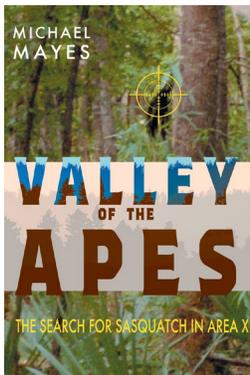


**BOOK AND
MULTIMEDIA
REVIEW**

Valley of the Apes: The Search for Sasquatch in Area X

Jeffery Meldrum
jeff.meldrum@gmail.com



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Mike Mayes is a long-time member and Investigator with the North American Wood Ape Conservancy (NAWAC -- <https://www.woodape.org/>) and currently serves as Chairman of its Board of Directors. *Valley of the Apes* chronicles a pioneering long-duration research program conducted by the members of NAWAC, whose mission statement reads: To investigate and conduct research regarding the existence of the unlisted primate species we refer to as the wood ape, also known as the sasquatch or Bigfoot; to facilitate scientific, official and governmental recognition, conservation, and protection of the species and its habitat; and to help further factual education and understanding to the public regarding the species, with a focus on the continent of North America.

This ambitious undertaking, dubbed the Ouachita Project, comes at a premium of personal time and resources, perhaps the largest obstacle to “amateur” investigation. Mayes notes the human foibles inherent in any group of sometimes fractious volunteers, especially understandable under the frequent logistical challenges and privations of field conditions. He concedes the lack of generational knowledge of how to hunt these animals and pragmatically rates their chances of success as slim at best. Yet he recognizes and highlights a commitment by members of the NAWAC to the application of the scientific method in their dedication to solving this mystery.

The group’s adoption of a strategy for the lethal collection of a specimen is naturally a lightning rod for strongly felt opinions on its merits and ethics. Mayes takes this bull by the horns right out of the gates in the preface. He immediately lays out this highly polarizing issue that is unavoidably integral to this book – *kill or not kill*. Is the lethal collection of a definitive specimen justifiable? The topic is grappled with repeatedly. The NAWAC team cites the January 2020 “Collection of Voucher Specimens” guidelines of The Animal Research Review Panel (ARRP) and Animal Ethics Committees (AECs) to rationalize their position. Mayes points out that this principle was not applied indiscriminately. In over ten years of the Project, firearms were discharged only five times.

Some would argue the point as moot since they will not acknowledge the existence of an unrecognized species of ape in North America as a legitimate possibility. Others assume Bigfoot or Sasquatch is a phenomenon of the Pacific Northwest, not the South. Accordingly, the first chapter establishes the case for Bigfoot in the four-state region of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana. Extensive tracts of forested lands blanket the hill country of this region. “if the region can support black bears, which it does in great numbers, there is no reason to think a small population of wood apes could not survive there as well.” (p. 25). Indeed, the location reportedly has a history of encounters dating back to the 19th century. Wood apes are said to be part of the landscape.

The tactics for the Ouachita Project evolved into a series of overlapping shifts

in order to sustain the presence of investigators at the research site. These initially were employing what was considered the standard methodologies: boots on the ground, cutting sign, deploying camera traps, night vigils with thermal cameras, etc. But, innovative approaches were also developed. For example, the novel use of tiny nanotracker deployed to entangle in the hair of a tall animal passing by.

The Project spans over ten years. The bulk of the book comprises a chapter for each phase, or operation, of the Project, dubbed with titles such as Endurance, Persistence, Tenacity, and Relentless. The chronological narrative spanning more than a decade becomes somewhat tedious, which is actually a fair representation of the nature of this sort of enterprise. A dedicated field researcher must be disciplined to the daily and nightly routines, which are only rarely, if at all, punctuated by evidence or "activity" -- some quite mundane, often subjective, some more intriguing, or even quite sensational. Past director of NAWAC, Alton Higgins, reflected that "events that in themselves, often serve as compelling evidence for participants, but which for many readers or skeptics merely comprise fodder for the fantastic."

The repetitive narrative would have benefited greatly from a table listing project titles, locations, times, and distinguishing events. More photos, especially an insert of glossy or color photos, would have enhanced the conveyance of the observed evidence. A generic map, without divulging specific locations in Area X, but providing

some orientation to events would have been helpful. A useful supplement, which was only first mentioned and referenced in the endnotes to cChapter 10, is the *Ouachita Project Monograph*. It provides the reader with some of these missing elements, but glaring absences of corroboration of reported encounters and discovery of trace and physical evidence remain. Mayes indicates in one of the closing chapters that a pause and pivot was eventually undertaken by NAWAC. He frankly suggests that the single-minded pursuit of a holotype resulted in the neglect of evidence collection and proper documentation. This is apparent in, for example, the lack of photos of "pristine" tracks with "toes clearly visible," or the lack of mention of any follow-up analysis of the possible blood sample. Therefore, the leadership mandated that collecting photographic evidence is now the top priority of the Project, although it appears that specimen collection is still an objective.

Overall, in *Valley of the Apes*, Mayes provides an engaging narrative introducing the NAWAC and drawing the reader into their experiences of a sustained field operation to hunt the elusive wood apes. He succinctly raises a number of issues, from the pragmatics of the ultimate mission objective to the evaluation of evidence sustaining the motivation for the Project. He provides a forthright, if brief, summary of outcomes in the penultimate chapter, "What we have learned," with the pledge that the NAWAC has not ended its quest. "Stay tuned."