



We Emerge

by Martin E. Dodge

We are two of the multitudes of humanity who limited their public outings to grocery shopping and neighborhood walks for over a year. Memorial Day weekend 2021 is our first opportunity to leave Charlottesville, Virginia, fully vaccinated against Covid-19. We do not want to deal with airports and look for places within a reasonable drive. We have never been to Great Falls National Park in Reston, Virginia. I decide that trip will have to wait until the periodical cicadas are not around. Instead, we go to Roanoke, Virginia, to stay for three nights and four days.

Brood X Cicadas in the News

Brood X cicadas, numbering in the billions, emerge after seventeen years!

The largest occurrence of periodical cicadas in the world!

They will be everywhere!

Friday is forecast to be seventy-five degrees with a mix of clouds and rain. The sun breaks through when we stop in the town of Buchanan on the way to Roanoke. We park in a public lot near the Buchanan Swinging Bridge, a registered Virginia historic landmark, and a 366-foot-long and 57.5-foot-tall unique pedestrian crossing over the James River. The dubious-looking bridge is suspended from a metal structure with drooping cables atop a rock foundation anchored in the middle of the river. The flexible wood plank walkway of the swinging bridge unnervingly twists to attach to the Route 11 bridge's sidewalk. A sign warns, "NOTICE. Bridge use restricted. Pedestrians only. Limited to three pedestrians. Do not run. Do not cause bridge to sway."

I am sure that walking over the swinging bridge will trigger my High Places Phenomenon - a sudden urge to jump when in a high place even though I will not. The condition causes anxiety, panic, and a desire to flee. The feelings are compulsive, and I involuntarily squirm. Surprisingly the rickety and bouncy bridge does not bother me. The bridge's walkway is at the halfway point of the structure's height, and the cable railing is substantial. The James River flowing below the bridge is clear and reveals the deeper holes where I would love to cast a fishing line. We walk over the bridge and back without incident or additional amusement for my wife. She did walk behind me and bounce the bridge a little to get a reaction from me. *My Sweetie*. I enjoy the scent of the river and the sweet nectar of honeysuckle in the breeze.

We leave the car in the public lot and walk the length of main street Buchanan on our quest to find The Witt Stop restaurant. Beyond the storefronts are a couple of municipal buildings, churches, and big, nice houses, all with manicured lawns perfectly edged with the sidewalk. I always wonder how such main streets come into existence in tiny towns. Where does the money come from, how, and where do ordinary people live and work?

The Witt Stop restaurant has a LOVE sign mural. My wife and I collect pictures of us with the signs we deem worthy. Virginia LOVEworks is a state tourism program promoting the "Virginia is for Lovers" slogan, businesses, and the arts. The mural at The Witt Stop restaurant in Buchanan is our seventeenth LOVE sign.

We order lunch on the restaurant's sunny patio, and I eavesdrop on the other tables. The restaurant owner shares his knowledge of town lore with a group of travelers. Our server assumes the role of protective mother to a young man on a solo bicycle trip that started in Yorktown, Virginia. The others overhear their exchange and add questions for the bicyclist about his journey and his safety. I concentrate on my gourmet burger, homemade onion rings, and

water. My wife remains committed to her chicken salad sandwich, mac-n-cheese, and Diet Coke.

The Witt Stop's owner checks on us after the travelers leave and we finish eating our chocolate cake. I compliment him on his knowledge of the area. He explains that he is a local who returned after serving as a globetrotting Marine and wants to revitalize the town. The conversation that follows deserves its own story on national news. I hope the town council of Buchanan appreciates his passion, dedication, resourcefulness, and leadership.

We wish the bicyclist a safe journey when we start our walk back to the car. On the drive out of town, we pass the skeleton of the button factory and signs to other such landmarks mentioned by the owner of The Witt Stop. The clouds and potential for rain return by the time we get on the interstate to finish the drive to our getaway accommodation. A giant American flag is there, visible from the interstate, belonging to a Gander Mountain RV dealership and sporting goods store next to the Tru by Hilton hotel.

Checking in to the hotel is fast using a mobile phone app. We put our facemasks on before entering the building and stop at the front desk to ask where the elevators are. The front desk doubles as a snack bar and is in the center of a large open common area divided for computer work/ reading, dining, lounging, one pool table, and window seating. On the way to the elevator, we walk past a group of guests crowded around the pool table. Hotel employees are wearing facemasks, but only a few of the guests are wearing them. I sense unease and notice a mixture of confoundment and defiance on the faces around us.

The mobile app unlocks the room, too. The room is minimalist in design but has all the usual amenities in plain sight, mounted to walls or resting on narrow wall shelves. The room is smaller than a standard hotel room and lacks conventional furniture save the pillowy king-size bed, an office chair, and a table nested under the long shelf supporting a 60-inch TV. The bathroom is not skimpy and has a generous size shower stall with an adjustable spray shower head. I love the wall-mounted refillable squeeze bottles of hand soap, body soap, lotion, shampoo, and conditioner.

We stock the room's fridge inside and out with the provisions we picked up while exploring the vicinity before check-in. Google Maps reveals our dinner options after we settle into the room. We decide to eat inside of a restaurant and see a movie in a theater, too! The restaurant is walk-in only, and

we buy the movie tickets using a mobile app. We are living as dangerously as vaccinated people wandering around in public can!

Dinner at Hollywood's Restaurant and Bakery is unmasked, unsettlingly crowded, and delicious. We park in one of the last spaces in the small lot, observe some diners enter without facemasks, and decide to follow suit. Inside the restaurant, we are seated at the last remaining table in sight. We admit to our server that it is our first time eating inside a restaurant in over a year. We share an appetizer of homemade chips with melted blue cheese, tomatoes, and green tail onions. I have a Creole-style meatloaf with mashed potatoes and green beans, water, and peanut butter pie for dessert. My wife has shrimp and grits with tomato and spicy sausage, water, and a generously sized heavenly homemade cream puff for dessert. *We are ready to burst!* I soak in the humanity and bustle of service and ride an emotional rollercoaster. I see many other faces that share my sentiment. The servers quicken their pace to keep up as "the weeds" grow. A man in plain clothes appears and begins organizing the overflowing patrons waiting inside and outside the door to be seated.

The movie theater allows vaccinated patrons not to wear facemasks but does not check for vaccination cards. So, we will watch our movie with naked faces! It is opening night for the "House of Mouse" movie about a cruel fashion designer, and we are there for the 7:15 p.m. showing. Our sense of flirting with danger deflates when the movie starts for a spread-out crowd of maybe eight other people, but the punk high jinks of the villainess origin story boost our morale.

The drive back to the hotel is a dark wet mess with poor visibility. I do not miss the days before GPS-guided directions. To comply with the posted policy, we put our facemasks on before re-entering the hotel. The pool table is surrounded by the same guests as earlier, now all mask-less, and I catch some of them grimacing at us as we walk by.

Brood X Cicadas in the News

Police say, "Stop calling 911 about the cicadas!"

The cicadas are as loud as a lawnmower or a jet plane!

The "Woodstock" of the bug world lasts for a month and a half!

The tension concerning facemasks is present in the hotel's common area at breakfast. Guests of all ages use the same press-pump coffee urns, utensils, and handles for self-serve waffle irons, scrambled eggs, sausage links, and a toaster for bagels and English muffins. Paper plates, plastic ware, fruit, condiments, and napkins are also grabbed from a communal station. Judgmental glances seem to concentrate on wearing a facemask or not while filling your plates or cups. All guests are mask-less while seated over their breakfast. Nobody has difficulty remaining socially distanced, though.

Saturday's forecast is a high of 70 degrees with rain off and on. The breakfast included with our accommodation is substantial, so we relax in our room, waiting for a break in the weather. The hikes we want to do are all a short drive from the hotel. I have PDFs of information and maps of all trails saved to my phone and paper copies in Ziplock bags just in case. Timing the rain is critical for us to get the most enjoyment out of our hiking plans. Today looks favorable for the hike at Read Mountain Preserve. I organize our gear while my wife assembles a picnic lunch and snacks. We stop at the front desk to let them know our room does not need housekeeping before leaving the hotel.

It is past noon when we get on the road to Read Mountain Preserve. The clouds look dicey, so we detour to check out the parking situation at the McAfee Knob trailhead first – jammed is an understatement. Read Mountain Preserve is not famous, and we park without a struggle. A couple finds us staring at the severely weathered information kiosk, tells us about their walk, and offers us the park map they used. Talking with them is a treat after a year of limited in-person interaction. I gratefully accept the map and tuck it into a pocket of my cargo pants.

The blue trail is 3.9 miles round-trip, with Buzzards Rock at its peak and other trails that cut across or loop out for those who want a shortcut or to extend their walk. The trail slopes upwards with occasional switchbacks and rock steps. At times drizzle or raindrops seep through the leaf canopy. Footing is slippery on some of the wet surfaces. We encounter a few other hikers on the way up, and we all strategically make room to allow passing. My wife compliments a man for his walking stick on one stop – we regret leaving our sticks in the car. *My fault.*

The rocky forest is mostly maple, oak, and poplar trees. Mountain Laurel shrubs are scattered all over with clusters of small white flowers in peak bloom. Ferns add a lacey texture to the green landscape. Mosses, most are small and spongy, some are strangely leafy, carpet larger stones and fallen wood. Sparsely distributed pale lichens cling to rocks and tree bark as flat scales or

rest atop the moss in puffs of branching tendrils. The season is over for many of spring's wildflowers, but some blooms can be found. Unfortunately, the year is still too young for the appearance of many fungi.

The last stretch to Buzzards Rock is easy. The trail meanders along the ridge of the mountain and ends at the 2180-foot elevation scenic overlook. My High Places Phenomenon tugs at my nerves, but I manage to quell my panic. We eat lunch in light rain with the view from the Buzzards Rock bench to ourselves – Roanoke Airport on the far left to the Carvin's Cove Reservoir's damn on the far right. We also identify the colors and movements of a distant feature as the giant American flag at the Gander Mountain RV dealership! I take pictures of us with the dreary vista using my waterproof pocket camera mounted on a collapsible tripod.

The way back down the mountain is slippery in places but easy. The weather must be a bother to more creatures than man. The cry of a Pileated Woodpecker adds to the list of birds heard and not seen. The hike mercifully lacks biting and buzzing insects, too. Near the end of our time on the mountain, we stop to let an older man and young woman with a dog pass. The man asks about the trail, and after a welcome conversation, I give him our hand-me-down trail map.

We bring takeout back to the hotel room for dinner: traditional Greek hummus with pita chips, a supreme-style pizza, and tiramisu. The table nested under the TV shelf works nicely as a dinner table when dragged to the end of the bed. We are too close to the big TV to watch comfortably, but eating is the task at hand. We will order more from the Greek-owned Veranda Bistro in the future.

Brood X Cicadas in the News

Pets are overeating cicadas – puking up and pooping out buggy messes!

News reporter startled by cicada lets the profanity fly!

Cooler weather slows cicada activity, but they'll be back!

The morning news on TV states we can expect a daytime high of sixty-one degrees with a chance of rain showers all day on this Sunday before Memorial Day, the unofficial start of summer. Our breakfast at the hotel is quick, and few other guests are starting the day as early. Guides recommend allowing four to six hours to complete the McAfee Knob hike and warn about

parking challenges at the trailhead. Yesterday we saw firsthand how crazy the parking is. We pack for a long, cool, wet day, leave a generous tip for housekeeping, and exit the hotel by 8:30 a.m.

The McAfee Knob trailhead parking lot is a fifteen-minute drive from the hotel, and it is almost what we consider full when we get there. After seeing the creative parking jam yesterday, I worry we will be blocked in when we return to the car. Guides say the lot holds fifty vehicles, but I think that is a gross undercount to the reality of how people make use of the space. Vehicles parked outside the lot along Route 311 will get towed. I found park and ride options researching the area online, and we saw signs for them. I prefer to get directly into my vehicle and leave after the hike, though.

I set my camera on a collapsible tripod and took pictures of us with the information kiosk for McAfee Knob and the Appalachian Trail. The kiosk has safety warnings about proper shoes and clothes, water, trash, trail hazards, wildlife, maps, and more. Today my pack has an extra liter of water, lunch, a small first aid kit, a multi-tool pocketknife, sanitary items, toilet paper, and plastic bags to pack waste out. Hikers of all skill levels and preparedness are here to start or finish the walk or trek through with long-distance goals. We are bringing our walking sticks today, and it is 57 degrees and cloudy when we begin the 7.8-mile hike at 9:00 a.m.

A steep primitive stairway rises into the woods on the other side of the lot, and the white blaze of the Appalachian Trail marks trees along the well-worn path that follows. We encounter hikers traveling in the opposite direction, talking about the sunrise. A troupe of college boys in pajamas amuses me. We are starting our day, and I am winded after fifteen minutes. The people passing game is constant as we continue our trek. We let speedier people go ahead, and etiquette decisions slow everyone on the quickly bottlenecked trail. The tasks of interacting with traffic, watching our footing, and finding our breath replace the beauty around us. The trail splits after about .3 miles, and signs make the options to continue obvious. I already know to follow the Fire Road and not the AT. The Fire Road runs parallel to the AT and is a better match for our fitness level but lacks camping stops with primitive privies. The privies are currently closed, anyway.

The Fire Road is luxuriously wide and free of people. We take advantage of the extra room and adjust our clothing. The cool, damp air makes judging to add or remove layers a puzzle. My wife opts to remove the long-sleeved layer from beneath her hooded raincoat. I add a raincoat over my t-shirt and continue to wear my booney hat. The walking sticks function as accessories but are more

of a comfort than a burden. We are both wearing new hiking boots, and our feet are holding up well. As we march on in light rain, my cold fingers gradually lose the need for pockets.

We are free to enjoy the scenery from the Fire Road, however dreary the weather. Breaks in the trees on either side showcase views of valleys and mountains. Massive rock formations jut up along sections of the road. The forest is like the Read Mountain Preserve, though the plentiful Mountain Laurels have pink and white flowers. The birds and bugs are absent, too. The roadsides provide habitat options for weeds of all sizes that prefer more sun. Black Raspberry canes are dropping their white flower petals as berry season begins. Pasture Roses bloom from prickly greens; their light pink flowers have five petals and a bright yellow mop of stamens. A variety of other small plants have yellow flowers, white foamy spear shapes, and more. I also notice there are many holes in the ground, all of them the diameter of a pencil. Cicada nymphs have emerged here, but I have not seen any. They must be in the treetops ready to molt into adults – regular yearly cicadas, not the periodical cicadas that I changed our travel plans to avoid.

A chain prevents us from continuing on the Fire Road when it intersects the Appalachian Trail. In addition, signs indicate where to go. The voices we could hear as we made progress along the road reunite with the bodies of their owners when we all arrive at the same spot. The game of people passing begins anew. We let the faster people go up first and then navigate around the people coming down. The trail crosses a wide strip cleared through the mountain for a row of powerline towers further on. Mountain Laurels and brambles carpet the clearing with pink and white flowers. Later on, large rock formations create a small maze just off the trail. The trees get shorter as we gain elevation, and the terrain becomes rockier. The closer we get to our goal, the mistier the woods get. The whiteness beyond the trees informs me we are in the clouds.

The trail spills onto a broad rock surface fenced by thick stubby shrubs. I get out of the way of traffic and sit down. I notice a small sign nailed to a stunted tree that points back to how we came marking the distance to the parking lot. *We are at the top!* I remember two signs back at the AT and the Fire Road intersection: the distance to McAfee Knob and McAfee Knob Overlook being a tenth of a mile more. I am exhausted, and I do not see another path.

A hiker asks me, “Is this the way to the overlook?”

I reply, “I don’t know. Maybe that way?” I point in the direction where the AT continues.

The hiker follows up with, “What about the blue blazes?”

Confused, I say, “It’s my first time up here. I am not familiar.”

My wife chimes in, “There is a sign behind you.”

I see a small sign that reads “Overlook” nailed to another stunted tree but no path.

The hiker figures it out and follows a couple of blue blazes painted on the rock surface to where the shrub line is indented. The overlook is hidden around the corner. I feel stupid, my blood sugar is low, and it is lunchtime. I wonder how many people make the same mistake and continue on the AT?

The peak at McAfee Knob is at a 3,171-foot elevation and is the most photographed location on the Appalachian Trail. Our view right now is a whitewash of clouds. There is only the white nothingness beyond the edge of the cliffs. I find the iconic ledge of McAfee Knob and figure out the camera angle needed to capture it, and I know My High Places Phenomenon will not allow me near it. All of the other hikers go to stand on the ledge. I do not expect to get a picture without other people in it. I quickly set up my little camera on the tripod and get the best shots I can before more people arrive – my wife and I standing on a rock surface framed by shrubs with a white void behind us.

The people that arrived at the top with us expressed their disappointment about the view and spent little time resting before leaving. The sentiment is shared by all of the other hikers that arrive while we are there. Most people still take pictures, and some dare to sit with their feet dangling from the McAfee Knob’s signature ledge.

My wife selects a spot for us further along the length of the cliff to sit and eat. As my blood sugar returns, I realize I am taking pictures of things in a shrub inches away from a deadfall. I panic and back away from the edge. My High Place Phenomenon is not fully activated, though. I do not feel compelled to jump but to get far from the edge. The white void prevents me from discerning depth and distance. *Not complaining.* My wife is unfazed and finishes her lunch as I pace. I need to get out of this environment and restore my sense of safety.

The walk back to the car finds the limits of our feet. It is the longest hike my wife and I have done together. She stops to adjust her shoes and hopefully

slow the breaking of blisters. The bottoms of my feet ache fiercely. The walking sticks find purpose as leaning posts to balance with on our way down to the parking lot. Vehicles are still arriving to attempt to get in. Getting out is nail-biting, but we do not scrape the car's sides or lose a side mirror.

We are back in the hotel room before 3 p.m. and close the blackout shades of the room's big window as the clouds are breaking up outside. We take Tylenol and nap on the bed for a couple of hours. The sun is bright when we go to dinner, and the giant flag at the Gander Mountain is waving. I get a great picture of the American flag in front of dark cloud puffs backlit by the sun and a blue sky.

We enjoy a Mexican dinner on the patio of Agave Azul. I have Enchiladas Poblanos, and water. My wife has a Chicken Quesadilla and one of the restaurant's signature drinks, the Moscow Mula. Afterward, we retire to our hotel room for a well-earned rest.

Brood X Cicadas in the News

Chocolate covered cicadas!

Cicada tacos!

Eating cicadas triggers shellfish allergies!

A buzzing screech is in the trees and getting closer. I find myself at the edge of a cliff with no view and turn around against my will. Red eyes, black bodies, and glass wings cut through my facemask and swarm down my throat. The nightmare wakes me around 5 a.m.

Memorial Day's forecast is mostly sunny with a high of eighty degrees. We make plans over breakfast in the hotel's common area. Later, we move our stuff to the car, leave a generous tip for housekeeping, and checkout using the mobile app. There are two LOVEworks signs for us to collect in Roanoke before lunch with my wife's parents in Radford, Virginia.

The LOVE sign at Black Dog Salvage is big, colorful, and fabricated from scrap. It is a feature of the outdoor music venue behind a refurbished warehouse. After we get our picture with the LOVE sign, we browse through the cavernous building. It is divided into sections: random, unfinished, and finished stuff and furniture, a custom build shop, an art gallery loft, and a

massive artisan consignment and antique store. We buy branded t-shirts, two pieces of artisan woodcraft, and a pottery item.

The second LOVE sign is located between the buildings on a multi-school campus. I feel nervous about being there while setting up the camera. It is a public schoolyard, but it is still private property. We wave back at the friendly passengers in a minivan that drives by as we pose. The middle school students here made a sign we want a picture with – high praise considering the many other LOVEwork signs on the Virginia tourism website did not catch our eye.

The drive to Radford takes half an hour. We greet my wife's parents with mask-less hugs and handshakes as we are all fully vaccinated. They show us their completed home improvement projects. We all enjoy socializing over a wonderful homemade lunch and dessert. After a tour of their garden, we harvest radish greens, lettuce, and red onion green-tails to take home. The weather is gorgeous and summery. I take pictures of us as a group and just the parents before getting back on the road.

Interstate 81 is busy! Traffic bottlenecks and comes to a complete stop for a time due to an accident ahead. Luckily, the snag delays us from getting home by little more than half an hour. Once home, we unpack and prepare for work the next day. Our third getaway to Roanoke, Virginia, is a success! We explore different places each time we go, and the area has plenty more to offer before we revisit our growing list of favorites.

Cicada!