Pace Bald Revisited

John Brown—Cleveland, South Carolina

On a pleasant Wednesday morning in June, three stalwarts met in a driveway on a street appropriately named "Lands End." Pleasantries were exchanged, and assurances made that maps had been consulted and routes measured.

Trip leader Doley Bell advised the group that a short one-and-a-quarter mile hike with an elevation change of 1,200 feet would bring us to the "downtown" section of Pace Bald. Having no documented history of prevarication, the statement was accepted as fact. We loaded the car and began the trip in reasonable spirits.

The objective was Pace Bald, a section of the Appalachian Trail located north of Copper Bald and south of Tellico Bald near Franklin, North Carolina. It was unofficially named after Leon Pace, with an intended reference to Leon's follically challenged pate. A brief history of Pace Bald was presented in the Winter 2005 issue of ***The Azalean***, Volume 27, Number 4, page 80.

Leon and Doley have catalogued some 15 varieties at Pace Bald, ranging from what is thought to be pure species to obvious hybrids. Records of each plant are carefully maintained in a field notebook, documenting the location, makeup, and bloom history. Using a Global Positioning System received as a recent Christmas gift, the plant location is being more accurately recorded.

'Jean' lives in the suburbs of Pace Bald. In the local jargon, that means the plant dubbed 'Jean' is located approximately 50 yards north of "downtown." The unfortunate thing about 'Jean' is that after a brilliant cantaloupe colored bloom in 2006, somewhere between RHS 24B and RHS 29B (1995), the plant failed to flower this year. Leon and Doley have noted that many plants do not bloom consistently, giving rise to speculation that some limiting factor—light, moisture or mineral deficiency—is causing the lack of consistent bloom.

▼ A very fragrant *R. arborescens*.

Photo John Brown

Photo John Brown

▲ *Galax urceolata* in full bloom.

▼ Leon Pace, front, and Doley Bell, with *R. cumberlandense*.

Photo John Brown

On the current expedition, the group trekked up the north face of the mountain, quickly encountering a series of switchbacks. This was to be expected considering the 1,200-feet rise along the one-and-a-quarter mile route. We felt heartened as we spotted an occasional *Rhododendron arborescens,* whether by the fragrance or actually seeing bloom, along the trail.

After two hours of hiking through unfamiliar territory, we stopped for lunch still not in sight of our goal. One feature of all trips to Pace Bald is the unvaried menu: cold fried chicken and a tomato sandwich. This is the only food brought to the Bald, and one might believe that superstition is involved. During lunch it began to rain, wetting both our sandwiches and our enthusiasms.

Shortly after lunch, familiar territory was spotted, and I was introduced to the collection of plants known as "downtown" Pace Bald. *R. calendulaceum* was, for the most

Photo Leon Pace

▲ *R. cumberlandense*

Photo John Brown

▲ Yellow hybrid with long interstitial growth.

▼ Nice hybrid: *R. arborescens x R. cumberlandense*

Photo Leon Pace

part, well past. A few plants had dangling flowers to give the essence of color, and most showed a good seed crop in the process of development.

The best *R. cumberlandense* were in prime condition, but that didn't prevent a glowing description of what had been there last week. In fact, some excellent dark red specimens were recorded. Pure, or nearly so, *R. arborescens* was displayed nicely in its fragrant white, nearly white, and yellow forms. The show stoppers of the day were the hybrids, thought to be *R. cumberlandense* crosses with *R. arborescens*. Even with the limited access to sunlight, these plants show promise of excellent genetics. One can only wonder what could be done with these plants in a cultivated setting.

One disturbing element of the trip was the condition of many of the *R. maximum* seen along the trail. Some of the older, mid-size and young plants had died and left skeletons standing in place. By my estimate, as many as one quarter of the total population of *R. maximum* along the trail had died. While many of the plants were showing signs of stress, others appeared to be thriving.

Although I did not go to Copper Bald, I was told that the conditions were worse than those seen along the north trail. Possible reasons for the problem include drought conditions during the last three years and the Easter freeze last spring. It is quite possible the drought and Easter freeze combined to deal *R. maximum* a deadly blow.

Conversely, no damage was noted on any of the deciduous azaleas. There was no evidence of insect damage and the distribution of the damage seemed to be completely random. It is noted that our examination of plants within 200 feet of the trail does not constitute a study, but it does highlight the need for further investigation.

Galax urceolata (sometimes called *G. rotundifolia*) was in full bloom along the trail in large patches, and *R. maximum* plants not showing stress were beginning to open bloom.

Later review of trail guides and maps revealed that our trip amounted to a tad less than 4 miles each way and the ups and downs made the total elevation change closer to 2,000 feet rather than 1,200. It rained for the entire trip, making footing slippery and conversation limited.

Leon and Doley now report that access to Pace Bald is much better through Burning Town Gap, passing through Copper Bald and continuing for an additional three quarters of a mile to Pace Bald. After a few drowned rat jokes, the group admitted that it was a good day in the woods, and plans are underway for the next trip.

John Brown *is currently serving as ASA President with several committee responsibilities, including Archives and Back Issues in addition to duties as Vaseyi Chapter Secretary. He has also served as ASA National Secretary and Director. Current interests include landscaping a new house site that he shares with his wife, Carolyn, and three dogs. Spare time is spent roaming the woods in search of native azaleas with friends willing to share their knowledge, and trying to maintain a semblance of order on the family farm.*