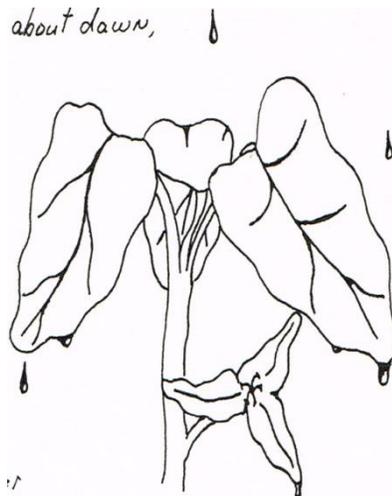


Thru Hiker March 30 to July 23 1974

Mark Strittmatter

5/19/1974, Along the Appalachian Trail

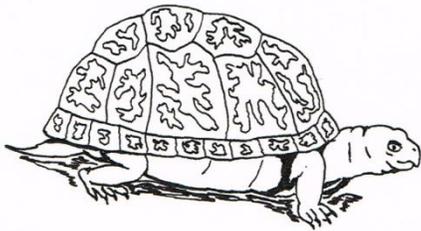
*Laying half asleep under a large beech tree, I felt a light sprinkling of rain on my face. It was very early, about dawn, but I thought I better get up and put my sleeping bag safely away from the rain. I crawled out of the bag and put on my heavy hiking shoes. I brushed the bag off as I rolled it up and strapped to the bottom of my pack. I covered it with the rain cover to insure it remained dry. I sat down under the beech tree with it's new spring leaves and ate a*



*quick breakfast. The smell of rain and ozone was strong in the air, but not so strong as to overpower the sent of old leaves and new green plants. It's late May in Shenandoah. The sky is filled with low traveling rain cloudes, but still it lightened a bit. Bird song began to filter out of the misty darkness. The first to break the night's songfast was the melody of the Wood Thrush, one of the most beautiful sounds of the deep forest. This bird is a pleasure to both the eye and ear. Awakened by the thrush, a Cardinal calls from a distant tree and is soon joined by a Robin. In a matter of a few minutes the air is filled with song. Song sparrows, Red-winded Blackbirds and Bob white Quail let themselves be known. After finishing breakfast, I stood up , brushed off the leaves, beech nuts and daddy longlegs and hoisted my back-pack on to my sholders and started the*

days hike. I traveled through woods and across abandoned fields, most of the morning. A good down-pour started just after I left camp and looked, from the cloud covered sky, like it would last all day. My rain soaked hair dripped in my face and down my neck. I could feel an occasional drop run down my spine searching for dry spot to moisten.

My pant legs were heavy with water brushed from tall weeds in the fields I had just passed through. They shimmered with wetness and made a slapping noise as they passed each other. The water slowly filtered down and into my boots. It wasn't long before the slapping sound of my jeans was joined by a squishing sound from my boots. I went slapping and squishing along a wood section of the trail, which looked more like a stream than a trail.



I came upon a turtle, a box turtle to be more precise, (*Terrapene carolina*). I was only a few feet away but unnoticed by the creature. The sound of the heavy rain had covered the noise I made, coming down the trail. I could see that he was very intent on something and a closer look revealed a large night crawler slowly coming down the trail. I moved along side of the turtle to get a better look. He was frozen in place, watching the approaching worm. I could see in his eyes, the fierceness of a mountain lion about to spring onto an unsuspecting deer. It was not until the crawler moved to within a few inches that the turtle started to make his move. Slowly he extended his neck toward the intended victim. His feet never moved. The turtle's neck got longer and longer. He turned his head a little to one side to get a better look. He stopped and remained motionless until the worm was within striking distance. I could feel the tension mounting. I thought of yelling a warning to the crawler but not knowing any crawler language or if crawlers could even hear, I decided to just wait and see how the events would play out. The worm finally crawled right under the turtle's nose. It was too much, he could hold back no longer. With the speed of a half frozen rattlesnake the turtle lunged forward and grasped the crawler's midsection in his powerful jaws. The unwary victim, upon realizing what was happening was thrown into a violent fit of rage. He started thrashing wildly, twisting and turning. The turtle was in

*for the fight of his life. The enraged crawler wrapped himself around the turtles head and like a python, tried to strangle his attacker. Slowly it began to tighten its coiled body attempting to squeeze the life from the turtle, but this only caused the turtle to clamp down all the harder. So powerful were his jaws, that the slimy beast was split in two. With any other creature this would have ended the battle, but in this case, it only made things worse. Now instead of one quarry to deal with, he was now faced with two, thrashing and twisting. I thought, at first, faced with two opponents, the turtle might run for cover. Looking deep into his eyes, I saw no fear, only the determination of a wolf after a hamstringed moose. Knowing it was time to make the kill, the turtle stepped between the two thrashing bodies and devoured one half and then the other as they flung themselves back and forth against his head in a vain attempt to escape. After swallowing the last of his victim, the turtle rolled back his head, and at this same moment, thunder rolled across the sky or was it a roar of victory from the turtle? Slowly the turtle continued his journey up the trail. He looked like any other box turtle, calm, shy and quiet, but I knew better. Inside that shell beats the heart of a lion, a fierce warrior, ready to do battle with anything that comes down the trail, maybe even me.*

M J S



1974 - Mark Strittmatter on Katahdin, Maine