

## The Cumberland Plateau's Significance in Today's World

By LinnAnn Welch



*"Grand Canyon of Tennessee" Photo by George Hornal.*

In recent years, there has been much written about the Cumberland Plateau and the dangers threatening it. The vast woods covering this region of Tennessee is quickly diminishing due to building, logging practices and other disturbances such as the introduction of non-native species. However, the plateau is extremely biodiverse and with large tracts of wild land remaining, it is well worth the fight to conserve the forests and features so unique to it.

The Cumberland Plateau is a strip of land running southwest through eastern Kentucky and passes through Tennessee into Alabama. It extends also into parts of Virginia and Georgia. The geological features of the plateau include extremely deep gorges, or gulfs, mountains, waterfalls, and stone arches. Forest composition varies from mixed mesophytic dominated by American Beech, Sugar Maple, Tulip Poplar, and ash to hardwoods mixed with pine or vast stands of pure hemlock with rhododendrons beneath. Many areas also have stands of oaks and other species.

Having lived in the rolling hills of the Western Highland Rim all my life with family ties going back to the same parcels of woods for five generations, I've often wondered why more emphasis seems to be placed on saving the Cumberland Plateau than conserving vast tracts of Highland Rim forests. The expansion of Nashville is having devastating effects on natural features in all counties surrounding the city. I experience pain on a daily basis traveling from place to place as I see hundreds of species die as lot after lot is bulldozed for suburbia. Yet more research into Cumberland Plateau issues shows that therein lies the answer to the push to conserve the plateau. There is still hope for it. It is far enough away from Nashville to not suffer from its growing pains. Crossville and Chattanooga are located on the edges of it and are not tearing it apart from within. Thousands of acres are still in a wild state, with many of the deep gorges containing old growth trees, and many families still feel a connection to the land.

Native species biodiversity is disappearing across the globe at an alarming rate. The Cumberland Plateau is one of the most biodiverse areas in the country. It has an amazing number of common and rare plant species. Animals are abundant with even predators such as Black Bear having ample room to live in remote areas without too many threats from humans. Examples of rare or endangered species include Cumberland Sandwort, lady slippers, white cedar (at Fall Creek Falls), Cumberland Dusky Salamander, and the lampshade spider. Some of these species such as the lampshade spider live only



