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Off-Trail at Home

Bushwhacking around Mount Cardigan

Sandy Stott



Outset

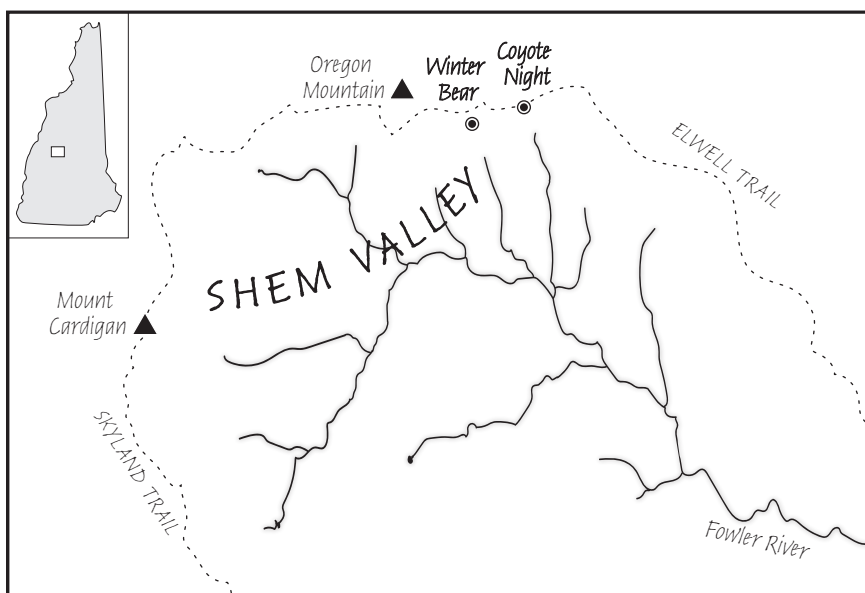
July's stuffy, windless nights and the promise of days unscripted in New Hampshire's Shem Valley made sleep hard to come by when I was 11. Lying on top of my sleeping bag on the thin mattress, I watched the twelve-paned window for sign of first light. A slight graying meant I could get up, slip on my shorts and T-shirt and tiptoe, sneakers in hand, down the dark stairs to the silent kitchen. My brother and parents slept on in the other little bedrooms of this old, unplumbed saltbox. Milk from the icebox (real ice in there) splashed over cereal would do, and, as I ate, I watched a motionless drape of fog above the field of remnant cider apple trees, which poked above it.

Trout lived in the dark pools of the nearby Fowler River, and I had found a quick fondness for trailing bait into those pools and sometimes pulling trout out. My father had taught me the rudiments of fishing. We were worm-dunkers, and so, absent all the complex art-consideration of fly choice and casting styles, my fishing had two real elements: bait the hook in a way that didn't make the worm easy to steal, and drift your bait down into a pool from above and let it meander where the current took it. In short, my impaled worm must look like an unfortunate washed into the river. Its misfortune should look like a trout's lucky day. I'd also learned that all of this deception was better worked before the sun rose to shine truth's light into a pool. Rod in hand, worm can in the other, feet already soaked from the dewy grass, I set out alone for the river. And so, out into this 5 A.M. gray stillness.

At 11, even in a drowsy hour, we are all impatience. The half-mile to the river, first up the woods road going to forest, and then down the gypsy trail our family had created to some of the river's best pools, took more minutes than I liked. But soon I reached the river-world with its fish and the always-sound of water pouring from one pool down into the next. Once my worm was sacrificed and plying its pale lure in the dark pool, everything slowed.

Then I, a boy whose mind jigged like a bug in flight, wondered about the water flowing by, going away. Why does it never run out? Where does it come from? I wondered, and I'd look upstream into this new valley at the constant sheeting arrival of more water. Over time, I began to trace those waters back up toward where they came from.

The Cardigan ridge draws Sandy Stott back again and again. SANDY STOTT



The Shem Valley is the remote area in midstate New Hampshire where the Fowler River and its associated streams branch out. Above them, the ridges of Oregon Mountain and Cardigan Mountain rise. Marks show where Sandy Stott encountered a coyote and a bear during his wanderings. ABIGAIL COYLE/APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

Life in the Shem 'Shed

My boyhood fishing habit, which soon waned, acquired a twin, who lives on still—I began climbing the woods roads, trails, and ridges that wriggled this way and that in the Shem Valley. On days when I wasn't conscripted as chief brush dragger in my father's effort to reclaim the bony fields around our house, I could set out up valley by turning right at the end of our dirt driveway.

To my right, the land sloped up a mile or so to Oregon Mountain's ledgy ridgeline, the northern arm holding the Shem. To my left, three miles beyond the Fowler, the Skyland Ridge described the Shem's southern arm. And dead ahead lay Firescrew Mountain and Mount Cardigan, the two-domed ridge that defined home. Over time scribed by my feet, I learned that this ridge really does set this valley apart. It has its own coyote pack, turkey flocks, and solitary animals, its own history pocked by cellar holes, its own watershed drained by three brooks, Clark, Bailey, and Davis. Their waters become finally the Fowler, which I met first, and which wants only to escape and get on with its run home to the sea.

Although it was clear that, over time, I would follow the river out into the sea of the everyday world, it also became sure that, like some anadromous fish, I would return. I would come back to this valley, would wake there on any number of mornings, walk to the end of the driveway and turn up the dirt road running up into the hills. In short, wherever else I lived, I would keep coming home.

What's a Trail?

Early on, my foot habit made me familiar with the two ridges and twin mountain and all their trails. I stopped counting climbs of Cardigan and Firescrew somewhere after 100, and the Oregon and Skyland ridgelines knew my sneakers and boots at least that well. Still, I came from a trail-abiding family; whenever we set out, we followed agreed-upon routes, dotted lines on the map. Until we didn't.

One day in my late teens, we looked up from Cream Hill, which rose a few hundred feet behind our house, to the open ledges of the Oregon Ridge. The Elwell Trail ran along that ridge, but reaching the Elwell in our usual fashion meant going up or down the valley's dirt road a mile or so and reaching a trail that climbed another mile-plus to the ridge. "We could just go straight up from here," one of us said.

The next day, we were back—with a couple of hatchets and a small buck-saw. We set out through the mosquito-rich woods, bound for the ridge. Soon we'd crossed through thick brush and then over a jumbled stone wall and entered well-spaced hardwoods that had been there for a long time. We nosed this way and that, pausing often, looking for natural features—little ridges and vales, stony ledges—that said, "This way; this is the way."

Slowly, we followed the land's suggestions, made that way. Every so often, we'd blaze a tree; when branches made the way brushy, we'd trim them with the saw. We crossed two seasonal streams that fed left and down into the brook that finally reached the Fowler at the edge of our land. Then, we reached the knee of a ridge whose beech and maple trees ran up to the dark promise of spruce and hemlocks. The ledges began with the conifers.

Narrow swaths of woods striped the ledges, but most of the walking now was open. We bundled a few cairns together, mostly for the pleasure of piling stones; we admired the blueberry bushes, already planning return in season. Then, a wall of thick pines reared again, and we paused to find where we might fight our way through.

Such a pause, I would learn, lies at the heart of bushwhacking: which scratchy non-path should I try? is its active question. Hat off, glasses on, profile thinned—you hope—you plunge in, hoping too that a new set of open ledges lies nearby.

Beyond what turned out to be a brushy swale, we could see that the ridge jumped up 30 to 80 feet. In places, cliffs overhung the dark, mossy forest floor. We searched the cliff-line for a weakness, and a few hundred yards up swale, we found a crack angling up. Thin trees grew from it, and we used them like ladder rungs to haul up, and then out onto a flat, south-facing ledge.

There, a few feet ahead, lay the lightly used track of the Elwell Trail. If then you turned left, upridge, a quarter-mile of climbing would bring you to the first of the expansive Oregon ledges. Here, a thousand feet above the valley floor, a 300-degree viewshed ran from Mount Moosilauke in the north, east, and south around to the Skyland Ridge, and to Cardigan itself in the west. At various points of mid-sweep, the Franconias, Presidentials, Water-villes, Sandwiches, Chocorua, and then a jumble of southern vassal hills shaped the horizon. “Be here; look far” seemed the ridge’s suggestion. I took it.

There and Here

At age 22, I was more than a little lost in the nondescript woods of postcollege wondering. Given an absence of postgraduate plans and a vague inclination to write, I’d persuaded my parents to let me winter in the old saltbox near the unplowed road’s end. Each day as winter deepened, I figured out another way not to write. Most days that meant time wandering on snowshoes, and most of that wandering took me beneath and along the Oregon Ridge.

The snowshoes, discovered in the barn, were strung with a diamond pattern of gut and, with their foot-long tails, measured out to around four feet. Decaying leather harnesses aside, they were in great shape, and I rapidly learned that they bore me above that winter’s deep snowpack splendidly. I could, I soon understood, go almost anywhere in this season of deep access. Yes, the going was slow, “snowshoes” I took to calling them, and the bindings broke often (I took to carrying fishing line and nylon cord for midday repairs), but in winter the whole forest seemed a possible trail.

One day I was nosing along the base of the cliff-line that defines the upper ridge. I was reading the cliff for ascent lines that might be scrambled and noting spots where snow had sloughed to the base in piles taller than me. A ten-foot tall triangle of snow several feet from the cliff’s bottom caught my eye,



The author stopped counting his climbs of Cardigan Mountain after 100. PAULA CHAMPAGNE

and, as I neared, I could see that it rested on two slabs of rock that, once upon a deep time, had slid to the cliff's base. Oddly, in the midst of what might be deemed a three-foot-tall doorway, I saw a hole in the snow. I shoed over, leaned in to look, and a scent rising from the hole wrinkled my nose; musky air, though not unpleasant, and the closer I leaned, the thicker the smell. I looked in. Faint light had made its way through the snow, and I thought I saw fur. Which made me sit back.

I knew bears favored this ridge, especially the mature beech forest at its base. Their claw marks were easy to spot on the smooth, elephantine trunks they'd shinnied up to get to the beech nuts. And—waddle here waddle there—we'd run into each other (or come near) before the snows had arrived. But this few-foot gap was way inside whatever circles of self a bear and I might draw to control overlap. We were winter-kin, I thought as I sat back on the tails of my snowshoes and sniffed the sour-scented air. I felt no inclination—I'm sure this isn't a surprise—to reach into the hole and touch the bear. But I did feel sleepy and leaned back against a beech rising next to the slabs.

When I awoke some minutes later, for a whiff of time, I felt I lived here.

Voices

I've written about this moment before in my editor's note for this journal in 1998; I return in part because it resonates still.

Late afternoon on an August day that's featured a windless warmth, I stuff my larger pack with overnight gear and set out uproad. The climb of the Cream Hill road warms me more, but a rainless month has dried most of the mosquitoes from the air, and I am at ease as I turn off-road and climb through the yet-to-be-mown grass atop the hill. Then, I step between two trees and over the rubble wall, and I'm away.

The Oregon Ridge rises before me, and I must cross a few logging tracks from a recent cutting of the lower slopes; an older cutting just below the first ledges is already vanishing in the brushy regrowth. The ledges, slower to change, are much as they have been for these 40 years, and I pass their various outlooks and points of wonder without pause; so too the final ridge rampart. Then it's up to the 300-degree view ledge, where I dump my pack and nose about for the night's spot. Which turns out to be a mossy flat astride the Elwell Trail just before it reenters the woods on its way west. Big Agnes pops into shape in under a minute, making me laugh, as ever, at her small stature and outsized name. Pack stowed, offering in hand, I amble over to the rock knuckle we always sit on and settle there.

What's on offer? The answer's complicated, though its container of time is simple. I'm here for the night, to watch its character-stars shift across the sky, to wonder at the occasional burn of thought across my mind, yes. But mostly I'm here to offer thanks for what I see and what it holds. Our part of the Shem Valley creases the land below. I can see the open field atop Cream Hill, the spot where the dirt road crosses the Fowler and skirts a lower field; I can see the wink of tin roof from the new house. Everything I see is clothed in story, shaggy with memory. Over my right shoulder, Firescrew and Cardigan look down valley too. The other offering? A dollop, two really—one for me and one for this ridge—of amber bourbon. A swallow of one, a ledge splash of the other, a general bending in thanks. It is as close to prayer as I can get.

FROM SUCH A PORCH THE SKY SEEMS NEAR. I'VE FASHIONED A SITTING PLACE facing east, cushioned it with my sleeping bag and settled in for the night's narrative. Though it's a moonless night, enough starlight gathers to keep the mountains to the left and ahead in silhouette. Night lights wink in the visible vales; they dwindle over time. Sometimes I lie back and look up, and the

star-swirled sky canopy bends to the edge of vision. From time to time, I talk to myself of family picnics on this ledge, blueberries gathered, animals real and imagined. Ridge stories, valley stories, mountain stories, all foot-found, foot-won.

Sometime in the early morning hours, I go to my tent, slide into my bag and make the slight shift to sleep, one dream world to another.

THE HOWL GOES RIGHT THROUGH HEARING TO SOME CENTER I DIDN'T KNOW I had. Each hair—thousands of them—bolts up before I can move. The silence that follows is so alive I want to run from it, but I am still enbagged, and now fumbling for the zipper. Which is, of course, stuck.

This next howl elooooongates. Were I anything other than meat in a bag, I'd attend to the tremolo that floats out the length of the valley, that finally triggers an answer. Actually, answers. But I am stirred to frenzy, trying to get out of my casing, trying to get my feet free (runners!) and my hands (battlers!) AAARROOOOOOOOOOO . . . OOO . . . OO . . . O . . . answering yelps bang around the ridges and valley below.

I am—let's get serious here—150 pounds of muscle and motivation, and this howl, even as it has ancient roots, has to be coyote. Impressive animal for sure, but even this eastern version tops out around 50 pounds, and all this coyote yowling isn't a summons saying, "I got a week's worth of meat up here." Instead, it's got to be the canid version of "WTF."

And now that I'm out of my bag and running atop the boxcars of my hitched train of thought, I feel better, curious even, enough so to slide down the tent zipper and peer out.

Nothing doing. Dream? Morning-mare? Then, from 100 yards or so west, a final howl.

Each New Day a New Way

Over the decades, my beyond-the-valley life grew in annual rings of teaching and writing. It didn't take long for the Shem Valley's ridges and vales to inform that world too. I sited my editorial seat for this journal on the Oregon Ridge throughout the 1990s, and much of my teaching trailed another woods wanderer, who liked to, as he put it, go "cross lots." Which is another way of saying off-trail. In the midst of his signature work, and in the midst of my many teachings of it, I often paused for some time over a passage that offered apt expression for what it is to be off-trail in my Shem Valley.

Henry David Thoreau has just emerged from sheltering during a sudden thunderstorm with a family of Irish laborers. Throughout the storm he has tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade them to adopt his ideas about how to live an original life, which adds up to another form of “off-trail.”

Chastened, perhaps a little down at his failure (he has, after all, written *Walden* for “poor students,” as answer to “the mass of men [who] lead lives of quiet desperation”), he leaves their shack; this moment of doubt and answer follows:

As I was leaving the Irishman’s roof after the rain, bending my steps again to the pond, in my haste to catch pickerel, wading in retired meadows, in sloughs and bogholes, in forlorn and savage places, appeared for an instant trivial to me, who had been sent to school and college; but as I ran down the hill toward the reddening west, with the rainbow over my shoulder, and some faint tinkling sounds borne to my ear through the cleansed air, from I know not what quarter, my Good Genius seemed to say—Go fish and hunt far and wide day by day,—farther and wider,—and rest thee by many brooks and hearth-sides without misgiving . . . Rise free from care before the dawn, and seek adventures. Let noon find thee by other lakes, and the night overtake thee every where at home.*

THESE FEW STORIES, SELECTED FROM A DECK OF HUNDREDS, SUGGEST HOW the slant of this ridge became the family way along the north side of the Shem Valley. Each foray up or down asks its own route-finding; each is its own ‘whack. Being off-trail below and along this ridge has, over these many decades, become my way of being “every where at home.”

SANDY STOTT lives and writes in Brunswick, Maine. He edits this journal’s Accidents section and was its editor-in-chief during the 1990s.

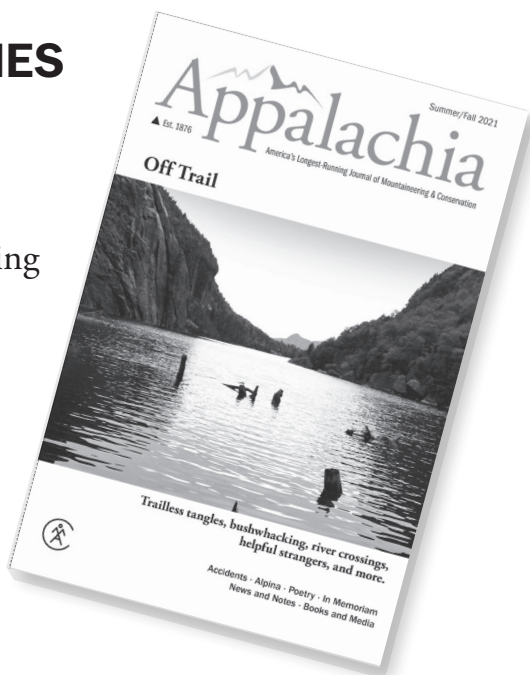
* Thoreau wrote this in “Baker Farm,” a chapter in *Walden*.

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