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Narragansett Marathon

*Just before leaving his native Connecticut for Wyoming,
a young explorer finally takes a 50-mile trek
from his parents' doorstep*

Tom Fagin



THE OPPRESSIVE WARMTH OF THE DAY DIMINISHED AS THE LATE-summer evening crept across the sky.

It was that sticky, insect-infected heat that marks the end of August. With daylight fading, cryptic shadows settled back into the woods. Familiar shapes of trees became abstractions. A chorus of peepers chirped their waterfront conversation along the shore. To me, their chatter sounded like a song for the dying season.

Although the air gloated over the land, hot and humid, the tide had turned against the excesses of summer. A revolution in the seasons was at hand.

And there I was, on the shore of a lake I had never visited before, even though it is not so far from my home in southeastern Connecticut.

It had taken my friend and me most of the day to hike there from my doorstep, a bit over 20 miles along the Narragansett Trail and then just east of the Rhode Island border.

We were near familiar territory, a stone's throw from the places we had grown up around. The difference was that we had retreated into the woods not for a quick hike, but for a long-distance overnight trip.

We were walking instead of driving, getting drinking water out of streams instead of faucets. Three miles was no quick hop in the car. It was an hour of walking with bugs and heat for company. At the end of the day, we would have to find a suitable place to put up a tent and cook a dinner that we had carried in ourselves. We weren't just walking on the land; we were relying on it.

Sure, I had gone on expeditions like these, but usually they were up in the mountains of New Hampshire or Maine—at least four hours of driving from home, often more than that. But now I had successfully removed myself from the familiar just by strapping on a pack and walking.

I was in the woods and worried about woods things, not the abstract, complicated questions about what I would do when I got out.

I'd graduated from college about a year before and spent most of the time since living with my parents, scrounging up funds with a part-time reporting job. Going home to work kept me in familiar territory, but I felt dislocated in my life's arc. Growing up, I had imagined that at this point, I would be in some distant place, in some grand adventure. Years later, I was still thinking along those lines.

High Ledge, in eastern Connecticut, rises as a dark mass, its sides littered with shattered rocks from the last ice age. TOM FAGIN

When I looked for new jobs or cities I would like to live in, I looked west where the mountains were tall and there were yet miles of uninhabited land. The great American myth of self-determination lurked out there somewhere, I decided. There was a strong possibility that I would never find what I was looking for, but I wanted to at least try putting roots down elsewhere and thereby redefine myself on new ground.

Meanwhile, I was in Connecticut with no 14,000-foot mountains close by. If I couldn't leave, maybe I could do some worthy exploring close at hand. There were 27 miles of the Narragansett Trail, which started about a mile away from my parents' house.

From its western endpoint at the silica cliffs of Lantern Hill, the little-known pathway winds through Pachaug State Forest, Connecticut's biggest state park. It goes between the secretive stands of pines and the dense groves of mountain laurel to where it ends on the other side of the Rhode Island border. Boulders, dragged up by ancient glaciers, still lie scattered over hills and rest beneath the shade of the oaks and hickory.

For years, I had thought that one day I would lace up my boots and hike from my door to the other end of the trail. Instead, I'd procrastinated and bumped the idea down the schedule to make room for other adventures or unforeseen commitments.

I might have just waffled on the trip forever if I hadn't had my friend Andrew to motivate me. Andrew likes adventures, even if the purpose isn't entirely clear to anyone. The December of our sophomore year in college, he and his buddies decided to take his parents' car and see how far we could drive it north. Within a couple of days of nonstop driving, I was standing, shirtless, with Andrew, his friend Sean, and brother Jon on the southern shore of Hudson Bay. It made an awesome photograph with the piles of jagged ice in the background.

Andrew liked my Narragansett Trail idea plenty. We were confident that after all our lengthy hiking in the Appalachians, a backwoods stroll in Connecticut wouldn't be much challenge. But in a way, it was.

Neither of us had hiked much more than 20 miles in a day. Now, we were going to go 27 miles twice in a row. And that was assuming that we tented exactly at the other end. If we didn't make it that far the first day, we would have to cover more than 30 miles the second day. It would be made more challenging by the fact that the land rolls. There may not be any big mountains in my neck of the woods, but there is plenty of up and down.

Even if Connecticut doesn't have the extreme climate of Death Valley or Patagonia, it is still important to stay cool during the day, warm during the night, purify stream water, and bring food—a stove too if you want it warm. Before any multiday hike, it is also useful not to stay up late packing and working on an article due the next day, lose sleep, and then get a really late start. Of course, that is exactly what I did.

By the time Andrew rolled in that morning and I had finished last-minute packing, it was already 10:30 A.M. The chances that we would reach the end of the trail by the end of the day weren't looking too hot.

We set off in our hiking gear through my neighborhood, big packs on our backs. To people mowing their lawns, out and about on a summer day, we were a strange sight indeed. It looked like some parody of someone else's adventure.

I'm just glad no one asked if I was running away from home.

Finally, we cut off the road, up a steep embankment into the concealment of the trees. We were on our way to the summit of Lantern Hill, where we would start along the trail.

Even though we had barely begun, the summer heat was already squeezing the sweat out of us, drenching our backs. Lantern Hill, which is less than 500 feet tall, still had us puffing under the weight of our packs. We stopped at the summit to unload our burdens and restore ourselves with slugs of water. It was about 11 A.M. I was hoping that in the remains of the day, we would be able to cover at least 25 miles.

We had miles to hike in the heat, but we encountered scenes of uncommon beauty, scattered among the mundane.

The hour after we came off Lantern Hill, we descended to a landfill, crossed a road, and then wound through the sweaty woods on a downhill pitch until we popped out at a freshly mown field.

Shortly after, we found a quiet millpond and dunked our heads in to get cool. Only a stone's throw away, a river of vehicles was going up and down Route 2, on the road between Connecticut casinos and Rhode Island beaches. Still dripping, we found our break in the traffic and scurried across to where the trail followed a country road on the east side.

Soon, we dipped back into the trees, the clamor of traffic receding in our ears. We had about five miles to go to get to High Ledge, which, I decided, should be our next stop. The path took us up a steep hill and back down into a dell where a beaver dam had flooded several dozen acres of woods.

The beauty of that backdrop was no simple scenery; it contained the whole drama of catastrophe, death, and rejuvenation.

The trees were drowned, but the flooded land was passionately alive. The air rang with the chirps of peepers and insects. At our approach, a great blue heron exploded into flight, abandoning the fishing spot for refuge in high branches. The water reflected the blue and the clouds from overhead, a mirror image framed by the green sedges and the wildflowers that grew along the periphery. Below the surface, water bugs scrounged amid the pond detritus.

We walked past the solemn scene like solitary pilgrims along the water's edge. The wet ground squished beneath our soles.

A drowned army of trees, bare of leaf and bleached by sun, stood sentinel in the water, their skeletal arms jabbing at the blue sky. The sight of them, hundreds strong, towering above us, only reinforced the ceremonial feeling of the place. And yet the flowers, birds, and insects, alive under the sky, dispelled any inherent gloominess about the scene.

We left the pond quietly and reentered the dim cover of the woods. Here, a shadowy bulk of rock formations loomed behind trees.

Eventually we came to High Ledge itself, which rose as a dark mass, its sides littered with the shattered rocks and boulders scraped out of the land by the last ice age. We climbed a steep pitch, out from the wet darkness, toward the sun and a light breeze.

From the top, we could look down over miles of green-topped canopy and the cool waters of Wyassup Lake. We let the wind carry off some of the damp sweatiness that we had brought with us from the woods. Here, we took a short rest for sandwiches and enjoyed a respite from the heat. Below us, a sea of trees waved lazily with the gusts of wind. We filled our stomachs as we watched, taking in nourishment as we did the view.

There were other bodily needs to attend to, however; water was one of them.

We left the ledge and descended to a wooded valley, where we found a trickle of a stream. Having drained both the one-liter bottles I had brought with me, I set about refilling them with murky water. I took a cup and poured it down through a head net, successfully filtering out the larger particles. The liquid retained its yellow tinge, acquired from the tannin of leaves that fell upstream. Finally, I added some Aquamira drops to even the odds against water-borne nasties.



Andrew Piccirillo tends the stove under the pines near camp. TOM FAGIN

That purified yellow drink was to sustain me through the rest of the day. We had already burned away a good part of the light, but were committed to hiking as much as time and energy allowed.

As the afternoon gave out, we came to the Green Falls River, which flows through a steep-sided canyon closed in by dark pines. It was more of a brook, really, gurgling along its stony bottom as it made its way. We went the opposite direction of the current, taking delicate steps over the slippery rocks and roots. Moss grew everywhere, exploiting every moist surface.

Andrew and I climbed up to a nineteenth-century dam at Green Falls Pond, ate some trail mix, and soaked our heads again. We were still probably about 10 miles from the trail terminus in Rhode Island. By now, I had accepted that we would need to pitch my tent before we got there. New clouds overhead threatened. At around 6 in the evening, we came to the Rhode Island border. Another half-hour of trail took us to the delightfully named Yawgoog Pond. Andrew and I stopped by the edge of the water, looking out across to the Boy Scout camp on the other side.

Though not an official tent site, our spot beneath the pine trees was a tenter's dream, a flat surface, cushioned by soft needles. I wearily removed my pack, and we set about setting up our shelter for the night.

For the dinner course, I had brought along some dried-up mashed potato to heat over a can of Sterno. Tired as we were, the rehydrated flakes of starch, mixed up with salt and garlic powder, were five-star fare.

We had our rest. As for relaxation, there was not so much.

Shortly after we had finished eating, the dark clouds fulfilled their promise with a brutal downpour that forced us inside the tent for refuge. I tossed for hours before nodding off briefly. Around 4 A.M., I awoke to the clamor of wind and the realization that water was leaking through the ceiling. The fabric walls punched in at me with each gust of wind and the floor curled upward. With nothing else to do, I rolled over in the dampness and waited for morning.

It would have been nice to get more sleep, considering the big day that loomed ahead of us. Lying in my bag, I felt the stiffness in my leg muscles. As tired as I was, I knew that the next day would be even more taxing than the first.

It's a funny way to wake up, enclosed within a small, wet fabric structure, knowing that somehow, for whatever crazy reason, I had walked there by choice and that I was about to put myself through more of the same.

After we woke up, we hung our dampened sleeping bags to dry on tree limbs and made a mush of oatmeal using pond water for the breakfast course.

We still had about two and a half miles to go before hitting the eastern end of the Narragansett Trail. From there, we'd turn around and go about 27 miles to reach the western end of the trail—and then walk back to my parents'. Andrew and I agreed that the way to cover the short section to the eastern terminus would be as a blitz hike, sans packs, with only some water, trail mix, and the camera in a stuff sack.

We ran most of the way to the end, leaping over logs, plunging through stands of laurel. Here and there, an outstretched branch would slap us with cold rainwater. It was a better wake-up than coffee. Some of the rowdiest terrain that we encountered on that hike was along Ell Pond, whose shores were populated with laurel bushes and house-sized boulders. This was the point along the journey when we pushed ourselves hard. We wanted to leave enough time to turn it all around and get back home that night.

My heart rushed as I pounded my boots over the terrain, over the rocky slopes and over logs. I was pushing myself as hard as I would push myself anywhere else. I could take that challenge that I wanted for right then, I didn't need to go west for it if I could create it from the elements that I had right next to me.

We were getting close to the end of the trail, I knew, the culmination of all those miles behind us.

Except that when we got there, there was no sign or anything at the end, just a gravel road and a house on the other side where a guy was mowing his lawn.

"We did it!"

It didn't have to be anything more than it was. I wasn't interested in making any big ceremony of it. So we sat down in the sun at Ashville Pond, celebrating our success with handfuls of victory trail mix and slugs of water.

Then we turned around.

IT TOOK US UNTIL NIGHTFALL TO GET BACK TO MY DOORSTEP. With just five miles to go, Andrew pulled a muscle, which reduced him to a lurch as we returned over Lantern Hill. All told, we logged something more than 30 miles that day, more than anything we'd done before.

When we had left the neighborhood the day before, goofy packs strapped to our backs, the whole thing might have seemed like a crazy pipe dream. As we returned, in the cover of darkness, no one would have seen us returning through the neighborhood, covered with dirt and looking as if we had fallen out of another dimension. If they had, I wouldn't have cared. We had proven we could do it. I'd have been happy to tell them about the fine adventure just a couple miles yonder.

Andrew and I capped our adventure at the doorstep, going into the living room that looked basically the same as when we had started out some 30 hours earlier.

Even in that short amount of time, I felt that I had paid some dues to the place where I had grown up and had come back with a little more respect for it. How ungrateful would it have been for me to eschew this local adventure before I left for glamorous expeditions in far-flung places? There is a quiet beauty to the Connecticut woods. It might not trumpet itself like Teton peaks or the cataracts of the Niagara River, but its drama waits to be found in places like the beaver pond we'd seen. Going out on foot, we could spot these tiny worlds and appreciate their significance.



Tom Fagin on the shore of Ashville Pond.

ANDREW PICCIRILLO

There, a stream was no mere stream but a source of necessary water. We measured distance and topography in effort and fatigue.

Contrast this with the convenience of driving, removed from physical exertion and the weather, when it is all too easy to forget the realities of the landscape. My short marathon through the woods was still too brief to absorb even a fraction of these truths, but it brought me closer to the land I had grown out of.

Which is funny, because I would be leaving soon.

A MONTH AND A HALF LATER, I WAS ON THE HIGHWAY DRIVING west, going away from the trees of home out to the wide, empty spaces of Wyoming. I was leaving because of a job, but also because of the itch for travel I'd felt since I had left college. I wanted to know what kind of person I would become in a new environment. It would be many months before I set foot on the East Coast again.

That hike of the Narragansett feels like the parting hug now. Perhaps it is a keepsake like any other souvenir or snapshot. I have that memory on the shelf. I pick it up sometimes, when I want to think about the adventures that I had back home on a wild landscape that had been there all along.

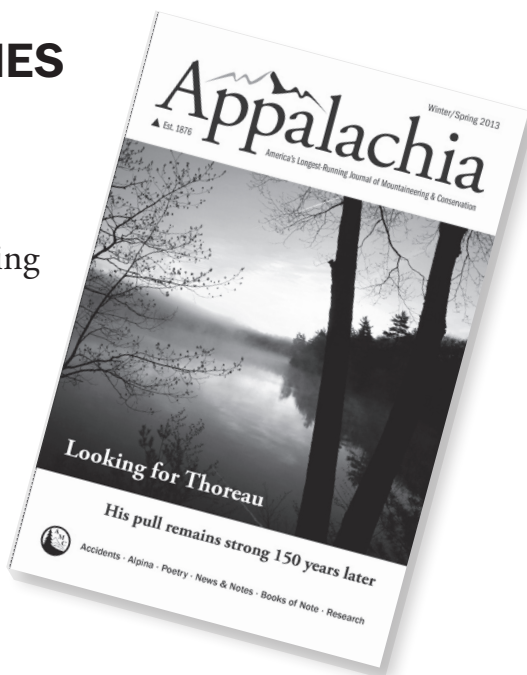
TOM FAGIN, a 2010 graduate of Union College, grew up in Ledyard, Connecticut, and spent many years hiking in the Northeast. He works as a reporter in Gillette, Wyoming, and blogs about adventures at tomsonthemove.blogspot.com.

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