

# Appalachia

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Volume 73  
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2022: Cataclysms in  
the Catskills and Taconics*

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Article 19

2021

## Valley and Skyline Sketches

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### Recommended Citation

(2021) "Valley and Skyline Sketches," *Appalachia*: Vol. 73 : No. 1 , Article 19.

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# Valley and Skyline Sketches

## The Goldfish Pond

Gregory L. Norris

A very long time ago, when I was 6 or 7, I made a strange discovery on what began as a routine day. It was summer, a curious summer, out of focus from the rest of the world, in Windham, New Hampshire, a place where few people lived, a place where magic lurked in cool glades and sunlit meadows.

The year before, my best friend Jonathan and I had seen a giant bullfrog lurking in the cement pipe where the brook meandered through the meadow and under the one-lane country road. We'd named it Jeremiah and captured it. The monstrosity was bigger than a cat, the size of a small dog in our arms. Neither of us knew what to do with it once it was in our clutches.

Jeremiah had remained in captivity for only a handful of unforgettable seconds before slipping out of Jonathan's grasp. When we last saw it, the giant was hopping away, a gray-green apparition. It vanished into the overgrown meadow of timothy, buttercups, and black-eyed Susans on the far side of the road. At the end of every summer, that field transformed into a webbed killing ground ruled over by *Argiope aurantia*, the black and yellow garden spider, which caught and ate anything unlucky enough to venture there, such as Monarch butterflies feeding on milkweed.

One summer before Jeremiah, Jonathan and I were picking flower bouquets for our mothers at the edge of a thin trail hikers had pounded through the meadow over the years. A snake crossed the trail. We held our breaths and waited for it to pass beyond. The snake continued. Seconds tolled with the weight of minutes, *hours*—how long, how *big*, was the thing? In my memories from which all color has been drained, at least twenty feet. Maybe more.

THIS YEAR, JONATHAN, MY FELLOW ADVENTURER AND THRILL-SEEKER, WAS gone. The spiders in the meadow hadn't gotten him. Neither had the bobcat we'd once spotted racing up the maple tree in our backyard. No, Jonathan's family had moved away from Windham to a place called Nottingham, which sounded adventurous and mysterious, like the classic story, but far away, a distance of light years. I was alone.

So, on an unremarkable summer morning, bored but not forgetting that I lived in a country realm where the uncanny existed at the periphery, I ambled

past the old place where Jonathan's family used to live, over the brook with its population of crayfish, and picked up the dirt road that wandered behind the string of year-round bungalows. I came to the seasonal places on the shore of Cobbetts Pond, a deep, cold lake. I was searching for new myths and legends.

The residents of those houses stayed only from the end of May until early September, right before the air turned chilly. There was a one-story house, green with cream shutters, which different families rented throughout the season, and a group of tall New Englanders cloistered right to the very edge of the water. Two of the houses boasted Victorian details—one with a cupola and gingerbread lattice work, another with plantation shutter doors that formed private changing rooms for swimmers. The third house in line was an oblong box with dusty blue paint, and it was here that I discovered the goldfish pond.

Two proper old ladies with white, white hair lived in the house with the cupola every summer. Their front room was filled with bookshelves and a thousand old books that smelled like vanilla, as I discovered earlier that summer when, thinking myself quite smart and supremely bored, I decided to go trick-or-treating in June. The two old sisters took pity on me and invited me in for homemade cookies—chocolate chip, still warm from the oven. The two sisters also tended enormous rose shrubs that were growing wild and spilling over the cement steps leading down to their front door. The air was sweet from the blossoms, bewitchingly so, but I recalled how the thorny spikes grabbed at me like talons. The spots where they jabbed bled, then turned itchy, and so I veered right, intending to loop around the dirt road until it picked up once more at the pavement closer near the pond.

A woman's voice drifted out of that blue house. She was singing to something on the radio. I've since forgotten the song, but at the time, I knew it and decided to listen. I got closer. The rose bushes from the house of books had spilled over and onto the other house's narrow strip of yard. In avoiding their thorny clutches, I noticed something I'd never seen there before.

It looked like a pond, but it was much, much smaller than the vast, deep lake just beyond my vantage point. It existed a short way down the slope where the yard leveled off. It was set before a flagstone patio with wooden Adirondack chairs.

It was, in my memory, perhaps ten feet across. The ground surrounding it was typical pine forest, crisscrossed by gnarled roots running above the earth, the soil brown and dense from untold decades of rotting needles.

From this landscape, the cement pond appeared, forming a crater filled with living plants—native cattails and flora that looked like underwater

leaves. Swimming in the platinum-colored stew were, wonder of wonders, goldfish! My great discovery was a goldfish pond!

The fish in there were not the giants seen in pictures of Japanese koi ponds, no. These were your goggle-eyed, garden-variety specimens found in algae-covered fish tanks in the pet department of the Woolworth's store one town away.

Oh, but how happy those goldfish appeared as they flitted through their cement world. Some swam alone, others in tiny schools. Sunlight glinted down through breaks in the canopy of pine branches, and I thought those little creatures were like living sunshine as they moved about, as oblivious to my presence as the lady in the house singing to the radio. I was happy, too, no longer bored or feeling so alone. I had, yet again, been handed proof of the world's magic.

MY FATHER HUNTED PHEASANTS IN THE HUNDRED ACRES OF LUSH FOREST that surrounded our house. More often than game birds, he brought back their feathers and, at the end of summer, apples—a version of Red Delicious that I called *jungle apples* for their exotic appearance and also their origin. Those apples, which tasted sweet and warm from the sun's light, came from an orchard abandoned and forgotten years earlier. The woods had grown in around them, and only a few modern souls knew where to look to harvest their fruit.

That summer, I returned often to the secret goldfish pond where I sat at the edge of the crater and watched the goldfish for what seemed like hours. No one ever confronted me or told me to leave.

In September, the heat broke, and it grew colder. The summer residents left the lake, as they did after every Labor Day. In November, I hiked down the dirt road and to the goldfish pond for the first time in weeks, not knowing what I would find. The brook had iced over. So, too, had the goldfish pond. A thin, clear glaze covered its surface. But peering down from the edge, I saw colorful streaks darting out of focus beneath that window, the goldfish still going about their joyous activity despite the change in the season.

By December, snow had covered the ice and soon made travel down the dirt road, which wasn't plowed in winter, impossible. But in the spring, I found the ice melted, the small pond waking from the long cold. And in that space, the goldfish—at least some of them—had survived.

The year I turned 13, my family moved away from the big woods and lake to a house in the suburbs, where there was far less magic and almost no wonder.

But I never forgot the mysteries of my youth, not even now, five decades later, and I often search for reminders here in my house far from the former wilds of Windham. Like that boy who recognized the wizardry of the natural world just outside his front door, I appreciate the little yellow flowers that spill over the rock ledge in my backyard. They grow seemingly overnight following long, brutal northern New Hampshire winters. I eagerly await the spring sighting of a black bear moseying down my driveway, visible through the windows outside my writing room. I always, always remember to smile when I turn right at my driveway, turn right again, and there's Mount Washington, towering above the horizon like Fuji, Olympus, or Everest in my fertile imagination.

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GREGORY L. NORRIS is a prolific writer of many genres, from science fiction to horror to space opera—and the occasional nature memoir. He lives in Berlin, New Hampshire.

### **The Unexpected Run-In**

*Gordon DuBois*

I steered my pickup truck on the narrow, snow-covered Success Pond Road near Berlin, New Hampshire, and told my friend Fran this story: Earlier in the winter, I had planned to hike the Journey's End Trail to the northern end of the Long Trail in Vermont. Driving in, my truck skidded off the narrow, snow-packed road and into a deep culvert. I could not dislodge the truck, so I called my son-in-law, who pulled me out with his plow truck.

Fran and I had just bushwhacked in three feet of snow, breaking through an icy crust, to the summit of Henry Hill. This obscure mound east of Berlin stands 2,032 feet high, something of a bump on the topographical map of New Hampshire. We had bushwhacked to the top because it's on a list of the 500 highest peaks in New Hampshire and, like many of these mountains, it has no trail. To reach the peak requires trekking through wilderness terrain using a map, compass, and GPS. From the summit of Henry, which had been recently logged, we could see almost the entire Mahoosuc Range stretched across the southern horizon: North Bald Cap, Mount Success, Goose Eye Mountain, North Peak, Fulling Mill Mountain, Mahoosuc Mountain, and Mahoosuc Notch to the extreme east.

After Fran and I returned to my truck, we munched on our sandwiches and discussed whether we had time that day to bushwhack Success Hill (2,190

feet). We mulled over the risks of going over to the peak using the snow-covered logging road, Success Pond Road. It had taken four hours to break trail for 2.5 miles up Henry. Did we have time for another trailless peak? We looked at our watches and decided we did, but we had to hurry.

I drove fast on the single-track logging road. We had to gain momentum to punch through fresh snow that had fallen the previous day, and skim over ice created by a recent rainfall. Temperatures were dropping to near zero that evening, and we knew we must be out of the woods before nightfall. As we plowed ahead, I wrapped my hands tightly around the steering wheel, while Fran calmly suggested, “Slow down . . . slow down.”

The snow here was deeper, and I struggled to keep the truck from sliding into a culvert. As the road climbed toward Success Pond, we suddenly noticed a bridge and a large sign, “ONE LANE BRIDGE.” I slowed the truck to a snail’s pace and carefully steered it onto the bridge, while Fran peered out the window looking at the rushing water below. There was no room for error. I thought to myself, “This is the end,” quoting the Doors’ song featured in the movie *Apocalypse Now*. I was praying that this wasn’t our day of reckoning.

We crept across the bridge, like a salamander crossing a roadway, and with a sigh of relief we felt the truck’s tires hit terra firma. We slowly rolled off the bridge, inching along the narrow, snow-covered road. A monstrous logging truck was heading straight toward us. The driver was barreling down the logging road (his road, really—maintained by his employers), and I could tell he expected me to move to the side. I couldn’t move the truck to the side of the road. There was no side of the road, just deep culverts. As the logging truck thundered forward, blaring its horn, brakes screeching, I jumped out of my vehicle waving my hands.

The truck slowly came to a stop. The driver jumped down from his rig and firmly suggested, “Just back up a few hundred yards, cross the bridge, and you’ll see a log landing, nothing to it. Turn into the landing, and I’ll be able to drive by without crushing your truck.” I said, “It sounds like a plan,” as I hoisted myself back into the driver’s seat. Fran looked stunned. His face turned white. We were within a few hundred yards of the bridge. I told him not to worry, and to forget what I had told him earlier about my rescue on Journey’s End Road.

I held my breath as I slowly backed my truck, keeping it squarely in the center of the narrow road. Fran leaned out the window, prudently monitoring my path, like a sailor in the crow’s nest of a sailing ship. He kept repeating, “Stay to the right, you have plenty of room, slow down, watch behind, don’t panic!” Following Fran’s commands, especially the one about not panicking, I

inched the truck nearer to the bridge. As we closed in on the bridge I became tenser, visualizing the truck tumbling into the fast-moving water below. There was little room for error. We were thirteen miles from Berlin with no cell service. It would be a long walk back to civilization if we didn't make it.

The log truck followed us as we backed up. I knew the driver was anxious to get his load to the mill before nightfall. When we made it over the bridge, we sighed in relief like deflating balloons. I backed into the log landing, and the monstrous truck roared by. The driver gave me the thumbs up, and I waved back, feeling proud of my feat. A few seconds later, we heard the rumble of a truck engine from behind. I looked in the rearview mirror and saw another massive log truck hurtling down the road leading out of the log yard. The driver blasted his horn, warning us to get out of the way. Thoughts again flashed across my eyes: We're going to be crushed! I was able to get the truck to the side, leaving just enough room for the log truck and its full load of timber to roar past. After pausing to reflect, we decided (with some trepidation) to carry on with our plan to bushwhack up Success Hill.

Many of the adventures Fran and I have shared on the way to these peaks offer unexpected bombshells. We have slogged in deep unbroken snow, broken through thick spindly fir, scrambled over and under blowdowns, scaled rock slides and ledges, been tripped up by hobblebush, and been scratched bloody by thorny blackberry canes. These are standard operating conditions when bushwhacking. This was my first time backing across a one-lane icy bridge to make room for a logging truck, though. A topo map doesn't provide "intel" about these obstructions. Over many years of bushwhacking, I've learned to always be prepared for the unexpected. How I respond becomes part of the experience. That was the lesson I learned that day.

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GORDON DUBOIS is the author of *Paths Less Traveled: Tramping on Trails (and Sometimes Not) to Find New Hampshire's Special Places* (Dorrance Publishing, 2020). He wrote a column about his trail adventures for the *Laconia Daily Sun* for many years. He now lives in northern Vermont.

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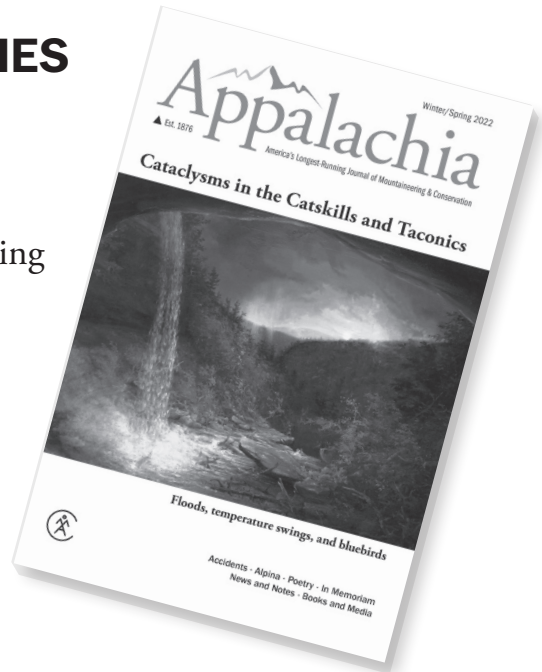
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