

LEARNING TO CLIMB ROCK ■ PACK YOUR GOAT AND GO  
HIKING ARIZONA ■ HOW MEAN IS A 600-POUND BIRD?

# Backpacker

THE MAGAZINE OF WILDERNESS

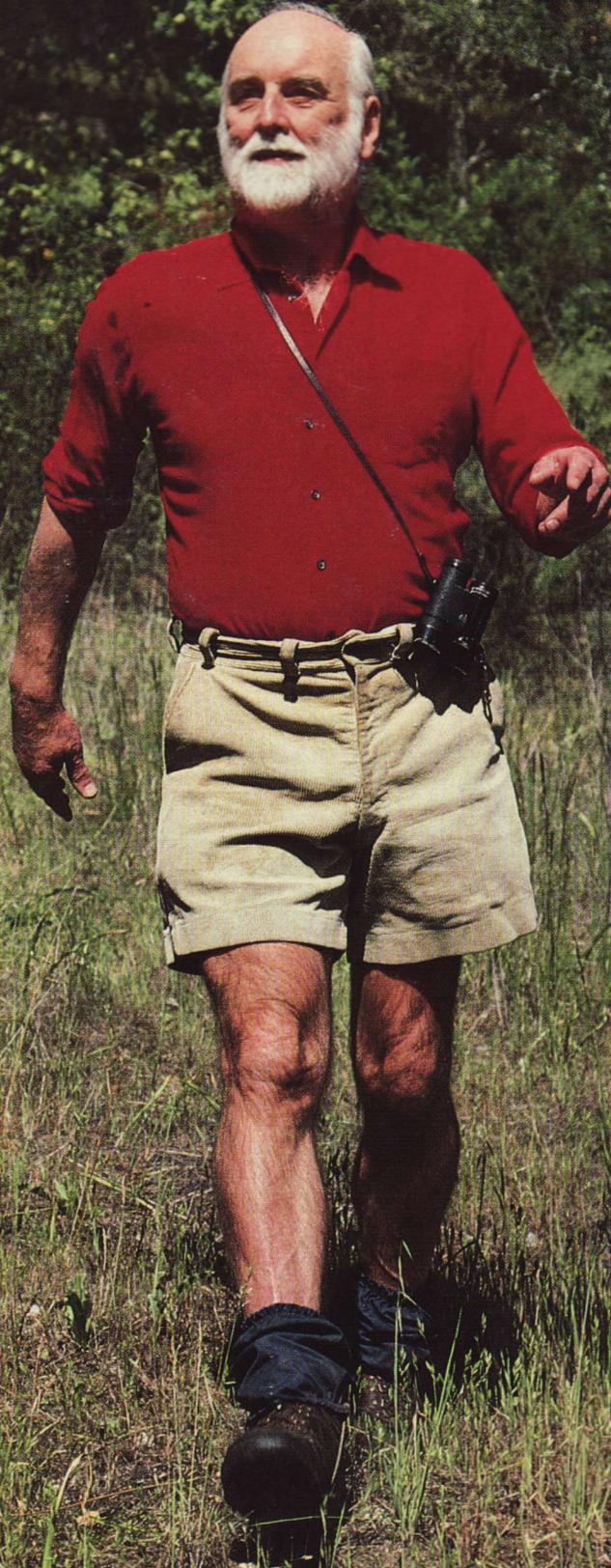
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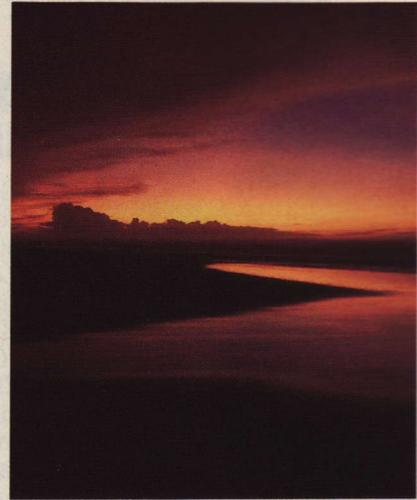
## COLIN FLETCHER

The man who  
walked through  
time and  
escaped  
to reality



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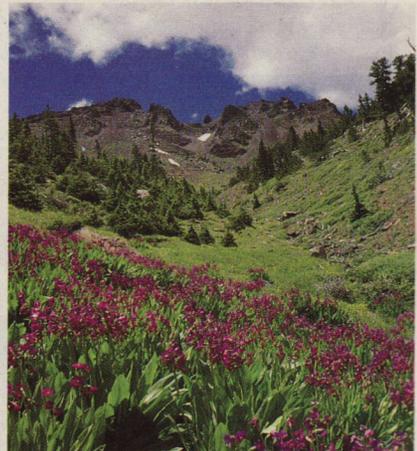


RICHARD HAMILTON SMITH

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DAMON G. BULLOCK

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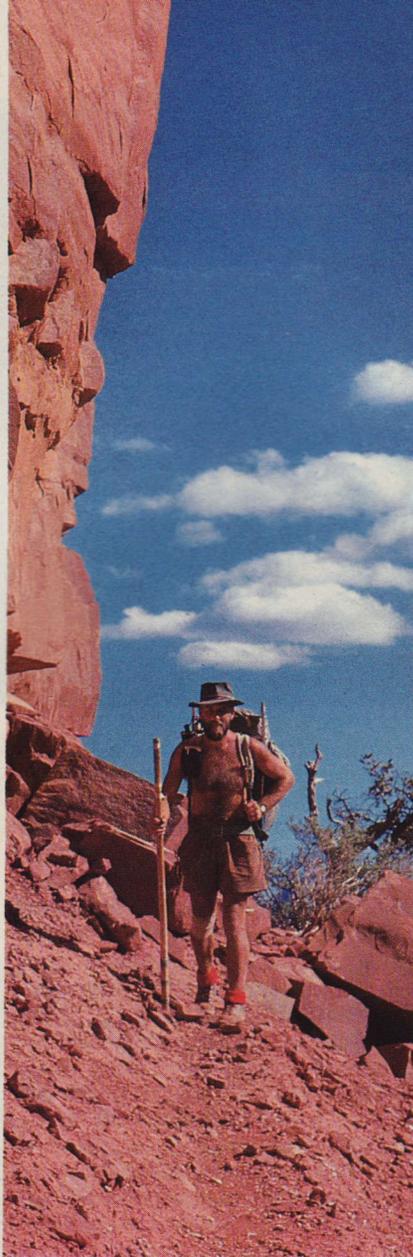
I had to sweet-talk my way through two secretaries just to have his New York editor say, "I doubt very much that he'd be interested," and refuse to give me his telephone number. Perturbed and verging on misanthropic, I kept the editor on the line explaining, complaining, lying and generally making a fuss.

Once in a blue moon, pigheadedness pays off. A week later I lifted the phone and heard a deep voice say in an English accent, "Hello, this is Colin Fletcher." Success.

A month later I was in a red Nissan rental, wiggling through the remote red hills of northern California in search of a mailbox with a decoy name on it. Considering Colin Fletcher's need for privacy, it should come as no surprise that he tries to hide his whereabouts with an alias. What was surprising was that I passed by his place three times before getting it right.

The house behind the mailbox was perched on a steep slope hidden in high grass, flowers and trees. A solid, gray-bearded man wearing black horn-rimmed glasses opened the door, smiled, shook my hand vigorously and immediately dragged me off to his office. Colin Fletcher was writing.

That's what he does. That's what he's known for. It has been exactly two decades since the debut of *The Complete Walker*, a classic that critics have since referred to as the backpacker's bible. Then came *The New Complete Walker*, and four years ago, *The Complete Walker III*. The first paragraph of each version is identical:



COLIN FLETCHER

"I had better admit right away that walking can in the end become an addiction, and that it is then as deadly in its fashion as heroin or television or the stock exchange. But even in this final stage it remains a quite delectable madness, very good for sanity, and I recommend it with passion."

A whole generation of wilderness walkers grew up on those words.

Fletcher had been at his computer screen when I arrived. Although a self-acknowledged "solitary son-of-a-bitch," he still had invited me out to his home for a weekend of walking and talking about walking. Accordingly, not more than an hour after I arrived, Fletcher suggested we take a walk. "Gets the juices flowing." He donned a pair of rugged, baggy shorts, slipped into some light hiking shoes, locked the door behind him, and led off uphill into a warm, pastel California evening.

"Every day that I don't play tennis I try to walk up the hill behind my house. At a brisk pace, it's a 40-minute jaunt. Preferably, I walk up the hill or play tennis six out of seven days a week—unless, of course, I'm backpacking. For really getting in shape, walking uphill is excellent."

Fletcher doesn't look like the kind of man who needs to get in shape. At 65, his gait is rhythmic, his legs heavily muscled, and gauging from the length and quickness of his stride, his lungs must be accustomed to exertion. By fate or function, Colin Fletcher has been walking, in some form or another, since he can remember.

# WHY COLIN FLETCHER WALKS



PHOTOS BY TED STRESHINSKY

Because it's a delectable madness  
that's good for sanity.

BY MARK JENKINS

**Reflecting on his journey during the 1963 walk, Colin Fletcher gazes down the Grand Canyon. He was the first to walk its length below the rim.**

"When I was a kid I knew that the universe was created for boys to fish in. And fishing, trout fishing anyway, involves getting there—walking." That was in England before the war. Then came six years in the service doing a rather different kind of walking, usually with a heavy pack. "And you'd think that would cure me, but it didn't."

After World War II, Fletcher moved to Africa. He farmed for several years in Kenya, then went south to supervise the construction of a road in what is now Zimbabwe. Then it was back up to the Northern Hemisphere where he spent a couple of years in Canada, ostensibly as a prospector, walking through woods. "Something close to backpacking," he recalls.

It was in the late 1950s, when the word "backpacking" was unrecognizable to most Americans, that Fletcher made his first long walk. "I was regarded as crazy. I think initially, I thought of walking up the coast. But the idea evolved into walking up California, taking the fewest number of steps on blacktop. I can remember the first road I crossed. I took as few big steps across it as I could. That's an artificial sort of thing, but it has its place in the evolution because it pushed me to take the route I took." It was a route that hugged the Colorado River from where it entered Mexico, crossed the Mojave Desert and Death Valley, rode the spine of the Sierra northward until it ran out, then marched 200 miles through sagebrush country to Oregon.

Out of that walk came *The Thousand-Mile Summer*, and a changed Colin Fletcher. "After that, immediately after that, I would go up two days, a day, a week backpacking. It became a method of operation." In 1963, Fletcher walked down into the labyrinth of the Grand Canyon, alone. Two months later he emerged at the other end, becoming the first person known to have walked the length of the Grand Canyon below the rim. The ensuing book, *The Man Who Walked Through Time*, has become another classic in wilderness writing.

A generation later, Fletcher is still walking, still backpacking and still writing about it. "The man who walked through time" has done just that. Backpacking for Fletcher has not been a fad, a pastime, or even a sport. "For me, I must say it is almost a way of life."

Dry leaves crackle underfoot as our trail contours through patches of brown scrub brush. The sun has just slid from



sight. The rich orange hue that has stained the landscape for the past half hour begins to drain away. Our conversation turns to meaning, reasons, and motives for walking.

"Sometimes it's just the sheer challenge of doing it. The degree of physical challenge changes trip to trip. Look, psychology types miss the point by calling such things masochistic or some such thing. 'Tisn't like that at all, is it? It's just a nice challenge. You get out there and you don't know whether you're going to amble for a couple of hours or go like hell for three days. Recently I spent five days in the backcountry, alone, just as a matter of course. There are times when you go and you just need physical exercise. Just getting up a hill and sweating is awful damn nice."

I notice our pace, although moderate, has raised beads of perspiration on my forehead. The hill we're walking isn't really a hill, but then it's not quite a mountain either. Something in between. The path winds beneath arching black cottonwoods, then abruptly steepens. I feel the faintest drop in temperature. The clouds have vanished. Conversation lags, and my mind begins to wander. A footnote from *The Complete Walker III* comes to mind:

"Fletcheritis is a recurring and scurvy condition (typically, a horrendous slump with variegated symptoms, uniformly exhausting and dire, or semi-dire) that oozes into existence at such moments of crisis as the onset of a new book. A different doctor, whom I had acquainted with the correct medical terminology, once told another patient, 'Hmm, in my opinion you've got Fletcheritis.' The patient stared, round-eyed. 'My God, what's that?' 'Well, the way to cure it is to go away and get drunk. And if possible, laid. Then call me tomorrow and tell me how you feel.' The

patient duly called. 'You were dead right,' he said. 'I feel great.'"

Fletcher is defining a universal condition: fear of a challenge.

Still pushing uphill, I query Fletcher about his motivations for writing *The Complete Walker* series. He doesn't respond for a moment, nor does he break

Colin Fletcher has walked more miles than many people have driven. So who better to listen to when it comes time for advice? What follows are a few choice Fletcherisms that may make for a better trek.

**BOOTS:** "In new-tech boots the nub question is the sole attachment's reliability. But the answer seems to be that, beyond gross and obvious deformity, looking will not tell you much. Other than rely on the maker's reputation, all you can do is wear the damned things and see if they hold up. The second criterion in choosing your boots is fit. The third criterion is fit. And the fourth criterion is fit."

**WALKING STAFFS:** "Although the vast majority of walkers never even think of using a walking staff, I unhesitatingly include it among the foundations of the house that travels on my back. The other day I was solemnly advised that doing so is even further out of the mainstream than when I wrote the last edition of this book. OK, call me Eddy, but I still take my staff along almost as automatically as I take my pack. It's a third leg to me."

**THE FLASHLIGHT:** "After dark you must always know exactly where

cadence. Then without looking at me, he answers. "Walking is a means to an end. It's important to be competent at it so it doesn't get in the way. It's like typing or writing. You're not particularly interested in being a good typist. It's not the aim. But you've got to learn to do it without thinking, then you can get on to what matters."

"The rhythm of walking is very important. You can't walk efficiently without walking in rhythm. You won't get there. For me, real walking doesn't begin until you've mastered the little things—rhythm, backpacking techniques, et cetera. That's rather the point of *The Complete Walkers*."

**S**ilence again. The stars are beginning to pull themselves out of the blue. Suddenly I'm aware of a certain irony. Fletcher is a solitary walker. He prefers to walk alone.

"Listen, I have walked with people. I took a 10-day walk with a good friend, who at the end declared me a bloody mountain goat. That trip went fine. I have occasionally gone with groups and I hate it. I don't feel I'm out there. With a group, I feel as if I'm cut off from what I went out there for. Walking with someone, you just



*"To me the great value is going out where you escape all the business of words."*

don't have the freedom to let your mind wander.

"To me the great value is going out where you escape all the business of words. We need this balance between the conceptual business of words, which is the world we live in most of the time, and the down-to-earth gritty reality of getting out into what I call the green world."

Another passage of Fletcher's writing comes to mind, this time from a chapter

called "Why Walk?" that I found in *The Complete Walker III*:

"Perhaps if you found it suited you, you learned about solitude. Real solitude. Not the kind with two or 10 or 20 other tarps strung up beyond the next tree bole. Not the kind where for half the day you talk with other humans, instead of with the rest of the world, with yourself. But the kind where you feel cheated if you meet more than two people a week; a bit bruised if you have to exchange more than one-word greetings. The kind in which you learn about silence and peace and the wider circles."

"Sounds like some kind of escape," I say, coming back to the conversation. In the blue darkness before the moon rises, I can't see his face, but his head jerks my direction.

"Yes, escape is true, and yet escape has pejorative connotations. The suggestion is you're escaping from reality and I don't think you are at all. You're escaping to reality. But it's not escape in the sense of escapism, which is watching daytime soaps on television, which we all know gives you cancer of the brain, and which you notice I distinguish very markedly from watching the 49ers." A low, ribald laugh

## COLIN FLETCHER ON GEAR

the flashlight is. Otherwise, chaos. My flashlight spends the night in an easy-to-feel position in one bedside boot. And I used to have a rule that when it was in intermittent use, such as before and during dinner, I never let go my grasp on it without putting it in the pocket designated for the night. Which pocket depends on what I was wearing. This rule is so strict that I rarely break it more than three or four times a night."

**FLUFFING THE SLEEPING BAG:** "Although I am told that many people fail to do so, it seems only common sense that before you get into bed at night you should always shake the sleeping bag by the edges, and so fluff up the down or even synthetic fill and suffuse it with the air pockets that actually keep you warm. At this point in the first edition of this book I wrote: 'One of these nights I must try it out.' I'm happy to report that the act of writing that sentence prodded me into doing the job fairly regularly. It's good to know firsthand that the book has taught somebody something."

**THE WARDROBE:** "I belong, unreservedly, to the fussy, thermally responsive faction. With every variation

of effort and environment I button and unbutton, unzip and rezip, peel and restore and then peel again. I find that in any but frigid weather it takes barely a mile of walking and a side glance of sunshine to strip me down to hat, shorts, socks and boots. That, I find, is the way to walk. With air playing freely over your skin you feel twice as fresh as you did with a shirt on."

**NO WARDROBE:** "Now, nakedness is a delightful condition, and by walking naked you gain far more than coolness. You feel an unexpected sense of freedom from restraint. An uplifting and almost delirious sense of simplicity. In this new simplicity you soon find that you have become, in a new and surer sense, an integral part of the simple, complex world you are walking through. And then you are really walking."

**NON-PHOTOGRAPHY:** "Photography, I suddenly understood, is not really compatible with contemplation. Its details are too insistent. They are always buzzing around your mind, clouding the fine focus of appreciation. You rarely realize this painful fact at the time, and you cannot do much about it even if you do. But that day in

the Grand Canyon, after the camera had broken, I found myself savoring in a new way everything around me. Instead of stopping briefly to photograph and forget, I stood and stared, fixing truer images on the emulsion of memory. And the week, set free, became a carnival."

**GUIDEBOOKS:** "I'm sorry now that, in an attempt to be tolerant and reasonable, I corked my true feelings. And I'm damned if I'll pussyfoot around any longer. I loathe trail guides, strong and sour from the bottom of my gut. They gnaw at the taproots of what I judge wilderness walking (or any kind of sane walking) to be all about. The whole idea, surely, is to cast off the coordinates of civilization. You want to get away from it all."

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echoes down over the lower hills.

We've contoured around the massive, dark, dinosaur hump of land and curled up beyond the trees. A bony hook of a moon is just freeing itself from the horizon. The red hills below have turned maroon and roll like ancient waves away in every direction. Our pace has been smooth and consistent, brisk even though it has been all uphill. I begin to think of the last long moonlit walk I took, the last long moonlit ski tour.

Out of nowhere, Fletcher says, "You know, if I've got a particular problem to solve, I'll walk this hill before breakfast. To me there are two places, walking and in the shower." A blanket of silence muffles his laughter.

The rough, rounded summit of our hill appears ahead of us. Not a breath of wind. An airy, cool blue light spills across the landscape. That strange sense of timelessness begins to brush across the sky. Fletcher continues:

"Sometimes I come up here and achieve nothing, except maybe to clear things a little bit. I'm not saying every time I come up I get a golden idea. Hell, no. But I do find, almost always, as soon as I get out in the green world, sometime during the day there's a moment when my mind's really going.

"It's where my head goes that makes a good walk. I come out here almost as an antidote. I live by words, but I need the contrast. It's just getting the hell up here. Getting some fresh air and getting the blood moving. It helps my thinking. Getting up here and getting the noise out of the way."

Finally we're at the top. We stop and look. We could be almost anywhere. A thin seam of red along the horizon separates blue from black. The cluster of faint orange lights far below could easily be tribal campfires in the Rift Valley, or streetlamps in a small English village.

After a few minutes, we turn and begin to saunter down through an absolutely still night. I hear Fletcher laughing to himself.

"Listen, it's really quite simple. Walking gives me perspective. To me, the idea that a beautiful grove of trees is like a cathedral is a lot of crap. The cathedral is like a grove of trees. 'Tisn't so much walking, it's what walking puts you in touch with.

"Comes down to this: Either you've got the world by them, or it's got you by them. You go out for a walk, a long walk, or just up the hill, and it loosens its grasp. You've wrenched them free. It's the testicular imperative." ■

*When he's not at his Laramie, Wyoming, home writing, climber Mark Jenkins prefers more vertical jaunts, such as those he has made up Mt. Everest and Mt. Kenya.*

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