of the river, the waters seem to simply roll on toward the sea with neither acknowledgement nor appreciation of the transient beauty that temporarily surrounds them, annually giving each place its own uniqueness in time and space. And yet at other times, the sun-flecked, dancing waters of the rushing Chattooga seem to revel in the blessing of the mountain laurel.

As my horse and I progress along the river trail the florescence of mountain laurel brightens our way. When we pause at the edge of the ford, I look both upstream and downstream to bends where the river seems to disappear. I know that for many miles beyond these bends *The Great White Way* is the way of the great river.

As May progresses, the bold, assertive flower pistols gather all of the pollen necessary to assure the continuum of mountain laurel life. Flower parts, once radiant in white and pink, shrivel and turn to shades of caramel, then drop to the forest floor to reenter the biotic stream of energy and nutrients. Although seemingly lost in the sea of green leaves, there exist millions upon millions of fertilized pistols within which new life is taking shape. Within their collective purpose lies the hope of the future and the promise that once again the waters of the Chattooga will dance in the radiance of *The Great White Way*.