

# Appalachia

---

Volume 69  
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2018: Role Reversal in  
the Mountains*

---

Article 7

2018

## The Resourceful Teen: A Broken Stove Awakens Ingenuity

Lisa Densmore Ballard

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ballard, Lisa Densmore (2018) "The Resourceful Teen: A Broken Stove Awakens Ingenuity," *Appalachia*: Vol. 69: No. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol69/iss2/7>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu](mailto:dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu).

# The Resourceful Teen

*A broken stove awakens ingenuity*

**Lisa Densmore Ballard**



MY SON, PARKER, CONTRACTED TEENAGER-ITIS AT AGE 15. A conscientious student, he fought it quietly for a year, then I noticed two telltale symptoms. On school vacations, he slept until noon, and he exhibited uncharacteristic anxiety on the rare occasions the Wi-Fi in our house didn't work. I tried to be sympathetic, but his condition irked me.

We're an outdoor family. His teenager-itis complicated our lives. Before this affliction, he embraced nearly every outdoor pursuit. He came along on hikes as soon as he could fit in a child carrier. We attached tiny skis to his snow boots when he was 16 months old. He could paddle a canoe by age 7 and a kayak a year later. A confident swimmer, he'd gleefully leap off a cliff into water whenever I gave the nod. By age 12, he had slept in every Appalachian Mountain Club hut in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and he owned a drawerful of junior naturalist notebooks.

Then puberty hit and, by no coincidence, teenager-itis. Curing him coincided with yet another backcountry adventure, one that didn't go smoothly.

Parker started ninth grade at the Holderness School, a boarding school in New Hampshire, in September 2010, just after we had moved from Hanover, New Hampshire, to Red Lodge, Montana. During summer vacation between his sophomore and junior years, when he seemed the most listless, I suggested a mother-son overnight backpacking trip to Lake Mary in the Absaroka–Beartooth Wilderness near our new home. Lake Mary is an alpine lake located at 9,960 feet elevation. Several outdoorsy Red Lodge locals had told us they treasured it as a backcountry destination. Perhaps the outing would cure my son.

The 940,000-acre Absaroka–Beartooth Wilderness lies on the Montana–Wyoming border on the northeastern side of Yellowstone National Park. Granite Peak (12,799 feet), the highest mountain in Montana, crowns this craggy expanse speckled with hundreds of remote tarns. Backpackers consider these high lakes the premiere destinations in the region because reaching most summits in the Beartooths requires rock-climbing gear. Lake Mary appealed to me because we hadn't been there before, and it sounded like a comfortable overnighter, 6 miles each way.

The route to the lake begins about fourteen miles from Red Lodge, at the West Fork of Rock Creek trailhead. As we sorted gear before locking the car, Parker, who now stood several inches taller than me and weighed about 20

*Parker Densmore, perhaps not yet aware of his own strength, sets out with his mother through the Beartooth Mountains.* LISA DENSMORE BALLARD

pounds more, offered to carry the tent, stove, and fuel. I paused, pleasantly surprised. Until that moment, I had been the family Sherpa, lugging 50-plus pounds to any given trip's pick-your-backcountry-spot. My boy had humped his clothes, sleeping bag, pad, and water for years, but I had dared not give him more. For him, I adhered strictly to the backpacker's rule of not carrying more than a quarter of one's body weight. For myself, I ignored that rule. Now his offer to carry more weight was a revelation. I handed him all that he requested, plus half the food.

As we shouldered our packs, I noticed Parker sliding his cell phone into the top of pack.

"You won't need that," I said.

"What if there's an emergency?" he countered, testily.

"There's probably no cell signal where we're going," I replied.

He shoved his phone in his pack anyway. Not wanting to start our backpacking trip on a bad note, I didn't push him further.

The first 5 miles to Lake Mary were delightful. The trail gained only 1,000 feet as it passed a succession of cascades framed by towering rock walls. We walked through an old burned area, where the scorched, stubborn trunks of



*Asking, "How much farther?" soon ended with this triumphant gesture near Lake Mary.*

LISA DENSMORE BALLARD





*A broken stove, a dinner campfire.* LISA DENSMORE BALLARD

old lodgepole pines tickled the sapphire sky above the emerald boughs of new saplings, spurred to germinate by the bygone wildfire.

The path traversed a talus field, then continued through the timber to Quinnebaugh Meadows, a sizable clearing below the Silver Run Plateau. Many backpackers camp at this lovely, wildflower-laden lea, though we found neither people nor wildflowers there on that late-summer day.

From Quinnebaugh Meadows, the spur to Lake Mary left the main trail, heading north and uphill. In fact, the last mile to the lake felt vertical, ascending 1,200 feet on a narrower path.

"How much farther?" Parker groaned as we rested atop a dramatic cliff. Then we looked back down the path we had just trekked, and he seemed to gain energy from the view. In a moment of inspiration, he stepped onto a rock perch and stretched his arms as if to hug our epic surroundings. At that moment, I could have sworn he grew a little more, too.

Parker and I reached Lake Mary by midafternoon. He gathered firewood and made a ring of stones for a campfire while I set up our tent. Our conversation turned to Hobbit movies, the math teacher Parker didn't like, and his chances of making the varsity soccer team in the fall, topics we never discussed at home. We rarely conversed at home, period, due to a constant influx of messages on electronic devices.

"I like when we get to do these trips together," said Parker, nursing the campfire into a steady blaze as daylight waned.

"Me too," I agreed. "But not when the camp stove doesn't work!" I couldn't start it. The top of the fuel canister was damaged, preventing the burner from screwing onto it. Hungry and tired, I wondered how I would make a hearty enough dinner for us out of a few granola bars.

"We can cook over the fire," Parker declared. He leaned over and reworked the rocks in the fire ring so our little pot could heat over the hot coals. I swear I saw a gleam in his eye. A half-hour later, we had boiling water.

At that moment, I knew Parker had transformed. In his case, the physical challenge of carrying a heavy pack and his resourcefulness at overcoming our cookstove challenge contributed greatly to his cure. It was also a revelation for me. My son was a young man, skilled and confident in the outdoors. If need be, he could take care of others now, and indeed he does. Today, Parker is a student at St. Lawrence University, entrenched in that college's outing club, where he leads trips year-round into the Adirondacks. And I confess, it's sure nice to have another Sherpa in the family.

---

LISA DENSMORE BALLARD, an adventurer, writer, photographer, and filmmaker, contributes often to *Appalachia*. See her story on humanitarian climbers in Mexico on page 24.