SPECIAL FEATURE: Mountains in a Pandemic

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Mountains in a Pandemic

Winter 2020 brought the new coronavirus, SARS-Co-V-2, to the world. Few alive had ever lived through a worldwide threat of a highly contagious virus whose origins were murky and treatment yet to be found. Suddenly, the best public-health advice was to return to the days of the 1918 flu pandemic: wear masks and stay away from people to avoid catching coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). That meant that traveling out and up into distant mountain ranges could not happen, and exploring home trails and forests became a stressful affair. In mid-March, in this journal’s home range of New Hampshire’s White Mountains, the U.S. Forest Service snow rangers decided that to keep everyone safe they would cease predicting avalanches or doing rescues in Tuckerman Ravine. Soon after, the White Mountain National Forest closed many of the popular trailheads. The Appalachian Mountain Club closed its mountain lodges in Crawford Notch and Pinkham Notch and had to block off entry to its parking lots.

So we asked writers and adventurers from New York City, Boston, New Hampshire, the Alps, Maine, and Pennsylvania to write about what a quarantine feels like when it means you cannot feel free to wander in the wilds. We hope their explorations and resilience will offer some inspiration to get through the next year.

The mountains are not going anywhere.
The Closed Outdoors

A hiker quarantines in New York City

Derick Lugo

The Quarantine

My first impulse was to flee to the mountains. “The Appalachian Trail, here I come!” That compulsion was quickly dashed to pieces. The AT was not an option for me or other hikers seeking solace in its outdoor embrace. I was trapped in New York City.

In mid-March 2020, life took an unexpected turn into the unknown. New York was on lockdown; restaurants, bars, gyms, and unessential businesses were told to close their doors. New Yorkers were ordered to stay at home. The state of emergency had us quarantined in our small apartments for an uncertain period. The rest of the country soon followed suit, yet the Empire State, with a population of 19 million, was reporting the most COVID-19 cases. And with almost half of the state population living in New York City, it was no wonder the unknown virus severely affected us.

“Step back, step away from me . . . haven’t you heard of somethin’ called the coronavirus? It’s been killin’ people!” An elderly man shot the remark to an unexpected patron at my local post office. The early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic made many people scared to be around others, especially when initial reports of the virus had it being fatal to seniors. As far as he knew, he could have been infected. I was unsure what to think of all of this.

I tend to lean toward optimism in difficult situations. It’s what got this inexperienced hiker to complete a long-distance hike of the AT. My Instagram stories were full of corona jokes, and with the discovery of TikTok, I was doing all the quarantine dances. Yet, as the weeks went on and the numbers of cases grew, the tone of this pandemic was far from funny.

Before the wide spread of the virus, I rarely watched TV news. Except for the last few seconds before the news hour concluded, it seemed like all I kept seeing were reports of bad events. For once I wanted to hear, “Breaking News: The United States and China formulate a plan to end world hunger. Other
countries are eager to join the cause. And after the break, how the government is planning to supply thru-hikers with hundreds of hiker feeds all along the Appalachian Trail. Stay tuned.”

Now, the local and international news had nothing I truly wanted to start or end my day with. But once word got out that New York had become the epicenter for the pandemic, I needed to be in the know. I had hiking plans for the upcoming months, and I did not want to be caught off guard so I kept CNN on all day long, mostly on mute until I thought there was something I needed to know or if the Cuomo brothers were on.

They call it a man crush, maybe, but I was not the only one; the rest of the country was drawn to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo. His confidence,
tough voice, and clear explanation of the situation was what New Yorkers needed. He didn’t just give us casualty numbers; he took control and made us feel a bit at ease about the state we were all in. Now add his younger brother, a CNN news anchor with the same demeanor, and you have an interview that at times ended with some funny brotherly banter.

But I digress, distracted by the Cuomos. For the first few weeks, new developments of the virus, how it was being contained, and the daily restrictions were announced. Every day was a new extreme. The subways were left empty except for the essential and healthcare workers...and the homeless. Bank lines wrapped around the corner, when in the past there weren’t even lines. Making a quick stop at the supermarket was nonexistent. Resources were running low and the rush for toilet paper left me confused. (How could I have missed that this virus caused uncontrollable bowel movements?)

During the first week of the city lockdown, I began feeling pressure on my chest, followed by chest pains. It felt like I was wearing a 60-pound backpack across my chest while climbing a steep mountain. Fatigue that made breathing a challenge took over my evenings. When the fever and chills started, I knew I was dealing with something I had never experienced before.

I did not rush to the hospital. With an inadequate amount of testing available, we were asked to stay home if we had flu-like or even COVID-19 symptoms. For almost two weeks, I had the worst case of the flu. Did I have “the Rona”? I don’t know, but what I do know is that my tush did not need the extra toilet paper. Like the pyramids, the mystery of the toilet paper hoarding was unsolved. Best guess: aliens!

Daily developments continued to be broadcast; first, only the elderly and persons with underlying conditions were in danger, and children were not especially affected. Before we could finish our sigh of relief for the young, that report was not 100 percent accurate. Children were getting sick.

“Masks are not necessary. . . Oh, wait. Yeah, wear them.”

I couldn’t keep up. Suddenly the news was becoming stressful to watch, and although after two weeks, I recovered from whatever it was, and I was as healthy and as strong as ever, the news was making me ill. I wondered how many people watching the news were getting phantom symptoms.

At its highest point, 45 percent of the United States coronavirus cases were in New York. Will the Cuomos ever report good news? My bromance with them was fading fast.

How can this get worse?

“People of color are at greater risk of COVID-19.”
More than ever, I wanted to grab my pack and spend another six months (how long it took me to thru-hike) in the wilderness. Like Snake Plissken, I wanted to escape from New York, yet I couldn’t do that either.

**A Closed Appalachian Trail**

Days after the city lockdown, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy announced the cancellation of several hiking events. This included Trail Days (the AT’s biggest hiking festival) in Damascus, Virginia, and the closing of several shelters along the AT. A week later, the ATC advised hikers to stay off the trail. Their decisions coincided with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s recommendation to stay home in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus.

This was a gorilla-size monkey wrench thrown into my 2020 plan to hike and tour my AT memoir in the hiking towns I had visited during my 2012 AT thru-hike.
No hiking and no contact with others?
I’m done, put me away. This was a hard one to swallow.
For me, the AT is not only about the mountains, the scenery, and the terrain. It’s also about the interaction with others on the trail. I could not have finished my thru-hike without resupplying in small towns, hostels, trail magic, and hiker feeds. I agreed with the ATC decision to urge hikers to stay home and attempt a thru-hike when the pandemic finally passed. Not necessarily because I thought hikers could infect each other and locals or vice versa, which was a possibility, but for me, my thru-hike was more than just a trail that led me up and down mountains. It was, to my surprise, about the community. The people not only helped make my thru-hike a success, but they also made it truly enjoyable. If that had been taken away, then I would have missed out on a vital part of my journey. I felt for the class of 2020 thru-hikers who had to cancel or postpone their adventures but in my experience, like my gear, I would not have completed my thru-hike—well, not easily or not as enjoyably—without human interaction.

Not Only Surviving, but Thriving
When we were advised to stay indoors, I, like many outdoor enthusiasts, understood the reasoning, but my hiking plans were disrupted. My initial reaction was diva-like.
“What the further?!”
I felt like a grounded ’tween being told that I couldn’t use all electronics, including my cell phone. The kid in me was screaming, “When you’re done stomping on my ambitions, why don’t you sweep them away so I’m not bearing witness to its lifeless form? AAUGH!”
After my exaggerated moment was over, I eventually understood the reasoning behind the restrictions, and although I was not thrilled with them, I accepted them. The next step was to adapt and move forward. We were all going to pull through these life-altering times. The other side of these challenging times was going to be bright. But I didn’t just want us to survive; I wanted us all to thrive.
I took to social media. I needed to see how hikers of all sorts were coping. It seemed that the quarantine had extended the hiking off-season. Many were using this extra time to continue planning a thru-, section- or weekend hike. Staying busy in this way kept the anxious hiker busy and sane. Research material, such as hiking books, either guides or memoirs, were read. Podcasts
and YouTube videos were also used in preparation. Spring hikes may have been disrupted, but in our hearts, summer and fall hikes were bound to still happen, and we were going to be more than ready.

A socially distant walk near the George Washington Bridge had to suffice. COURTESY OF DERICK LUGO
Respecting the government guidelines to avoid groups, stay six feet apart, and wear face covers—hikers did just that. Yet there were still tons of open trails where a safe social distance hike was possible.

As a fellow hiker put it, “I don’t think most hikers are staying off the trail entirely. They are just changing perspective, choosing easier less populated hikes near home and being cautious to avoid gatherings.”

That may be so. I had to adjust my way of staying active. I was living with my partner on the top floor of a five-story brownstone walk-up. Three long flights of stairs replaced my mountain climbs. Thirty minutes up and down those steps left me feelin’ like I was on the approach trail to Springer Mountain.

Yeah, hikers were discouraged, yet we adapted and kept an open mind.

While our public lands, trails, and greenways were closed, were they healing, like India’s cities, where a clear blue sky could now be seen because of a lack of air pollution? I saw photos of luscious green grass growing on trails that no one had trotted on for weeks. Was this a blessing in disguise? Will a rejuvenated wilderness make our outdoor experience that much better when we can finally trek? One thing is for sure, the hardworking trail maintainers, who are as eager as anyone to get out onto the trail again, will have much work to do.

Until that grand day arrives, adapting and coping with the current situation has become a worldwide mission, especially for those who thrive on treading along a trail and breathing in the crisp, clean mountain air. Video communications such as Zoom and social media live streaming are used to share stories and photos of past hikes, as well as plans for future outdoor activities. All spring it was becoming clear that our feelings and motives for being out in nature were as sacred as the trail and mountains that evoked them.

For me and many others, the year drastically changed because of COVID-19. My book tour for *The Unlikely Thru-Hiker* and hiking plans screeched to a halt. Writing outdoor stories and attending Zoom book clubs became my new virtual book tour. Like the reflection on the sunglasses of my book cover, I had my sights on climbing mountains. I was aching to be out there again. Being in the presence of beautiful scenery can leave us in a heavenly trance, yet as Robert Macfarlane expressed in *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (Penguin Books, 2013), “But there are also the landscapes we bear with us in absentia, those places that live on in memory long after they have withdrawn in actuality, and such places—retreated to most often when we are most remote from them—are among the most important landscapes we possess.”
The pandemic has indeed left many of us with a ravenous appetite for the outdoors. We are ready to rage up a mountain as soon as our feet touch the trail. The absence of the outdoors has truly made our hearts grow fonder. How much more appreciative are we all going to be when we finally get to freely explore any trail our heart desires? Greater respect and wonder will run through us with a thrill we have never felt before.

Derick Lugo—trail name Mr. Fabulous—is the author of *The Unlikely Thru-Hiker* (AMC Books, 2019). He lived in New York City for most of his life and in July moved to Asheville, North Carolina.

The Vertical Mile

*An obsession of repeated climbs*

Stephen Kurczy

At a secluded crag near my house, there’s a climbing route called Malevolent Eye. It’s 32 feet high, with a 3-foot overhang and a difficulty rating of 5.10–. It’s tricky enough to challenge a good climber, with several blade-thin holds and a slippery, insecure lunge in the middle.

A couple of decades ago, the prolific Connecticut climber and guidebook author Ken Nichols ascended Malevolent Eye 50 times in one day. His record stood unchallenged until early 2020, when a mutual friend of ours—Brian Ludovici, then an undergraduate at the University of Connecticut and president of its climbing club—climbed it 70 times in a day. When I heard, I told Nichols—who is in his early 70s and still climbs religiously—that I wanted to try to set a new record and possibly break 100.

Connecticut doesn’t boast the soaring cliffs of New Hampshire and Maine, so climbers here have to get creative to do long routes—especially when outdoors areas are closed because of a new coronavirus. The American Alpine Club in March discouraged climbers from visiting cliffs so as to not spread...
the virus, while New Hampshire’s sport climbing area of Rumney and New York’s Shawangunk Ridge altogether closed. But under controlled conditions at local crags where social distancing is the norm, climbing in small groups appeared to be in keeping with the Connecticut’s governor’s executive order that “individuals should limit outdoor recreational activities to non-contact and avoid activities where they come in close contact with other people.”

Nichols was skeptical of my goal for Malevolent Eye. I’d fallen repeatedly when first trying the route two years ago and since then had only managed ten ascents in a day. My wife, Jenna, and I had recently had a baby, a fact that earned me endless ribbing from Nichols that my climbing days were numbered. Still, he loved the idea of a competition developing around who could do the most ascents of Malevolent Eye. Since he was recovering from a shoulder injury and couldn’t climb himself, he volunteered to belay me for the effort—while of course maintaining a six-foot social distance.
On a cool morning in early April, we hiked the half-mile into Husky Rock (so named because nearby University of Connecticut’s mascot is a husky), tied an anchor around a tree at the top of the cliff, and hung a static rope. I had a coffee canteen. Nichols had his peanut M&Ms. We were prepared to be there all day.

I started climbing at 8 a.m., feeling infinitely far from 100. My plan was to do reps of five, with a five-minute rest between sets. The climbing sequence went like this: Side pull with left hand, high crimp with right hand, step feet onto blade-thin edges, bump right hand to higher crimp, cross left hand over right hand to medium pocket, match hands, shuffle feet, bump hands up to deep pocket, shuffle feet, move left hand up to a rounded and downward sloping hold, high step right foot, bump right hand to the “malevolent eye” sloping hold and then to a deep pocket for a hand jam. Shake out. Reach high, reach high, reach high again, and mantel to a stance on the cliff top.

I kept a tally with rows of stones so I wouldn’t lose count of my total. The first three hours I averaged 20 ascents per hour, falling for the first time as I was about to surpass Nichols’s record. He promptly lowered me to the ground, as per his rules of climbing: The ascent only counted if I didn’t fall. There would be no hangdogging. By 11 a.m. I had finished 60 reps. I gave myself a half-hour rest.

The temperature was in the 60s with full sun. My fingers were pink and burning. My head felt foggy, partly from the climbing but also from sleep deprivation, having been kept awake the previous night by a crying baby. I lay on the ground and closed my eyes.

What was propelling me onward? It seems absurd to suggest I was climbing for the “glory,” as who cares how many times an obscure, short cliff in the boondocks of Connecticut has been top-roped? There’s an arbitrariness to all athletic “achievements,” be it sprinting in a circle or running 26.2 miles, hitting a ball over a net or throwing one into a 10-foot-high hoop. And what I was doing was nothing compared with the monotonous pointlessness of the Sri Chinmoy Self-Transcendence 3,100 Mile Race, which consists of 5,649 laps around a city block in Queens, New York. What motivates humans to such endeavors? They drive “people to persevere through unpleasantness in the hope of grander rewards in the distant future,” social psychologist Adam Alter wrote in a 2015 essay on long-distance runners in The New Yorker. People who run around a city block 5,649 times (or who endlessly climb Malevolent Eye) “are driven by something more secular than spirituality—they could be hungry for meaning, in general.”
At 11:30 a.m., UConn student Pratham Shah, who happened to be president-elect of the climbing club, appeared at the top of the cliff, saying he’d be joining us. I hopped up to reclaim my position on Malevolent Eye.

I wrapped cloth tape around each of my fingers to forestall further skin burn as well as staunch several openly bleeding sores, but the tape pulled off quickly. My pace slowed to 10 ascents per hour—half the speed I’d been climbing the first few hours. After each climb, I’d return to the ground, take a swig of water, close my eyes for a minute, then do another ascent.

I fell for the second time on number 70, my body subconsciously stumbling over the idea of surpassing Ludovici’s record. When I reached 71, Nichols rewarded me with a Cadbury chocolate bar. I ate it with two ibuprofen. Nichols had a devilish grin on his face, betraying his enthusiasm that another climber, aside from himself, was becoming obsessive-compulsive, to a potentially alarming degree, about racking big numbers climbing. During a half-century of climbing he has meticulously tracked all his climbs, recording exactly 120,000 clean ascents by the end of 2019.¹

One route he established is called the Great Wall of China, traversing 9,000 feet across the Trapps cliff of the Shawangunks and considered the longest climb in the world. This made my endeavor on Malevolent Eye seem tame.

Spurred on by chocolate and pain relievers, I hit number 100 at 3 p.m. and triumphantly added a 100th stone to my rows. I figured I might as well try to do a few more reps, because my goal was never to stop at 100—it was to climb as long as possible. It was a self-created “escalation trap,” as psychologists call it. According to a famous 1999 paper by George Loewenstein of Carnegie Mellon University about why mountaineers choose to climb mountains, “Fame, self-esteem, and the desire for mastery may bring people to the mountains, but other forces keep them at it when conditions get miserable. One such force is the almost obsessive human need to fulfill self-set goals.”² In my case, the mere act of setting a goal to endlessly climb was compelling me onward.

At this point, Nichols had to leave to pick his wife up from work. I was out of water, having consumed three liters plus another half-liter of coffee. It made sense to stop. But Nichols promised to return in 90 minutes with more water and to continue belaying me. I recruited Shah, the UConn student, as my substitute belayer.

¹ On the occasion of his 100,000th lifetime ascent in 2016, Nichols was profiled by Michael Levy for the Summer/Fall 2017 issue of Appalachia.
² George Loewenstein, “Because It Is There,” Kyklos 52 no. 3 (Summer 1999): 315–343.
My new goal was to do 110 reps, which sounded like a nice round number. Once I got there, my goal became to hit 122, which was the personal single-day record for Nichols—and in all likelihood the all-time single-day ascent record for any cliff in the Northeast, he said. Because who else in their right mind does stuff like this?
Just as I topped the cliff for number 122, Nichols reappeared. It was as if the momentousness of my surpassing his record had conjured him back. He retook the belay from Shah, who headed home for dinner. I popped two more ibuprofen with fresh water.

My fingertips had gone numb. My hands were bleeding. An oozing rash appeared near my wrist from repeatedly doing a hand jam. I had also memorized the route so completely that I felt totally confident in ascending, save for one move toward the start. Before each ascent, I would tell myself two things: “It’s just one move,” and, “My fingers are pillows,” as a way of convincing myself to ignore the pain in my fingers. The recitations became my mantras.

Now my goal was 130. Then 140, which would double the previous record. Once I got to 140, I figured I might as well round up to 150.

Nichols was periodically breaking into chuckles. As I approached 150, he suggested a few more. “If you climb it 157 times, you’ll have done more than 5,000 feet of climbing!” he said.

It was now 6 p.m. All I’d eaten that day were two pieces of toast, a chocolate bar, a Clif bar, an apple, and some Goldfish crackers. I was exhausted. I wanted to be done. I stared at the ground.

“You’re so close to 5,000 feet,” Nichols said. “Why not just do seven more?”

When I hit 157, I figured I might as well do another three to reach an even number. As I neared number 160, Nichols moved the bar again. He was scribbling numbers on a piece of paper.

“Steve, I am not kidding,” he said, “but I did the math and if you climb 165 times it would be exactly 5,280 feet—a vertical mile!”

As much as I was ready to be done, I was charmed by Nichols’s enthusiasm. He’d been belaying me all day, fueling me with chocolate, refilling my water, and giving constant encouragement—despite the fact that I was trying to break his old records.

“You just have to do 165!” Nichols said. “It’s too perfect. And then, I promise, I won’t egg you on anymore.”

When I completed the 165th ascent, Nichols dubbed me a new inductee of the Mile-High Club—I don’t think he realized “mile-high club” is slang for people who have sex on airplanes. I’d climbed the equivalent of both The Nose of El Capitan and Half Dome in Yosemite in a day. We turned back-to-back and elbow-bumped. I arranged my 165th stone on the ground.

Climbing Malevolent Eye 165 times was absurd, a trivial repetition of human movement. But isn’t this how life in general can feel, perhaps especially amid self-quarantining and a pandemic? Hit the alarm clock, drink
coffee, log online for work, walk to the table for dinner, climb back into bed, repeat. Life is a series of repetitions that can feel like an endless loop.

But in the words of the philosopher Albert Camus, meaning comes from embracing the absurd. This theme is at the heart of his philosophical essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus.” In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to repeatedly roll a boulder up a hill. Camus argues each human lives a kind of Sisyphian life. But by embracing life and putting a shoulder to the boulder, I can create meaning. “Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world,” Camus wrote. “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

It was dusk as Nichols and I coiled the ropes and walked back to our cars. I got home at 8 p.m. Jenna shook her head when I recounted my day. “It sounds like a hot dog eating contest,” she said of my endeavor on Malevolent Eye.

My hands were so red and raw they felt like they were burning when I ran them under water. That night I was on baby duty, and I winced in pain when my 5-month-old grabbed my fingers. In the morning, I could hardly pick up a cup or type on a keyboard. My finger pads were sensitive to the touch. My hands hurt to clench. My right pinky finger had a subungual hematoma (bleeding under the nail). For days, I woke with burning fingers and needed to run my hands under cold water, apply lotion, and pop ibuprofen to ease the throbbing. And I was happy.

“Bravo!” Nichols emailed. “What a feat! Very impressive! If you were not sore today, I would have written you off as an extraterrestrial.”

Stephen Kurczy is a Connecticut-based journalist. His book The Quiet Zone, about an Appalachian town where cell phones and Wi-Fi are banned, will be published in 2021 by Dey Street Books.
“Wait a minute: It’s right there!”

The weedy, wide logging road at my back, I faced a dark green tunnel of mossy ground and spruce-fir walls. The narrow route fell cleanly into the category of “hiking trail.” It was late April 2020. After three or four frustrating and unsettled weeks trying to find the best evening close-to-home hike for my dogs and me, I had finally arrived: the Scudder Trail.

A few weeks earlier, when the sled dog mushing and racing season had ended but before the usual hiking season fully began, I looked for trails where I could take my dogs, routes with a south-facing aspect and low elevation, less ice, and easier traveling. My biggest emotions have always needed big spaces, and this pandemic spring brought a lot of big emotions. In a wash of anxiety and fear, March moved to April, the transitional month that has always been hard for me emotionally, and especially so this year. Rooted to my desk for work, the daily question of where to hike with my dogs connected me to bigger things: the positive attitudes and love of my dog team and of my mountains.

“My mountains.” The possessive here is not of the actual landscape, but representative of the life I’ve lived in these mountains. My memories that live in and among the ravines, ponds, and ridgelines: hiking trails I’ve built, National Park Service boundary lines I’ve painted, places where I got a little lost off-trail amid the disorientation of the hillsides. Throughout the pandemic spring of April and May, and into June, I walked over and over again on the same trail, as ground turned to grass and brown turned to green leaves and snow turned to moss, every trip an incremental step forward, while the world I experienced at my desk stalled in uncertainty.

When I have the time to look up and wonder at the world, I usually find myself sitting on the floor by my bookcase, flipping through the twenty years of my hand-penned journals. There, I locate my former self and track
the small decisions and significant events that have directed my life’s path to where I am now. In a similar fashion, during the eight weeks on the Scudder Trail, I met my old memories in the mountains.

Those trail and mountain memories were a tool to decoding and understanding where I stood, both geographically and emotionally, in the current pandemic reality. Looking back isn’t just an act of nostalgia. It can be a force of strength in a world of fear.

For almost ten years, I’ve lived in the town of Shelburne, New Hampshire, on the northernmost edge of the White Mountain National Forest. One of the first colonized towns in the valley, Shelburne follows a braided
Androscoggin River woven between steep ridgelines. Topography and geology confine houses to the clusters along two roads that parallel the river. Shelburne is a town of about 350 people adjacent to larger towns of Gorham (2,600), Berlin (7,000), and Bethel, Maine (2,600). We are quiet and a refuge for others. Rising on the north edge is the rugged Mahoosuc Range, to the south the softer spine of the Carter-Moriah Range, and the treadway of the Appalachian Trail ties the two together. I chose Shelburne because the mountains are larger than the people, and the people have listened and respected that—no houses crawl up ridgelines, and there are no tourist-driven guesthouses or hip brewpubs. The mountains are in charge.

I chose to live here also because I love the Mahoosucs, a range that has always escaped the population and recreational sprawl of easily accessed areas like Franconia Notch. Surrounded by privately owned timberland, containing absolutely no 4,000-footers, and where most hiking trails are accessible by the rutted, potholed, and dusty Success Pond Road, the Mahoosucs have always felt raw. A sparse set of campsites and shelters remain unstaffed except by a roving caretaker. I was that roving caretaker for two years, when I formed the basis of this love and understanding.

The Mahoosucs harken to the land and heritage of the 1800s, the early days of White Mountain hiking and trailblazing, a place referred to by nineteenth-century explorer Marian Pychowska as the “Success Wilderness,” not because a federal agency and act of Congress declared it so, but because of the wilds it held. When I step onto a trail on these hills, I breathe easier. I know how wide this system is, partly because I know the history and have stared at the maps that show the 30,000 acres of the pure land of Success just on the other side of the ridgeline.

A few popular trails ripple up the flanks of the Mahoosucs: the Centennial Trail that tracks the Appalachian Trail before it reaches the Mahoosuc Trail and the side access paths of the Peabody Brook, Austin Brook, and Dryad Falls Trails. Popular is a relative term, here, as the trailheads barely hold spaces for two or three cars. “Popular” in Shelburne usually means one car parked there. The pandemic redefined popular on a microscale in Shelburne. The trail to Mount Crag—a less-than-one-mile hike on a well-marked trail through conservation land, leading to a stunning vista—became truly popular. Pre-pandemic, I had hiked that trail many times in the evening with a dog or two and rarely seen anyone or any car. Suddenly, that changed. I saw neighbors, I saw folks from upriver, and I met someone who brought her family on the hike she had last done as a teenager. Every day multiple cars crowded the tiny
lot. I also saw cars with “from-away” plates that brought up a surprising xenophobia in me. In the woods, I gave people a wide berth to pass me. I wanted something else—space—less because I feared contagion but more because I sought a place with fewer people where my mind could be at rest. Knowing of other trails, I resolved to drive past the Mount Crag parking lot every time I saw a car there, pushing on to the logging roads and quieter trails around Mill Brook Road.

Mill Brook Road has been my entry point to the Mahoosucs for almost fifteen years. The first time I set foot on it was in May 2008 as an employee of the Appalachian Mountain Club. It was also my first time in the Mahoosucs. Here I found myself on private timberland and the trail management system at the same time. My job that day was team member of the AMC Trails Department rite of spring, the annual helicopter airlift. It delivers materials for summertime construction, trail work, and maintenance and takes used supplies out.

A lot happened quickly that day. I went from downtown Gorham to Mill Brook Road, where the helicopter roared while my coworkers rushed to load lumber and supplies onto the hooked cable hanging down. I rode in the helicopter to the summit of Mount Carlo, ran down to the campsites, and then stood off to the side while the rotor blades pushed air wildly into the bending tiny spruce trees and the tiny cable hook lowered down. I helped load a bundle of a dismantled outhouse onto the cable. Barely an hour had passed since I had left my car in Gorham.

My supervisor and I rushed back to the summit of Carlo, where the helicopter would pick us up after finishing its other jobs in the range. We paused for a moment and a breath. The two-way radio at our feet buzzed with conversations between the helicopter pilot and the crews on the ground. The radio crackled, the helicopter blades hummed in my ears, and the wide green expanse of privately owned forestland of Success Township spread out at my feet. I saw what the Mahoosucs are: a place where people and forest live close together in trust.

On that same road, in 2011, my dog Quid and I roared uphill in a tiny red Chevy pickup. Suddenly an 18-wheeler barreled down the steep hill on its way to the mill, weighed down with a load of trees. It almost ran us over. The trails were cut over, exposed on all sides to thinned out overstory and new piles of discarded treetops. I learned to keep an eye and ear out for the articulated movement of the skidder with the cleated chains on its giant tires, holding aloft piles of newly cut trees officially now turned to timber. In the ten-year
cycle of management, loggers returned here again in 2019 or so. This is a constantly shifting landscape, with the benefit of an improved road, so I could access the trails and the swimming holes in my no-clearance Toyota Prius.

Mill Brook Road meets the paved North Road at a subtle green street sign. It gives no indication of anything up there other than inconsequential private timberland, land often missed or unseen by hikers. I once read an article in the *Boston Globe* by a travel writer who hiked up the road, musing about the death and decay and spookiness of periodically logged forestland, a place barely offering value for him as a hiker and adventurer. The tone that writer took was problematic for me. It was the tone of a conqueror. He placed himself in a position of authority as someone from a civilized location. That view often underlies the tension in rural towns in tourist destinations. Yet I myself have not been immune to it. During the pandemic spring, I needed to let go of my own assumptions of beauty, trails, and mountains to find a place of safety. I needed a place to hike.

With a mathematical calculation on available time, the time available between my workday ending and my need for dinnertime, I needed a hike that was less than an hour and a half round trip door to door. Unanchored from newly popular Mount Crag, I considered the Scudder Trail, which starts on Mill Brook Road. From the other times I’ve been on that trail on my way to a Shelburne peak, either Mount Ingalls or Mount Cabot, I remembered that trail as a wide, grassy logging road, where ticks clung to my socks and muck flowed into my shoes, sun at my back as I followed a path that had the logic of a logging road. The first time I’d gone there was in 2010, with Quid. I chose Scudder for a weekend hike of curiosity. I had never repeated it, for there were other, longer, and better trails I hiked for work as an AMC employee. I am not immune to the same blindness and acts of unseeing as the *Boston Globe* writer.

The Scudder Trail meets the privately owned Mill Brook Road about a mile up, where *trailhead* means an intersection of two roads with a handmade sign pointing the way. The entire length of the trail itself is unprotected, passing through 5,000 acres of forestland that is part of a sort of archipelago of tracts from Ontario to Maine managed by one company. In early spring 2020 I started using the Scudder Trail, only traveling up it for ten to fifteen minutes. Before turning around, I sat on a decent stump at the edge of a snowfield, where the bare trees enabled a view across the valley and where the dogs sniffed and explored swampy areas. I rested my mind and ended my day after a steep climb uphill. I stopped at that stump because I had made up
my mind that continuing toward Mount Cabot was a longer commitment, a longer walk.

Then, on April 25, I walked past the snowfield and stump. That day I had enough time and spiritual and physical energy to keep going. I learned the shocking truth that I had been stopping at the threshold of where the trail left the wide logging road and skirted conservation land. I stepped through a narrow tunnel, a series of orange blazes, and a one-foot-wide treadway. The trail was right there, the summit less than 15 minutes farther. My dog companions that day were redhead Squan, whom I'd raised from birth, and blue-eyed Gem, one of my lead dogs. I turned to them and said, “We found it!” Squan happily launched herself at my face (a trait she unfortunately had inherited from her father).

Powered by a new fully achievable goal, a summit that we could reach, hiking up Scudder to Mount Cabot provided a purposeful anchor to the uncertainty the pandemic world created.

Not long after we’d found Mount Cabot and settled into a new routine, the White Mountain National Forest shut down—sort of. Not actually shut down like government shutdowns, since staff members were still employed, but shut down by declaring trailheads closed. Reserves and preserves in some towns and land trusts did the same. These public lands may be forever green, but their protection requires a balance between use and conservation. It is not easy to close public lands, but in mud season of the pandemic year, car and foot traffic to many trails skyrocketed. The WMNF felt it had to close its trailheads.

My friends who still work in land management and recreation management, for AMC and the WMNF, were caught in a tough place of upholding public safety and resource protection while the public demanded access. One had the job of turning people away from the blocked-off parking lots. Another spent a day hiking past gates to put up signs, which someone tore down a day later. For a brief time, some unseen standard of public and mental health seemed to be demanding a higher need than resource protection: the right of longtime seasonal second-home residents to shelter in their properties looming over fragile rural communities. So many seasonal communities deal with tension between those who live normal lives all year and those who prefer to see it as a vacation destination. In my own valley and elsewhere around the national forest, the pandemic only exacerbated these tensions. Those who didn’t have a second home also looked to public lands as a place they had a right to visit. This added fuel to a raging fire.
Meanwhile, over in the Mahoosucs, the Scudder Trail remained open. These trails are usually painted as vulnerable: cut over, lacking investment, difficult to find, unattractive to hikers. They cross land as an afterthought, the primary ownership reason preserved for the timber resource to be cut and paid back to investors. I’ve seen the management maps for these properties. They show protected green of public land in negative space, while the timber lots are darkened and labeled. There are few trails, there are no houses; there are only the lot numbers, logging roads, and landings. Sure, public access is allowed because the Northern Forest allows passage through private land. These are not the cultivated trailheads that govern decision-making on the WMNF to the south or the AT that runs along the spine. When these trails are shut down, it’s not because of public health or overuse, it’s because of harvesting timber. These plans are never announced to trail managers, so more than a few times in my trail work, I’ve walked into the woods to find things changed.

It has also not been lost on me that when lodging and restaurants tied to the outdoor tourism industry have been closed and will be challenged to reopen, the timber industry is still at work. For as long as I’ve lived here, I’ve sat at tables and conferences and been interviewed by New Hampshire Public Radio where the discussions use the tool of a false either/or. They say that New Hampshire’s North Country is either timber or tourism, when both have existed alongside for a long time and will for some time more. The Mahoosucs are not much different from when Marian and Lucia Pychowska explored them in the 1870s. Even that Boston Globe writer mused on the irrelevance of timber. Yet in this pandemic timber cutting kept on, the paper mill upriver produced toilet paper, and it changed its supply practices and made that paper available to residents during the early weeks of supply shortages. Tracing the fiber-supply chain, trees cut from this forest could have become that toilet paper.

I left the logging road and kept walking uphill. The Scudder Trail joined the Red Trail and then the Yellow Trail, arriving rapidly at the Mount Cabot loop for the sweeping view into the valley and west toward the Presidentials. While I could have formed a loop using the color-blazed trails of Philbrook Farm Inn, for weeks I kept going up and down Scudder as an out-and-back. The names of these trails, the simple naming by color, appear on the map as almost out of place. In urban parks such as the Blue Hills Reservation outside Boston or a mountain bike park I found once in New Jersey, trails are often color-coded for ease, recognizing hikers who don’t need a fancy
name; they just need a blaze to follow. These color-coded trails of Shelburne, tied to the Philbrook Farm Inn and built for the inn’s guests, are in many ways the same: These are the “urban” trails of my own town. These trails are so invisible to some that at times they have been left off the AMC White Mountain Guide and maps. The Scudder Trail is different, an effort of recent reclamation by my local hiking club, the Shelburne Trails Club, only ten years old.

Walking the same trail almost every day, I rotated through my dog team’s nine young puppies, each 10 to 11 months old. I gave them one-on-one coaching time, paired them with a suitable adult dog, and watched how they approached the world of the trail. I tested them on the trail junctions, seeing how they acted without direction from me and seeing which choice they made and why. Hoss blew through intersections determined to be in the lead no matter what. Page looked at the correct trail direction and then chose the other precisely to be contrary and adventurous. Speck padded along quietly and calmly, accurately following weeks of dog scent. The entire family of Squan, Bruce, Skee Ball, Riptide, and Jameson made whip-smart turns because they believe in making good decisions. During our hikes, we met exactly one porcupine, flushed numerous grouse, and spooked a bear into the trees. There were a lot of flowers, biting insects, and eventually brilliant green leaves. In eight weeks, I saw two cars, and two hikers, one a neighbor, and one a hiker I never placed.

As April turned to May and neared June, I started noticing something. It had been a long time since I’d hiked on the same exact trail almost every day, watching the snow melt out and the new ground appear and dry out. I’d grown accustomed to tracking the change of spring in my front yard, snow melting quickly with an extended bare brown limbo, before grass growing, crocuses popping, and leaves greening out. In the lingering spring at higher elevations, where the gap between snow and summer is short, there’s an immediacy of transition. Witnessing that visible change across the mountain ecosystem on a daily basis helped my heart and mind anchor, as there wasn’t a lot to trust in the pandemic reality but one can always trust snow to melt. “This was snow, only a week ago,” I said to the dogs, much as I announced receding snow to Quid the winter we lived at the edge of timberline as caretakers for the Randolph Mountain Club’s Gray Knob cabin.

I have always been one to try to level mountains and wilderness to the backyards, always afraid of the risk of holding mountains as a separate dreamy place. We restrict ourselves too much, placing mountains on lists
to be conquered in some residual colonial way or feeling that we are only truly ourselves in a place far away from our homes where we’ve made full lives. The flip side of this is that it is as well to ask myself the same questions, as the mountains are my backyard. As the snow finally releases its hold on the higher elevations, and higher and longer hikes beckon, even as a resident of this valley, I waver a little bit. Am I complicit then in the new problems?

A friend’s comment during the trailhead closures in April has stuck in my head: “I feel like I’m on the edge of articulating something.” She wrestled with the tension of supporting access to public lands but was so disappointed by the negative reactions of hikers to trailhead closures. Living in a rural trail town, which is quiet half of the year, she also recognized that there is a firmly established culture and economy that involves second-home owners and tourists, some of whom are her friends; yet she saw them as the vector they posed. Those flashpoints form an ecosystem of human relationships on top of the over-loved White Mountains, and our communities are under stress. Our relationships with the mountains we love are tenuous, even on our best days. Maybe that’s why I’ve felt more comfortable lately in the raw, less formed land of industrial timber. It is an area unclaimed by these formal relationships, almost a returning to the beginning of our trail-based history in the White Mountains. A connection to the mixed and often difficult history of community.

At the end of May, I decided it was time to try Mount Crag again, but only if the parking lot was empty. My companion would be Gemma, one of my main lead dogs who is a loner and prefers going without another dog partner. On a muggy Friday after a brief downpour, chances were good we’d find no one there, and that proved to be right.

But as I took the first few steps, I had mixed feelings. I felt guilty for walking on a trail that I know was being hammered with more use than it could take, and shocked at so much change and difference in the flowers and leaves after eight weeks of absence. More than anything, I felt homesick for Scudder. I wondered what was happening on that logging road just to the east. The next day, I turned back to Scudder with the puppy Skee Ball and an adult, Flora, two dogs who had been communicating that it was their turn for adventures.

We walked over dense green grass on the logging road and through the densest fog of mosquitoes I’d seen. Pushed forward at higher speed, without a reflective moment to stop. The trip to the summit and down took less than
an hour. I wasn’t able to fully soak in the stunning clear vista, the valley dried out of moisture and sharpened with green. I had to stay in motion constantly, both hiking and waving my hands. Closing the car door at the end in relief, I realized that the car had become the safe place. Scudder had gotten me back on my feet, and it was time to go somewhere else.

SALLY MANIKIAN has been writing for Appalachia since 2008 and is the journal’s News and Notes editor. She previously worked for the AMC’s Trails Department. She now works for The Conservation Fund in New Hampshire and Vermont and is grateful for the chance to turn from technical grant writing to heart-driven essays here. She lives in Shelburne, New Hampshire, with her disabled brother and sister, her partner Chuck, and the 25 athletes of Shady Pines Sled Dogs.

Going Small

A father and daughter do backyard field research

Dan Szczesny

IN A SMALL PATCH OF CRUMBLY DIRT AND MULCH, NEAR THE WEATHER-
worn trellis where the hydrangea had begun to bloom, my 5-year-old
daughter, Uma, plucked a beetle off the wood and held it up to the sun.

“Daddy, look Daddy. Isn’t she cute?”

“She” was a tiny winter firefly (Ellychnia corrusca), that peculiar but com-
mon “dark firefly” with the bright red bands. Uma dropped the beetle into
her palm and it scuttled up her arm. After a moment, the insect spread its
thick, black wings and lifted off. It disappeared over the top of the shed.

“Awww . . .” the tiny entomologist, my child of the garden beasties, said.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Look.”

Her eyes widened. Spread out up and down the trellis and side of our shed
were a dozen fireflies crawling this way and that. The adults hide out under
tree bark and can survive subfreezing temperatures. They begin to reemerge
in the spring when the maples begin flowering, sometimes clustering around sap flows.

“Do they live here in our backyard?” Uma asked.

“These do,” I said. “It means springtime.” I told her the fireflies came out with the flowers.

_Uma Szczesny with a winter firefly in her yard in Manchester, New Hampshire._

DAN SZCZESNY
Watching for spring for us normally means taking peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in our backpacks on what my daughter calls “adventure days” to the White Mountain National Forest or state parks. Last year, Uma had earned her first hiking patch through the New Hampshire Division of Forests and Lands’ Fire Lookout Tower Quest Program. Near the end of fall, she climbed to five of the state’s fire towers. She got stronger with each hike. She seemed to draw energy and confidence from the wind and granite.

We had had big plans for 2020. We’d taped a map of New Hampshire to my office wall and pinned the eleven fire towers we hadn’t seen yet for later hikes. We were going to splash in Echo Lake in Franconia Notch State Park and maybe even spend a night in an Appalachian Mountain Club hut. But by mid-March, it was clear that the world was changing and we needed to adapt. Our little family gathered around the kitchen table to talk about our new life, our plans becoming local and smaller. We’d explore our neighborhood, use field guides for city critters, plant a garden, and let the wild come to us.

My daughter was disappointed at first, of course, but we explained that nature is unlimited and, like the virus that kept us home, the outdoors has no boundaries if you look hard enough. I thought of the thirteenth-century poet Rumi, who wrote, “Beauty surrounds us, but usually we need to be walking in a garden to know it.”

So, we decided to enforce simplicity: We stayed home and turned to our backyard to feed our souls. Even in a dense neighborhood in Manchester, New Hampshire, our hometown, our little family is blessed with an enclosed, expansive backyard. My wife, Meena, plotted out the vegetable garden. We adorned the birch and pines with birdhouses and hummingbird feeders. We collected rainwater in enormous barrels, let the rhubarb run wild, and scattered as many seeds we could find to the wind.

Uma and Meena would scold me for tossing away apple or watermelon seeds instead of planting them. Our compost bins became an obsession, creating fuel for our backyard soil. Last Halloween’s pumpkin, still bearing mold-fuzzy seeds, sprouted a pumpkin plant in the compost nursed by nothing more than what appeared to be Uma’s strength of will.

We waited, we grew impatient, frustrated at our inability to go to nature. But the days got longer and warmer, and week after week, day after day, the wildness began to emerge.

One warm morning in May, my daughter and I pulled some old plastic Adirondack chairs out of the garage and set them up in the sun, overlooking the backyard. We brought out some snacks, a couple of New England flower
and wildlife guides, and wore hats. We were trying to practice field research in a small, pocket blank book I had bought. Asking a 5-year-old to sit quietly and watch for wildlife is expecting a lot, but she focused her attention like a tiny scientist. That is, until a downy woodpecker (*Dryobates pubescens*)

*The junior naturalist takes a break by the back of the house.* DAN SZCZESNY
swooped into our yard and perched on the metal suet holder we had hung from a thin branch of our hobblebush.

This became too difficult for her to sit back and watch, and she developed another strategy for absorbing our backyard friends.

“Daddy, can I go closer?”

I nodded. “See how close you can get, but try to stay as quiet as possible.”

She crouched low to the ground, a small Jane Goodall in pink shorts and a T-shirt that said, “Puddle Jumper,” and began to take tiny steps across the yard to the bush. I expected the bird to take off immediately, but it didn’t. The junior naturalist got to within five feet. Four. Then three. Only when she raised her hand to the jittery bird did it alight and float just over her head to a pine tree across the yard.

She tore after it, all pretense of sneaking gone. Amazingly, the bird once again let her get within a few feet before lifting off again, shooting straight back to the feeder. Uma followed, and the game repeated.

Uma was screeching with joy, waving her arms, her legs pumping hard to keep up. After a few minutes of this, the woodpecker jolted straight up into the sky and drifted away, a black and white winged balloon. Uma stretched out in the grass, spent.

The American naturalist John Burroughs liked to point out that humans never really commune with nature: Rather, wildness provided the conditions and the solitude and “the soul furnishes the entertainment.”

I walked over and looked down at my daughter, breathing hard, arms outstretched, the dandelions entwining with her hair, cheeks red from laughing.

“That bird liked me,” she said.

“It really did.”

“I can’t move, Daddy.”

I lay down in the grass with her, the tops of our heads touching, and we watched the clouds drift by for a couple minutes, until the squirrels and fireflies and woodpeckers began to return. Not a mountain in sight.

Seasonal Affective Reorder

Which reality is capable of a pause?

Sarah Ruth Bates
It’s the second-least attractive New England season, and my mom and I are on a walk. The least attractive New England season is the gray sludgy stage of late winter, when the leftover snow has cohered into gritty piles that refuse to melt. We’re just past that. Last fall’s leaves carpet the ground, still whole. The snow preserved them, the sun has melted them out, and they look like they might’ve just fallen. The world’s simple, here: creamy sky, pen-sketch trees, leaf carpet.

We’re climbing the hill behind the park. It’s the closest wild space to our suburban house. Not so wild: You can see the football field where the high schoolers play. Fenced yards delineate the edge of these woods. It’s less “idyllic sanctuary,” more “where the high schoolers escape adults.” But it’s still the woods: maples, pines, leaf-covered ground. I know these are last fall’s leaves, and this now is the inhale before spring. If I’d been dropped here without knowing the date, though, I wouldn’t be able to tell if it was a late fall or an early spring day, snow coming or going, days shuttering or opening.

I’d flown home from graduate school in Arizona a week prior, planning to stay ten days for spring break. I had not yet flown back. Instead, I taught and took classes from my childhood bedroom. My parents and I walked most afternoons, often near water: the Charles River or a reservoir—lush excesses to me after months in the desert. Fog hovered above the water, and droplets condensed on pine needles. It felt like decadence. I’d been living where spots that show up blue on the map run dry more often than wet.

Time passed, and felt like it didn’t. My life, resuming, would have happened in Tucson. The world had, impossibly, paused. The usual time markers meant nothing. Events got postponed. They’d still happen—same place, same people—but in an indefinable later. No classes or teaching or talks or parties or groceries or appointments—for you, too, I know.

At first, our daily neighborhood walks required armor: masks but also hats, gloves, and boots for the cold. I borrowed my dad’s long underwear. The snow didn’t melt, but stuck. I threw snowballs at my parents (gently). They laughed but wouldn’t fight back. Lame.

On various Zoom calls I watched the natural light in Arizona windows not fade, as my face darkened. I refreshed my email for word on when I’d be

*By the Charles River, “the staticky hum of news and anxiety quiets.”* TROY ALMEIDA

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expected back in classrooms. We are assessing the situation. Crocuses up. We are not sure at this time. Magnolia bloomed. We will not resume in-person classes this spring. The maples pressed out celery-green buds.

These days, we often walk in the meadow near our house. The grass is patchy yellow. The landscape’s not ugly, but it’s scruffy. In a usual year, around this time, the colleges roll carpets of sod over their own scraggly grass. This year, they are skipping commencement and leaving the grass to grow on its own time. Here in the meadow, it will be a while. The robins look shabby, too, their red breasts not yet vibrant. But there is no shame in looking like you’ve had a hard winter.

Sometimes, even before the virus, “real life”—life in American society—seemed to me imagined, and absurd (“business casual,” fistfights over sports teams). That’s magnified, now. The pandemic has punched through the walls of our sets.

In the Julio Cortázar story, “La Noche Boca Arriba,” the protagonist slips between sleep and wakefulness. He’s lying on his back in the doctor’s office—then on his back, about to be killed in a ritualized sacrifice. The story begins at the doctor’s, but it ends with the sacrifice, revealing that world as the binding plane of reality. Cortázar’s trick relies on the reader’s assumption that the first known world must be the real one.

I talk to my grad school cohort from my parents’ backyard. They say I look green screened into my background. The scene I’m in appears faked.

Walks are interludes, breaks, from “real work” at the computer. But which reality is capable of a pause? I walk, and remember again that the natural world is happening, as it always continues to, and I am just running in place inside a small and walled-off part of it. In the woods, the staticky hum of news and anxiety quiets. The pines have put out their new growth, bright and tender as a pear. The red-winged blackbirds scream, conk-ka-REE!, stopping for nothing and no one. Why would they?

That line, If a tree falls and no one hears it, does it make a sound? The arrogance of it! We thought our human-made world had inevitability. Then, we stopped it. So much less of it was essential than our egos wanted to believe.

I call the outside “the woods,” even when I’m in the desert, because this is my nature. I know how to trust a foot planted on granite, wet or dry, lichened or clean. I know the give-spring of a wooden bridge through a muddy path. This particular wild is what I am a beast of.
A rare genetic disorder makes people unable to sleep. It comes on in adulthood. When it comes, it kills. The mind and body cannot stay on all the time. Rest has to balance activity. You have to go into the putting-back-together place sometimes. It’s not an exact analogy, of course. I don’t need the woods to survive. But I need the woods to do well. I forget that, sometimes. That forgetting, and the attendant wondering how much it really matters that I do well if I’m getting a lot done, that is a symptom of the spell that the woods breaks.

In the meadow, the grass has grown as high as my knee. I watch the wind whiffle it. The sky is as bright a promise as you can believe. I admire it, and I love it, and I loved it gritty and snowy and scraggly and brown, too.

My dad says the cure to jetlag is to walk outside during the sunset. You speak to the animal of your body in a language she understands. These months unfold that exposure on a grander scale. I’m showing my body the seasons. Today the maples have unfurled their leaves, like a thousand thousand tiny bright still-drooped umbrellas, a thousand thousand brave forays back into this world. I watch them, smell them, walk under them. I am readjusting my body to the cycle of change.

Sarah Ruth Bates is a writer and second-year candidate for an MFA at the University of Arizona. Her essays and interviews on adventure, medical ethics, and life have appeared in this journal, the Boston Globe Magazine, WBUR’s Cognoscenti, and elsewhere. Read more at sarahruthbates.com.
Androscoggin Constant

The town belongs to geese and bears

Judi Calhoun

When the world went quiet, I took my sketchbook out to the Androscoggin River to capture the *Branta canadensis*, Canada geese. I used woodless pencils . . . steel gray, sleek, and cold as winter to touch. I lined them up in a silver tin like branchless trees. H2 graphite issues a lighter line, one step up from HB, at the center scale of pencil grading standards. Creating doesn’t always require excellent tools, although they help.
Making the first mark is always connection, soul to spirit, almost sacred. The beginning is vital to the paper and pencil relationship. I felt it somewhere in my soul. I was careful not to invade too deeply into the paper’s texture. Long sweeping arch shapes create silky feathers isolating beautiful features defining each stunning quill. The air was alive with scattered snow flurries. I drew my turtleneck up to my ears. But for the splendor of these winged creatures, I braved the bitter cold. What artist would not?

I have always tried hard to understand the mechanism of our changing seasons here in the Great North Woods of New Hampshire, where I’ve lived with my husband for more than fifteen years. Here, winter is long. Snow feels like such a final postponement of spring. But birds make winter in this woodland community bearable. They come soaring, honking, and squawking across the sky in winter darkness—a wondrous symphony outside my window. These creatures that share our world haunt my dreams with visions of flying.

I cannot see them but hearing their song brings a certain comfort. They’ve made it home safely. This simple migratory routine that succors my belief that life can be normal again even amid a global pandemic.

The birds never worry about snow falling on spring flowers, nor do they care how our human world is getting along during the COVID-19 pandemic. Birds have only love on their minds. The majestic Androscoggin represents new life, the birth of yellow, fuzzy baby geese.

When the wind tried to steal my drawing-paper, I turned away. The birds with their long necks and kind eyes followed me as I strode quickly across Route 16 back to the house. Spring snowflakes melting against my skin, I hid my sketchbook beneath my jacket and rushed inside my studio, now cluttered with books, sketchpads, paintbrushes, silly things only I understand.

I held my breath like the rest of the world, hearing news of this pandemic, my heart breaking for families of lost loved ones. I wasn’t sure if I should worry. Was it the end of the world? I pondered things I hoped to do but had never accomplished. No. It was not over. That chubby dame in the Viking hat had not begun her aria. Besides, it’s not in my nature to panic, as it does no good to worry. I found the best way to cope was to lose myself in creativity. A Chinese proverb: “The birds of worry . . . fly over your head, this you cannot change, but that they build nests in your hair, this you can prevent.” It is always a choice. So, I became lost in my creative world of words.

A tremendous part of my peace comes from my faith in an intelligent designer. With so many bright youth declaring their advocacy of a nihilistic
philosophy, my belief system could be considered archaic and not very popular. I shrug it off. I see myself holding, in one hand, a shield of faith, in the other a powerful sword, the sharpest—my pen.

I expected to wake up one morning and feel the world changing. I did not. Life here on the Androscoggin stayed steadfast, immutable. There were subtle changes. Neighbors called to see if we were all right. Did we need anything? Hardworking young people bought food and picked up prescriptions for shut-ins. What we have here everyone in the world wants: people caring about people, an old-fashioned America. I sometimes feel a little guilty to be a part of this uncommon life in our thriving woodland paradise. I am so grateful.

I read an article on a unique phenomenon in animal behavior happening across the globe since the COVID-19 outbreak. Wildlife began appearing in unusual places because of the silence on earth from government-imposed lockdowns.

My own unusual animal encounter happened one glorious day in March when a couple of geese came strolling across the road away from the river. Perhaps they wanted to get a gander at my empty garden beds. I liked to think they came to visit me. After all, they had seen me with my sketchpads by the water, always watching.

My husband is a wooly man, slowly turning into Santa Claus, badly in need of a haircut since the barbershops deemed nonessential businesses had closed. He excitedly started yelling, with true Paul Revere flair, “The geese are here! The geese are here!”

From my window, I watched two of them exploring my yard. A couple, one a little delicate, the other rotund. They pecked at my lawn, honked at the house—calling me out to play. I could hardly breathe. It felt almost magical. Should I assume or entertain the idea that they came to discover me, as I have explored them?

They ambled like my husband; the stress and fears of the pandemic world do not exist to them. Perhaps both the birds and my husband sway on the fringe of existence where the peaceful flow of the river dictates their rhythm of life.

I thought maybe the geese were lovers. No . . . an old married couple. He honked at her, It’s time to go. He turned to leave, but she stayed. He honked again, louder. She didn’t want to leave; however, eventually she followed. They waddled leisurely into the middle of Route 16 holding up traffic.
By now, they must have been aware of their own star power. They reminded me of elderly couples I’d seen at the beach the previous summer, mindlessly strolling into traffic, having every confidence the cars will stop.

Afternoons around 3 o’clock I go for a walk. There is a gaggle of birds down toward the walking bridge along the river, near the decaying remains of rusty logging-train rails, spikes still embedded in the splintering wood. I stand still, eyes on the sun sparkling off the water. It doesn’t feel like we are living through a pandemic. Being here seems almost prosaic, as if I should don a lab coat and catalog the birds rather than simply enjoy their beauty.

I opened my sketchbook and started to draw. Suddenly I felt uncomfortably aware of how oddly quiet it was. Across the street, the schoolyard was empty. I used to hear the happy sounds of children’s voices rising in the chaos of joy. I hardly saw children anymore, as if they had all left the planet.

This shelter-in-place order must have been harder on children in well-populated areas. Here, families practiced social distancing by hiking, fishing, or canoeing. A few still jogged, yet most of our sidewalks were empty.

The large gossiping parties of my feathered friends moved away, and not too far, a comfortable distance as if they too practice social distancing. When
I followed, they shifted away again. Now I spoke softly, letting them know it was OK. I meant no harm.

I’m no expert on geese; I’ve learned their behavior, figured out the dynamic. The loudest honker gives a sharp warning, is in charge. I read that bird conversation depends on the age of the goose. The oldest of the rank honks out orders and the others follow.

I never thought I would be living where, on any given day, I might glance out my window to see a family of black bears strolling down the street, heading for the river. Yet this spring, during the pandemic lockdown, the black bears were bolder, coming out more often than ever before. Folks living here are intimately familiar with our family of bears residing in the woods just up the road. When you run into a bear, it’s as uncomfortable for you as it is for the animal.

My neighbor Gregory Norris, a writer, lives at the very edge of the woods. He has had many misadventures with bears. One warm day, as he sat on the sunporch, the largest bear tried to get inside, destroying the porch door. If this had been the city, the bear would have been hunted down. I shudder to think what could have become of the creature. Gregory had to fix his door, and while not happy about that part, he did not begrudge that bears sometimes act like bears.

Down the street, the local pastor walking her dog encountered Mama bear. When they startled each other, the dog barked; Mrs. Bear ran off. Most of the joggers and walkers carried cell phones, with an app whistle or horn.

It was spring—bears were ravenous. The local newspaper warned people to take down feeders, as the bears would destroy them to get at the seeds inside. The last thing you want to see outside your picture window is a hungry bear devouring birdfeeder seeds while watching you.

Some days the geese called me from my studio. I rushed outside. The cold wind was biting. I tucked my hands inside my sweater. Now, once again, I was suspended in sensory splendor watching their dramatic acrobatic ballet soaring gracefully into the white sky, diving, and spiraling before a backdrop of dark snowy trees. I don’t believe there is a more beautiful sight.

I yearn to share this moment with all who suffer. So I offer up a prayer for the dying and wish I could change the world.

Judi Calhoun is an artist and writer who lives in Berlin, New Hampshire.
Annotating Darwin

The more we learn about living things
how the crimson on a sumac
begins near the ground, rising
night by chill October night;

the clearer it becomes that life’s processes
the springing forth, the gathering
of light and storing of sap,
the letting go in a shower of gold

are based on the same
chemical and physical laws
claiming each leaf and every
life back to the song

we see at work in a stone or a glass of water
—poured with a bow to the cloud,
pond, North Atlantic—bow
not much different from a prayer

Polly Brown

Polly Brown’s new book, Pebble Leaf Feather Knife, from Cherry Grove Collections (2019), includes a number of poems first published by Appalachia. She’s written about war and peace at the University of Massachusetts Boston’s Joiner Institute and helped organized plein air poetry events on a Massachusetts hillside. She and her husband have been doing more of their hiking on the trails managed by the Seven Lakes Alliance in Maine.
Lockdown in the Alps

All quiet in Chamonix

Doug Mayer

Anyone who has touched a climbing rope utters with reverence the name of the French town at the base of Mont Blanc: Chamonix. Its glaciated peaks and its 15-mile-long V-shaped valley just below the 4,809-meter peak, have been at the forefront of alpinism since Jacques Balmat and Michel Paccard first gained the summit of “Le Mont Blanc” on August 8, 1786. This journal first mentioned “Chamouny” in its December 1884 issue.
Even some of the mayors of Chamonix (current population 8,906) have alpine stories to tell. Maurice Herzog, whose team made the first ascent of 8,091-meter-high Annapurna, held the office from 1968 to 1977. Current Mayor Eric Fournier runs high-elevation ultramarathons. “I trained for 45 minutes,” he quipped when asked how he prepared for a 100-kilometer race around half of the Mont Blanc massif.

Nick Yardley, a guide and mountain rescuer from the White Mountains of New Hampshire, has climbed for three decades in Chamonix and calls it “the place to come to test oneself against the milestone climbing routes of such heroes as Walter Bonatti and Riccardo Cassin,” two of the Alps’s famous climbers.*

In Chamonix, through World War I, the 2018 flu pandemic, and World War II, ice axes were always swinging.

Until, at noon on March 17, 2020, in the world’s birthplace of alpinism, everything stopped.

**Le Confinement**

The coronavirus caused a seven-week lockdown. Facing surging infection rates and the prospects of overflowing hospital emergency rooms, the French government took a series of decisive actions, starting on March 12, when it announced that all schools and universities would close, indefinitely. Next, large gatherings were prohibited, and cafés and restaurants closed.

Finally, on March 16, French President Emmanuel Macron went on national TV to announce the start of a mandatory home lockdown, which became known as *Le Confinement*. In Chamonix, locals took to the mountains for a final fix, uncertain what the future held. Emily Geldard, a hiking guide and longtime resident, grabbed her skis and climbing skins and headed for Le Tour, a small valley village not far from the Swiss border. “Although the ski lifts had closed the day before, we turned up to a packed parking lot,” she

* The Italian climber Bonatti pioneered technically demanding routes on the world’s highest peaks, including the first winter ascent of the North Face of the Matterhorn. He died in Rome in 2011. His Italian contemporary, Cassin, made over 2,500 ascents, including more than 100 first ascents, such as a technical ridge named in his honor on Alaska’s Denali. He was a decorated World War II resistance fighter, who died at age 100 in 2009.

*A seven-week lockdown left the normally bustling streets of Chamonix, France, completely empty.* KATIE MOORE
“Looking down the run, you could have mistaken it for a busy ski day, but with most people moving up rather than down!” Geldard was glad she went. “It felt like our freedom was about to end.”

For my part, I had planned to attend the popular Pierra Menta ski mountaineering race in Arêches, 90 minutes from Chamonix. Considered one of the world’s great mountain races, the event draws competitors from around the world and thousands of spectators, who ski deep into the Beaufortain mountain range to cheer the skiing athletes as they climb and descend challenging alpine terrain on lightweight skis. Pierra Menta, of course, was off for this year. Suspecting a lockdown was coming, a friend and I nonetheless kept our hotel reservations, taking what we thought were reasonable sanitary precautions. We enjoyed two days of quiet ski mountaineering—and on the
third and last day, I fell and broke my arm. At the hospital the next morning, I chose to wait outside, the small, poorly ventilated salle d’attente already filled with sick-looking, coughing patients. An MRI revealed that surgery would not be necessary, and a friend gave me a ride home. It was, I decided, an act of genius. If I had to break a bone and miss a season of spring skiing, at least this time around there would be no FOMO, or Fear of Missing Out.

The vibe of town had already started to shift. Normally, Chamonix has a lively nightlife, with many bars, pubs, and restaurants open into the early hours of the morning. Geldard’s husband owns the popular Big Mountain Brewery. “It was already different, with people avoiding hugs or kisses when meeting. There was lots of chat about COVID and speculation about the upcoming confinement.”

When it came, the confinement was strict. Anyone venturing out, Macron announced, would need to complete a form called an Attestation de Déplacement Dérogatoire. Fines were levied for improperly completed paperwork, with repeat offenders facing a penalty of up to 3,750 euros, or about $4,300, and six months in prison. Time outside was capped at one hour, and approved reasons for leaving home were few. The government allowed just one hour of exercise and only within one kilometer of your residence. Within a few days, leaders added a cap of 100 meters of climbing above home. The goal was clear: reduce hospital admissions and free up medical staff for the impending tsunami of COVID-19 cases.

During the confinement, I was living in an apartment just at the one-kilometer radius from downtown Chamonix. On the second full day of lockdown, I filled out my attestation, signed and dated it, adding the time, and struck out for a walk. Chamonix, famous for its busy pedestrian-only downtown and bustling outdoor cafés and restaurants, was a dystopic ghost town. Gendarmes, the local police, were very nearly the only people out, checking papers and IDs. Of the half-dozen residents I saw, one was half-slumped on a bench outside the mayor’s office in Place de l’Église. She caught my attention and today lives in my memory for one notable quality. She was coughing violently.

Confined, Les Sportifs Cope

In short order, a wave of illness swept across the country. On March 31 alone, 7,578 new cases were reported across the country. On April 4, the country recorded 2,004 new deaths that day; on April 15, 1,438 were dead from the
virus. The daily new cases and death rates dropped dramatically by mid-May, but cumulative deaths would reach more than 30,000 by mid-July.

In Chamonix, several of my friends were sick with a range of symptoms. One of the valley’s strongest ski mountaineering guides, Fred Bernard, battled a severe COVID-19 infection at his home in Le Tour. At one point, he drained an oxygen bottle saved for clients. Geldard, with whom I had recently shared a long car ride, fell ill. At home a few days into confinement, I began to experience light flu-like symptoms that lasted ten days. I wondered if I had been lucky enough to gain immunity without much personal sacrifice.

Down valley, in the village of Servoz, an American high mountain guide from Saint George, Vermont, had started his confinement a few days before the rest of the country. Brad Carlson, age 31, had been climbing with a friend who contracted the virus from a client. Carlson, only the third American to go through Chamonix’s École Nationale de Ski et d’Alpinisme’s high mountain guide program, also holds a PhD in alpine plant ecology and works part-time as a researcher at Chamonix’s alpine environmental research nonprofit, CREA Mont-Blanc. Carlson’s wife, Hillary Gerardi, is a sponsored mountain runner for Black Diamond and worked at six of the Appalachian Mountain Club’s White Mountain huts between 2005 and 2009. Carlson and Gerardi have lived in France for nine years, the last three in Chamonix.

In many ways, Carlson and Gerardi are representative of the Chamonix community—overachievements included. High-level sportifs, their living depends on time in the mountains, sometimes with tourists tagging along, other times pushing their limits, hard. “If it’s a beautiful Saturday and you’re not working, you sure as hell better be out sending hard or doing something rad,” says Carlson, who likens the vibe to a treadmill—cease your relentless forward motion, and in the blink of an eye you’ll be jettisoned off the back.

Carlson, who has a low-key presence and a gentle demeanor, is both wise and thoughtful. He found a silver lining in confinement. “It was a really positive experience for me. I needed to slow down.” The couple took time to enjoy their backyard, having lunch outside and exploring local trails in their village, even as the pandemic raged at their doorstep—an irony not lost on either of them.

The more typical Chamoniard reaction, however, was a bit more angst-ridden. Climbers, trail runners, and backcountry skiers slowly began to chafe against the lockdown. After a full moon, residents spotted ski tracks high on the Mont Blanc massif. A few trail runners admitted privately to completing duplicate forms, noting the time on the second form an hour later, so
they could double their time outside. Other residents gently tested boundaries. Colorado native Rob Coppolillo, who lives in Chamonix with his wife, Rebecca, and two children Dominic and Luca, delicately explored the fringes of the 100-meter cap and was promptly admonished by a local gendarme. “He was very polite, with a big smile,” said Coppolillo, who thanked the officer. “I was going a bit stir crazy and sure enough, it bit me in the ass,” he confessed.

**PGHM Responds**

The local mountain police, *Le Peloton de Gendarmerie de Haute Montagne*, or PGHM, were at the ready for the cat-and-mouse game. With their helicopter, Dragon 74, they patrolled the peaks, occasionally landing to fine the few climbers and skiers brazenly violating confinement. They watched the GPS app Strava, looking for *les sportifs* who neglected to keep their phones off. They flew drones, hid in the trees near bouldering areas, and stopped trail runners, asking to see their sports watches—some of which were ticking well past the one-hour mark.

Chamonix’s airborne athletes weren’t immune to the itch, either. In a moment of poor judgment that is already becoming legendary in the valley, one paraglider couldn’t quite restrain himself. The problem? He lived in a building with a number of PGHM employees. His climbing rope provided the solution, however, and in the middle of the night he rappelled out his window, climbed above Chamonix, and happily sailed over the sleeping town. When he returned, PGHM members were lying in wait with a few questions about the dangling rappel cord.

Midnight rappelling aside, most Chamonix residents took the confinement in stride. Danny Uhlmann, a mountain guide from the United States, started an online training program for his fellow guides. Guide and paraglider Dylan Taylor organized his peers via the messaging service WhatsApp. When American guides Mark Houston and Kathy Cosley fell ill, the group brought the longtime Chamonix guides their groceries. (Cosley later got tested and was negative for coronavirus antibodies. Houston decided not to get tested after Cosley’s negative result.) Chamonix’s trail runners went virtual, supporting each other on a popular local Facebook group, Wild Trail Chamonix. For their part, Gerardi and Carlson set up a cycling trainer, pull-up bars, and rings in their yard that Gerardi had scored right before the looming lockdown. “We made ourselves a *Deep Confinement* Spotify playlist and generally embraced training hard in a 500-square-foot space,” said Carlson.
**Le Déconfinement Arrives**

For Chamonix and the rest of France, the first phase of *le déconfinement* came on May 11. France’s Minister of Sports issued painfully conflicted guidance: climbing was allowed, but climbers needed to maintain 1.5 meters of spacing—impossible on a narrow belay ledge. One could set foot atop the summits . . . but please don’t stay long. Mountain sports were approved for training, but clients were not yet allowed. In the Haute-Savoie, the mountainous region of France that is home to Chamonix and more than a dozen other mountain towns, the regional government chimed in, noting that hospitals would be near capacity, and the usual rates of mountaineering accidents would not be acceptable. “The chance of overstoke was very high,” Carlson said,

In general, though, alpinists took the intent of the decree to heart. In Chamonix, there were a few accidents. One skier fell 600 meters in the Cosmiques Gully, off the Aiguille du Midi, and was seriously injured. Two weeks after the deconfinement, Hugo Hoff, a past winner of the Freeride Junior World Tour, fell 700 meters and died while skiing the Gervasutti Couloir, on the east face of Mont-Blanc du Tacul. A professional, sponsored athlete, he was just 20 years old.

In town, Chamonix remained eerily empty, the result of a new 100-kilometer travel limit. A few cafés and restaurants opened for take-out only, and small groups of friends awkwardly rejoiced in seeing each other, tapping elbows in lieu of the famous French *bise* on the cheek. They did their best to remember the new 1.5-meter *distantiation sociale*. Nearly all wore masks, and posters went up reinforcing the new norms.

Three weeks later, on June 2, France entered phase two of *deconfinement*. A much smaller than usual clutch of climbers and skiers gathered outside Boulangerie Le Fournil on Avenue de l’Aiguille du Midi, downing a café au lait while they waited for the early morning tram up to glaciers below the Aiguille du Midi, where they would have instant access to the alpine world they so missed.

**An Uncertain Future**

In recent years, Chamonix has metamorphosed. The largest events are now trail races like the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc and the Marathon du Mont-Blanc, each of which bring tens of thousands of mountain runners and onlookers to the region. Climate change, meanwhile, has been melting the permafrost that acts as glue, holding together classic alpine climbs. In
September of last year, an estimated 100,000 cubic meters of rock collapsed on a portion of the Mont Blanc massif, falling on to the Glacier des Pèlerins, below. The dusty plume was visible for miles. And now, guides, shopkeepers and others who bank on alpinists and trail runners showing up, are wondering what the summer holds. “The forecast is for close to zero international clientele,” Carlson said. He and his colleagues at the Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix expect business to be about 15 to 30 percent of normal, their few clients being regional tourists looking for adventures close to home.

Cosley, who has been guiding in Chamonix for two decades, wonders if it’s the end of an era. “I go back and forth between thinking we’ll have a weird year or two,” she said, “and wondering if maybe the business model of American guides getting American clients in the Alps is gone for my generation.”

Coppolillo, for his part, is trying to reposition and find more regional clients. He’s part of a social media group of American guides, and few expect much business from the US for some time. With European Union borders less likely to close than more distant international ones, looking for clients a little closer to home is clearly a safer bet.

If stress and uncertainty was the order of the day during the seven-week confinement in the world’s home of alpinism, there was another population that, one imagines, was decidedly OK with the change. Chamonix’s alpine fauna experienced a newfound peace. Mathieu Dechavanne, CEO of the Compagnie du Mont-Blanc, which owns the valley’s 69 mountain lifts, captured unusual footage during one of the handful of times the town’s Aiguille du Midi cable car—the world’s second longest—was in operation during the confinement. In the video he posted online, one of the Alps’ few wolves is casually roaming over the spring snowpack, mere meters from the shuttered Refuge Plan de l’Aiguille mountain hut—and, no doubt, blissfully unaware of the human drama unfolding a thousand meters below.

Doug Mayer lived for years at the base of Mount Madison, in Randolph, New Hampshire, where he was trails chair for the Randolph Mountain Club. He now lives in Chamonix, France, and runs the trail-running tour company Run the Alps.
Katahdin

Standing above unsettling thoughts and emotions

Anthony Emerson

It’s May now in Maine, which usually means spring, petrichor, songbirds, and snowmelt coursing beneath rock and earth. It means frigid hikes on trails blocked by fallen trees stripped naked by the wicked months

On top of Pockwockamus Rock, early April 2020. The author hiked here from the Golden Road, a logging route, because the main road was covered in snow. JUDITH ARCHIBALD
of January and February. It means the restlessness that brings me on drives up familiar roads flanked by birch trees bent like parentheses, each drive bringing me farther into the woods as the snow recedes out of sight. And, it seems, out of memory. It’s May now in Maine, and those things are still true, though barely noticeable behind the pall of a global pandemic.

As John Muir said, “Nature in her green, tranquil woods heals and soothes all afflictions.” My particular afflictions—anxiety, boredom—have been amplified inestimably by the pandemic. The momentum of the changing seasons cannot be slowed by the spread of the virus, and neither can my enthusiasm to get into the backcountry. I wanted to be near the mountain, to feel the escapism of drifting into the timelessness of the wild. Instead came the recent news that Baxter State Park would be closed until July and with it the crushing realization that I’d be forced to cancel my season-opening camping trip and take day trips below treeline.

There are many uncanny differences between this spring and springs of the past—differences you cannot escape no matter how far into the woods you go. In the park the evidence is everywhere. Yes, volatile weather conditions often delay the opening of certain trails or even the entire park this time of year, but there is a palpable stillness now, like a vacant movie set or a ghost town from the old West. I half expected to see a tumbleweed galumphing down the tote road. The park’s visitor center is shuttered, facilities locked up. The website displays a ticker with font and colors that imply foreboding. There’s the empty ranger truck being used now as a receptacle for winter signage. The closed gate at the entrance and downed tree left unattended in the parking area are less than inviting. Then there’s me and my new behaviors: sanitizing my hands after using the pencil at the registration box. Casual trail etiquette has been replaced by the dread of meeting a fellow hiker on the trail and exchanging hurried pleasantries behind a bandana pressed against my face. And the new thoughts: Do the animals know? The trees? Can the forest sense my fear the same way I can feel the leaves surge with the wind?

Typically, my time in nature forces me to consider things both small and large at the same time: the immediacy of honking geese and the complexity of their migration patterns, their inscrutable instincts. My hikes fix my awareness on the concrete and the abstract of the wilderness. This has not been my experience since the spread of the virus. On my recent trips into the woods, I have struggled to grasp the dichotomy of an intimidating, robust landscape, which is also part of a sensitive ecological system. A system that when standing beneath a 100-year-old, 100-foot-tall white pine feels infallible.
but is in grave danger because of our human influence. I found this easier to understand recently when I returned home to several inches of May snow blanketing the boughs of evergreens. I watched as the waterfowl that had made a home in the boggy pasture behind my house were forced out by the fickle whims of Maine climate, and something called the polar vortex.

A man walks alone in the woods; what is he looking for? I’ve had this refrain stuck in my head, as a kind of prompt, on my post-virus outings. I have no good answer. Is it solace or solitude? An escape from the horrors of a diseased society? Maybe. And maybe the forest is medicine. I have felt a kind of existential sickness over a dislocation from the natural world. And if the forest is medicine, then Katahdin is a monument to good health—a beacon of aliveness, and light. The mountain has been a spiritual stalwart for thousands of years, from the native people who deified it, to the adventurers who conquered it, to the writers and artists who immortalized it, and the conservationists who helped preserve it. For me, mostly, it was the aesthetic backdrop to my early childhood. It didn’t become a source of curiosity, pride, or importance until very recently, when my interests in self-reliance and self-discovery pushed me into the woods to experience for myself what I had only read about.

I have over my lifetime engaged with the mountain, but only as art or idea, never in a physical sense. My family for generations has lived in sight of Katahdin. I feel something bizarrely akin to birthright when I see it, though I know better. When my mother was growing up, her mother would make her wear a snowsuit until the snow...
was totally off of the mountain. Now, I have a yearly bet with that grandmother—born out of that unsettling tale of my mother's childhood—about the date the snow will disappear fully from Katahdin's peak. Every year we put the kayaks in the alpine ponds at the mountain's foot long before the snow is gone. As I write this, I am sitting beneath a black-and-white photo of the mountain's Great Basin. It was taken by my great-great uncle for the Great Northern Paper Company, and if my house were suddenly ablaze, it would be the first thing I'd grab.

I am 29 years old, the same age Henry David Thoreau was when he first climbed Katahdin. I don't know why exactly, but that fact seemed important to me when I first discovered it. I still was planning (and as of this writing still am planning) to climb the mountain several times in summer 2020 with Thoreau in mind. I'm hoping he can help me glean from the mountain the kind of wisdom I might need entering my 30s in times such as these. I know well the feeling of triumph over unsettling thoughts and emotions. I have not experienced the kind of victory that comes from exceeding the perceived limitations of my own body. I want to explore the boundaries both within and without myself, and I know the mountain exists somewhere on those boundaries. I don't know if I'm handling this crisis well now, or if I'll get any better or worse as the summer rolls inexorably on. I know that I find myself clinging to books by people with such names as Leopold, Emerson, and Muir.*

The ones who opened my eyes to what Thoreau called “the tonic of wilderness.” I know that I wake every morning with the urge to be outside and to see Katahdin flourishing in the sky. I need it.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, I used to think of the mountain as a metaphor for various principles of my mindfulness practice. I'd think of a time-lapse video of clouds passing by the peak while the mountain sat in quiet observation, grounded, unperturbed. Now I think of the clouds not as ephemeral thoughts but as the collective societal turmoil of our present and near future. It comforts me knowing that Katahdin—that greatest mountain—will be standing serene, unfazed through it all.

Anthony Emerson is a student and writer living in northern Maine.

* Aldo Leopold, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Muir.
The Shaking Trees

In the forest, catching up with Mom by phone

Andrew Jones
“You should be wearing your mask,” my mom scolded from 400 miles away.

“I’m in a forest,” I replied. “I think I can rule out the maples coughing up virus particles.”

There’s a young forest that starts at the edges of my backyard. It doesn’t go very far: Wolf Creek and the Grove City suburbs that look like every other western Pennsylvanian small town keep it from developing into a dense and thriving forest. Most of the trees stand fairly tall, but their trunks aren’t thick. Flexible and limber, the strong winds that blow from eastern Ohio cause maples to smash into black gums, while pines rustle down needles like green dandruff. Nature had become a quick yet effective panacea to isolation life, and these brief excursions into this pocket of nameless nature nestled between my house and the creek provided some relief that sidewalks and passing cars couldn’t. “Either way,” I told my mother, “I rarely see people wearing them.”

“Well, I read that in Pennsylvania it’s mandatory when you leave the house to wear a mask or something covering your mouth.” She sighed and paused. “I just want you to be safe.”

“I know,” I respond. “I’m sorry. But there’s rarely anyone back here. I think I’ll be OK. I am thinking ahead. It’s just a bit different out here than by you.” There’s such a disconnect between our experiences with this stay-at-home order. It feels impossible to speak about something without having to clarify something or frustrate her.

“Is Sky with you, at least? I bet she’s enjoying the day. It’s nice and sunny here.” I look up, and dark clouds are pushing through the blue sky.

“Yeah, she’s up ahead a bit.” I scanned around and watched Sky, my black and white pit bull, sniffing a patch of grass. She began to open her mouth when I yelled out. “Sky, you’re not a cow. Do not eat that!”

“What’s she doing?” Mom became worried on the other side.

“She was just about to eat some grass,” I responded. “Nothing to get worked up over.”

“Oh. Well, work’s having me do some extra shifts,” she said while my other ear listened to a not-so-distant woodpecker. “The nurses’ union set up a daycare for all Long Island hospital workers who have kids,” she said. “The daycare centers shut down, so we’re all they have that’s open. I’ll take their temperatures a few times during the shift to make sure no one’s exhibiting a

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*The author’s dog, Sky, explores a suburban woods in western Pennsylvania.*

ANDREW JONES
fever. We don’t have enough tests to go around, so taking their temperature is the only way to reliably guess whether they have it or not.”

“Catch anyone yet?” I asked. I leaned over to a musclewood and felt its smooth bark. It’s not often anymore that you can touch another living thing, with social distancing and face mask enforcement around every corner. Even though it’s been relatively quiet, we’ve been given pretty strict guidelines to follow. The quiet stresses me.

“So far, we’ve been lucky, although I’m sure one of them will get it eventually.” Mom was silent for a few seconds. Sky found a patch of grass to roll in for a spell. “Had to bring Aunt Barbara some eggs. She was almost out; I still have half a dozen left, so I should be good until whenever I find them next.”

“Why was she running out? Couldn’t she just go to the store and grab some herself?”

“Andrew,” my mom said. “The stores are all out. Long Island is out of everything essential.”

“Oh,” I muttered. I thought back to my last trip to the store. Eggs were there by the dozens of dozens, along with milk, bread, chicken. Hell, you could still have the deli slice up a pound of American cheese and hand it to you. The only odd thing not in stock was toilet paper, which so far had been the only commonality we’d shared throughout all of this. Even if they did run out of eggs, I knew enough people that had chickens. I think I knew more chickens than people in Grove City.

“Which reminds me,” my mom began in that tone that told me I would be quiet for a minute or two. I let her ramble on about eggs, freezing milk, buying yeast, doing some deep cleaning, and going for a jog around the block with Sky to keep my mind off things. The wind was picking up again, and I could hear it in the trees. A branch here or there would plummet to the ground, and Sky would jump if they landed near her. The trees bowed together and whipped around, crashing into their neighbors like packed subway passengers. What I wouldn’t do to be a subway passenger stuffed in a full subway car, tapping into others as it shifted and stuttered toward something to do filled with people to see. Concerts have been canceled, classes have been postponed, and work has been upended. The restaurant where I work has converted to take-out only.

I heard a loud crack across Wolf Creek: Another tree must have given in to that eastern terror piercing through. I walked over to the steep hill that dipped into the creek and peered through the trees to try to find its fallen trunk.
“Grandma’s not doing well,” Mom’s words broke through the woods and brought me back into the conversation.

“Didn’t she just get out of the hospital last week from pneumonia?”

“She wasn’t in the hospital. She stayed in the nursing home that time, but yes, they think she’s got pneumonia again,” Mom said. “Or maybe not. You’ve seen the case numbers out here.” The number of confirmed cases in New York had just crept over 20,000. Meanwhile, Western Pennsylvania has barely seen cases in the 100s. Grove City only had one case, and that was reported two days ago. “So she’s in the hospital now.”

“Have you gone to see her yet?”

“They won’t let you in,” her voice became heightened. She took a deep breath. “They don’t let you into the hospitals with so many COVID patients going in, and she said she’s getting tired of talking to everyone on the phone. It’s hard for her to talk. So I haven’t heard from her. I call the nurses station every few hours and send them bagels every once in a while. It helps them remember her. She said at one point it took her four hours to get some Tylenol.”

“Do you think she’s got it?”

“All I know is that they’re doing the best they can.”

“She’s gotten over worse. I’m sure she’ll get through this. She’s practically an expert at kicking pneumonia’s ass,” I tried joking. Conversation was all I could do, and this realization made me feel worthless.

“Just pray for her,” my mom trailed off, holding something back. I could hear the trees groan louder. The wind blew harder, and black clouds covered the sky.

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There Was No Mountain

But there were memories—of shoes

Elissa Ely
For the moment there is no mountain, no vista, no traveling, and barely even breathing room behind the masks. Living in fear of the new coronavirus feels like living on a planet where the inhabitants cannot survive the surface. Everyone proceeds dutifully, anonymously, and mostly silently through the untrustworthy air. Passing strangers, you can’t tell whether they are smiling at you or not, and because of this, it’s much easier to look down. For many weeks in 2020, I saw more shoes than sky.

Instead of hiking in mountains, I hiked in my memories. It was a way to review the past—and, I suppose, not a bad rehearsal for the future. At first, the memories rose high: to the top of Mount Lafayette, to the Lakes of the Clouds, to wildflowers in Crested Butte, Colorado. The views were broad, without blisters and without pain (though without real satisfaction, either).

Eventually, like a falling kite, the memories sank closer to the ground. I recalled a sign on the Old Bridle Path in New Hampshire’s White Mountains and a coiled snake near the bottom of the Wasson Peak Trail outside Tucson. When these memories hit ground, I started to remember shoes.

Footwear! If everyone who has ever walked a trail offered an opinion, it still wouldn’t tie the laces on this topic. In one way, the discussion is simple: just wear the right kind—preferably one for each foot. Henry David Thoreau and John Muir did, and their results were spectacular. In another way, it’s a discussion without end, one of those political arguments neither side enters thinking they will change their minds.

I’ve used the same hiking boots in various incarnations for decades. They’re dense and clunky, high on the ankle and built for the rocky, rooty New England conditions that wear you down or trip you up. Life is too full of uncertainty to venture from success, and they get the job done. But everyone makes their own choices. There are many ways to walk.

Once I was setting off toward Artists Bluff and Bald Mountain above Franconia Notch and passed some families congregating at the trailhead. The women wore long skirts and open-toed sandals or loafers. The men wore black leather shoes. The children wore sneakers.

Shoes like this have no business on a trail, I thought to myself. Thoreau would not have approved.

A minute after I passed them in my reliable boots, I stumbled and fell. It was the imbalance of age—that growing unsteadiness that googling tells us

*Everyone makes their own choices. There are many ways to walk.*  
JAYNE IAFRATE/AMC PHOTO  
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can be prevented by standing on one foot while watching the news at night—but I landed hard. It took another minute to sit up and review the relevant body parts. There were scrapes that would be tender in a few hours, a bleeding knee, and torn pride.

When my boots and I finally limped onto Artists Bluff, the families were already there: they had taken the loop from a different direction. No one was scraped, scratched, or bleeding. The women sat serenely, shoulder to shoulder, on rocks overlooking Echo Lake. Some of the children had kicked off their shoes. In the end, their footwear had been just as steady as mine. Their balance had been significantly better. In these strange times, memory takes me back to other shoes: the old friend I hiked with, who constantly stopped to tie her boot laces because she didn’t believe in double knotting. In the middle of an important thought, she would suddenly drop to her knees, and mumbled sentences would drift up from below. We argued about this for decades, but never stopped hiking together because companionship is far more precious than speaking clearly.

On a White Mountain trail, a stranger once paused to kick off his boot and sock and, while he rummaged in a pack for moleskin, he told me about his very ill wife. I could see the blister on his heel and understood that he might prevent it but could not cure the person he loved.

I remembered shoelessness. In Red Rock Canyon outside Las Vegas, I met a man climbing barefoot, wearing nothing but dreadlocks and a loincloth, deep in reflection. It was wrong to turn and gape as he receded, but I couldn’t help myself; the rear of him was so dignified, and his pace was so sedate. Nakedness speeds some of us up, but it did nothing to hurry him. Maybe he was feeling gratitude for having feet.

These days, when driving from one New England state to another in order to hike is discouraged, the mind is left to climb in memories. Odd images emerge, from where they usually live in some folded inner place. Under normal circumstances, they remain there. But looking down, as we do now, has brought them into view.

Elissa Ely is a Boston-based community psychiatrist and nonfiction writer.