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A Week in the Wild at Medawisla

One night in the wild for each hour he drove

Daniel Hudon



I ARRIVED AT MEDAWISLA TO SILENCE. NO JETS, HELICOPTERS, NO garbage or recycling trucks, no jackhammers or car alarms. No air conditioner fans. No leaf blowers. Missing, too, were the sounds of summer lake recreation: motorboats and Jet Skis. The sun was high, and the trees stood quiet. Beyond the waterfront cabins and bunkhouse, the Roach River passed slowly, underlining the feeling of stillness. A few birds chirped. I'd forgotten this was how things were in the wilderness.

I had spent the previous month at home in Boston watching the World Cup, so I was desperate to connect to nature. Soccer had dominated my life, and I worried how the digital world occupied my mind. Even while I was reading a book, I felt perpetually distracted, wondering about new emails, notifications, and updates on my various social media feeds. Now I wanted to get lost in the wild. Medawisla Lodge and Cabins promised limited cell reception and no Wi-Fi, so if I didn't get lost, I could at least unplug for a week. I also considered staying longer, to help with Maine Audubon's annual loon count at the end of my stay.

Medawisla Lodge is perched on a pond in the heart of the Maine Woods and the 100-Mile Wilderness. I liked both names: *Medawisla* means loon in the language of the Abenaki, who lived in the area for thousands of years, and when I thought of the 100-Mile Wilderness, I thought I could get lost there.

But a map shows a landscape dominated by water. When glaciers receded from the region 13,000 years ago, they scraped out 1,200 natural lakes and ponds, like Second Roach, which the lodge overlooks. The 19-mile Roach River winds through the area, spilling into several large, numbered ponds before emptying into Moosehead Lake, the most impressive body of water in the region. After passing through Greenville, Maine, I caught only brief views of the lake, through gaps in the trees. Each time it was like a secret being revealed.

Day 1

Desperate for a swim after six hours in the car, I followed the path between the cabins to the pond. The waterfront opened into a cove ringed with evergreens and edged by a marsh on one side and rocky outcroppings on the

Silence was the rule during the author's time on Second Roach Pond, seen here from the air. JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN/ECOPHOTOGRAPHY

other. Beyond the cove was a wooded island with the gentle slope of Farrar Mountain in the background. The glaciers did not scrape deeply, so the water is shallow, and they left behind a layer of crushed rocks on the bedrock. I walked into the cool water and balanced my arms to try to prevent from slipping on the slick rocks. After a few steps, I found it easier to crawl out on hands and feet, like a crab, until the water was deep enough to swim. Dragonflies descended on me, quick and curious. As I stroked out from the shore, they landed and re-landed on my head and face, as if to initiate me. One was bold enough to land on my upper lip.

I had indeed arrived.

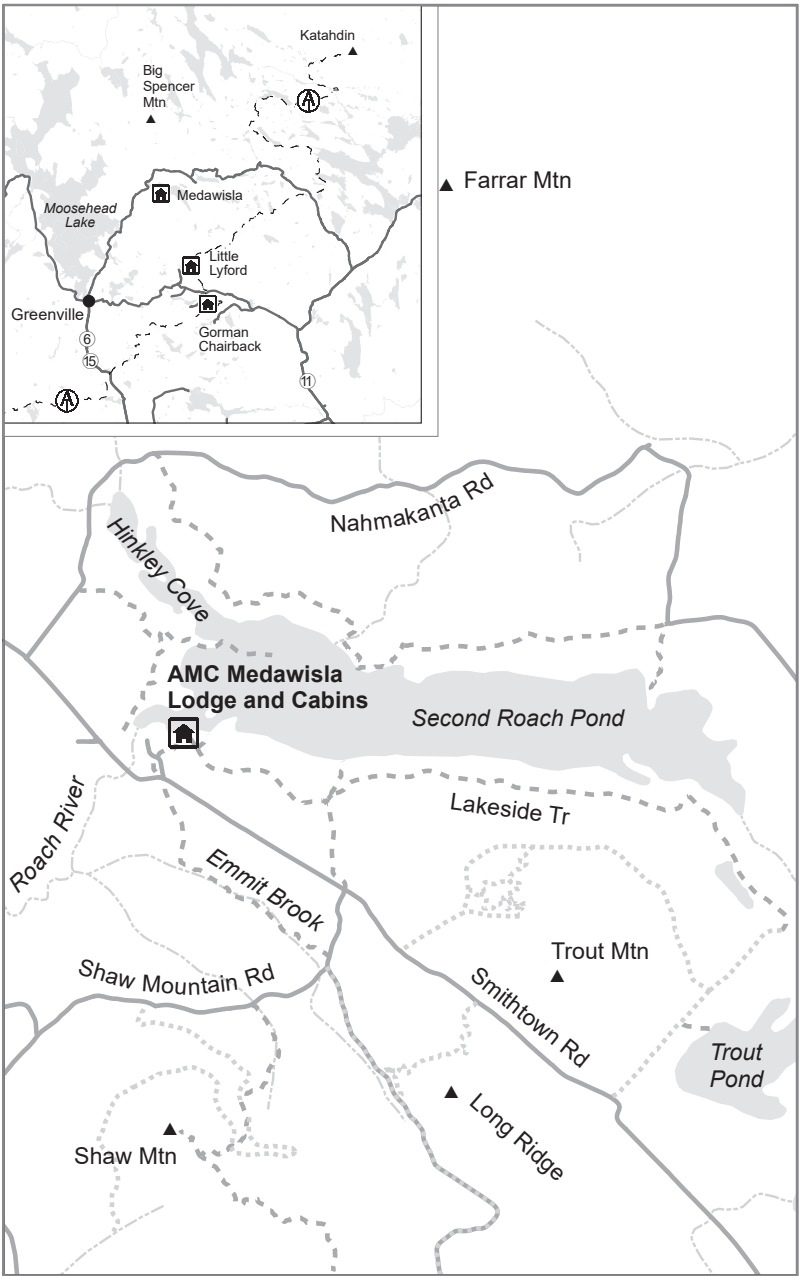
Before dinner, I took a walk into the forest to find Hinkley Cove. As I listened for birds, I wondered if I could somehow “level up” with the black flies. Would the mini-menaces leave me alone after 10, or 100, or 1,000 bites? A frog made two giant leaps to get out of my way, and chipmunks scampered about, but the thick forest hid larger animals.

Though I felt anxious to do things, I was reminded of the slowness of time in the wilderness at dinner. My tablemates expressed uncertainty about how long they’d been there, and whether a hike they had done was one or two days before. “Yesterday seems like ages ago,” one said. Most had made a long weekend out of it and were envious that I was staying for six nights. “One night for each hour in the car,” I told them.

In the evening, I took a kayak out, and the quiet began to seep into me. The only sounds were the white noise of my ears ringing and the static of my mind flexing and expanding into the landscape. I paddled out of the cove and, just before reaching the main pond, saw a duck with her chicks on a rocky point catching the last rays of sun. She had frizzed head feathers that made her look like a punk rock star—a merganser. Even when I was at least 20 feet away, she muttered to her brood, got up, and led her chicks back into the water, where they paddled furiously to keep up with her. Frogs thrummed around the edge of the cove.

The long shoreline of the main pond seemed to divide known and unknown. Do we know what lurks in the forest any better than what hides under the surface of the water? Here, the water was reflecting the endless sky. By the time I paddled back, a few people were sitting around the bonfire, and I sometimes mistook the rising sparks for fireflies or stars.

In my journal, I drew a map of my new surroundings, labeling “Duck Point” and the places where I’d seen frogs and fireflies, to create a set of living



Medawisla lies east of Moosehead Lake in Maine's 100-Mile Wilderness.

LARRY GARLAND/AMC

landmarks in my mind. In bed with the bunkhouse to myself, I flung my arms above my head and slept with abandon.

Day 2

A pair of loons floated in the cove. No wind blew, and the pond was like glass.

They swam perhaps 50 feet apart and seemed to occupy the space with an uncanny and unassuming authority. Clouds hung low, and the loons drifted through the still morning.

The forecast called for rain and thunderstorms all day, so I planned only a short hike up nearby Shaw Mountain, which promised twin peaks to explore, a view of the network of Roach ponds, and Katahdin in the distance. Beside Emmit Brook, the forest trail was lined with ferns, the first plants to colonize a disturbed environment, and my favorite ancient plant. But when I got to the top, the rain came down in earnest—no view—so I canceled further exploration.

The rain broke that afternoon, so I took out a stand-up paddleboard. No wind blew, and the pond was placid. I paddled out of the cove toward the island and lay down on my back. As I watched the clouds, I slid into an otherworldly nap.

In the evening, near the water, I didn't know which direction to look: Lightning flashed over the pond and rippled into the sky, while around me fireflies blinked on and off silently among the trees, like miniature alien spacecraft.

Day 3

My knee acts up in damp weather, and yesterday's walk downhill in the rain left me limping. I used it as an excuse to stick to paddling for the day. Initially, I kept to the western shore because a sharp wind blew over the pond. A loon came and went, as if conjured and dismissed by the pond. A raptor flew from the shore to the island, and I wondered if it was the immature eagle some guests had been talking about.

I paddled out of the cove, past the island, around the end of Hinkley Point, and into Hinkley Cove, a long, narrow finger of the pond, almost a mile deep, rimmed with marshes. It was prime moose habitat, one of the animals I most wanted to see here. Moose are said to outnumber people by a



*Daniel Hudon heard the calls of the common loon, *Gavia immer*, from a distance. The loons in this photo were captured with a long lens in New Hampshire; the rare shore-nesting birds need space and respect to survive. See the article on loons' struggles in *New Hampshire in Research*, page 136. JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN/ECOPHOTOGRAPHY*

margin of three to one in this area of Maine, and an outfit in Greenville runs tours up to where the tip of Hinkley Cove meets the road. But in the middle of a hot July day, any moose in the area were probably resting deep in the woods, and I saw none.

I returned to the cove in the evening and watched the sun set behind the long flat top of Big Spencer Mountain. The wind dropped, and the sky faded from pink to blue as twilight deepened. Loons called out their tremolo (usually a danger call) from the eastern end of the pond.* As mists rose from the marsh, I heard a few frogs sound off like the snap of thick elastic bands, and farther away, a few birds called, too—urgent, with maniacal cackles, whoops, or sawtooth cries. Mists drifted around me. My kayak was still.

* Loons make four distinct calls: the tremolo, the wail (the familiar, haunting call loons use to locate each other), the yodel (used by males to defend their territory), and hoots (used between mates; the sounds I heard between the pair earlier that summer would be described as hoots, but they were softer and more varied than the word implies, as if in intimate dialogue).

The night sky is wild in its silence, randomness, and tranquility. We know how the stars live and die, their entire life cycles—and that we are made of stardust. Yet on this dark night, the stars are wild in the mysteries they carry. With the crescent moon setting, Deneb, Vega, and Altair, the three bright stars that make up the Summer Triangle, were emerging.

Scorpio was rising above Shaw Mountain in the south, and I'd forgotten how big the "teapot" in Sagittarius is. Slowly, the Milky Way was starting to glow. And here were the planets following sundown. Venus shone on the water, next to the crescent moon, and Jupiter was just as bright. Saturn trailed behind, only slightly dimmer.

Then I noticed a bright red light appear at the top of Trout Mountain, just south of the pond's eastern end. I wondered if it could have been a beacon from a fire lookout station. I stopped paddling and remained motionless on the water to see if the light would move. It rose above the trees on the mountain. It was Mars! I had seen it singing out in Boston near the moon a few weeks ago and remembered reading that its closest approach in fifteen years was just over a week away. Its brilliance stunned me.

Paddling back to the cove, the moon lit up the mists so the water looked like an ice rink, and like a skater after a few sure strides, I glided home.

Day 4

Adventure day. My knee was still sore, so my plan was to drive 3 miles to Trout Pond, whose shape resembles an outstretched cat, pick up a boat there, and portage over to Fourth and Third Roach ponds. As soon as I entered the water at Trout Pond, a loon appeared and then disappeared. The sun was beginning to flex its strength, so I took my time paddling around the rim of the pond and sought shade whenever possible. As I approached, a blue jay fled up the shore, and a turtle plopped into the water.

I paddled slowly, often with a dragonfly for a copilot, keeping an eye out for any movements but also simply looking at the shore: how the rocks and boulders piled up, how the trees stood, where the evergreens gave way to poplar or birch, which trees were dying, which ones were hanging out over the water or about to topple in, which ones were so resilient they were rooted in rock, where the bird sounds—random chits and chirps—were coming from, the direction and feel of the wind, the stillness of Trout Mountain, Shaw Mountain, and the hills. The act of looking overwhelmed the act of

wondering, so I fell into a meditative calm without trying. Now and then, a birdcall awakened the deeper machinery of my mind, and my neurons fired to extract where the sound was last heard.

I found the first portage without too much trouble, lifting and dragging my kayak through the woods. This, I reminded myself, was part of the adventure: to carry your boat over your shoulder through the woods, watching every step so you don't turn an ankle, and to come to an opening in the trees where you see for the first time the delicious, deserted waters you'll be exploring. It was only 0.1 mile and fairly flat, but when I took a break I thought of Fitzcarraldo dragging his boat over a mountain in the Amazon.

The portage to Fourth Roach opened to the western end of the mile-long pond. A couple of forested islands emerged. Boulders strewn about the water gave it a feeling of being formed eons ago but never finished. A long, narrow peninsula, with a stand of red pine, broke up the middle. I noticed a small, gravelly beach with a couple of glacial erratics off the shore—a perfect place for a swim. The second portage was only 200 feet, and you could almost “lie with your face in the one and your toes in the other,” as Thoreau said about another short portage in the Maine Woods. By this time, although I'd spent most of the day paddling around the shaded rims of the ponds, the heat was getting to me, so when I got to Third Roach, I did little more than seek shade and take a nap.

Given the remoteness of the ponds, I hoped I had discovered a hidden animal playground, like some watering hole in the Serengeti, but I didn't see anything larger than a chipmunk, certainly no moose. I had not yet learned to think like an animal. I'm sure both the road cuts and the openness of the pond induce wariness. But I was pleased that I had successfully read the map, found the portages, spotted loons on each pond, and, when not fighting against the poor tracking of my kayak, I had felt entranced with the simple act of looking.

ON MY EVENING PADDLE, I WAS DETERMINED TO SEE A MOOSE, SO I WENT deep into Hinkley Cove, to the beaver dam, as far as I could go. As the light faded from the sky, I had to look two or three times at fallen logs in the marsh because so many things seemed moose-shaped. But nothing moved except for black flies and mosquitoes that prevented me from staying later. Again I heard the call of loons from the far end of the pond. As I paddled back around the point, half a dozen fireflies flickered among the evergreens and lit them up like Christmas trees.

Day 5

It happened. I got lost. Not lost where I couldn't find my way, but lost in space and time, unsure even of who I was. It was fleeting yet indelible. I got up out of the bunkhouse sometime before breakfast and intended to head down to the water to see if any animals were hanging about in the cove, as I'd done every morning. I closed the door of the bunkhouse and looked up into the blue summer sky, the same summer sky I had seen upon arrival and enjoyed since the rain clouds had cleared a day and a half ago. Suddenly, I didn't know how long I'd been at Medawisla, how much longer I was staying, and whether I even had a life elsewhere. It was as if I'd been there forever, that this was my life now and always had been. Time didn't pass here. I just existed here, where I was meant to be.

I WENT DOWN TO THE WATER, WHERE THE POND LETS OUT OVER THE rocks into the Roach River, giving a perpetual swishing sound, and found a snake sunning itself on the rocks. I thought of D. H. Lawrence's "Snake," the quintessential encounter-with-nature poem, in which the poet is honored by meeting the serpent until, overcome with the animal's lore, he is suddenly repulsed and scares it away. We all wish for the encounter, but we want a tame one. We don't want to be frightened or repulsed. We want to be honored.

I had that feeling earlier the same summer, on another lake in Maine. I saw a loon as I went for a morning paddle and casually tried to follow it. It disappeared under the surface to feed and appeared again elsewhere, as if by magic. Eventually I lost the bird. But I continued to explore the lake, and when I went into a small cove, I found the loon swimming there with its mate. It was like passing through a hidden door in the animal kingdom. They were cooing to one another and kept up a constant dialogue as they swam about, perhaps getting ready to build a nest. I was about 15 feet away and didn't try to get closer. They were preoccupied with each other, but I got the sense they were allowing me to stay, honoring me with their presence, as it were, as if they were some kind of animal royalty. After a few minutes, the special audience was over. They dived under the surface and disappeared.

At breakfast, I heard of another moose sighting, opposite to the point I was at the previous night, in the marsh beyond what I called Duck Point. The moose had risen out of the water, glistening with liquid, shining with light, like some sort of mythical creature. "You just have to keep looking," one of

my tablemates said. For a moose, she meant, but in my mind, I heard, “for the wild.”

In the afternoon, with the sky clear and the temperature in the mid-80s, I paddled from one shady spot to the next. Above the southeastern end of the pond, a chain saw roared into life, interrupting the quiet. The sound carried easily on the water, so I had to abandon my niche on the north side of the pond and venture across to the southern side, in the hope the trees would muffle the noise. It worked, and I found a poplar grove that shaded an outcropping of boulders. I tried to get comfortable in the curve of one. Did I doze off? A frog came out from the water’s edge, sat stoically, and stared at my kayak.

On the opposite shore, a pair of crows cried out all afternoon with wails that sounded all too human. Now and then there was a ruckus, some loud squabble over territory or mate that sounded vaguely mischievous, and I was reminded of the poet Ruth Salter’s comments on the orphaned and injured wild birds she rehabilitated in Idaho. Her favorites (she wrote in 2000 in the journal *Sheila-Na-Gig*) were “crows and magpies because they are rowdy and know how to have fun.”

The pond was a blue medallion. I swam. Each time I came out of the water, I felt like the first amphibian climbing onto primeval land.

In my evening paddle, I went out in a canoe with another guest, Liz, who knew a few bird songs. As the light from the sky faded, and the moon and planets began to shine, we sat motionless in the pond and listened for any birds that had not yet gone quiet. She told me about the song of the white-throated sparrow, a simple, elegant three-note song that I had heard on the edge of the woods. Finally, in the symphony of songs I had heard all week, I now knew—and would never forget—one of the singers.

Day 6

I got up early to help with Maine Audubon’s annual loon count. I volunteered to count at the far end of the pond, 2 miles down from the lodge, where I had heard the birds all week. Katie Yakubowski, the organizer, took the cove and island area, and another couple drove down to Trout Pond. Last night, Yakubowski had told us some of the natural history of loons. They mate on ponds, and it takes the chicks seven years to mature—on the ocean. They

will abandon nests if threatened, and males will sometimes take over another male's mate. They can dive more than 150 feet, and they swallow fish whole, sometimes even choking to death. Juveniles fledge over about eight weeks. In 2017, 2,817 adults and 453 chicks were counted in the southern half of Maine.

I was on the pond in my kayak at 6 A.M. under the calm, clear blue sky and abundant sunshine. I had to paddle down to the far end of the pond for the count between 7 and 7:30 A.M., sticking to the northern shore to get the sun out of my eyes. I heard a loon call from behind me, deep in Hinkley Cove, and another from the far end of the pond or perhaps beyond—the direction I was heading. The pond was a sheet of blue, so visibility was superb, but today of all days I saw no loons. Binoculars revealed a pair of crows goofing off on the shore, but no loons.

On my way back for breakfast, a bald eagle swooped through the sky ahead of me. And I heard a loon call from behind me. Had I missed him? Was he playing games? Luckily, the others were successful: The couple counted a pair of adults, and Katie counted an adult and a chick. (Though, of course, null sightings are data points.)

But I saw a moose. On my way down to the far end of the pond, I paddled around Duck Point, where others had seen a moose, and he was there, waiting in the marsh. He'd seen me coming, a blue vessel on the water, and kept his eye on me. I reached into my bag for my camera and pulled out my phone at the same time. Not having any of this "honoring" business, he walked across the glade, crashed through the bushes, and was gone.

I returned to the marsh on my way back, and to my surprise, the moose stood there again, wary, knee deep in the water. I zoomed in with my camera and saw his luscious, chocolate-brown coat, mercifully missing any signs of scruff from trying to rub ticks off. The small antlers didn't seem to fit such a fabled creature. This time he waited a little longer before clambering out of the water and making his loud exit.

By the time I showed up for a late breakfast at 8:30 A.M., I had already paddled 4 miles, heard but not seen loons, seen a moose twice and a bald eagle once. I floated all morning.

With my week winding down, after a spell of reading in my hammock in the shade, I walked the 2.7-mile Lakeside Trail to the far end of the pond and back in the late afternoon. It was a long, tree-lined corridor with only a few glades where an expanse of sky was visible. I passed the source of yesterday's chain saw noise, where a trail crew was taking out culverts and widening the

trail. Given the time of day, most birds were quiet, but I heard the white-throated sparrow whistle its familiar three thin notes.

I went for a last, evening paddle, again with Liz. The scene was much like it had been all week: the pond serene, the sky over Big Spencer fading from pink to blue to darker blue, the moon and planets gleaming, the chorus of frogs striking up. On this night, a loon swam nearby.

Day 7

A quest for my last morning: to find what I have named the Bird that Sings in the Heart of the Forest. I heard its flutelike song on my hike up Shaw Mountain and heard it again as I hiked Lakeside Trail. It was as distinctive as a loon's but a whole different quality. Always from deep in the woods. I walked the trail out to Hinkley Point and heard the familiar white-throated sparrow and the staccato, happy call of the song sparrow, and got recordings of a couple of other birds I still haven't identified. I might have caught the mystery bird's sound in the distance on a video on my way out of the forest. Could it be a hermit thrush? Its identity still eludes me. So for now I will invert its name. I will not call it the Bird that Sings in the Heart of the Forest. For the ponds, marshes, and glades that throb with life, the trees that undulate over the hills, rising and rising again, the susurrus of the river, and the pulse of the wild stillness, the heart of the forest sings like a bird.

DANIEL HUDON is a writer and lecturer in Boston. His most recent book is *Brief Eulogies for Lost Animals: An Extinction Reader* (Pen & Anvil Press, 2017). Visit him at danielhudon.com.

Learn more about Medawisla at outdoors.org/medawisla. We recommend the Maine Mountain Guide, 11th Edition, edited by Carey M. Kish (AMC Books, 2018).