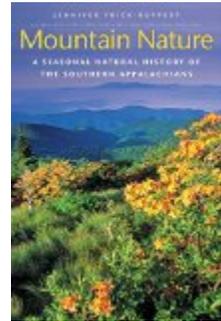


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jennifer Frick-Ruppert. *Mountain Nature: A Seasonal Natural History of the Southern Appalachians*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xiii + 224 pp. Illustrations. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3386-5; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7116-4.

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## Experiencing Nature: A Seasonal Approach to Appalachian Ecology

In *Mountain Nature* (2010), environmental scientist Jennifer Frick-Ruppert presents a general introduction to the natural history and ecology of the southern Appalachian Mountains (defined by the author as the mountainous area stretching from the Potomac River in Maryland and West Virginia to northern Alabama and Georgia [p. 2]). Though the region is often known for its distinctive culture and music, Frick-Ruppert shows that Appalachian biology is equally unique. *Mountain Nature* is deeply engaging and well written and should be required reading for scholars of the environmental humanities (environmental historians, sociologists, anthropologists, etc.) focusing on issues related to Appalachian ecology, culture, and history. Nature enthusiasts seeking an accessible entry-point into the dazzling natural diversity of Appalachia will find *Mountain Nature* to be an excellent source as well; and because it covers such a wide array of subjects, even the lifelong Appalachian local will learn something new about his or her home region. Though the book suffers from the same limitations as any work attempting to provide a general introduction to a complex ecosystem, it remains a valuable contribution to scholarly and popular literature on the Appalachian environment.

In Frick-Ruppert's own words, *Mountain Nature* is simply "a guide to the enjoyment and understanding of nature in the mountains of the Southern Appalachians" (p. 1). More than simply a guide to the Southern Appalachians, though, *Mountain Nature* draws the reader

into more emotional connections with the region and its seasonal changes. The work is unique in its organizational structure and its emphasis on the cyclical nature of biological events. Frick-Ruppert clearly takes great joy in observing the yearly changes of her home ecosystem and she places extra emphasis upon conveying that joy to her readers. Unlike common field guides that generally include numerous easy-to-search, short entries, *Mountain Nature* is meant to be read from cover to cover. The book is broken into five lengthy chapters along with a shorter introduction on the basic geological history of the Appalachian Mountains. Chapters 2 through 5 focus on each season of the year, beginning with spring and moving to winter. Each chapter is partitioned into numerous subheadings focusing on a broad range of seasonal subjects, including plant and animal activity, edible flora, and general climatic conditions, and is peppered with highly informative sidebars on diverse subjects such as medicinal uses for local plants, the impacts of environmental problems like climate change and habitat loss, gardening tips, and folk knowledge. Numerous black-and-white and full color photographs provide important visual referents for many of the plants, animals, and fungi discussed throughout the book. The work is thorough in the range of subjects covered, though readers seeking more depth on specific issues may need to find other sources.

Chapter 1 is perhaps most unique to *Mountain Nature*, using musical metaphors to explain the cyclical pat-

terns of natural events. Various features of the world move in regular cycles, from the miniscule changes of microscopic organisms to the dramatic rise and fall of mountains due to continental shift and erosion. In Frick-Ruppert's words, it is sometimes baffling to consider the myriad changes regularly occurring around the world, but she adds, "all these different natural rhythms combine harmoniously, like some vast musical score, to provide order, vitality, and charm to our world" (p. 9). In another section discussing the possibility that organ pipe mud-dauber wasps use vibrations from their wing-beats to help shape their mud nests, Frick-Ruppert exclaims, "so much of nature is harmonic!" (p. 93). Such statements are slightly at odds with modern ecology which, as a scientific field, has generally moved away from discussions of harmony, order, and equilibrium toward more complex and chaotic ecosystem models. Frick-Ruppert nonetheless draws upon a long tradition of affective writing within the natural sciences, dating back to famous authors like Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, and Ernst Haeckel. It is possible that Frick-Ruppert has taken some inspiration from these earlier advocates of the natural world.

Though an overall informative work, *Mountain Nature* is not without some minor flaws. Because it is neither easily searchable nor exhaustive of Appalachian species, *Mountain Nature* is probably best read along with a field guide. Unfortunately, the book is rather short on further educational resources for the reader. The references section contains listings of field guides cited by Frick-Ruppert, but it is not an exhaustive list and does not give any indication as to which guides a novice nature-lover might find most helpful. As someone who has clearly spent a lengthy amount of time in Appalachia, surely Frick-Ruppert could recommend good, introductory guides for her readers. The educational power of the book would also be furthered by more in-depth appendices. The book's one appendix lists federally owned lands in Appalachia, including national parks and forests, along with their total acreage. For a work that emphasizes the value of physically experiencing Appalachian nature this is a bit disappointing. Surely Frick-Ruppert

could have listed relevant hiking, gardening, or bird-watching groups throughout the region. The author includes some information about certain cultural events, including ramps festivals (celebrating the Appalachian medicinal plant—the ramp—and its cultural history) and wooly worm festivals (where wooly worms are used to predict the intensity of the winter), but again, much more information could have been provided to readers on the numerous other seasonal festivals. It is also unfortunate that *Mountain Nature* ends without a proper conclusion, leaving the reader with little closure.

Finally, though she addresses issues like climate change, habitat loss, and pollution throughout the book, Frick-Ruppert could have more explicitly discussed how the unique ecosystems of Appalachia are also among the most threatened in the United States. The Great Smokey Mountains National Park, as she explains on pages 168-169, is also one of the most polluted in the nation, due largely to prevailing wind patterns and the high rates of automobile traffic through the park. Many of the side-bars note how certain species such as monarch butterflies, pitcher plants, and orchids face extinction due to habitat loss, but little mention is made of the specific contemporary practices, such as mountaintop removal coal mining, that are contributing to this loss. While engaging in political issues could alienate some readers (especially in Appalachia, where coal is a much more sensitive issue than elsewhere in America), Frick-Ruppert could have provided sources for more information on the specific threats to the region's environmental integrity and lists of organizations to help readers get involved. Still, these small issues do not greatly detract from the pleasure of reading *Mountain Nature*.

Overall, *Mountain Nature* is a highly informative and enjoyable work. Though limited in its suggestions for further study and involvement, the book provides a pithy and memorable introduction to Appalachian ecosystems and their seasonal permutations. While perhaps too simple for readers with scientific backgrounds, scholars of the environmental humanities as well as individuals seeking greater knowledge of Appalachia will not be disappointed by *Mountain Nature*.

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