



A story of Gray's lily and mountain balds

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Flora

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Rare Gray's lily on Roan Mountain's open grassy balds. Photo by Ken Moore.

By Ken Moore

Once in a while, I take leave of the wealth of local natural areas to see North Carolina treasures farther afield.

One of my favorite places is the string of Roan Mountain grassy balds striding the border of North Carolina and Tennessee, where there is a very special wildflower. Every time I see Gray's lily, *Lilium grayii*, I am thankful for the Southern Appalachian Highland Conservancy's (SAHC) efforts to preserve this and other highland areas of North Carolina. Since 1974, this group has protected more than 38,000 acres of significant natural areas in the highlands.

I first saw Gray's lily on a botany field trip back in the 1960s. It was rare back then and it is rarer now. Its worldwide distribution is centered in a few mountain counties in the corner of Tennessee, North Carolina and Virginia.

The best viewing opportunities are on the balds of Roan Mountain. If you have never visited the Roan, you have missed an opportunity to fall in love with a mountain.

Most folks really do fall in love with it. That certainly is the feeling of the 42 people who participated in this year's SAHC 15th Grassy Ridge Mow-Off, a thoughtfully planned effort to preserve the balds and rare plants like Gray's lily. You see, that lily and other rarities are being displaced by the encroaching growth of blackberries, alders and that much-admired purple rhododendron, *Rhododendron catawbiense*.

Formerly, the balds of Roan were more extensive. In recent years, as the Roan highlands have moved from private ownership to conservation lands, grazing farm-animal activity has been eliminated. As a result, the once-extensive open balds began shrinking.

The origin of high-elevation mountaintop balds continues to be debated among regional ecologists; the one point of agreement is that, left undisturbed, the balds of North Carolina will perish. A diversity of management techniques including tractor mowing, grazing by cattle and goats and labor-intensive hand pruning are being evaluated.

For years, I have wanted to participate in one of the SAHC bald-clearing projects. I was happy to be a part of this year's effort, where, with brush cutters and pruning loppers, we humans – in the old pioneer barn-raising, working-together spirit – cut and grubbed blackberry brambles, alder thickets and even those revered purple rhododendron to recover acres of formerly open grassy bald. Supervised by SAHC, in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service, The Nature Conservancy and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, we were simulating the work of mountaintop herbivores of past times.

Along the Appalachian Trail route to Grassy Ridge, we observed a fenced grazing area supervised by a goat herder keeping watch over 40 Angora goats. Some Carrboro residents may want to "Adopt a Goat" to help with the Roan Goat Grazing Project supported by Friends of Roan Mountain ([friendsofroanmtn.org](#)).

I am so in love with the Roan and its Gray's lilies that I can't give enough thanks for the stewardship efforts of the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy. Becoming a member of SAHC, ([appalachian.org](#)) provides numerous opportunities during the year for walks and hikes over other SAHC western Carolina highland natural areas, as well as other Roan "mow-offs" scheduled this summer and fall. Go visit the Roan, and you'll fall in love too!

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Members of Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy working at 6,000-foot elevation to protect the Roan Mountain grassy balds from encroachment of woody vegetation. Photo by Ken Moore.

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