

# Appalachia

---

Volume 73  
Number 2 *Summer/Fall 2022: The Ubiquitous  
Cell Phone*

---

Article 1

2022

## Appalachia Summer/Fall 2022: Complete Issue

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



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

(2022) "Appalachia Summer/Fall 2022: Complete Issue," *Appalachia*: Vol. 73: No. 2, Article 1.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol73/iss2/1>

This Complete 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).

Summer/Fall 2022

# Appalachia

▲ Est. 1876

America's Longest-Running Journal of Mountaineering & Conservation

## The Ubiquitous Cell Phone



**Do cell phones help adventurers or hinder them?**



Accidents · Alpina · Poetry · Research  
In Memoriam · News and Notes · Books and Media



Volume LXXIII No. 2, Magazine No. 254

Summer/Fall 2022

# Appalachia

▲ Est. 1876      America's Longest-Running Journal of Mountaineering & Conservation



Appalachian Mountain Club  
Boston, Massachusetts

AMC MISSION

The mission of the Appalachian Mountain Club is to foster the protection, enjoyment, and understanding of the outdoors.

Since 1876, we've made it our mission to protect the mountains, forests, waters, and trails you love in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions. We envision a world where our natural resources are healthy, loved, and always protected, and where the outdoors occupies a place of central importance in every person's life. We encourage you to experience, learn more, and appreciate the outdoors knowing that your participation supports the conservation and stewardship of the natural world around you.

AMC is inspired by the untold diversity of our members and friends. We aim to be an inclusive, equitable, and kind community. At AMC we are united in our adventures by mutual trust, collective safety, respect for the natural world, and appreciation for our time together outdoors. We pledge that AMC will always provide a welcoming and respectful environment.

© 2022 AMC Books

*Appalachia* is published by AMC from its publications office at 10 City Square, Boston, Massachusetts, 02129. ISSN 0003-6587  
Third-class postage paid at Boston, Massachusetts, and other mailing offices. The journal is issued two times a year: Summer/Fall issue (June 15) and Winter/Spring issue (December 15). A subscription (both issues) is \$18 for one year, \$32 for two years, \$42 for three years. Distributed by American News Company (ANC).

The opinions expressed by the authors do not necessarily reflect the policies of AMC.

No part of this journal may be reproduced without the consent of AMC. For uniform binding, this issue constitutes No. 2 of Volume LXXIII and is numbered pages 1–160.

The interior pages and cover of this journal are printed on responsibly harvested paper stock certified by The Forest Stewardship Council®, an independent auditor of responsible forestry practices. For more information, visit [us.fsc.org](http://us.fsc.org).

Committee on Appalachia

|                                     |                      |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Editor-in-Chief / Chair</i>      | Christine Woodside   |
| <i>Alpina Editor</i>                | Steven Jervis        |
| <i>Assistant Alpina Editor</i>      | Michael Levy         |
| <i>Poetry Editor</i>                | Parkman Howe         |
| <i>Book Review Editor</i>           | Steve Fagin          |
| <i>Assistant Book Review Editor</i> | Stephen Kurczy       |
| <i>News and Notes Editor</i>        | Sally Manikian       |
| <i>Accidents Editor</i>             | Sandy Stott          |
| <i>Assistant Accidents Editor</i>   | Scott Berkley        |
| <i>Photography Editor</i>           | Skip Weisenburger    |
| <i>Contributing Editors</i>         | Lucille Stott        |
|                                     | Douglass P. Teschner |
| <i>At Large</i>                     | Catherine Buni       |
|                                     | Jeff Fair            |
|                                     | Derick Lugo          |
|                                     | Rebecca Oreskes      |
|                                     | Laura Waterman       |
|                                     | Michael Wejchert     |

Appalachia Production

|                           |                |
|---------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Production Manager</i> | Abigail Coyle  |
| <i>Designer</i>           | Eric Edstam    |
| <i>Copyeditor</i>         | Robin Gold     |
| <i>Typesetter</i>         | Tim Holtz      |
| <i>Proofreader</i>        | Kenneth Krause |
| <i>Indexer</i>            | Ezra Freeman   |

AMC Board of Directors

|                           |                               |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Chair</i>              | Yvette Austin Smith           |
| <i>Vice Chairs</i>        | Laurie Gabriel                |
|                           | Stephen Rushmore Jr.          |
| <i>Secretary</i>          | Martha (Marty) Wallace        |
| <i>Treasurer</i>          | Lois Rothenberger             |
| <i>Board of Directors</i> | Robert W. Ackerman            |
|                           | Greg Agran                    |
|                           | Susan Arnold                  |
|                           | Charlie Arsenault             |
|                           | R. William (Bill) Burgess Jr. |
|                           | Kathy Campbell                |
|                           | Birgitta C. Dickerson         |
|                           | Cheryl Duckworth              |
|                           | Shan Soe-Lin Hecht            |
|                           | Kathleen McCarragher          |
|                           | Dee Dee Mozeleski             |
|                           | Rachel Rowe                   |
|                           | Samarjit Shankar              |
|                           | Steve Tadler                  |
|                           | William B. Tyree              |
|                           | Jenna Whitney                 |
|                           | Eileen Yin                    |
|                           | Beth Zimmer                   |



*Tents lined up for campers at Appalachian Mountain Club Echo Lake Camp, 1922. The camp is marking a century this year. See page 130. AMC LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES*



# Appalachia

▲ Est. 1876      America's Longest-Running Journal of Mountaineering & Conservation

## In Every Issue

- 6 **The Long Way Home**
- 80 **Letters**
- 86 **Accidents**
- 104 **Alpina**
- 112 **Research**
- 122 **In Memoriam**
- 126 **News and Notes**
- 136 **Valley and Skyline Sketches**
- 146 **Books and Media**
- 160 **A Peak Ahead**

## Poetry

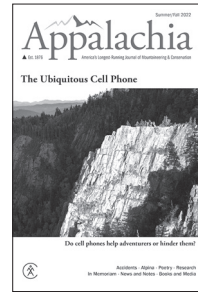
- 35 **Heresy**  
TODD DAVIS
- 79 **Liturgy of Going to Water**  
MICHAEL GARRIGAN
- 85 **Cormorant With Swimmers**  
STEPHANIE KRAFT
- 111 **The Traveler**  
DAVID K. LEFF
- 121 **Pacific Creek**  
FRANCIS LUNNEY
- 125 **Morning on the River**  
JOHN SMELCER
- 135 **The Harvesters**  
KRISTEN STABY REMBOLD

Title page photo: *A cell tower disguised as an evergreen tree rises high above actual trees on a New Hampshire roadside. Stories about cell phones begin on page 8.*

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Front cover photo: *Late-day shadows seen from the Cohos Trail add drama to the cliffs in Dixville Notch in Dixville, New Hampshire.* JOE KLEMENTOVICH

Back cover photo: *Claire Dumont at Ritterbush Lookout in Eden, Vermont, fall 2020. See page 48.* COURTESY OF CLAIRE DUMONT



## In This Issue

### The Ubiquitous Cell Phone

- 8 **Do Cell Phones Belong in the Mountains?** A 24-mile journey with a 1-year-old suggests a quieter mountain way. • STEVEN KURCZY
- 24 **Never Lost:** On the Pacific Crest Trail before smartphones, a hiker never had to choose. • DAN WHITE
- 30 **Backcountry Cell Phone Vignettes**
- 30 **Connected and Disconnected.** • IAN RAMSEY
- 31 **Each Day, a Little Less Phone Use.** • IAN RAMSEY
- 33 **Digital Disorientation.** • DOUGLAS BALMAIN
- 36 **Why Does No One Climb the Palisades?** Just north of New York City, a glacier-exposed cliff tempts a climber. • MICHAEL LEVY
- 44 **A Life Lesson in Denali Park:** A grizzly bear follows a camper. • J. ROBERT HARRIS
- 48 **COVID-19 Exposes a Wilderness Myth:** A Long Trail trek is not about retreating from towns and community. • CLAIRE DUMONT
- 54 **A Change of Plans on the Cohos Trail:** After his mother's death, a hiker faces why he loves the wild. • WALT McLAUGHLIN
- 62 **Leave a Message:** A beep and expectant silence. A kind ranger returns the call. • ELISSA ELY
- 66 **Debacle on the Salmon:** A rowdy river humbles two foolhardy canoeists. • MICHAEL ROULEAU
- 74 **Pondering Graceful Aging on Table Mountain, South Africa:** A septuagenarian rock climber reflects on his past and future. • DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER

# Time as an iron hand versus time as a shifting wind

**I**N REGULAR LIFE, DOWN IN THE VALLEYS, I UNDERSTAND LITTLE ABOUT time, struggling to identify how long it takes to get anywhere. I have been known to arrive late to my dentist—he's down the hall from my office. I have never truly learned how long it takes to walk there or drive to a place where someone is waiting for me. In the valleys, I rush. Time stresses me. But in the mountains, time seems to expand; it feels like my soul, and the days seem twice as long. I rarely feel rushed in the same way I do at home.

I have idly thought that I don't belong in the Western world, this appointment-driven society where I have lived my whole life and where if you're five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes late, you have inconvenienced someone else, frayed a relationship. The good side of deadline pressure is that without it I might not do much work.

This year I discovered the ideas of anthropologist Edward T. Hall, who compared differing approaches to time in North America with those in Latin America and the Middle East. He noted in his 1976 book *Beyond Culture* (Anchor Press/Doubleday) that time and space interrelate. Moving through a landscape, whether on foot or on some motorized thing, defines time. At least where cooperating with others is concerned.

Hall labeled the way Americans manage their lives as “monochronic time,” which “emphasizes schedules, segmentation, and promptness.” Hall wrote how irritated Americans get when they go to another country that does not adhere firmly to appointments and deadlines. He named the way people in many non-Western cultures function in “polychronic time,” in which many activities go on at the same time. People focus on their relationships as they complete their transactions with each other instead of “adherence to preset schedules.”

Hall said that not every activity in America runs that way. Some jobs in my home country inherently go against the norm of monochronic time. For example, he said, the city editor of a newspaper's job is inherently “polychronic.”



At a news outlet's city desk, everything is about reacting to unpredictable events outside. One must be ready to change course. I know about that. I worked as a city editor at a daily paper. I sat by the police scanner. I routinely jumped up and, say, pulled a reporter off one story and sent her out to a fire. I was in sync.

TAKING A CUE FROM HALL, I WONDER IF BACKPACKING IS INHERENTLY polychronic. You don't need a watch, but you must watch the sky.

Storms roll in. Surprises await: ledges, high streams, reaching camp to find it filled with people. I sink like a mist into that kind of life, dealing with unexpected conditions and threats. Moving through the land, I don't feel rushed. I am not letting anyone down. I wonder if people who hate mountain climbing dislike this lack of structure.

The pinnacle of my wilderness life, so far, was a solo trip I made around the Pemi Loop in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. My counter-clockwise loop followed Lincoln Woods Trail to the Bond Range, the Twins and Mount Garfield, and finally across the Franconia Range. I took four days (three nights out) to do this loop. Some people run it in a day. Others take even longer. My four days gave me an abundance of time. That doesn't mean I didn't have to rush sometimes. My first day I trudged fast over the Bonds near sunset, too cold from a wet, windblown raincoat.

On my third day of that trip, I walked in a soft, steady rain on the Franconia Ridge. I encountered a family heading the other way, perhaps to Greenleaf Hut. The man, leading a woman and two children, had a set jaw and held his body erect, sort of nervously cheery. Maybe his family had never done this before. Maybe he thought they should have gone faster earlier. I don't know. After I said hello and we passed each other, and I continued on to Liberty Springs Tentsite alone, I suddenly felt very free. Time was mine, rain or not.

I do not know why I struggle so with time out of the mountains. Is it a false sense of power over distance because I own a car and phone, always measuring distance by how long it will take? Am I chasing too much in the valley? Am I filling in my days with unnecessary tasks where they are not required?

I think I'll go to the mountains for a few days to figure this out.

—Christine Woodside  
*Editor-in-Chief*

# Do Cell Phones Belong in the Mountains?

*A 24-mile journey with a 1-year-old suggests a quieter mountain way*

**Stephen Kurczy**



MY SON WAS ASLEEP ON MY BACK, HEAD CRANED SIDEWAYS AS HE slouched in a child carrier, oblivious to the marathon journey in front of us. We were hiking up the Garfield Trail in the predawn darkness of August 2021, my headlamp lighting the rocky path, and his heavy breathing exchanging a rhythm with my crunching footsteps.

An imagined news headline flashed across my eyes: “Father deemed grossly negligent for bringing 1-year-old on 24-mile hike across New Hampshire’s White Mountains without cell phone.”

I pushed the thought out of my mind and tried to focus on the trail. My heart raced with excitement and trepidation as my son Mansfield and I plodded toward Mount Garfield, to be followed by Galehead and then Owl’s Head, our 48th and final 4,000-footer together. Today’s 24-mile hike would tick off these last three summits on our list of New Hampshire’s tallest mountains. And Manny, I was told, could very well become one of the youngest people to ever complete all of New Hampshire’s 4,000-footers.

I couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that I was doing something wrong—that each step I took into the Pemigewasset Wilderness was a misstep. My pack weighed about 50 pounds from my son, water, food, diapers, and extra clothing. One thing I didn’t carry, however, was any kind of technology that would enable us to connect with the outside world. No phone. No GPS. No emergency beacon. Off-line and incommunicado, we were on our own. If I sprained an ankle, fell and hurt either of us, or got lost, we would be hours from the nearest trailhead and unable to call for help.

“What was he thinking?!” I imagined critics saying. “What cavalier, reckless, horrible parenting!”

My legs already ached. The previous day, we had hiked 23 miles over the summits of six other Pemigewasset peaks (the Twins, Zealand, and the three Bonds). My wife, Jenna, with our 3-month-old second child in tow, had picked us up at the Lincoln Woods trailhead, and we had all stayed at the Seven Dwarfs Motel in Twin Mountain. If you’ve ever tried to stay in a motel with two kids under 2 years old, you can understand why I’d slept only four hours.

Given that my tank was half-empty, did I have a parental responsibility to at least carry a cell phone now, despite all my qualms with the devilish device? That is, was I acting negligently in not carrying one in the mountains?

*The author and Manny atop South Kinsman, their 29th mountain, on May 28, 2021, a chilly day when they also tagged North Kinsman and Cannon Mountain.* COURTESY OF

STEPHEN KURCZY



## Wiring the Wild

For more than a decade, as a matter of principle, pride, and stubbornness, I have refused to own a cell phone. In 2009, years before I was first introduced to the White Mountains, I threw away my first and last phone after a torrid, four-year, love-hate affair with it. I'd slept with the device, heard phantom calls from it, and felt tethered to it as a social lifeline. It was the last thing I looked at before bed and the first thing I reached for in the morning. It was a source of joy when a friend called, misery when a boss checked in, angst when nobody called at all.

I was alarmed by my addiction to such a simple device and disturbed by research showing that the cell phone—and its role as a major conduit for social media—undermines people's ability to focus, live in the moment, maintain eye contact . . . to be thoughtful humans, in many ways. So I threw it away. Living phoneless seemed like a way of maintaining some quiet in my life, ensuring that I would be off-line for at least part of my days. I've come to embrace this lifestyle. I even wrote a book about an area of America known as the National Radio Quiet Zone where cell service is outlawed and smartphones are restricted, which sounded like heaven to me. (The reality was more complicated, like many things.)

In general, I've never been a fan of modern means of “connecting” through cell phones or social media. I've never been on Facebook or Instagram, much less Snapchat or TikTok, because of a Thoreauvian wariness of these supposed advancements in communication. (“We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas, but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate,” Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, in a line that presaged most of what's on social media today.) When I bicycled across America in 2004, I opted against carrying a cell phone because I wanted to really be on my own. (Half the trip was solo.) That I wouldn't always be able to call for help made the adventure epic, memorable, life-changing, and, well, adventurous.

I feel the same way about going into the mountains. A cell phone undermines the adventure and spirit of the backcountry for me. And I've found that I'm not alone in this conviction.

“A cell phone in your pocket erases maybe the most glorious part of being out there in the mountains,” Laura Waterman, a prolific hiker and writer who is something of a godmother to the Northeast's outdoors community, told me. “You're erasing any trace of self-reliance.”

Whether to bring a phone into the backcountry is a question of ethics, says Waterman. She'd know: She literally wrote the book *Backwoods Ethics*

(Countryman Press) with her late husband, Guy. First published in 1979\*, it made an early case for low-impact hiking, climbing, and camping as a way of protecting nature and experiencing a sense of the wild. Cell phones didn't exist back then. But four decades on, Waterman believes the device has caused the "biggest change" in humans' relationship with nature, enabling us to "carry our everyday lives with us when we're out in the wild," as she wrote in the new introduction to the 2016 edition. The technology prevents us from escaping our everyday world and creates a digital barrier to engaging with the outside.

That said, Waterman does own a cell phone. An old Tracfone is stashed in her car in case of emergency. It never leaves the glovebox, and it certainly never goes on hikes, she said.

Waterman is hardly alone in opposing cell phones in the backcountry. The nonprofit watchdog Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) has for years advocated to keep wild places cell-free and opposed the National Park Service's plans to install cell towers across America's national parks. "A national park is supposed to facilitate the public's ability to enjoy the natural world and be able to escape the electronic tendrils of civilization," PEER's executive director told *Sierra* magazine in 2020. "To commune with nature. To unplug. The Park Service is doing the very opposite. It's wiring the wilderness."

After I spoke with Waterman, she snail-mailed me an excerpt from a new book, *The Appalachian Trail: A Biography* (Mariner Books, 2021), by Philip D'Anieri. Its final chapter addresses "the Internet-ization of the AT," with hikers stopping in towns to recharge battery packs and download shows to be watched in huts and shelters. Smartphones allow hikers to bring the world onto the trail and the trail to the world, with some hikers livestreaming their 2,190-mile journey and turning what was once a personal sufferfest into a public performance.

John Marunowski, a U.S. Forest Service wilderness manager for the Pemi-gewasset Ranger District since 2004, said he noticed this internetization of the trail about a decade ago. All of a sudden, every thru-hiker seemed to be asking if they'd get cell service atop the next mountain.

"Part of me was disappointed," Marunowski told me. "Is that what the experience has turned into?"

---

\**Backwoods Ethics* was issued again in 1993. In 2016, Countryman Press (now a division of Norton) brought out a new edition called *The Green Guide to Low-Impact Hiking and Camping*.



*Mansfield Cho Kurczy enjoys a hiking break on the pastoral summit of Mount Moosilauke, his 37th 4,000-footer, on July 5, 2021. STEPHEN KURCZY*

I have to wonder why so many people take cell phones onto trails, given the devices are widely reported to cause stress and anxiety. “It’s a matter of safety,” some hikers have told me. But digging into this topic, I’ve found that many search-and-rescue professionals believe that cell phones are unessential in the backcountry. They even say the device can be dangerous.

### **“A Big Mistake”**

Five miles into our trek, Manny and I summited Mount Garfield, scrambling up the old fire tower foundation just after sunrise. The wind chafed our cheeks and made our noses runny, but otherwise the weather was perfect: blue sky, wispy valley fog, and a 360-degree view of peaks and ridges soaring thousands of feet above the forest. I felt no itch to check social media or post a selfie, no desire to call my wife or check if she’d messaged. Nor was there a cell tower in sight to blemish the view.



We hiked three miles across Garfield Ridge to Galehead Hut, where I signed our names in the register. Manny relished the opportunity to walk around and explore, stretching his legs. A hut crew member was surprised to see such a tiny creature in the hut, and she welcomed him to drink all the apple juice he wanted. She added that, earlier that summer, she'd seen a woman carrying her 3-year-old on a one-day circuit of the entire 32-mile Pemi Loop—meaning my endeavor was by no means at the edge of insanity.

From the hut it was a quick jaunt up Galehead Mountain before we descended into the isolated valley around Owl's Head, where at some spots we would be about twelve miles from the nearest road. Without a cell phone, I was potentially cut off from a primary means of rescue but, at the same time, I had embraced the ethics of self-reliance and enhanced our adventure. Isn't adventure why we go into the mountains?

In a 1995 essay for *Appalachia* titled "Let 'em Die" (vol. 50 no. 4, pages 42–55), the Canadian mountaineer Robert Kruszyna argued against the idea of search and rescue because it "robs climbing of its sense of adventure, which is probably the only meaningful justification for an otherwise useless activity." That extreme position may be unpalatable to many people. But I appreciate the sentiment. Being self-reliant is part and parcel to an adventure. And one way to double-down on self-sufficiency is to ditch the cell phone.

Despite all of these ideals, is Kruszyna's "sense of adventure" a justifiable trade-off for not carrying a relatively lightweight device that could potentially save lives? Setting aside backcountry ethics, was I failing to take a simple safety precaution by not bringing any emergency communications technology? That is, is the cell phone an *essential* part of the hiker's toolkit?

I brought that question to Lieutenant Jim Kneeland of New Hampshire Fish and Game. He heads NHFG's sixteen-member Advanced Search and Rescue Team, which handles rescues throughout the White Mountains. If anything happened to me, Kneeland would likely have coordinated the response as well as determined whether I would be billed for the rescue. A state law allows NHFG to bill hikers judged to have acted negligently, which can mean they didn't carry basic items like a map or headlamp.

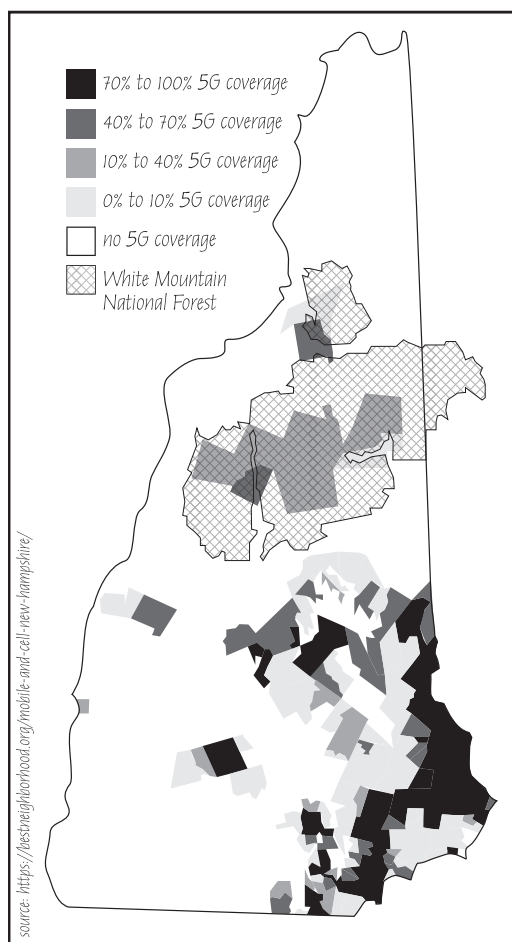
I asked Kneeland, Would a hiker be deemed negligent for not carrying a cell phone?

No, he said. Neither a cell phone nor any kind of electronic communications device is on the hikeSafe list of ten essentials, meaning they are not required or necessarily recommended. "And I don't think it will ever be there," Kneeland added.

He said the cell phone is an unreliable tool. “They’re fine to carry with you,” he said, “but to rely on it as one of your essentials is a big mistake.”

For one thing, cell service is patchy in the White Mountains and variable with many factors, including terrain and weather. Kneeland estimated that less than half of the Pemigewasset Wilderness has cell service, which can come as a surprise to many hikers. After all, we’re encouraged to think our devices will always work. “Can you hear me now?” the man asks in the Verizon commercial, and he always gets a response. We’re expected to be always online, and this culture of constant connectivity casts a shadow over the mountains, even if the mountains aren’t always connected.

But where there is cell service, phones *have* made the backcountry safer, right?



There’s evidence to the contrary. According to a 2000 report from the USFS, cell phones and other emergency communications devices increase hiker confidence and make them less willing to retreat in the face of danger. Cell phones also lead self-identified risk-takers in the backcountry to put themselves in more precarious situations, according to a 2012 study from researchers at Humboldt State University in California. This has

*This map of 5G (“fifth-generation”) cell service in New Hampshire shows that in most of the White Mountain National Forest, fast service is not available. Hikers are often in dead zones for voice calls, even where 4G service is available.* ABIGAIL COYLE/AMC

become a well-accepted idea. When Oregon tried to pass a bill that would require climbers to carry an electronic signaling device above 10,000 feet, the initiative failed because search-and-rescue teams feared it would embolden unqualified climbers, according to a 2015 article in *Sierra* titled “The Danger of a Life-Saving Device.”

SAR officials in New Hampshire have expressed similar reservations about cell phones. “I think there are people who take more of a risk thinking they can always make a call or even use their cell phone as a light in the night,” Joe Roman, the Appalachian Mountain Club’s SAR coordinator, told me. A representative from NHFG echoed that sentiment way back in 1997, telling Sandy Stott in *Appalachia*: “Hikers who go out with cell phones seem to overextend themselves; they go one or two steps farther than they should because they have a false sense of security” (“The Celling of the Backcountry,” vol. 60 no. 4, pages 48–59).

Roman does believe cell phones “have saved lives” because they enabled hikers to call for help and provided navigational technology, and I was told that all SAR personnel are required to carry cell phones and other emergency locator technology. But it’s unclear if cell phones have reduced overall deaths. Since joining NHFG in 1992, Kneeland has not noticed a decline in hiker deaths per capita, which suggests that cell phones have not made the mountains safer.

To put it another way: Would deaths spike if cell phones disappeared? “I feel people would self-rescue more, find their way out, crawl out,” said Marunowski of the USFS. “I wouldn’t be more worried.”

Kneeland said he’d never criticized a hiker for not carrying a cell phone. In fact, many times he’d wished hikers hadn’t carried cell phones at all. The device has led to a rash of nuisance calls, particularly during the shortening days of autumn when hikers are “trapped by darkness.” Almost every night in fall is a triage for Kneeland, who often finds himself hunched over a computer, toggling between maps, handling call after call from hikers who carried no map or lamp.

“When something starts going wrong, hikers are quick to call 911 and request assistance,” said Kneeland. “I’m not opposed to giving that assistance, but a lot of times they probably could have worked themselves out of their mess by carrying appropriate equipment such as a map or headlamp or something like that.”

Sometimes Kneeland will tell a benighted hiker to wait for another person to come down the trail with a headlamp, or to enjoy a night in the woods

and self-rescue when the sun rises. That rarely goes over well. “They’re going to call me every five minutes,” he said. “Quite often they keep you up half the night, so you might as well go get them and be done with it so you can go back to bed.”

Everyone expects Kneeland’s immediate attention, as we’ve all come to expect instant service in all forms: an Amazon delivery, a Google search result, a 911 response. Nobody is willing to wait patiently for the aid of a Good Samaritan or the morning sunlight. Sandy Stott, the Accidents editor of this journal, even heard of a group that called 911 asking for two things: directions out of Tuckerman Ravine and a delivery of pizza.

### **A Prayer**

Under the full force of August’s midday sun, the relentless, mile-long talus field up Owl’s Head felt heart attack-inducing—especially with a whimpering child on my back. Dirt and rocks shifted underfoot as if I was in beach sand. An unofficial trail, the path felt like one of the more precarious in the White Mountains, where a slip could easily turn serious. (Two years earlier, in fact, a man reportedly had suffered a “medical emergency” here and died.)

We finally topped out on the forested summit dome. After another quarter-mile hike through the bush, we stopped at a trail-ending cairn, where I set Manny down. I swallowed some ibuprofen. Manny trotted about and pooped in his diaper. This would be his twentieth and final diaper change above 4,000 feet, as I’d been keeping tally since we started this whole endeavor more than a year earlier.

Coming down Owl’s Head, we crossed paths with a brawny, shirtless man trudging uphill with a four-foot-long log propped over his shoulder. He said the log weighed 25 pounds and that he was training for a strongman competition. We then passed a father and his teenaged son, and the father seemed to eye me judgmentally. I jittered downhill and skirted around him. The ibuprofen had put a pep in my step.

“It’s a good thing you’re not alone,” the father said.

“Right, I’ve got my 1-year-old with me!” I responded.

“You know that’s not what I mean,” he said with a glare. “I’ll say a prayer for you.”

The man’s over-serious religiosity grated on me, as did the fact that he felt I needed somebody to watch over me. It seemed to underscore something about the desire many people have to remain connected with an all-powerful

overseer, be it God overhead or AT&T in our pocket. We're uncomfortable to the point of being existentially terrified at the idea of being alone. Going into the mountains used to force everybody to get comfortable with that aloneness. It was baked into the adventure. Now it's an option that more and more people opt out of.

I would later recount my trip to Ty Gagne, another father who has brought his kids into the White Mountains many times. He's also the author of two of the most well-read books about accidents in the White Mountains, so I wanted his assessment of my decision to do a 24-mile wilderness hike with a 1-year-old and without any communications technology. Gagne's first book, *Where You'll Find Me*, recounted the 2015 death of Kate Matrosova, whose rescue was delayed when her personal locator beacon emitted a series of conflicting coordinates that initially sent rescuers in the wrong direction; technology failed her. His second book, *The Last Traverse*, told the story of two hikers stranded on Franconia Ridge in February 2008 with no communications device; technology might have saved them.

Neither of those books is a lesson about technology being a menace or messiah, Gagne told me. The lesson from both is how our own behaviors and emotions fuel our decisions. And he found it a reasonable emotion to want to disconnect when in the mountains.

"I miss the simplicity that existed before this kind of distraction tool that's become an extension of our bodies," Gagne said. So far as the wisdom of bringing a 1-year-old deep into the woods, Gagne reserved judgment. "I can't sit here and criticize what you did because people have been hiking in the backcountry *without* technology longer than they have."

### **Phone-Free Zones**

As part of my research, I reviewed the past decade of Accidents reports from this journal to see how cell phones have played into rescues. If essential, wouldn't cell phones be celebrated as lifesaving devices?

I found phones often mentioned in a negative light. A winter hiker took her smartphone up Mount Monroe, then took so many photos that her battery died, and with it her map. There was the teenaged trio who embarked in late afternoon on a nine-mile hike with total equipment of "a half-bottle of vitamin water and three cell phones"; they spent a rainy, hungry night in the woods when they lost cell service, and their way. There were numerous incidents of hikers calling for help when they could have problem-solved



their way out. Once, more than 30 rescuers responded to a hiker with an injured ankle who, ultimately, was able to walk down. The device caters to panic. In another incident, a hiker called 911 for *another group*, which later told the 911 responder that it never wanted help.

“Clearly, there is a lot less ‘muddling one’s way out,’ and a lot more pressing buttons for help,” Stott wrote in one Accidents column. In his 2019 book *Critical Hours* (University Press of New England), Stott recounted the egregious case of a man who called for help from Mount Adams because he’d injured his leg. A SAR crew carried the man down four miles of steep terrain. At the parking lot, the injured hiker rose from the litter, stood on both feet, and announced he was OK then. In another recent case, a Dartmouth College student got lost within 1.5 miles of Moosilauke Ravine Lodge. He’d been looking at his phone as he hiked; when he looked up, he couldn’t spot the trail. He was found two days later, shoeless and hypothermic.

“Trading the actual world for the screened one invites collision with objects such as trees, stones, or mailboxes,” Stott commented in his Accidents report. “But the loss of awareness of one’s real world is deeper than that. The screen life becomes the familiar one; the real life becomes surpassingly strange.” Stott’s warning resonated for me. Were I to hike with a smartphone, I worry that I’d become overly obsessed with the tiny screen, checking email and whatever else from the trail, endangering myself and Manny because I’d lose focus of my surroundings.

In a phone interview, Stott told me I wasn’t wrong to detect his exasperation with cell phones. “A lot of times, at the first sign of difficulty, people get on their phones in no small measure because that’s the habit that seems to be reinforced and reinforced and reinforced, and so it’s gotten stronger,” he said.

Stott has watched this trend play out over a quarter-century. In that prescient 1997 article “The Celling of the Backcountry,” he described a weekend trek up Mount Jefferson when he found that half of all hikers carried cell phones; one man even claimed to have “done deals from all over these mountains,” meaning business transactions. Cell phones were already ubiquitous—so much so that the USFS was discouraging the use of phones in the woods and campgrounds because they intruded on “the backcountry experience,” there was a “consensus” among SAR officials that “cell phone use in the mountains was ‘getting out of hand’” with nuisance calls, and in 1995 the Randolph Mountain Club had instituted a no-phones rule at its shelters.

RMC still prohibits cell phone use at its four backcountry shelters. Each shelter has a sign that reads, “Cell Phone Free Zone,” which is enforced by the

club's caretakers and field supervisors. The nonprofit's camps chair, Carl Herz, told me that enforcement is a kind of mental jujitsu or Jedi mind trick—an effort to convince visitors that the rule is in *their* best interest, and that the sound of the wind is preferable to that of a TikTok video.

"Nobody wants to run into a sheriff," Herz said. "It's more about trying to facilitate an environment where they don't want to look at their phone. You might need to gently remind people about the policy and just say, 'Hey, we ask that people use those outside. We try to keep it pixel-free indoors. I know you need to let your wife know you're OK, but step outside and then come back in and eat by the lantern.'"

The Gray Knob caretaker for seven seasons from 2015 to 2018, Herz said he could count on his hands the number of times he had to crack down on phones. But there was one memorable incident. In the fall of 2015, a group of eight hikers arrived around 9 p.m. and began complaining about the spotty cell service. Herz casually mentioned that cell phones weren't allowed inside but added that Crag Camp, a half-mile away, had excellent reception. Without any prodding, the group packed up and hiked through the dark to Crag, such was their desire to get online.

For Herz, it was a small victory to get phones away from the others at Gray Knob. To me, it sounded like a desecration of the sanctity of Crag Camp, like peeing in the church baptismal when nobody's looking. But the reality was that it was impossible for Herz to be an all-seeing enforcer at all four of RMC's shelters, so he had to choose his battles.

In contrast with RMC, the Appalachian Mountain Club has no regulations against phones at its two lodges, eight huts, and numerous backcountry shelters—which see tens of thousands more people every year than RMC's 1,200 annual overnights. Although cell service is spotty at Joe Dodge Lodge and the Highland Center, both facilities have strong Wi-Fi. In fact, the last time I stayed at Joe Dodge—the night before Manny and I completed a one-day, 20-mile Moriah-Carter-Wildcat traverse in June 2021—my cousin streamed a National Basketball Association Finals game on his smartphone late into the evening from his nearby bunkbed. (I confess I wanted to be kept updated on the score.)

Half of AMC's campsites have cell service, according to Joe Roman, who along with being the organization's SAR coordinator is also its campsite program and conservation manager. Phones usually aren't an issue, he said. But there are cell phone-related annoyances, such as when AllTrails lists the wrong price for campsites and hikers show up expecting a lower

fee—which might be the least of all problems with apps that are notoriously inaccurate and often downplay trails’ difficulty while focusing on their Instagramability.

At AMC’s huts, phone etiquette has improved as texting has become a more common, discreet means of communication, according to Huts Manager Bethany Taylor. She said AMC has even *encouraged* smartphone use by inviting hikers to participate in long-range phenology studies with such apps as iNaturalist.

“Using that app, folks can take pictures of flora and fauna along the way, which will help them identify the species, and the life stage of the plant, as well as provide the exact location of the plant,” said Taylor. “This is all collected and mapped out as a huge collaborative research project and shows more accurately when and where different species are budding, flowering, and fruiting.” A wealth of crowdsourced data is being collected.

“The trick, I think, that we’re all learning is to utilize smartphones as tools and to know when, where, and how they augment the experience of being in these special places,” Taylor added.

Somewhat ironically, RMC has also found cell phones to be useful. Since 2017, the club has stashed a smartphone at either Gray Knob or Crag Camp as a backup to its emergency radio and pager. The device is also used to process overnight fees—although, per club rules, the transaction occurs outside.

## **Tech Education**

How do we keep cell phones in their appropriate place? One response is a “Katahdinesque” approach, as Stott calls it. Maine forbids the operation of radios, televisions, cassette players, and cell phones in Baxter State Park in an effort to follow former Governor Percival Baxter’s request that the land “forever be kept and remain in the natural wild state.” In the same vein, the park goes light on SAR because it takes away from the spirit of being in a wild place.

But even Baxter State Park is struggling to stay Katahdinesque. A previous park director told Stott that the no-phones policy had to be relaxed to attract young workers who wanted access to their devices. Visitors had also pushed against the regulation. In 2018, a park ranger told me they’d essentially given up on cell phone enforcement. At the summit of Katahdin that year, I found people taking selfies with their iPhones and making calls. A cell tower blinked on the horizon.

The White Mountains—being just a few hours from Boston and Montreal—are all the more accessible to millions of people, allowing the cell phone culture of the frontcountry to more easily pervade that New Hampshire backcountry. In 1997, USFS's Rebecca Oreskes told *Appalachia* ("The Celling of the Backcountry," page 55), it would be impossible to prohibit cell phones in wilderness areas. Herz of RMC also said there was no way to altogether ban phones in a public resource such as the White Mountains—not to mention in a state whose motto is Live Free or Die—so the best option is "education of reasonable use of tech."

And one of the best education initiatives in the White Mountains, according to Lieutenant Kneeland, is the Trailhead Stewards Program. Started in 2014 by John Marunowski of the USFS, the program has grown—with financial assistance from the Waterman Fund, founded in memory of Guy Waterman—to include 150 volunteers who station from May to October at the five busiest trailheads in the White Mountains (Appalachia, Welch-Dickey, Falling Waters, Bridle Path, and Ammonoosuc Ravine). A single trailhead can see as many as 500 hikers in a morning.

"A lot of the stewards are playing triage," Marunowski told me. "Somebody walks up to us and they're about to hit the trail. We engage them and do a quick once-over of what they're carrying. Are they prepared?"

The answer is often a resounding no, with overreliance on cell phones being a culprit. At Champney Brook trailhead one October weekend, a steward found that one in five hikers carried the recommended paper map; the majority relied on maps on their phones. Another time, the steward discovered hordes of Columbus Day hikers "unaware that they would need water, additional clothing, and that a paper map was preferable to a picture on the cell phone," according to an Accidents report in this journal. (Compared with those hikers, Manny and I were almost comically overprepared with our paper map, two lights, and 11 pounds [5 liters] of water.)

It's an uphill battle to influence people. About one in ten hikers will take a steward's advice, be it to add layers or do a different hike, according to Marunowski. But even that is enough to help prevent incidents, according to Kneeland. His SAR team averages 200 missions a year, plus another 150 cases where the situation can be handled over the phone. The number of phone-only responses jumped to 186 in 2020 when people flocked to the woods during the pandemic and the Trailhead Stewards Program was suspended.

When encountering unprepared hikers, trail stewards focus on the hike-Safe ten essentials. If hikers say their phones cover those essentials, it might



*Manny with his parents, author Stephen Kurczy and Jenna Cho, atop Mount Jackson, on October 10, 2020. COURTESY OF STEPHEN KURCZY*

spark a conversation about the superior reliability of a paper map and headlamp to a smartphone that's hemorrhaging battery power every time you swipe right. If hikers display poor phone etiquette, such as playing music over a Bluetooth speaker connected to their smartphone, the stewards will speak up.

"We'd say, 'People go into nature because they want to appreciate the sights and sounds of nature, and we would appreciate it if you kept that to yourself,'" Marunowski said.

### **Serendipity**

From Owl's Head, Manny and I still had nine miles between us and civilization. With the mental burden of 48 peaks behind me, I was soon skipping at a pace of four miles an hour. After a few miles, I veered onto an unmarked path that seemed to point in the general direction of home. I'd heard of an unofficial



trail known as the Black Pond Bushwhack that could eliminate several water crossings and a mile or two. For a half hour, I anxiously wondered if I was on the correct bushwhack or a dead-end deer path. There was a sense of excitement and exploration in not being able to check my GPS location.

Soon we popped out at Black Pond, then converged with the Lincoln Woods Trail—we were home free. I looked down the long, tree-lined corridor of what was once a railroad bed and saw a familiar figure approaching. It was Jenna carrying our 3-month-old. (The previous year, Jenna had completed half of all the 4,000-footers with Manny and me, but our second child had sidelined her peakbagging endeavors.) The fact that we were reconnecting without relying on phones made our reunion even more serendipitous.

I'm not trying to argue that extreme hikes with kids are for everyone. But I am using my hike as a way of arguing against cell phones in the wilderness. If Manny and I could safely do such a trek, and without broad condemnation from respected voices in the Northeast's mountain community, then I believe we all can start ditching our cell phones. It might help defend the spirit of the backcountry.

Because as surely as phones have infiltrated the mountains, won't more invasive technology? It's not hard to imagine hikers one day wearing Oculus headsets or another kind of virtual reality augmentation to enhance their experience. Think of the boon to safety. SAR officials could, in emergency situations, don their own VR headsets at home, and the officer could be virtually alongside the hiker, encouraging them down the mountain. "Virtual stewards" could station everywhere. Reality will increasingly blur with irreality, just as it's happening every day with GPS replacing maps, Zoom replacing offices, social media replacing friendships. . . .

I go into the woods to escape that contrived world of fake plastic trees, which means leaving cell phones behind and embracing the rewards of going off-line.

---

STEPHEN KURCZY is a Connecticut-based journalist, *Appalachia* contributor and our assistant book review editor, and the author of *The Quiet Zone* (HarperCollins, 2021). He does use a computer. Visit him at [stephenkurczy.com](http://stephenkurczy.com).

# Never Lost

*On the Pacific Crest Trail before smartphones,  
a hiker never had to choose*

**Dan White**



IN THE MOJAVE DESERT SECTION OF THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL, MY girlfriend and I walked up to a baffling intersection, where paths went off every which way like hydra arms. Our puzzlement turned into anger and frustration. In those days, I had little sense of direction. Vandals made the job even harder by knocking over or taking trail signs. For a half hour, we stood there arguing in the dust and heat. Which one of these overgrown goat paths was the PCT?

This was just one of several dozen confusing and hazardous situations that I faced in the days before smartphones and reliable handheld digital way-finding devices. After a while, a sympathetic and savvy hiker showed up and helped us out of that mess. Without his kind intervention, my girlfriend and I would have stomped and shouted in the sun for hours on end.

Mobile phones were rare, bulky, and awkward when I hiked the entire PCT in 1993 and 1994. In the days before featherweight iPhones, the cutting-edge choice was the Simon Personal Communicator, which looked like a walkie-talkie from a cheesy sci-fi television program. It came with a stylus and weighed more than a pound. Simon sold 50,000 units in six months. Compare that with the estimated 15 billion mobile devices in use right now, and you'll have some sense of the brick-shaped Simon phone's minimal impact.

Even if Simon had accompanied me on the trail, I couldn't have called out with it. In the early 1990s, one's willingness to be unreachable for long stretches of time factored into the decision to hike a National Scenic Trail. A total untethering was the point.

The PCT cuts 2,650 miles through California, Oregon, and Washington. At the time I hiked the trail, backpackers had to hitch a ride or walk into a supply town to check in with loved ones from a pay phone. One stop, Kennedy Meadows, a small Sierra Nevada town, lacked phone service until 1999. Unable to contact anyone and boast of my feats in real time, I had no way to water down my trail experience and no chance to have my solitude, raptures, sunsets, and photos of yuccas and horned lizards considered, "liked," or smiled upon with emojis. I could have a personal relationship with a moment, a view, a rapture, and an unexpected discovery without anyone weighing in.

I'm grateful I never had to make the choice to take a phone with me. The PCT has been my only long-term disconnected experience. My life will never be so simple. I got up every morning at first light, had a stretch, disassembled

*Dan White with his backpack and an extra plastic jug of water—and, of course, no cell phone—in the Mojave Desert in 1993.* COURTESY OF DAN WHITE

my camp, popped a sorghum-syrup-cashew candy bar in my mouth, stuffed the gear in my pack, and hiked until I dropped. I boiled noodles in camp, or before I reached camp to avoid the attention of hungry black bears. I put the tent up, lapsed into unconsciousness, awoke in the morning, and did it all again. Every day, I hiked into vast, unbroken spaces full of adventure, nutritive boredom, and time to think.

My girlfriend and I availed ourselves of every convenience and gadget we could heft into the woods with us, but none of that technology involved two-way communications. Tech could soothe our blisters, warm our feet, and keep bugs away, but it could not make our private moments public. We could not shout our stories to the world. Instead, those tales built up in our heads. At night, we scribbled in our diaries until our fingers numbed and the ink ran out. I remember thinking, “Chicago could be on fire right now and we’d have no way of knowing about it.”

I realize that a fully functioning 21st-century smartphone might have saved me from nightmarish situations.

Many times I overshot precious water sources in hot, dry portions of the route. Once, I had no choice but to filter water from a puddle of liquid mud because I had missed the turnoff for a reliable spring. In the High Sierra, I lost count of the times when I found myself bellowing at snowdrifts and ice that covered the PCT: “Where is the trail?” I shouted at the snow. “And why have you buried it?” I’ll never forget the sodden night in Oregon when I decided, unwisely, to do a “stop and drop,” pitching my tent on the trail itself, rather than push on and try to find a campsite. I almost got trampled by a group of pack mules. The mule driver cursed and hollered at me as the pack train clomped around my tent. Getting lost wasted precious time and added unnecessary miles. My guess is that my fumbblings on the PCT added a good 70 or 80 miles or so to its length.

Now that my long walk is over, I’m grateful for my unplugged version of the PCT. I have never faced such soaring heights and frightening lows on a hike since then.

If faced with the choice to take a phone or leave it at home, I know exactly what I would do. I would take along a smartphone without a moment of hesitation. Trail conditions have changed to the point where phones are more necessary these days. Scott Wilkinson, a spokesman for the Pacific Crest Trail Association, told me that the logistics of hiking the PCT are more complicated now because of more frequent and devastating wildfires. “With wildfires, the smartphone has become, sadly, a useful tool to figure out such workarounds



as transportation. And there have been situations where PCT hikers had to be airlifted out because they were trapped by wildfires.”

When he said “sadly,” Wilkinson was referring to the tragic complications of fire outbreaks every year. Wilkinson told me that “substantial portions” of the PCT route will be closed due to wildfire damage that the trail and its surrounding areas have sustained over the past two years. “It’s somewhere in the neighborhood of a hundred miles, and that is not even counting what could happen next year,” Wilkinson said.

Phones are now common on the trail. Wayfinding apps—and messages from other hikers—make it easier to find precious water, including seasonal trickles. “I can’t imagine doing [the PCT] without Guthook,” one hiker told me, referring to a popular backpacking app. “It was a godsend, especially because of the water resource info. It makes the trail a little less ‘wild’ per se, but safe.”

A backpacker today will often take along a SPOT Satellite Messenger, a device that can send and receive communications and GPS positions from remote areas.



*Dan White in the Cascades in 1994. Hikers left notes under rocks or cow turds to communicate with each other.* COURTESY OF DAN WHITE

“I have never heard anyone say in the past five years that they have hiked the trail without a phone,” Wilkinson said. “They, along with my sleeping bag and your stove, are considered mandatory equipment now.” Cell phones can also help trail walkers bail each other out of unpleasant or dangerous situations.

Back when I hiked the PCT, hikers often left pieces of paper under rocks, or, in one case, a pile of cow turds, with scribbled messages directing other hikers toward good water and steering them away from hazards such as prickly thistles and washouts. Nowadays, technology can fulfill a similar function. Veteran thru-hiker, outdoors advocate, and author Barney “Scout” Mann told me about a text message he received on his phone while hiking the rugged Arizona National Scenic Trail, warning him about a cattle gate that would slam back and rake backpackers with barbed wire if they aren’t careful.

When I asked PCT hikers on Facebook to describe their experiences with phones in the backcountry, I was surprised and somewhat heartened by their responses. Many hikers told me they mostly used the phones for wayfinding and taking pictures, rather than wasting precious battery power doing social media updates. My nightmarish image of people endlessly Instagramming their entire hikes began to seem off base.

BUT MY EXPERIENCE ON THE PCT IN THE 1990S ALSO HELPS ME SEE THE downside of tech in the backcountry.

Wilkinson, the PCTA spokesman, told me that phones can make hikers overconfident, getting them into dangerous situations. In 1993, I started the trail with an arrogant attitude and often pressed on into searing heat and hard rain when I should have stopped for the night and turned back. Would a smartphone have added to my boldness and hubris? I shudder to think of the possibilities.

I’ve also come to understand, from the hikers I reached through Facebook, that backcountry smartphones are nowhere near as dependable as I assumed they were.

On its PCT FAQ page, the U.S. Forest Service states, “Recent thru-hikers estimate that they had coverage about 70 percent of the time on the PCT,” but it also warns that coverage varies by service provider so “Don’t count on it!” Most of the hikers who contacted me took exception to the “70 percent” estimate. Several told me signals are pretty much nonexistent in broad swaths of the trail. “The Appalachian Trail may have fairly good reception since habitation is pretty close,” one respondent told me. “PCT—nope! Not in the

desert, definitely not in the Sierra.” Several preferred Garmin satellite devices to phones for off-the-grid messaging. One hiker told me he wished phone reception were much better so backpackers could be better equipped to escape forest fires. Other respondents told me they kept their devices in “airplane mode” most of the time so they wouldn’t drain their batteries searching for signals. As a backup, many hikers carry Anker rechargeable batteries. Most social media updates happen off the trail when hikers are in towns.

In light of all the new changes, my “old-style” experience on the PCT is a relic of the past, something irrecoverable.

But I can take some comfort in the limits of technology, which make it possible for me to disconnect from the pressures of my daily life, at least for short spans of time.

I backpacked for two days into Stanislaus National Forest with my 12-year-old daughter Julianna in the summer of 2021. My iPhone had no signal. It was essentially useless except as a camera. No one could check on us. I could not call out. For 48 hours, it was 1993 all over again. We bushwhacked, purified water using the same old warhorse Katadyn Filter I used on the PCT, prepared food, explored a rocky canyon at sunset, and watched metallic blue dragonflies buzz the surface of Sword Lake.

In my tent, with bloodsuckers bumping the mesh flaps, and frogs sounding out at 3 o’clock in the morning, it felt as though time had doubled back on itself. And all the while, my top-of-the-line iPhone remained propped up between a couple of rocks, dead-eyed and cold from lack of use.

---

DAN WHITE is the author of *The Cactus Eaters: How I Lost My Mind and Almost Found Myself on the Pacific Crest Trail* (Harper Collins, 2008), and *Los Angeles Times* “Discovery” selection, and *Under the Stars: How America Fell in Love with Camping* (Henry Holt & Co., 2016) He lives in Santa Cruz, California, with his wife and daughter.

# Connected and Disconnected

Ian Ramsey

LAST SUMMER I WAS IN THE BACKCOUNTRY OF ALASKA'S GLACIER BAY, 55 miles from a road in the largest designated wilderness in the world, surrounded by brown bears, humpback whales, and tidewater glaciers. And I was hunched over my cell phone, texting (through a Garmin inReach satellite device) with the National Park Service because the boat that was supposed to pick up my group of high school students was hours late, and we needed to make a plan.

A month later I was guiding ultrarunning trips around Mount Rainier. I used the same technology to keep tabs on runners spread out across 30 miles of the remote Wonderland Trail. I've used my cell phone to take pictures of brown bears, to help me stay on route on glacial moraines, and to listen to inspiring music during a 100-mile ultramarathon in the mountains of Utah. I teach people how to use apps on their phones to navigate, but I also teach students about the dangers of unintentional technology use and how it can literally reshape your brain.

Where the backcountry was once the one place to get away from technology, we now find ourselves wired up with GPS watches, cell phones, and satellite devices. Where humans' experience of wild places was once direct, it is now often shaped and curated by technology: using Gaia GPS to see where you are, holding glamorized YouTube videos as your aesthetic basis of beauty comparison, listening to podcasts instead of the gentle whisper of the wind. And while it means that we're often safer, more able to communicate and navigate, it also means that our direct experience and attention is corrupted.

When I take high school students into the Alaska backcountry for a week, it is often the first time in years—or ever—when they've been away from cell connection. And they become different people: quieter, less anxious, more focused and social. They sleep better. Their emotional connections reset to people, place. And self, not screens. They settle into what I call the Deep



Now. And at this moment in history, this can be one of the greatest gifts of the backcountry: a kind of sabbath from the self-referential dopamine-addicted crush of technology. A place to be slower, quieter, to look within and without. To settle into the moment and to become part of something greater than yourself. We are moving ever more quickly into a disruptive world of virtual reality, biomonitoring, and artificial intelligence. Our relationship to technology is intensifying. Those who thrive will be those who skillfully manage their relationship to it, who can use it and not be used by it. Even in the backcountry this increasingly takes effort and intention, but it is much easier than the overstimulated press of our daily lives. My hope is that when people go into the backcountry, they can experience the full, undistracted presence of their lives and remember that feeling afterward. The backcountry is where we can go to learn this.

## Each Day, a Little Less Phone Use

Ian Ramsey

WE WERE BACKPACKING FOR FIVE DAYS, A GROUP OF TEN MIDDLE schoolers, another teacher, and I. Through rain and fog and sun and blisters and Clif bars and tears and sing-alongs. And for the first two days the students would say, “This looks like just a movie,” or, “This looks just like an Instagram post,” and they would pose for selfies and try to get a signal no matter how many times we asked them to put away their phones.

But each day, they would use their phones less, or their phones would run out of power, and all that phone energy was replaced by kid energy because this is a middle school backpacking trip, and middle schoolers have many languages, some of which are obnoxious, such as farting and making bad jokes and bragging, or poking each other when you want to say I have a crush on you but don’t know how to say that yet and I’m afraid of what my friends might say, and some of them are silent fear, and some of them are yelling and jumping, and some of them are klutzing around because they don’t fit into their hormonally vibrating bodies yet.



*Kid energy prevails at the Appalachian Mountain Club's Zealand Falls Hut on August 13, 2019. PAULA CHAMPAGNE*

On our fourth night out, just after dinner, we were standing on piles of rocks outside of a New Hampshire mountain hut, above treeline, surrounded by the most crystalline night of stars any of them had ever seen. And the kids were supposed to be sitting silently for five whole minutes, which is an eternity for a 13-year-old boy, so there would be the occasional twitter or squeal or guffaw but mostly they were being quiet, when an older woman marched out of the hut and held up her smartphone to the riot of stars, trying to use some app that identified the stars, and when it didn't work after 30 seconds, she muttered and stomped back into the hut without ever bothering to look, unimpeded, at the stars. And all the kids saw this, and they had no problem being quiet after that, at least until one of them threw a pebble at another, and the whole sweaty gang broke up into high-pitched laughter. And the next day, no one took out their phones until we got back on the bus at the end of the trip.

And when they think back on this trip years later, they remember the smell of the alpine flowers. And they remember the way everyone cheered when the last kid made it to the summit. And how the one kid cried the whole way up

and how another kid ever so gently held the crying kid's hand. They remember the way that woman trying to see eternity through a three-inch screen missed the whole point of being out in these big heart-battling mountains, that it's just friends and all this sheer, intense, painful, awe-inspiring wildness pulsing right through them until they become part of something bigger than themselves.

---

IAN RAMSEY is a writer, educator, wilderness traveler, and musician. For twenty years he has been on the faculty of North Yarmouth Academy in Maine, where he teaches environmental writing, brain science, physiology, music, and mindfulness and leads student trips.

# Digital Disorientation

Douglas Balmain

LAST SUMMER, I INVITED MY FRIEND STEVEN ON A FIELD MONITORING trip into one of Montana's lesser-known Wilderness Study Areas. As we checked over our day packs, I noticed Steven looking at his iPhone.

"Are you getting service out here?" I asked, hoping the answer would be no. Bringing technology into the backcountry has always been taboo for me.

"No, I downloaded a map of this area last night. The app works offline."

"No kidding?"

"Yeah, it's pretty cool. It has property boundary and land ownership information in it too. Hunters use it a lot so they know they aren't trespassing."

"Huh. I'll be interested to see how it works." My reply was half-genuine. Modern technology does have its utility.

Despite them lacking high-tech features, I've remained loyal to the map and compass. I value the organic connection with one's environment that analog navigation requires. It forces me to pay special attention to the landscape. I find myself more closely noting the passage of time, changes in the weather, progress, and physical output—all of those subtle aspects of backcountry navigation that "smart technology" has made us forget.

Navigating with map and compass causes me to pause often, to continually re-center myself as I move across the terrain. I enjoy these pauses. They

have become as ritualistic as they are pragmatic. They are moments to breathe, to settle—to be present with the land I'm engaging.

Steven had no need of reorienting. As long as the icon signifying his location was active on his screen, he knew where he was. I found the simultaneous presence of screen and map to be frustrating. It had the effect of confusing me and detracting from my ritual. After a few distracted attempts to reconnect with my map, I folded it up and stashed it in my pack. Steven's phone would be our navigator for the remainder of the day.

The route back to our vehicle took us into steep and unforgiving terrain. The deep drainages and dense woods afforded little view of the sky. I was becoming increasingly disoriented.

Steven and I were working through a bog at the bottom of a defile and were both beginning to tire when Steven made a hasty jump for a fallen log. His boot slipped on the slick wood and sent him into an uncontrolled fall. As I watched him hit the ground, I was suddenly struck by the tenuous nature of our position. What if he was hurt? What if he smashed his phone's screen in the fall?

The phone had distanced us from our environment. We had been blundering through the country in a straight line. If we had maintained our connection to the land, we would have chosen our route more wisely, we would have had a pragmatic understanding of where we were in relation to where we were going, we would have kept ourselves safer. We had traded our powers of intuition away for a glowing screen.

---

DOUGLAS BALMAIN lives in Laramie, Wyoming, where he runs Pondering Poet Publishing Company.

---

---

## Heresy

I cannot deny God  
took the shape  
of a bear.

When the Spirit  
descended,  
a bloodied dove  
beat its wings  
on the ground.

Four legs  
scrambling up  
from a gulley  
in the earth.

Dark triangle  
of a head  
appearing,  
like a newly risen  
soul, wreathed  
in mountain  
laurel.

*Todd Davis*

---

---

TODD DAVIS is the author of six collections of poetry, most recently *Coffin Honey* (2021) and *Native Species* (2019), both published by Michigan State University Press. He has won the Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Bronze and Silver Awards, the Gwendolyn Brooks Poetry Prize, and the Chautauqua Editors Prize. He teaches environmental studies at Pennsylvania State University's Altoona College.



# Why Does No One Climb the Palisades?

*Just north of New York City, a glacier-exposed cliff tempts a climber*

**Michael Levy**



MOTORING ALONG THE HENRY HUDSON PARKWAY ON THE WESTERN edge of Manhattan, the driver with a wandering eye can't help but notice the prominent escarpment across the river. Running below the George Washington Bridge on the New Jersey side, this 200-foot-high band of brown rock starts at Jersey City and stretches north twenty miles to Nyack. Fans of the musical *Hamilton* might know the cliffs as the site of the infamous duel between the play's eponymous hero and Aaron Burr. But I, a rock climber, can think of only one thing: *Is there climbing there?*

From afar, the cliff looks perfect for it. Vertical stripes all along it are the type of cracks that climbers use to place their safety gear. The cliff angle appears varied, meaning there would be potential for beginner, intermediate, and expert climbs alike. And it's so close to New York City—it would be the closest roped outdoor rock climbing for Gothamites beyond the scant offerings in Central Park.

Climbing as a leisure activity has a long history in the Hudson River Valley. The Shawangunks, 70 miles north of the city, in New Paltz, New York, have attracted climbers since the 1930s, when German expatriate Fritz Wiessner established the first climbs. With the rise of climbing gyms during the last twenty years—and no fewer than four new ones opened in New York City in 2021, including the two largest to date—more climbers than ever venture out into nature for the real thing. A resource such as the Palisades would make outdoor climbing that much more accessible for city-dwellers.

But I had gotten ahead of myself.

"There's no history of climbing here," Christina Fehre, director of trails and outdoor programs for the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, told me in a phone call, nor does the Palisades Interstate Park Commission currently allow rock climbing at the Palisades. Fehre had dashed my dreams before my head hit the metaphorical pillow. "It's all very loose stuff," she said about the rock. "Any crack in the Palisades structure is basically because the rock is breaking off." As it turns out, when you stand below, you can see that the rock is anything but perfect. Teetering blocks the size of microwaves abound, endangering would-be climbers and hikers on the river-level hiking trails in equal measure. And kitchen appliance-sized blocks are only the beginning: In May 2012, a gigantic swath of rock the entire height of the cliff and weighing more than 20,000 tons came crashing to the ground in an earth-shaking

*The 200-foot-high cliffs of the Palisades rise over the Hudson River on the New Jersey side, north of the George Washington Bridge.* BILL MENKE

moment. Another major rockfall occurred in July 1938; many thought the resulting sixteen-story rock scar had more than a passing resemblance to Adolph Hitler, mustache and all, earning it the nickname of “Hitler Face.” (In March 1947, 23 months after Hitler took his own life, yet another rockfall erased Hitler Face forever.)

Bill Menke, a geologist at Columbia University’s Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory and a professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences at the school, explained that the instability of the Palisades rock has to do with how it formed 201 million years ago. Instead of lava erupting onto the surface, in a Hollywood disaster movie way, the Palisades were created by a spectacular underground eruption that forced its way into an already existing layer of rock, what’s known as a volcanic intrusion.

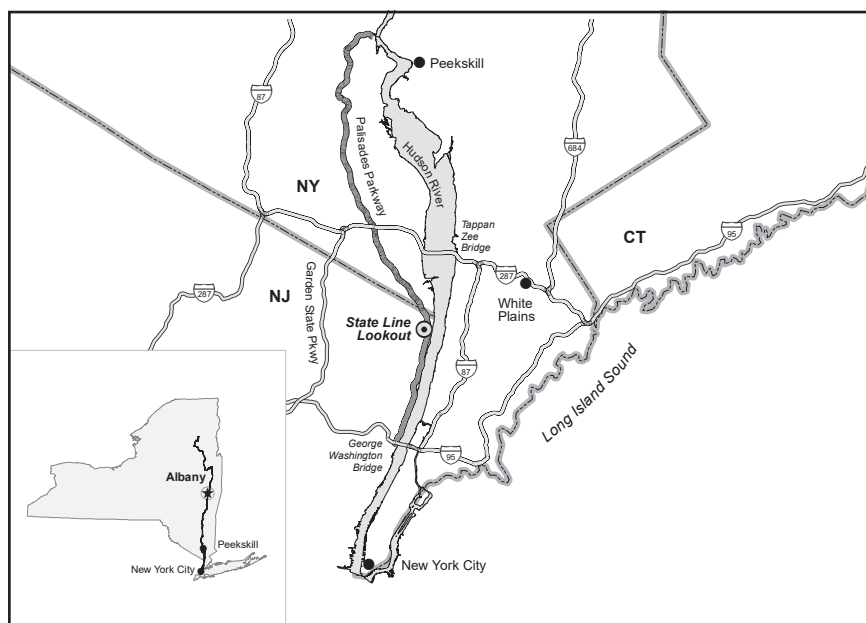
Menke compared the process to baking a jelly donut. Said Menke, “You first make the donut”—a preexisting band of sedimentary rock in the case of the Palisades—“and then you squirt the jelly”—the lava—“into the donut to make a layer.” The cliff band paralleling the Hudson River is the edge of that jelly layer, a cross-section exposed and sharpened by a massive glacier 15,000 years ago at the end of the last ice age.

The looseness of the rock is a direct result of the below-ground cooling process. Lava that cools above ground hardens quickly, but when it cools beneath the surface, the process is slower, and the resulting rock is coarser and more friable.

Based on this, that the Palisades never became a world-class rock-climbing destination isn’t surprising. Climbers prefer solid rock: It’s safer, more enjoyable.

But something still didn’t add up: How could no climbers have at least tested the waters? In my vast experience climbing—from sandstone in Utah to limestone in Vietnam to granite in Peru—climbers are like moths to open flames: if there’s rock, even if it’s the consistency of kitty litter, they’re going to climb it, no matter the personal peril. And as ominous and fascist as the cliffs sounded, they really didn’t look as fearsome as some I’ve climbed.

Trawling through long-inactive online rock-climbing forums from the mid-2000s, I found hints that maybe—*just* maybe—Fehre was wrong about climbing in the Palisades. In one thread from a defunct forum on a site called SuperTopo.com, several users posted accounts of surreptitious climbing at the Palisades in the 1970s and 1980s. After some sleuthing, including bounce-back emails from more than one dead account, I tracked down a couple of these old-timers.



*The State Line Lookout just off the Palisades Parkway offers access to hikers—but not rock climbers—who want to explore the cliffs of the Palisades. From that spot, climber Michael Levy hiked down to the bottom of the cliffs to examine the rock.* LARRY GARLAND/AMC

“We would enter via these rest stop pullovers—they’re kind of like scenic overlooks—on the Palisades Parkway,” Scott Ghiz, a lifelong rock climber, told me about the bandit climbing scene at the Palisades during the early 1980s. “Then we’d hop the guardrail, keep an eye out for cops, and scramble down a gully from the highway for 100 or 200 feet.” From there, they’d climb out on the cliff faces.

Because the rock stands right below the Palisades Parkway, climbers faced pitfalls beyond the less-than-stellar rock quality. Ghiz recalled brushing broken glass and discarded diapers thrown from the highway above off the rock as he climbed.

That climbing on the Palisades was illegal only spurred them on. “We had our own little cabal,” Ghiz said.

Even with all the detritus and loose rock, Ghiz said the Palisades were “pleasant to climb on. It’s good rock. If it had [climbing] traffic and actually got cleaned up, it’d be a great place to climb.” Ghiz also said he saw clear evidence of much earlier climbing at the Palisades. He and his friends saw old, rusted pitons—climbing safety gear not unlike metal railroad spikes—driven

into the cliff in various places. There *was* a history of climbing there, despite what Fehre had told me.

Precisely when these early traces of climbing are from, and who is responsible for them, is a mystery. A *Saturday Evening Post* article from February 1956, about technical rock climbing in the United States, notes, “If regulations did not forbid it, New York mountaineers would do their climbing on the Palisades, which rise majestically just across the Hudson in New Jersey. Too many loose rocks, rolling down on strollers along the riverside, caused the authorities of Palisades Interstate Park to close the area to rock climbers years ago.” The pitons could be relics from Wiessner—the progenitor of rock climbing on the Shawangunk Ridge and one of just a handful of proficient technical rock climbers in the Northeast in that era. Climbers who post on online forums favor that theory, although it’s impossible to verify.

So: What explains the disconnect between Ghiz, who thinks the Palisades are climbable, and Fehre, who thinks they aren’t?

Part of it has to do with the sensibilities underpinning the creation of Palisades Interstate Park. Before 1900, some stretches of the cliff band were heavily quarried for building materials, as were parts of the sandstone layer (remember—the donut itself), visible today in the brownstones all across the city. To preserve the cliff and its surroundings, Teddy Roosevelt, then governor of New York, and Foster M. Voorhees, then governor of New Jersey, formed the Palisades Interstate Park Commission. A series of walking paths were built within the boundaries.

“There are pictures of women walking in little shoes on the trail,” Fehre says. Vestiges of this upper-crust undercurrent—of gentlemen and ladies out for an afternoon stroll—remain today.

Dave Rosenstein, a founding board member of the Access Fund, the leading rock-climbing access advocacy organization in the United States, believes there is an “institutional resistance” to climbing, a historically counter-culture activity, in New York and New Jersey. “The Palisades Interstate Park Commission has a history of banning climbing,” he said. “There feels like there’s an agency bias against it. You can work on it park by park, but even that’s a challenge.” In 1996, Rosenstein and the nascent Access Fund won a protracted four-year-long battle and campaign to open Minnewaska State Park—another New Jersey location under the auspices of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission—to rock climbing.

At present, bicycling, hiking, and kayaking are all sanctioned activities within the Palisades. Mountain biking is in the process of being approved



as a trail system is built. But the head of the commission told me technical climbing is a nonstarter.

“Climbing in the New Jersey Palisades is not something we are interested in exploring, so I don’t know how much we have to say,” Josh Laird, the executive director of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, wrote in an email, highlighting the intransigence of which Rosenstein spoke. “Simply put, the cliffs are fragile and not suited for climbing, especially with other options in the region.”

To a climber like me, this flat refusal is puzzling. Although the Palisades’ rock is unstable, massive rockfalls such as those in 2012, 1938, and 1947 happen only every several decades, Menke said. In a place like Yosemite National Park, California, where the National Park Service allows and regulates climbing, major rockfalls happen every year.

Menke noted, “There are definitely places you can find that wouldn’t endanger others.” He bases this on his ample experience hiking the cliff base and kayaking the Palisades’ shoreline.

Ghiz agreed. “It’d definitely be safe. When we were there, there was no one below you”—no other hikers or recreationists below them, he means. “It was a steep dirt hill with trees.”

Laird of the park commission also cited the delicate ecosystem as an argument against climbing. Sensitive species such as the peregrine falcon and the federally protected Allegheny woodrat call the cliffs of the Palisades home. But this argument is thin. Land managers have closed heavy-use cliffs during nesting season in locations across the country, from the Flatirons in Colorado to the granite bluffs in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. These closures satisfy conservationists, land managers, and climbers.

Of course, it’s understandable that the park would seek to avoid any liability for injured rock climbers or other hikers in the event of an accident.

Said Rosenstein, sympathetically, “It’s the philosophy of government: If it ain’t broke don’t fix it. It’s more work for any individual park manager to allow a new activity in their park. Doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be done, but I understand the reluctance.”

Still, the success in opening other areas to rock climbing in recent years—from Minnewaska State Park in 1996 to select areas of New York’s Harriman State Park in 2013—demonstrates the feasibility of doing so at the Palisades, too. Such national organizations as the Access Fund and more local groups like the Gunks Climbers’ Coalition have decades of practice working with land managers as well as local, state, and federal bodies in drawing up and

implementing climbing management plans that address ways to minimize institutional liability and incorporate rock climbing, all without infringing on other recreationists' enjoyment and safety.

My investigation had come to a dead end. I was disappointed to learn that climbing in the Palisades is not even on the table for discussion. But I decided I needed to get a final and closer look.

ON AN OVERCAST DAY IN LATE NOVEMBER, I POINTED MY CAR WEST ACROSS the George Washington Bridge. After all I'd heard from Ghiz, Menke, Fehre, and Laird, the only thing left to do was feel this rock for myself. Like a mechanic who can't diagnose what's wrong with an engine until he hears it sputtering just so, for a climber there's no substitute for actually running one's hands over the stone.

The trees were mostly bare after a brilliant stretch of peak foliage three weeks before. A few scarlet and mustard-yellow leaves clung to the red oak and butternut hickory trees along the Hudson. I arrived at the State Line Lookout, a scenic overview eleven miles north of the GW Bridge that is part of the Palisades park system. I parked at the trailhead and trotted north on Long Trail. Next to the trail I saw small outcrops of the same brown stone as the cliffs below. I dragged my fingertips across them. The surface had the feel of 200-grit sandpaper. Further on, I passed families, fellow joggers, couples holding hands. Across the river a train crawled north along Metro-North Railroad's Hudson Line.

The trail descended down to river level, and the cliffs towered above as I doubled back south along the Shore Trail. I hopped between boulders half submerged in the water. An hour from the car, I hung a sharp right and hiked directly up toward the cliff. I angled toward a tall stripe of sulfur-colored stone—the scar from the 2012 rockfall. In two minutes I was sitting at the base. A larger boulder, surely one that tumbled down in 2012, had RINA ♡ MARK 2021 graffitied on it in two-foot-tall fuzzy white letters. After catching my breath, I fingered the edges and palmed the rounded corners of the cliff face in front of me. As expected, much of this rotten yellow rock, exposed to the air for only a nanosecond in geologic time, flaked off under only moderate pressure.

Twenty feet to the right, the weathered brown rock that accounts for the rest of the cliff line felt more stable. Looking at a cross section jutting out, I noticed that this portion of cliff was made of tall, thin columns stacked three deep, like books leaning against one another. This was the kind of rock the

naysayers fear: It is, for sure, extremely dangerous, and the wisdom of climbing it is more than a little questionable. Entire columns could topple over. My heart sank.

But I continued along the base, bushwhacking through fallen trees, snarled vines, rusty rectangles of corrugated iron, faded beer cans, and crumpled oil drums. The fallen leaves were shin deep. Fifty feet to the right, I arrived beneath a magnificent steep face, a brownish-burgundy color with a faint tinge of electric green wherever there was a thin film of moss.

This panel of rock was pristine. The clean geometry reminded me of rock I've climbed on Ragged Mountain, a crag in central Connecticut, and also on the Western Slope of Colorado, at an area called the Narrows. The cleavage pattern of perfect right angles and rectangles had a hypnotic effect. There was some minor looseness at spots, but, by and large, the rock was solid. It wasn't what climbers would call "bombproof," but there was no question: I would climb this rock if I were allowed to. In a heartbeat. Looking upward, my chin resting against the cliff, I imagined the possibilities.

Daylight was fading. For a moment I considered whether to pick a mellow-looking line and free solo out to the rim of the escarpment. It would save me some time on the hike back. And I was already wearing approach shoes with sticky rubber on the soles. It was tempting.

But I didn't want to jeopardize any future climbing access through a bone-headed impulsive decision that could end in me getting caught by the park authorities or, worse, falling, unroped. I resigned myself to the one-hour hike back up to the car, content in knowing that there *is* climbable and decent rock at the Palisades.

For now, I'll keep staring across the Hudson, hoping that if a proper campaign for access ever begins, that the climbers win their duel with the Palisades Interstate Park Commission.

"It would be a fabulous resource," Scott Ghiz told me as he reminisced about his climbs there. "It would take some legwork and some trail-building, and some sort of barrier to keep people from throwing bottles and trash off. But it would be great."

---

MICHAEL LEVY is a writer and climber currently studying for his MFA in literary reportage at New York University. He serves as *Appalachia's* assistant Alpina editor and is the editor at large of *Climbing* magazine.

# A Life Lesson in Denali Park

*A grizzly bear follows a camper*

**J. Robert Harris**



EVERYTHING WAS GOING GREAT UNTIL I SAW THE GRIZZLY. IT WAS HUGE, cinnamon-brown, heavily muscled, and looking right at me, but the scariest part was that I had seen this same bear a few hours earlier. I now realized it was following me.

It was early September in Denali National Park. The camper bus left the visitor center and rumbled leisurely down the unpaved park road into the backcountry. Off in the distance, snowcapped mountains under a bright blue sky offered a postcard-perfect panorama. Fifty-two miles out, the bus abruptly stopped, and the driver announced that I was at my drop-off spot, a place with a somewhat disquieting name, I Scream Gulch. From here I would be backpacking five days and four nights to explore the headwaters of the East Branch of the Toklat River. The bus pulled away and soon disappeared down the dusty road. I was now alone.

The East Branch, in the park's Backcountry Unit 9, is known for its classic mountain scenery and access to large expanses of alpine tundra deep in the Alaska Range. The wide-open valley is surrounded by high, rugged peaks and slopes of alpine tundra that come right down to the river. There are large glaciers and extensive glacial moraines at the headwaters, and the entire unit is above treeline.

I dropped down into the gulch and was soon at the Toklat River and heading upstream on the gravel bar along the bank. That's when I first saw the bear. It was out among the braided channels of the river, several hundred yards off in the distance. Up on its hind legs and facing me, I was certain it had picked up my scent and knew I was there. Having backpacked extensively in grizzly country, I am not particularly intimidated when I see a bear, and this one showed no sign of hostility and was not making any move toward me. Nevertheless, I was acutely aware that I was on my own and armed with nothing more than an aerosol can of repellent. The bear watched me as I hiked along the riverbank until I rounded a bend and was out of sight.

Late that afternoon, as the sun dipped behind the distant ridge and it started getting colder, I found a nice place to camp and got set up. That's when I saw the bear again. It was out there on a gravel bar, and this time much closer, about a hundred yards. It was standing still and looking dead at me, and even though it wasn't doing anything aggressive, its obvious interest in me was disconcerting and I was starting to feel apprehensive. We watched

*The author was too preoccupied to film the grizzly bear that stood watching him, but it would have looked like this bear wandering in Denali National Park.* NATIONAL PARK SERVICE





*J. R. Harris's campsite near the Toklat River.* J. R. HARRIS

each other for a long time. I was waiting for it to move off, but it didn't move. It just stayed there, staring at me.

The day became darker and colder. I was getting hungry but was reluctant to start fixing and eating my dinner; I was fully focused on watching the bear. Disturbing thoughts of a potentially unpleasant encounter were creeping into my head. Then, suddenly, I looked up and the bear was gone. The feeling of relief was so intense it surprised me; I didn't realize I had been that uneasy. But just before nightfall, I looked again and saw that the bear had returned. It was no closer than before, but it was there, it wasn't going anywhere, and soon it would be too dark to see it. Now I was scared.

Moving quickly, I gathered everything I had that was even faintly odorous and put it in a stuff sack. I took the bag, along with my food container, and stashed them on the tundra away from my campsite. Then I got into the tent, zipped the door shut, and waited. Sleep was out of the question. Sitting there in total darkness, I waited for something bad to happen. I felt trapped in the

confines of my little cloth shelter, worried that the bear might attack at any moment. I imagined that it might be creeping closer, that it might be right outside. All I could do was hold on to my bear spray and hope I wouldn't have to use it. Waiting there in the dark was horrible. I was hungry, cold, and tired, but mostly I was terrified. It was one of the worst nights of my life.

When it was finally light enough to see, I unzipped my door and cautiously stepped outside. The bear was gone. It sounds like a cliché now, but I remember thinking how glad I was to be alive. A big bowl of oatmeal and a mug of hot coffee helped restore my composure. Soon I was packed and hiking again. It was a gorgeous day, and the scenery around the Toklat headwaters was spectacular. A few days later I got back to the park road without incident and waited for a bus heading back to the visitor center.

I often think about that bear, wondering why it was so curious about me. I suppose I will never really know, but I now appreciate more fully that this wilderness was the bear's home, and I was simply a visitor. As hikers and campers, we enter a backcountry habitat uninvited, at the time and place of our choosing, and we stay as long as we please, often without considering the environment and how our presence can alter its pristine beauty or the lives of the creatures who live there. The lesson I learned is that I should always be respectful of the ecosystem I am visiting, that I should leave no evidence of my visit, and should depart with only memories, photos, and my rubbish. As I look back at this incident, it occurs to me that this bear had every right to be curious about me. Wouldn't you be curious if a stranger came into your home?

---

J. ROBERT HARRIS, a lifelong New York City resident, has completed more than 50 unsupported multi-week treks in wilderness areas around the world since 1966. He was elected to the Explorers Club in 1993 and authored *Way Out There: Adventures of a Wilderness Trekker* (Mountaineers Books, 2017). His JRH Marketing Services is the oldest African American-owned research and consulting firm in the United States.

# COVID-19 Exposes a Wilderness Myth

*A Long Trail trek is not about retreating from towns and community*

**Claire Dumont**



THE DRIED NOODLES LAY SCATTERED ACROSS THE FLOOR. THE RESUPPLY boxes were half-packed. The logistical struggles of thru-hiking during a pandemic rendered my Excel spreadsheet nearly useless. I was planning a September hike of Vermont's 272-mile Long Trail. Though, instead of searching for post offices and hitchhiking routes to resupply, I was calling friends to meet me in trailhead parking lots with boxes of food. Instead of checking bus schedules to the southern terminus and from the northern one, I was organizing drop-off and pickup points with a family member. Gone were the days when I could sketch out a rough plan and wing it. Instead, I had a slew of people who had to rearrange their weeks if I was running a day behind schedule. The mental exertion necessary to navigate this logistical ordeal was overwhelming, which raised the question: Why attempt a hike at all?

When I set out to plan my adventure, the idea to return to the trail seemed like a stable one. I, like many Americans, was raised to revere wild space as a place to go to escape and heal. Backpacking and hiking offered a sense of independence, which evolved into a steady confidence that has carried me through personal adversity. For as long as I could remember, it was a place on which I could depend for fresh air, peace, solitude, and community. It was a place of self-reliance and personal power. Planning during a pandemic inverted my perception of what I subconsciously took to be an everyday truth: The wilderness would always be there, and I could always go. What became starkly apparent during the planning process and throughout the hike was my level of reliance on the built infrastructure I was formerly able to overlook.

While planning and hiking the Long Trail, town days were no longer mere blips in northern progression. They became a point of potential infection and an ethical question mark. When I developed an unexpected but not hike-ending knee injury, I was forced to contend with the same concerns that trail associations and trail towns had voiced in March 2020. At the beginning of the pandemic lockdowns, most trail associations encouraged hikers to leave trails and return home. One of the primary reasons was for the safety of trail towns. The geographic nature of a long-distance trail rendered its hikers perfect vectors to spread disease between the rural communities they rely on for resupplies such as food, washing machines, showers, fuel, and post offices.

*Claire Dumont near the top of Camel's Hump on the Long Trail in Vermont.* COURTESY OF CLAIRE DUMONT



It was a moment when systemic social issues became clearly intertwined with the hiking community. The presence of rampant poverty, lack of nearby hospitals, and inaccessibility of quality health care in rural communities clashed with hikers' desire to spend time outside. The question of potentially introducing a deadly virus foregrounded these communities in hiking narratives. I do not mean to paint hikers as oblivious. The culture and rhetoric of the outdoors has enabled hikers to float into and out of trail towns without being forced to reckon with what is happening in them. Pandemic restrictions proved how central the resources in trail towns are to the success of a hike and consequently forced hikers to recognize their dependence.

Upon leaving a trail town in northern Vermont, I began the climb to the ridgeline. I stopped at a cliff overlooking the Lamoille River. The setting sun cast a yellow light across the rainbow of late-September foliage. I savored the moment as a lanky hiker swiftly passed. After becoming acquainted farther up the trail, I learned that he worked on a seasonal trail crew. He described the extent to which pandemic restrictions limited their ability to restore trails before the 2020 hiking season. I was struck by the sheer number of their interventions that made the landscape hikeable.

Land managers knew the extent of the stewardship necessary to maintain the trails, which yielded another warning against thru-hiking in early 2020. Managing bodies encouraged those who chose to hike to proceed with immense caution as they had not conducted regular maintenance. They warned against blowdowns, small landslides, eroded steps, and unstable bridges. Damaged shelters would not be repaired. Privies would be closed. Similar to resurfacing a highway or patching a school's leaky roof, the infrastructure of wilderness would not be serviced. While hiking, it was easy to forget that these trails and campsites would not exist without extensive care and maintenance. Amazingly, trail crews create spaces that augment the wilderness experience such that these areas appear untouched and pristine, yet in so doing, they contribute to the illusion of self-reliance.

In response to announcements from various trail associations, hikers expressed outrage and confusion. Although many did postpone or cancel their long-distance adventures, others continued with little recognition of the people and institutions they relied on to complete their expedition. Numerous hikers countered with the refrain, "Nature is the safest place to be," and they were partially correct. After months of living through the pandemic, scientists now agree that whether through ventilation systems, air purifiers, or outdoor gatherings, fresh air is essential to preventing infection. Wind disperses virus



particles. They live longer on metal and plastic surfaces than on wood. Transmission is more frequent in concentrated, densely populated areas compared with rural communities. Although hikers' claims held some truth, they depended on the pervasively accepted premise that wilderness was untouched, clean, and devoid of human interaction as though the virus could not possibly be transmitted under a forest canopy.

We are at the height of the pandemic, and wilderness is undergoing an existential crisis. The risk of COVID-19 and ensuing restrictions has highlighted how people experiencing the solitude of the trail actually heavily depend on the society and infrastructure they seek to escape. For many, this realization was profoundly unsettling. If there was no stability, no self-reliance, and no separation, then what was wilderness? The outdoor community saw countless responses to pandemic restrictions and warnings that challenged the cultural belief that nature exists separately from society, that it was pristine and empty.

I believe that there was something deeper at play in these perceptions that is rooted in the heart of what nature represents. From the work of environmental historians and geographers such as William Cronon, Carolyn Merchant, and Jake Kosek, I learned how the historical moment when the U.S. government designated Wilderness Areas defined what and who was allowed in those spaces. It was a moment of urbanization and a changing labor landscape. Protected areas appeared as the antithesis of cities and urban sprawl. The behavioral ethics that governed wilderness and taught people how to care for these spaces stemmed from the anxieties of the time. Stewards sought to create spaces that reflected the romance of rural life and allowed recreators to feel the self-sufficiency of surviving the wildness of the frontier. These ethics also ascribed cleanliness and purity to these spaces. Nature was divine and uncontaminated.



*Dumont deep in the Vermont woods during her Long Trail hike.* COURTESY OF  
CLAIRE DUMONT

In the people I met on the Long Trail, I observed how these ideas and their notions of wilderness as a separate entity persisted. This idea of separation I understand as the myth of wilderness. The very experience of visiting natural spaces is inextricably linked to everything happening outside of their boundaries. The pandemic has made us acutely aware of the holes in our collective thinking about wilderness, which has destabilized our perception of nature as reality.

Wilderness caused existential frustration in 2020 and provided a necessary outlet for the human spirit. I observed this both in my conversations with fellow Long Trail hikers and in searching for the necessary gear for my hike. A few days before departing for the southern terminus, I drove to Freeport, Maine's 24-hour L. L. Bean store to pick up the remaining items on my gear list. I easily found a new cooking pot and a headlamp. The fuel wall, however, was nearly empty: not a single canister of MSR isobutane to be found. I flagged down an employee to verify, and he referred to it as "the theme of the summer" because everyone was going outside. A little panicked—if Bean's did not have it, who would?—I called three other gear stores until I found one with fuel in stock, and it was limited. After interacting with other hikers, I learned just how lucky I was to find a canister. It seemed as though the pandemic was a catalyst for an explosion of outdoor recreation. Hiking, backpacking, biking, or kayaking were some of the few activities people could partake in relatively safely.

In the midst of an outdoors boom, yet another reckoning rippled through almost every aspect of American life. In May 2020, the first protests against the death of George Floyd swept across all 50 states. The movement sparked national conversations about police brutality disproportionately inflicted on the Black community. This gave rise to a massive discussion of how racism crops up for all people of color in every sphere of life. Hikers chronicled the bigotry they had experienced on trails and rightfully demanded change. The outdoors community witnessed trail associations and gear companies institute widespread initiatives to demonstrate their commitment to diversifying the outdoors. They pledged to donate gear and resources to decrease the monetary barrier to entry that discourages people from going outdoors.

Although addressing bigotry was central to the movement, activists pointed out that it was only part of the problem. The systemic nature of racism meant that even in the absence of bigotry, the systems that govern the United States disadvantage people of color. Yet in all of the discussions, there was a distinct lack of acknowledgement of how these systems operate within

the spaces that the hiking community relishes. Indigenous environmentalists have long spoken about how protecting land through the National Park and Forest system violently displaced their communities. Black civil rights activists have noted how the forest has historically been a dangerous place for their communities where local, white authorities would allow racial violence to occur. Looking back to the conception of land protection, one of the very urban anxieties that led to the separation of these spaces was immigration. Those who created wilderness did so partly to construct a space for whiteness.

It is a history that is deeply uncomfortable for the predominantly white outdoors community to acknowledge, especially because its legacies are so clearly present in current political discourse. It is more pleasant to conceive of wilderness as apolitical, but that is yet another myth because wilderness is not an apolitical space for everyone. It is another hole in our collective thinking through which 2020 has shone a light. These holes do not necessitate the collapse of wilderness; they do not weaken its importance or the importance of outdoor recreation. When I stepped onto the Canadian border at the northern terminus of the Long Trail, I gazed into the warm color pallet of autumn trees. A line of barren earth cut through the forest to mark the international border. I drew in a deep breath of crisp air and allowed the elation, excitement, and melancholy of finishing a monthlong hike seep out through my eyes. Anyone who knows the peace of spending a night under the stars or the exhilaration of stepping onto a summit understands how crucial these experiences can be to feel human. The essence of these experiences has not changed.

Acknowledging the holes has not weakened my love for wilderness, but it has rewritten my understanding of it and my role within it. During this surge in outdoor recreation, these holes have created space to expand what it means to love and appreciate the outdoors. The acknowledgement leaves us with the ability to imagine a wilderness that is inclusive. It allows us to recognize the legacies of exclusivity that have historically defined the hiking community and, through reflection and deliberate change, work to improve it.

---

CLAIRE DUMONT is a hiker and geographer from Newcastle, Maine. She graduated from the University of Vermont in 2019.

---

*Editor's note: This essay was the runner-up in the 2021 Waterman Fund Essay Contest. The Waterman Fund generously supports prize money for winners and runners-up. For more about the annual contest, see [watermanfund.org](http://watermanfund.org).*

# A Change of Plans on the Cohos Trail

*After his mother's death, a hiker faces why he loves the wild*

**Walt McLaughlin**



WILD COUNTRY SPREADS IN ALL DIRECTIONS FROM ROGERS LEDGE. I drop my backpack against a large rock then walk out to the cliff's edge. Mount Cabot, Terrace Mountain, and the other summits along the Kilkenny Ridge Trail peek above the heavily forested slope rising toward the Horn. The tentsite where I camped last night is somewhere in the valley below, not far away. Off to the left from a different vantage point, the Presidential Range looms on the southeastern horizon. And to the east, steam rises from the wood chip plant powering the city of Berlin, nestled in a distant valley. This is why I still pound the trail, even though I'm 63 years old. Not just for the view, but to stand alone in the middle of a sprawling forest and feel the freedom of the hills surge through my aching body. I love going wild, if only for a week or so at a time.

I sit down long enough to eat an energy bar and suck down half a liter of water while studying my topo map. Then I shoulder my 40-pound pack and go. Day four on the Cohos Trail, and I have a long hike ahead of me: exiting the White Mountains, doing a 3-mile road walk, then venturing several more miles farther north into the Nash Stream Forest before reaching Devil's Rest Shelter. I started at the trail crossing in Jefferson, 22 mountainous miles ago, and I intend to go all the way to Pittsburg during the remaining eight days that I'm out here. That was the plan when I started this hike, anyhow. But now I'm thinking I might want to amend that. Pittsburg is still 60-odd miles away. My body is wearing out faster than expected. The Kilkenny has done a number on me. I don't have the stamina of the young man who started backpacking in earnest 40 years ago. And the passage of time does make a difference, leaving its mark on the knees and other joints.

The trail easing down from Rogers Ledge is delightful—a nearly effortless walk along a narrow earthen path cutting through a vibrant green understory. Yellow clintonia, trilliums, and other spring wildflowers are still in bloom even though it's mid-June. A cool breeze keeps the bugs down. A thrush sings in the distance. My sturdy hiking poles click against the occasional root or rock as I amble along thinking how lucky I am to be here. The natural world is so incredibly beautiful! Two months ago, I wasn't sure this trip was going to happen. My mother's health was deteriorating, so I thought I might be making yet another impromptu drive back to Ohio to see her instead of coming out here this summer. Then she died.

*The dramatic, rugged topography overlooks Dixville Notch in a wild section of the Cohos Trail in New Hampshire.* JOE KLEMENTOVICH



I stop in my tracks, leaning into my trekking poles as an image of my aged mother flashes through my head. She's gone. She really is gone. A quick trip back to Ohio in late April confirmed it. Parkinson's finally confounded her. After several years of steady decline, my mother is dead. I burst into tears, dropping to my knees, felled by the searing reality of it. The woman who raised me, who has been in my life for as long as I can remember, no longer exists. I cling to my hiking poles while bent over heaving—the load on my back still tugging at my shoulders. There's no one around so there's no need for restraint. I cry out loud, letting the tears roll down my cheeks. I cry for what seems like hours before finally collecting myself and getting back on my feet. Then I use a sweat-soaked bandana to wipe away the tears before continuing my hike. I still have a long way to go today.

THE COHOS TRAIL IS THE BRAINCHILD OF KIM ROBERT NILSEN, WHO PORED over topographical maps back in the 1990s, imagining a trail going all the way from the White Mountains to the Canadian border. In 1998, the Cohos Trail Association came into being, and its members soon set to work turning Nilsen's dream into a reality. They cut new trails linking such established routes as the Davis Path and Kilkenny Ridge Trail to old woods roads, snowmobile trails, and skidder paths until the semblance of a 170-mile long trail came into being. They're not done yet. There remain long road walks that need to be bypassed, especially around Lake Francis and the Connecticut Lakes up north. Yet it is now possible to hike all the way through New Hampshire's northernmost Coos County, enjoying the wild, remote, and largely untrammled landscape called the Great North Woods.

For years I had my eye on the wildest portion of that trail: the 62-mile stretch between Jefferson and Dixville Notch. Earlier this year, while resolving to finally do it, I added another 20 miles from Dixville Notch to Pittsburg to my trekking plan. Then I started training. But real life sometimes gets in the way of the best laid plans. Work, a flooded basement, a sick dog, and family matters distracted me. I didn't train as well as I should have. No matter. I was determined to do the hike anyway.

A MILE DOWNHILL FROM ROGERS LEDGE, THE TRAIL IS ALL ROOTS AND ROCKS. Young spruce trees competing for light crowd the trail. Their boughs brush hard against my arms as I plow through them. The cool breeze dies away, and the bugs come out. Thanks to all the spring rain, it has been a banner year for both mosquitoes and blackflies. When suddenly I feel the sharp stab of pain





*The topography of Dixville Notch dwarfs a hiker (center).* JOE KLEMENTOVICH



in my forearm, I reach over to swat away a rather large fly, knocking myself off balance in the process. Down I go, twisting my right ankle in the rocks. This isn't the first time I've fallen on the trail, so I brush myself off and keep going. No big deal. But my ankle complains a while longer.

After drinking the last of my water, I fixate on getting more. The headwaters of Cold Stream aren't far away. I can just barely hear the rush of water in the distance. Soon I am stepping over seeps and rivulets merging into each other. The stream appears. I start looking for a good place to pump water and spot one not far from the trail. I drop my pack and bushwhack over to it with three empty bottles and a water filter in hand. Pumping water is a pleasant break from hiking despite the bugs. I'm crouched next to the stream and grooving on it. Water breaking over rocks has a soothing effect. It mesmerizes me. I gulp down half a liter of water while pumping. Once all three bottles are full, I resume my walk.

Cold Stream widens and becomes more animated as I make my way down to South Pond. The beaten path underfoot also widens. A large body of water emerges from the trees and suddenly the shoreline trail looks strangely familiar. I was here four years ago, walking this particular section of trail with my longhaired German shepherd dog, Matika. That was part of a scouting trip for the trek that I am now doing. But Matika doesn't walk with me anymore. She grew lame and became incontinent before we got around to doing this trek together. My wife, Judy, and I put her down in March. I miss Matika. For a dozen years, she was by my side on all my ventures into the wild. I miss her terribly.

A solitary loon greets me with its exuberant call as I approach the South Pond Recreation Area. I pass a patch of forget-me-nots that remind me of Judy. That's her favorite flower. Now I'm missing her, as well. A large sandy beach comes into view. The trail underfoot leads to a grassy picnic area just above the beach. Tiger swallowtail butterflies flutter over the grass. I drop my pack on the bench of a shaded picnic table while looking around. A robin hopping across the grass belts out its joyous song. A flag flaps in the wind from a pole nearby but there's no park ranger in sight. Midday. No one here but me. How odd.

I open my pack then prepare a simple lunch: trail mix, sesame seeds, a granola bar, and a little lemonade powder stirred into a cup full of water. It's a beautiful day in early summer and I'm sitting alone in a meticulously groomed park. Just then two twentysomething women appear with a toddler and a young girl in tow. They are carrying a cooler, beach towels, and water

toys. Another young woman and child appear shortly thereafter. The beach is now occupied.

I'm not hungry. In fact, I'm feeling half-sick with exhaustion and grief. I force myself to eat something just to keep going. I pull out my map to see what's lies ahead. After the road walk out to Route 110 and up Percy Road to the trailhead, there's a steady climb into Bald Mountain Notch before the trail goes downhill to Devil's Rest Shelter. Nowhere to legally camp between here and there. I can do the distance, but there won't be much left of me afterward. Tomorrow, I'll have to take a zero day, a day to rest before continuing farther north. I had planned on taking a zero day at Old Hermit Shelter the day after tomorrow, but I'm moving that to tomorrow. The half dozen summits of the Kilkenny have wiped me out, and my hip, knee, and ankle joints are not happy. Going all the way to Pittsburg may be out of the question. And with that rather depressing thought, I pack up my things and go.

The road walk is easy, but the hard asphalt surface pounds at my tender feet until a couple hot spots turn into blisters. Upon reaching the trailhead to Nash Stream Forest, I stop to patch my feet with Band-Aids and moleskin. Then I follow the bright yellow CT trail markers up a pleasant woods road carpeted with Canada mayflower. A mile or more into the woods, I reach a wooden snowmobile bridge crossing a stream. Seems like a good time to top off my water bottles so that's what I do.

Shortly after I get moving again, the woods road turns to the west while the CT trail markers veer away to the northwest. Good thing I was paying attention. I follow the markers up the narrowing path as it climbs toward Bald Mountain Notch. I stop several times to catch my breath along the way. The path underfoot becomes less and less distinct. The notch itself is bug-ridden and boggy with very little in the way of puncheon or any other trail work. Not easy traveling. I'm really tired now, but still have miles to go before I rest.

On the other side of the notch, the going gets better as the trail widens into a woods road. Then the CT markers veer off to the right again. I follow them along a fairly new section of trail called the Rowell Link. It's slow going to say the least: all roots, rocks, and mud holes, it seems. Or is fatigue warping my view of things? My right ankle turns, and down I go, again. Fortunately, the boggy, rain-soaked ground softens the impact. I get up, brush myself off, keep going. A brand-new footbridge spanning Rowell Brook crops up in the middle of nowhere. Someone has been doing some serious trail work out here. I cross it with ease before continuing my slog. Eventually, Rowell Link empties into a woods road. I follow it to a junction where another woods road

leads to Devil's Rest Shelter. I hobble down that road, then drop my pack in the shelter with a great big sigh of relief. Made it! Eleven and a half miles.

Devil's Rest Shelter sits on private land in Kauffmann Forest, which adjoins the Nash Stream Forest. Technically speaking, the shelter is half a mile off the Cohos Trail. The Cohos Trail Association built it in 2018 with the help of Garland Mill Timberframes. It still smells of freshly milled wood. There's a compost toilet and plenty of benches for sitting, but no campfire ring. No fires allowed here.

I tie up my mosquito bar—a rectangular piece of netting designed to cover a camper's cot—in the corner of the shelter. Then I sling a line in the trees for my food bag. I'm dog-tired, so the latter task takes more time than it usually does. Once that's done, I slip beneath the netting. In another hour or two, once the air temperature cools down enough to make the blackflies disappear, I'll fix dinner. But for now I'm happy enough just lying here, bug-free.

It looks like hiking to Pittsburg is out of the question. With my right ankle weakening, I'll be lucky to make it to Dixville Notch. Can't help but wonder what's wrong with me, why I'm having such a hard time trekking this time out. The 100-Mile Wilderness in northern Maine was tough enough when I hiked it ten years ago, but nothing like this. Last year's 46-mile trek on the Appalachian Trail with old hiking buddy was an effort, but at least I was still moving on day five. That won't be the case this time. Tomorrow will have to be a zero day.

Ramen noodles and tea for dinner, cleanup, then brushing my teeth in the long summer twilight. I don't have energy for much else. A loon calls in the distance, probably from Christine Lake not far away. I'm down for the count shortly after darkness consumes the forest.

I AWAKEN TO THE SOUNDS OF SONGBIRDS AND TRUCK TRAFFIC. HIGHWAY 110 is two miles away as the bird flies. The trucks sound like they're racing past only a stone's throw from the shelter. It's kind of strange, actually. Rather disorienting.

First thought of the day: I could push all the way to Pittsburg if I want to, but that would completely drain me. Is it worth it? No one cares how far I hike, and I certainly don't care. Mileage? That's not why I came out here. Then what exactly is this outing all about? To immerse myself in the wild and groove on nature—that's what. So why not take a couple zero days? How much time is left before my food runs out and I have to return to my routine back in the developed lowlands? Why not take three zero days—one at each



shelter between here and Dixville Notch, hopscotching along the trail? Now there's an idea.

A siren wails in the distance, growing louder then fading away. Someone is in trouble. Perhaps someone is reaching the end of his or her life. I think of my mother—the last time I saw her. Then I remember seeing my old boss and good friend David right before he died. Then I recall the last time I saw my childhood friend Jeff before he died a few years ago. It always comes as something of a shock. Life doesn't last as long as we think it will. The earth turns, the days go by, and all too soon we are old men and women. All living things die. That is nature's way. That's the way of the universe. The forest, with nearly as many trees on the ground as ones standing, makes that clearly apparent. All the same, it doesn't seem right.

Well, I didn't come out here to brood about matters of life and death. My mother certainly wouldn't have approved of that. I may be getting older, but I'm still young at heart, still interested in living, growing, and letting myself go wild. The end of the trail comes soon enough. The thing is to make the most of the journey. So with that in mind, I think I'll take as many zero days as I have to take to stay on the trail and fully enjoy this outing.

"The universe is a reality, though we cannot define it," the naturalist and woods walker John Burroughs wrote in his old age. "Life goes on, though we cannot account for it." Yes indeed, life goes on. With or without me or any other life form in particular, nature as a whole persists. Life goes on. That seems to be the hardest thing for any of us to accept, especially when loved ones fall away. I know that I have a hard time accepting it, anyhow.

Rising from my comfy nest on the shelter floor, I use the last of the water on hand to fix tea for breakfast. Then I pull on my boots and walk a quarter-mile down to the nearest brook to refill my water bottles. Today is a good day to rest up, clean up, and let the mind wander. Another beautiful day in the forest, with sunlight breaking through the canopy, the stream rushing past, and birds singing their songs. It feels good to be alive.

---

WALT McLAUGHLIN has published several books about his place in the natural world, including *The Consolation of the Wild: Grief, Hardship and Happiness on the Cohos Trail* (Wood Thrush Books, 2021). He lives in Vermont with his wife, Judy.

# Leave a Message

*A beep and expectant silence. A kind ranger returns the call*

**Elissa Ely**



IN THESE ANXIOUS TIMES, FILLED WITH MATTERS OF OVERWHELMING weight, thin worries can grow enormous. Maybe they feel easier to manage, maybe they give relief from greater unsolvable preoccupations, maybe we've reached a point where we can't tell the difference. Nonetheless, they are worries.

Section 6 of the Metacomet-Monadnock Trail in Holyoke's Mount Tom State Reservation—part of the New England Trail—covers about four miles out and back: a ridge stroll and a jaunty leg stretch on a chilly day. The Appalachian Mountain Club *Massachusetts Trail Guide* describes it as one of the more scenic sections of the 114 miles between the Connecticut border and southern New Hampshire. But I was worried about where to park.

The night before my hike, I called the ranger's office from home for answers. A hearty, pragmatic-sounding voice—a voice with a Swiss Army knife in its pocket and an Ironman watch on its wrist—invited me to leave a message. It felt like a personal invitation: *You there, the worrier who's lived in Massachusetts for 40 years but never hiked in the Pioneer Valley, leave your message here—it's just not a big deal.*

No one expects a human response to voice mail these days. We might as well toss ourselves into the tele-sea; the extensions we're told to press seem meant to drown us. But there were no buttons to press on the ranger's machine: just a beep and an expectant silence. I left my questions, all of them. Was this lot off Route 141 or Route 5? Was it hard to find? Were there plenty of spaces or only a few?

Then, lacking faith, I drove away on an errand.

This is why I missed the ranger's return call. He answered everything. The lot, it turned out, is midway between Route 141 and Route 5, along a road connecting the two, with entrances at each end, which makes it even simpler to find. His directions were perfectly clear, though somehow not quite clear enough for my anxiety. So I called a second time. And a second time, he called back. I recognized his voice with astonishment: Living proof that moral behavior still exists among strangers.

"It's after 6 P.M.," he said in a friendly, no-nonsense way, probably checking his Ironman watch. "I've gotta lock the gates. But what can I do for you?"

I asked my questions again.

*Hikers on Mount Tom in Holyoke, Massachusetts, a century ago. They probably rode the trolley from town then. Today, hikers must drive.* LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

“Hmm,” he said, as if he hadn’t heard them twice already. “Tree workers coming tomorrow. It’s gonna be a mess. I’d say the best way in is two miles from 141. Past the scenic views, past the picnic area, around the bend, on the right. Plenty of space. Free.”

In fact, the parking lot was impossible to miss. The trailhead for Section 6 of the New England Trail was also impossible to miss; slashes of white, with a useful bulletin board and a poster identifying the most endangered reptile in Massachusetts: the timber rattlesnake. If a hiker is “lucky enough to run into one of these shy creatures,” the poster added underneath a photo, would he or she please phone the station to report it? I wished the species much success with repatriation and hoped my luck had run out.

Section 6 was a lovely trail, with wild azaleas and windy bluffs and pastoral views to the checkerboard towns of Easthampton and Southampton below. Every now and then, as a reminder of the lower side of human nature, someone had spray-painted a rock or tree with graffiti. There could be no ignoring the gaudy initials entwined inside gaudier hearts, the solitary names signifying nothing, and a few RIPs for unknowns. Here were misdeeds of the shameless. Long ago, Mount Tom had been the summit of a trolley park, and maybe graffiti was part of the revelry. But it was still wrong.

I was swinging along, happy to think that in nippy weather an encounter with an endangered reptile was unlikely, when I passed a flat boulder near one of the bluffs. It was covered with misdeeds. In the center, in Day-Glo pink, some villain had sprayed:

## NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST

For some of us, graffiti is a rude and unnatural act. For others, it expresses the impulse to leave marks and commentaries of life for anyone who follows. I am one who has never been able to forgive graffiti on a rock that I feel should be covered with moss; even quotes from J. R. R. Tolkien, even from the great wizard Gandalf himself. Yet for once, the Day-Glo words spoke to me. I had been full of worry without reason or explanation—overcome by fear that had to do with not knowing where to begin. In these anxious times, I had been afraid to wander. This was clear now, and the rest of the out-and-back trail was clear, too.

Past 6 P.M., I got home. The parking lot and the reservation were closed, unless someone else, worrying unnecessarily, had left two or three messages.

In that case, my ranger—kind of a wizard himself—was probably on the line, reassuring them as he had reassured me that they would not be lost. Sometimes reassurance is the answer we need.

*Good night, stranger,* I thought, tenderly, and heard the gates lock.

---

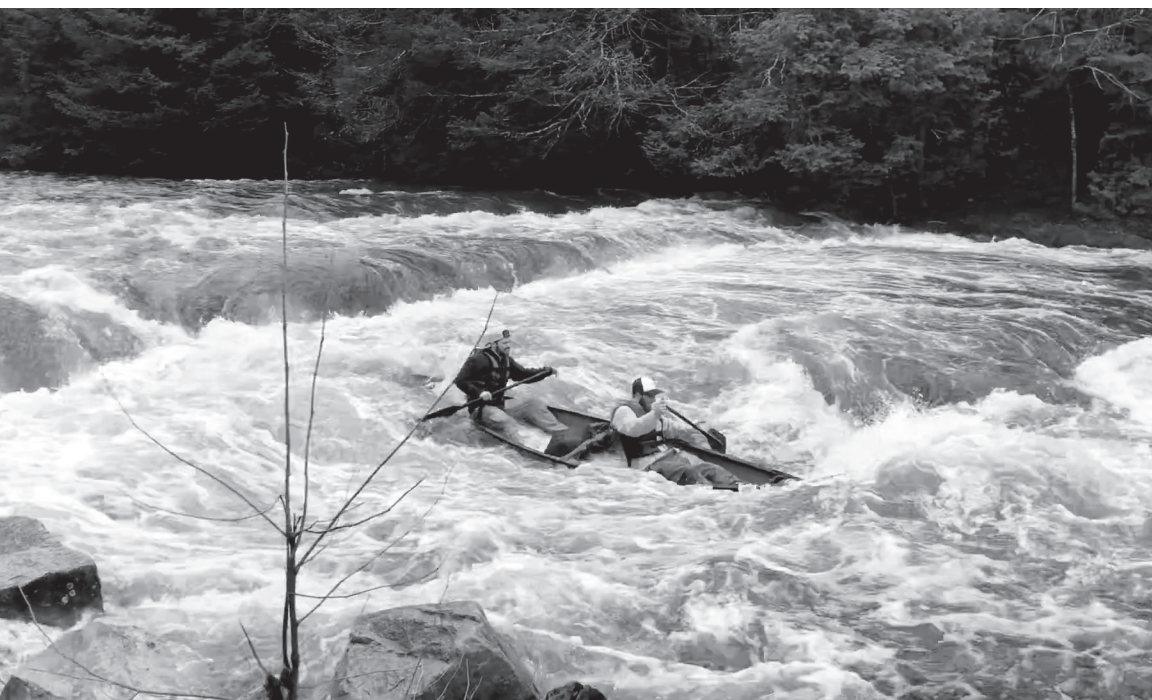
ELISSA ELY is a community psychiatrist and writer from Massachusetts.



# Debacle on the Salmon

*A rowdy river humbles two foolhardy canoeists*

**Michael Rouleau**



THE FOG GREW DENSER AS I TURNED MY CAR ONTO THE GRAVEL ROAD and descended into the Salmon River State Forest in Colchester, Connecticut. I slalomed around potholes and puddles before parking in a woody pull-off not far from the river. We hopped out, threw on our life jackets, and removed the canoe from the roof of my car.

Since I'd discovered paddling a year earlier, I had wanted to try this run of quick water and intermediate rapids through a scenic ravine. Our end point would be six miles downstream, near the Comstock Covered Bridge, where we had parked another car.

I had read that this is a springtime-only adventure, as summer's low water levels make it impassable for paddlers. I knew that on this hazy April morning the river was still engorged with the snowmelt and rain of an early New England spring.

I was eager to start the season strong and knew that my buddy Nick would be up for the challenge. We excitedly carried the canoe down the dirt road toward the sound of rushing water. We couldn't see it, but we could hear it through the trees.

"You're going in there?" asked a fisherman walking uphill. He looked surprised. We didn't know that this was the opening day of fishing season on one of Connecticut's favorite trout streams.

"Yep!" I responded enthusiastically, with the undue confidence of a single-season paddler.

He stopped in his tracks and his voice took a grave tone: "I've come here many years, but I've never seen the water like this."

"We got it!" I shouted over the flow and smiled as we left him standing there.

Moments later we arrived at the edge. The river was a torrent. Nick and I looked out and saw whitecapped waves speeding downstream. The river bent out of view, and steep forested slopes rose beneath an overcast sky.

"You sure this is a good idea?" asked Nick, suddenly skeptical.

I was thrown off by the ominous scene, too. The river looked much angrier than I imagined. But we came all this way, and I had talked up this run and dreamt of it for months.

*Michael Rouleau, in the stern, and his friend Nick approach turbulent water on the Salmon River in eastern Connecticut.* COURTESY OF MICHAEL ROULEAU

“Yeah man, we got this!” I yelled over the water. “The guidebook says the only sketchy part is in a couple miles at an old, washed-out dam! Like we planned, we’ll get out and scout it first!”

Nick appeared convinced.

Conveniently beside the torrent was a calm eddy inviting us to put in our canoe. Nick wore fishing waders—waterproof coveralls with boots attached—and proudly jumped into the water to show off his gear. I hopped in the stern, and Nick walked us toward the mouth of the eddy, then took his position up front in the bow.

The last time Nick and I paddled together had not gone well. It was the previous summer and I had just purchased this canoe. We were embarking on a multiday paddle on the Connecticut River, I in the stern, Nick in the bow. There was no teamwork, no coordination between our paddling. The boat slithered like a water moccasin as our discordant strokes offset each other. Nick could only stand it so long before insisting that he take the stern and steer us straight.

But that was last season. I’d since logged more than 100 miles of river paddling and progressed into a fairly competent stern paddler. I’d embraced canoeing and felt confident in my abilities to read the river and steer the boat. I had to prove to Nick that I was not the same paddler, that I knew what I was doing this time around.

Together we oared perpendicularly out of the eddy. The flow caught the nose of the boat and swung us facing downstream. The current swiftly carried us. I twisted the paddle so the blade sliced the water, then pivoted the shaft against the hull of the canoe to stabilize us. With the paddle jammed in the water, I pushed out, turning us right, pulled in, turning us left, then parallel, making us straight again.

“Nice!” yelled Nick up front, seeming impressed with my maneuverability.

The run was immediately thrilling. The boat heaved downstream as waves splashed over the nose and soaked Nick. Within a few minutes, gallons accumulated at our feet. The boat swayed like a pendulum as the water sloshed around. Nick, used to being in the driver’s seat, paddled to his own rhythm. Three strokes on the left, two on the right, one on the left, five on the right.

“Nick!” I yelled, trying to calm him. The river was moving fast enough, after all. He didn’t even need to paddle.

But there was no reaching him. The rollicking water and pumping adrenaline locked us into a chaotic tempo. We plowed through waves and took on water. Nick threw his body weight from side to side as he paddled.

And I followed suit, throwing my weight from side to side—ruddering on the left, the right, the right longer, the left—trying to stabilize us and keep from capsizing.

Eventually the river relaxed. We got into a groove and relished successfully navigating the intro rapids. Our hearts pumped and we laughed. We breathed in the misty forest air and felt elated.

“We took on a lot of water,” I said, bringing our attention back to reality. The cold April water was above my ankles. I was wearing Tevas—open-toed sandals strapped at the front and back of the feet.

“Shoulda worn waders,” Nick said, looking warm in his.

“We should be arriving at the dam soon,” I said. “Let’s dump the canoe when we pull over to scout it.”

I looked in the distance and there it was. The river appeared to end as the water crested the dam and fell over the edge. I steered us to river right, we pulled onto the bank, dumped the water, and trudged with anticipation through brambles and overgrowth toward an old foundation beside the dam.



*The canoeists inharmoniously paddled over the old dam, taking on water.* COURTESY OF  
MICHAEL ROULEAU

From our vantage we could see the whole obstacle. The guidebook was accurate. On river right, there's a break in the dam, creating a chute that smoothly channels water through three drops of a couple of feet each: a Class III rapid when the water is right. I didn't know if the water was "right," but it certainly wasn't low.

Nick and I deliberated and decided we should go for it. Below us, on the other side of the drop, stood a group of fishermen. Nick scrambled down and over to them.

"Hey guys, we're going to take our canoe down this!" he yelled over the sound of crashing water. Their eyebrows lifted. They looked amused.

"Can you film it?" Nick handed over his cell phone and one of the men happily took it.

"Absolutely," he replied.

We scurried back to the boat, took our positions and launched into the current. We resumed our lack of coordination and inharmoniously paddled toward the chute, which was much less visible from this vantage point.

Moments later we were upon the dam but slightly off target. Rather than the middle of the chute, we were too far to the left. And rather than a clean slide through three drops, we teetered and tipped over the first. The nose of the canoe crashed into a hard surface. The hull flexed outward, as if to fold in half. And a surge of water came flooding in.

The second drop came, and we started to tip. Nick, ever the optimist, continued to paddle. I grabbed the gunwale and braced for the inevitable ejection. The third drop came, and it was over. My face plunged through a huge wave and my body swirled under water until being spit out unscathed before the filming fisherman.

Nick was sucked underneath like a bucket submerged, as his waders filled with water. He clung to the upside-down boat, which dragged him downstream out of the rapid.

Unaware of the unfolding circumstances, I giggled and trembled with adrenaline and thanked the fisherman for capturing what was sure to be some hilarious footage. Moments later, Nick pulled our capsized boat to shore—thankfully we were both still holding our paddles. He looked very stressed.

"The gear, the gear!" he gasped.

I peered out at the water and saw both of our drybags—full of food, water, cell phones, wallets, keys—floating downstream. I followed his lead and ran through the woods as if we'd catch up to the gear and dive into the rapids to retrieve it.



Nick wasn't as nimble as usual, for his waders still were full of water. He ran like a giant saturated sponge, water gushing out of his clothing with each stride. We ditched this plan within minutes and slogged back to the boat.

Without a word to the still-chuckling fishermen, we took our positions and were back on the water, more uncoordinated than ever. I noticed the yoke—the wooden beam stretching across the hull—had broken from the gunwale. That had released the drybags.

Nick paddled up front with terror-stricken urgency in the direction of our valuables. Our paddling reached new levels of franticness—bodies and oars flailing from side to side. Just as before, we slithered and swayed through the rowdy river. Water again pooled around my feet, making the boat ever harder to control as the liquid sloshed around. The river bent our gear out of view. We doubled down.

Around the bend stood a row of annoyed-looking fishermen—perhaps they weren't having luck on fishing opening day. The river's quick bend caused our boat to fishtail as the bow breached the eddy and the stern stayed in the current. We plowed through all five of their fishing lines.

"Sorry about that!"

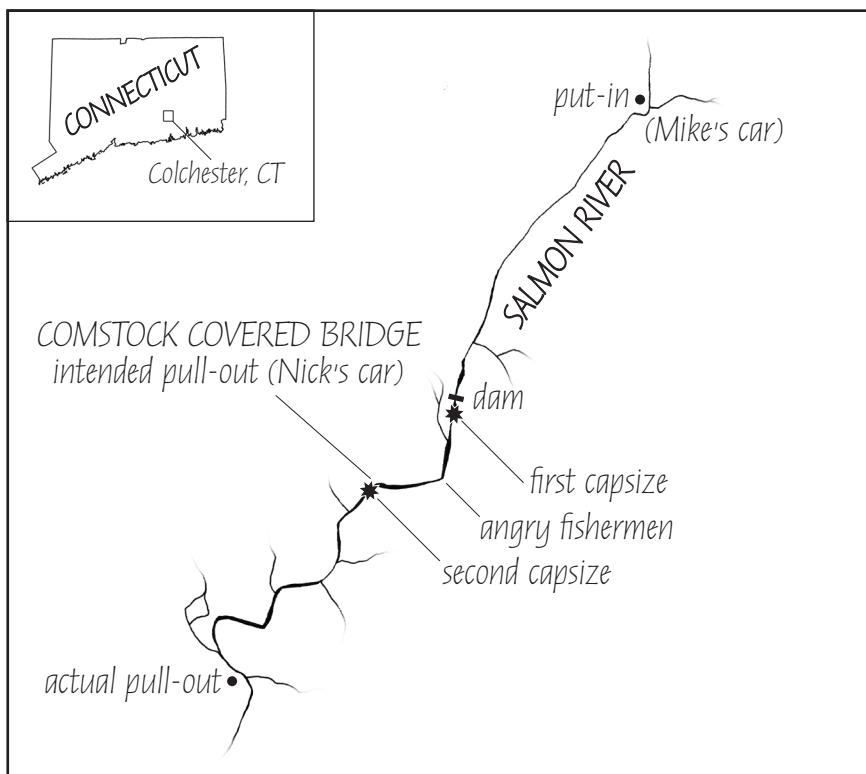
They hurled expletives at us. I couldn't help but laugh at the situation. This trip was devolving into a perfect mixture of failure and hilarity. How could it get any worse?

With our boat still fishtailed and our bodies miraculously unhooked by fishing lures, we now floated sideways. We drifted beneath the Comstock Covered Bridge—our planned end point. I could see Nick's car through the trees. This was also the busiest section of the river. The banks were lined with families and anglers, settled in for opening day.

Nick paddled of his own accord. I couldn't straighten out the boat, and we continued sideways through the choppy water. With maximum spectators watching, fate conspired and another flood of water filled our boat. We flipped again.

This time we were charged with the even more difficult—and embarrassing—task of righting the boat and dumping the water while in the middle of the river. I looked around and gave an imaginary wave to the people.

Luckily, we could stand, and within a couple minutes we were paddling yet again. The river bent into a much more secluded zone. The spectacle concluded. Our gear was nowhere to be seen, but the river was calmer, and we paddled gracefully. Where were the spectators now?



*The canoeists' landmarks, intended pull-out, and final end point on the southwest-flowing Salmon River, a tributary of the Connecticut River. ABIGAIL COYLE/AMC*

Farther and farther away from Nick's car we floated. What lay ahead and when would this end? The guidebook didn't describe this portion of the river. Another bend in the distance.

Taking advantage of the flat water, we moved swiftly downstream. We rounded the bend and there they were: two drybags bobbing tranquilly like buoys in a misty Maine harbor. We snatched them and exited the water as soon as possible. Good riddance, river.

Relief washed over us and cold set in—the sky was still gray and air still cool on this brisk New England spring day. We shed our clothes, down to our skivvies, and draped them over the boat. The final dumping of water came from Nick's waders. Shivering and half naked, we began the walk of shame and carried the canoe through the woods.

Shortly into our slog, we spotted a lowly fisherman camped in the trees. Still buzzing from our trials on the water, we walked toward him with a story to tell.

"I saw," he interrupted, not impressed.

"Our car is parked by the covered bridge," we said, sending needy glances.

"That's over a mile away. You boys need a ride?"

"Yes." This was no time for pride.

We situated the canoe in the bed of his pickup truck. The kind man turned up the heat and drove to our car, saving us the humiliation of walking disrobed past the angry fishermen and dumbstruck families.

I'm not sure if we'll attempt this river again. But if we do, we at least won't wear waders or strap gear to the yoke. A spare shirt and pants would be nice, too.

---

MICHAEL ROULEAU is a Connecticut-based outdoors enthusiast. He works in public relations at Eastern Connecticut State University and resides in Coventry with his wife, Amanda; son, Cole; and cat, Reiko.

# Pondering Graceful Aging on Table Mountain, South Africa

*A septuagenarian rock climber reflects on his past and future*

**Douglass P. Teschner**



CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA, HAS A REPUTATION AS A MODERN CITY ringed by mountains offering great rock climbing. But when I had the chance to go there in 2016 for a Peace Corps country director training event, I felt ambivalent. I was excited to attend the training in a city I had never visited but pained to think about going to a place with a reputation for good rock climbing given my declining abilities. I knew that even if I could find a willing partner, I would not be leading a rock climb.\*

When I was young, mountaineering was practically the center of my existence. Then there was a longer phase when family and work dominated my time, but climbing was still a big source of physical, emotional, and spiritual renewal. In 2016, at age 65, I was well aware that my body had been gradually declining since age 50. My knees especially, which were calling louder for replacement surgery.

I could still hike and ski, but had lost the ability to lead a rock climb. Confidence and balance just weren't there anymore; in turn, their absence eroded the inner drive. With a certain stubbornness and unwillingness to totally let go, I occasionally put on rock shoes to try easy boulder moves close to the ground. When I attempted the "sharp end" of the rope (leading), I invariably backed off climbs where I once easily moved upward. While increasingly retreating from climbing, I missed the roughness of granite on fingertips, the intense focus when "runouts" raise the risk of a possible fall, the deep partnership when tied to another, and the satisfaction of coiling rope atop the crag.

Thinking about Cape Town, I contemplated two possibilities: hike instead of rock climb or do something I have always been loath to do—hire a guide. My resistance to guides is less about the money (although I am pretty cheap) and more about my philosophy of climbing. Figuring things out myself, doing the research and planning, and making the on-the-hill decisions have always been as important to me as the climbing itself—critical elements in my personal definition of a quality mountaineering experience. After pondering

---

\* Leading is climbing first from the bottom up, placing protection to shorten the length of any potential fall. Leading a rock climb is more challenging and riskier than having a rope from above, whether "seconding" a leader or "top roping" from an anchor set by walking to the clifftop.

*Douglass Teschner on a belay ledge along the Arrow Final route up Table Mountain, Cape Town, South Africa.* ANTHONY HALL



possibilities for several months, I opted for some humble pie, plopping down money on PayPal to book the guide for an extra day after the conference.

I flew to South Africa, and the workshop went well, but I felt sad that nine years as a country director would soon end. I loved the job, especially mentoring the staff and volunteers, but Peace Corps limits how long you can work. Too soon after the conference, I would be headed home to New Hampshire to ponder my next life challenge.

October 1, 2016 (the day after the conference), a group of colleagues and I joined the crowd hiking the Platteklip Gorge Trail up beautiful Table Mountain, which looms so impressively above the city. Occasionally we looked back at the spectacular peak of Lion's Head, the blue Atlantic, and Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for so many years. The open summit was a bit of a scene as hikers, plus many more had who arrived via the famous cable car, crowded into a small café. I was cold and happy for rest and food, but, sooner than I might have liked, it was the preordained time to leave my friends to wait outside the cable car station for the promised arrival of my climbing guide.

I felt unusually nervous and doubtful, wondering if this plan I had hatched back in the comfort of my apartment was really such a good idea. Fortunately, the arrival of guide Anthony Hall quickly dissipated any concerns. We hiked downhill for most of an hour on the India Venster, a different trail than the one I had come up, chatting and getting to know each other like old climbing buddies. Then we roped together and headed up 500 feet of rock toward the top.

Anthony checked my knots and belaying technique, which I found a bit humiliating, but nevertheless necessary. After all, I was the client, and he was the guide. I was, however, quite agreeable when he offered to carry my pack! The first two pitches on the Arrow Final route were a mix of rock and vegetation, but I was happy enough to have a tight rope at two spots where I struggled—even though Anthony told me this climb was graded 5.5/5.6, well within the range I used to lead. It was also a classic “trad” route (without bolts), which I really appreciated.

Anthony said there weren't many climbers in Cape Town, and they all knew one another, which I soon found out was true. While I belayed him on the third pitch, Anthony disappeared around a corner, and I was by myself paying out rope through my belay device. I noticed two climbers on a steeper route to the right when one called down asking my name. I sheepishly admitted that I was a client of guide Anthony, whom, of course, they knew!

When my turn came to step around to the left, I was delighted to find myself on an impeccable slab—a classic setting all the more inspiring as the cable car swooped directly overhead. I moved joyously up perfect rock on good holds until confidence diminished at a harder section where I struggled and called for a tight rope. The fourth and fifth pitches were almost as good, and I managed well enough, but was happy for the final 50 feet of very easy climbing on broken rock. We coiled the rope just a few feet below the summit station where we could almost touch the passing cable car.

A short, unroped scramble led to one final move. I grabbed a megahold, following Anthony's instructions, noting that if I fell (however unlikely) it would result in dire consequences.

Crossing a railing, we were quickly mobbed and photographed like celebrities by a group of Chinese tourists. A few moments later, we were rapidly descending via the cable car. Anthony gave me a ride back to my hotel, the final touch in a perfectly executed guiding assignment.

I was glad to have done it, but my limitations colored the experience. The quality of the experience just didn't match the competence I felt as a longtime climber making the key decisions along the way. Despite the superb work of Anthony, struggling to climb the harder sections left me without the glow of satisfaction and sense of mastery and control I had always associated with climbing.

But, at the same time, I also understood that, if I was determined to age gracefully, I needed to identify a better thought paradigm.

Driving though Franconia Notch a few months later, I felt a knot of pain in my stomach gazing up at Cannon Cliff, which I will likely never climb again. I recalled past adventures perched high on the airy Whitney-Gilman route on Cannon, belaying and taking in the view of Mount Lafayette across the notch. I recall feeling tired but deeply satisfied up there, a glorious experience that is hard to match. Yes, maybe a guide could "drag" me back up there (although as the years pass—I am now 72—that seems more and more doubtful). Anyway, I know there would be limited satisfaction compared with leading that classic climb myself. I needed to let go . . . but maybe not completely.

So far, I lack the resolve of Bob Weekes, who wrote so poignantly in this journal about taking his old climbing gear to the landfill ("A Lament Inspired by a Visit to the Local Landfill," vol. 67 no. 1, 2016, pages 136–137).

Under pressure from my wife to get rid of stuff, I did chuck the wool knickers I wore on Denali back in 1976. (As a convert to fleece, I know I will never wear them again anyway.) But the ropes, slings, carabiners, nuts, ice

screws, and such remain safely stored in the basement. Trashing these would be too psychologically painful. I suppose my two sons will eventually be stuck disposing of what's left along with my human remains—hopefully recalling good memories of the old man taking them off to the crags.

In the meantime, I embrace a quote in this journal (vol. 62 no. 2., 2011, page 72) from Alpina editor Steve Jervis: “I often think I should retire, but climbing is living, so I cannot.”

So, in recent years, I have occasionally pulled out musty equipment for little adventures like “ice bouldering” in Kinsman Notch and a solo snow climb up Huntington Ravine’s South Gully on a fine early April day. There is a certain pleasure to wearing crampons and whacking a tool into low-angle ice, providing a sense of security you can’t quite get on the rock.

In 2018, I roped up with a young man (whose parents I met in Africa) to lead New Hampshire’s Willey Slide, a long, but technically easy, ice slab I used to climb each winter unroped. As for rock, there has been some top roping at Artist’s Bluff, where I ran into another old-timer who can still lead rock. When we later did a few pitches on an obscure rock route in Crawford Notch, I felt grateful just to be there.

Then I got knee replacements, which slowed me down some more. My therapist suggested organizing occasional Zoom calls with old climbing buddies, and during one such event, I was sharing a framed photo of Whitney-Gilman Ridge on Cannon Cliff when my mood suddenly shifted from the sadness of knowing that I will never climb that classic route again to a glow of gratitude for all the times I had done it in the past.

I am trying to embrace this spirit as a daily graceful aging practice: to find the right balance of letting go (but not too much), pushing (but not too hard), going with the flow (but also sometimes swimming against the current). It is vital to fully appreciate the half-full glass while also working to sustain as much of it for as long as possible. A little gratitude can go a long way. And hiking and skiing in the woods are pretty sweet, too.

---

DOUGLASS P. TESCHNER has published many adventures in this journal over the past five decades, most recently “The Hancock Loop Trail, Then and Now” in Winter/Spring 2021. Doug serves on the Appalachia Committee and works as a leadership trainer and coach. Contact him at [dteschner@GrowingLeadershipLLC.com](mailto:dteschner@GrowingLeadershipLLC.com). He lives in Pike, New Hampshire.

---

## Liturgy of Going to Water

“Everything relies on everything else in order to manifest.”

—*Thich Nhat Hanh*

*For Todd and Noah Davis*

We hike the owl's crown down to an old burn that runs its way  
into a confluence of muddy currents and knotweed.  
Cast, turn, trace the ravine back to its narrowest point  
flicking Royal Wulfs, studying scat, naming plants,  
fingers reach riverbed through speckled sediment shadows,  
an interbeing of brook trout and body manifesting  
landscape lineages of what we seek, marbled watersheds  
emptying and returning, always, to another river.

*Michael Garrigan*

---

MICHAEL GARRIGAN writes and teaches along the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania and strongly believes that every watershed should have a poet laureate. He is the author of two poetry collections, *Robbing the Pillars* (Homebound Publications, 2020) and the chapbook *What I Know [How to Do]* (Finishing Line Press, 2019). His writing has appeared in *Orion Magazine*, *River Teeth*, and *The Hopper Magazine*. He was the 2021 Artist in Residence for The Bob Marshall Wilderness Area.

# Letters

## Winter on Mount Washington

I found “Light Snow in the Whites” (Winter/Spring 2022) disturbing. My own experiences of winter hiking and camping were decades earlier than 1998, and limited to the Catskills, so milder, but cold enough, as I recall. I concluded that hiking that required crampons and ice axes was not for me.

What disturbed me in the Powerses’ story first was the “no room at the inn” situation at the observatory. The staff “implored” them “to rest briefly and quickly head back down” into the worsening storm. These polite New Englanders apparently did not ask to stay. Pushy New Yorkers would have, so my question is, how bad do conditions have to be before whatever custom or regulation gives way and “the public” who must be excluded becomes two fellow human beings who might very well not make it back alive?

A little further on, we encounter another candidate for the Accidents section, the young man out for a summer stroll in February. We are told he was with a group and the others, sensibly, turned back. Now faced with two spectral figures covered with snow and ice telling him to do the same, he continues on. Perhaps he was already hypothermic and not thinking clearly. Otherwise, mental illness is all I can conclude, and lacking police authority, they could not detain him. Does he in fact appear in the Accidents section?

Thanks to the Powerses for writing this cautionary tale for us all.

—Robert Roth  
Kingston, New York

---

*Editor’s note: I asked Charlie Buterbaugh, the director of communications at the Mount Washington Observatory, to respond. He says, “Mount Washington Observatory staff are no longer expected to do search and rescue. It was about ten years ago when we stopped offering this service, making sure that our weather observers can stay focused on maintaining our continuous 90-year climate record and weather and climate science. That being said, if someone is in desperate need and knocks on the observatory door in an emergency situation, we would assess the situation and collaborate with Mount Washington State Park staff to help the person remain safe. New Hampshire State Parks owns the Sherman Adams summit building, in which the Observatory is located, so our staff often work together.”*



*The Powers duo visited the building back in 1998, when the observatory staff were still also doing search and rescue. Our take on this is that the hikers were not in need of a rescue. They had the right gear, they were fit, and they were not too cold. The observatory staff told them, sensibly, to get off the mountain as quickly as they could, and the two took that advice.*

*We recommend a review of the safety principles at [hikeSafe.com](http://hikeSafe.com).*

*Our Accidents report in the following year did not publish anything about a lost or injured hiker on that day in March 1998. Our guess is that the man the Powerses saw on their descent turned around soon after they saw him.*

### **The Influence of Mead Base in 1959**

Many thanks to William Geller for the fine piece on Mead Wilderness Base (“A Line of Scouts,” Winter/Spring 2020). [Editor’s note: *The camp is now called Mead Base. It was then known as New Hampshire Daniel Webster Council Boy Scouts of America Mead Wilderness Base Camp.*] A week at Mead in the summer of 1959, when I was age 14, introduced me to the sport of what was then called “climbing”—hiking the Presidential Range and other high White Mountain peaks—and changed the course of my life. A few weeks later I returned with friends to re-hike Mount Washington; the following year I hiked from Franconia Notch to Pinkham Notch. I have spent a lifetime on trails in the Appalachians, the Sierras, Canyonlands, the Pacific Crest, the Rockies, and Alaska, for more than a half-century since that first hike.

Mead instructors emphasized certain fundamentals: hike together, everyone in the party has something to offer, check the map often, be scrumptiously clean in meal prep and cleanup, tie your bootlaces securely, ask every question you have. All this is testimony to the wisdom of teaching young people technical outdoor skills, while emphasizing self-respect and teamwork—and putting these into practice in a dramatic setting such as the Whites.

—Doug Dunlap  
Farmington, Maine

### **Origins of the Diamond Hitch in AMC’s Construction Crew**

I am writing to extol the virtues and describe the legacy of the diamond hitch, as noted in Bill Geller’s article, “Be Wary of the Hind-Leg Kick” (Winter/Spring 2022). His sentence about loading up a mule at Mead Base Scout camp in New Hampshire really struck a memorable chord in me: “The first

time the loads went on, they'd try to buck them off, but with diamond hitches holding the loads to the saddle, they stayed."

In 1968 after he completed his summer work at Mead Base leading backcountry trips, Bill Geller and I, along with his brother, John, did a weeklong backpacking trip on the Long Trail from Brandon Gap to Smuggler's Notch. For a pack on that trip, Bill had all his gear in a canvas sack tied on a homemade pack frame with a diamond hitch. He sang the praises of this clever hitch used by miners, prospectors, and other backwoods venturers on their mules: easy to tie without having to pull an end of rope through, adapts to any shape or size load, keeps the load from shifting, and a cinch to untie.

Two years later during my first summer working in the Appalachian Mountain Club huts, I was a member of the construction crew. At that time, the CC worked during the week doing renovations in the huts, and on weekends, we helped hut crews pack in supplies. As I began these pack trips and those for the CC work, I used the diamond hitch to tie on a secure load. I did not say much about it, although I noticed no one on the CC or the hut crews seemed to know this great hitch. As others saw that I tied my loads on quickly and they did not shift, they asked me to teach them the diamond hitch using the six hooks on the frame of AMC packboards. Its use spread, particularly that summer and among my crews during the next three at Mizpah Spring and Lakes of the Clouds huts. They subsequently taught the diamond hitch to their crews, too.

Over the years since then, when my wife and I stayed in the huts, it seemed as if the diamond hitch had become ubiquitous. I saw it on loaded packboards on the trails and at the huts. This series of events over more than 50 years from my learning the diamond hitch from Bill in 1968, to my teaching it to my fellow crew members from 1970 to 1973, and then seeing how its use had become widespread in recent years, reminded me how seemingly small actions or words can have lasting and unexpected legacies that we may only learn about years later. Those who inherit the legacy may not know from whom it came or when it started. My thanks to Bill for a most interesting article, and for starting me and the AMC crews on the path of using the diamond hitch.

—Bruce R. James  
*Lebanon, New Hampshire*

## **A Call to Action to Upgrade White Mountain Trails**

I enjoyed reading the Winter/Spring 2021 *Appalachia* articles about the mountains in a pandemic. Living in the White Mountains, I observed a big drop in visitors during COVID's early days in March and April 2020. I even witnessed the Kancamagus Highway's Lincoln Woods parking lot 100 percent empty one day! But, by summer 2020, things changed radically. Pent-up demand, the relatively low risk of transmission outdoors, and the loss of indoor recreation (such as museums, gyms, and theaters) drove high levels of visitors to the Whites. Trailhead parking lots overflowed, including Lincoln Woods, with many cars parked along the highway. There were reports of illegal camping and lots of waste left in the woods. Sales of New Hampshire fishing and hunting licenses were way up, too.

I have been reflecting on this in light of my article in that same issue on building the trail up the Hancocks in the 1960s ("The Hancock Loop Trail, Then and Now"). There are so many more people in the mountains now, with enormous pressure on the most popular trails, especially the most direct ones to the 4,000-footers. (People love their lists!)

The Appalachian Mountain Club has been a leader in trail hardening going back to the pioneering efforts by my friend Robert Proudman up through the excellent leadership by the recently deceased Andrew Norkin. But despite many outstanding efforts by our AMC trail crews and volunteers, we just aren't keeping up with the growing levels of use and resulting severe erosion at high elevations.

It is great that so many people are getting outdoors, and we certainly want to encourage that! But we need to do more to preserve our precious resource.

I was thinking about this during a recent hike up the Gorge Brook Trail on Moosilauke, my local mountain. I remember in the 1960s when the upper part of that trail went straight up the slope, but many years back, the Dartmouth Outing Club, which maintains it, made the decision to do a complete reroute of the upper section with switchbacks and heavy investment in rock steps and drainage. I think this is the model we need going forward for all of the popular, high-elevation trails.

Yes, AMC has built many rock steps and water bars, but these are mostly to reduce erosion on existing trails. As I wrote in my article, such efforts on the Hancocks have been overwhelmed by the steep slope and heavy traffic. It is sad to see the remnants of such positive attempts by our skilled trail crews. We have been trying hard, but it is just not enough.

I call on AMC to revisit our commitment and adopt a new paradigm, beginning by assessing every popular trail we maintain and developing a long-term plan that adopts the model DOC applied to the Gorge Brook Trail. This will require extensive re-routes with more traversing and switchbacks and heavy investment in rock steps and drainage.

This will be very expensive, but it is necessary. This should be the highest priority for our club moving forward, and I encourage the AMC leadership to put our expertise and resources, including fundraising, to bear on this critically important task.

Fifty years from now, we can have trails in better shape than they are today for the benefit of many future generations. But we need to act now and do so boldly.

—*Douglass P. Teschner*  
*Pike, New Hampshire*

---

*Editor's note: Doug Teschner is a member of the Appalachia Committee. Contact him at [dteschner@GrowingLeadershipLLC.com](mailto:dteschner@GrowingLeadershipLLC.com).*

---

## Cormorant With Swimmers

The ocean writes its soft babble on blue silence  
quieting all other voices  
turning the light under water to a trembling silken jelly.  
We swim in a cormorant's aquamarine eye.

Fifteen feet—not an unfriendly distance—  
he keeps, stitching a semicircle around our path  
with dives as fluid as the sea itself, the black feathered neck  
as if formed of water, bird one with water, water his truth.

Ten meters down, no tiny fish concealed  
in a rocky crevice of circumstance  
is safe from the hooked beak that scrapes and snags  
with the terrible innocence of chance in a random world.

Later four cormorants bob in a circle on the waves  
sociably, like old friends playing bridge,  
as if their image as lone foragers through chilling winds  
were a joke gently played on the human beholder.

*Stephanie Kraft*

---

STEPHANIE KRAFT is a former newspaper reporter, now a translator of Polish literature. She lives in Amherst, Massachusetts, and has often visited Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island and the Bird Islands. Her poems have appeared in *Christian Century*, *The Prose Poem Project*, *Dappled Things*, *Cold Mountain Review*, and *Sky Island Journal*.



# Accidents

*Analysis from the White Mountains of  
New Hampshire and occasionally elsewhere*

## Upright

There is, embedded in the raw file of incident summaries from which we drew the sampling that became this column, a reminder of one of the many subdivisions in our world. Although every age group suffers from slips and falls in the backcountry, rescues stemming from them are weighted toward the 65-and-over cohort. No surprise there. Even before the pandemic encouraged a new boom in walking and hiking, aging boomers (and I am one) were keeping on along the trails. “Seventy is the new (fill in your own fantasy age)” might be a boomer tattoo, if time would only hold still and the flesh were willing.

Perhaps a short look at a few slippage factors will make us all, whatever our ages, a little more mindful of balance and risks to it when we walk out and up.

Walking—as anyone who’s taken a tumble will testify—is all about balance. Often those moments when we fall are etched in memory, attached to feelings that can be called back too. (See, for example, Rob Z.’s accident on the South Trip pyramid slide in the Winter/Spring 2022 issue.)

Our balance “system,” like much we take for granted, is remarkably complex, partly because it must carry us through so many different circumstances—varied angles, speeds, levels of light, and so on—and still get it right. The American Physical Therapy Association website puts it this way:

Good balance depends on:

1. Correct sensory information from your eyes (**visual system**), muscles, tendons, and joints (**proprioceptive input**), and the balance organs in the inner ear (**vestibular system**).
2. The **brain stem** making sense of all this sensory information in combination with other parts of the brain.
3. Movement of your eyes to keep objects in your vision stable and keep your balance (**motor output**).

Starting in middle age, parts of our balance systems may lose some of their fine tuning. This too is common sense, and it's borne out by our experiences on trails, where a stony stretch that once was a quick-stepping puzzle asks a more deliberate solving. Still, simple awareness of balance's slow decline can help us compensate and keep on going up . . . and down. Chief among our balancing tools is fitness. Maintaining strength and cardio fitness helps keep us from the sloppy footing (and thinking) that comes on when we tire. When we're fit, we also tend not to pack on pounds that make us unwieldy. Finally, the fit tend to greater awareness of how their bodies are moving, so whatever decline is at hand is also likely to have been noticed.

Hiking poles, with their added points of balance, are also a common, helpful addition (even as they ask for a heightened awareness of their effects—widening trails and scarring rocks). Then too, there is the point where the tread meets the trail.

**Sole Thoughts:** We've noted this before, but it bears reminder: When we go to choose footwear for the mountains, we find a remarkable range of boots, half-boots, trail shoes, running shoes, and trail-hybrids; scrolling through outdoor store ads lengthens this list to a paragraph. Two imperatives seem centrally touted: weight and grip (with "support" also common). *Grip* is the key descriptor, and whenever setting out in a new pair of trail shoes, we use the first trips as tests of traction. This shows when new soles will hold and also how they land. As you and the shoes age together—the shoes more quickly, you more slowly, we hope—you become a team, and as you "read" the trail ahead, you know where your soles will hold and where risk lies.

All this is, of course, common sense, but it is worth returning the common to consciousness from time to time.

—Sandy Stott  
*Accidents Editor*

## Looped

May 19, 2021, saw a flurry of three calls issue from the Franconia Range. Often when rescues arrive in multiples, gnarly weather is involved, but the 19th was mild and relatively calm for this shoulder season. Temperatures atop Mount Washington averaged 7 degrees above the norm of 38, and the sun shone 84 percent of the time. Still, as the day aged, it grew more and more difficult for Cal Z., age 20, who by then was off-trail and alone in the vicinity of Mount Garfield. The call for help reached New Hampshire Fish and Game

Conservation Officer Heidi Murphy at 10:15 A.M. The caller said that he and his three companions had not seen Cal since 9 P.M. on the 18th. Murphy set a search in motion.

Having just driven in from Indiana and being new to the White Mountains, Cal and his four twentysomething friends had embarked on a multiday rounding of the iconic Pemigewasset Wilderness route known as the Pemi Loop. They left the trailhead at Lincoln Woods on the morning of May 17 and climbed the Osseo Trail to the ridgeline. The group spent the first night between Mounts Flume and Liberty, setting out early on the 18th for the climb up and over Mount Lafayette. Atop Lafayette, the four friends waited for a half hour for Cal to arrive. According to the group's unofficial leader, Jack S., Cal had been lagging and feeling negative about the hike. From Lafayette's summit the group descended the Garfield Ridge Trail, with three of them arriving finally at a spot just off the trail near Garfield Pond, where they decided to camp for the night. It was then around 8:30 P.M.

Throughout this descent Cal had continued struggling, and by 9 P.M., he and his brother Cy had not arrived at the campsite. His companions went back to help, relieving Cal of his pack, giving him a light, and encouraging him on. Jack estimated that they were about a quarter-mile from the campsite. Then, the group went on ahead again. Cy arrived, night fell, but Cal didn't appear.

At the campsite, the foursome cooked and ate dinner, listening also to music. They called out into the woods for Cal but got no response; they then decided that they would look for Cal in the morning. Their morning search turned up no sign of Cal, and around 10 A.M., they made their call for help.

Murphy's search for Cal on the 19th sent fellow COs up the Osseo Trail, the Greenleaf Trail, and the Skookumchuk Trail to check whether Cal might have turned back. Two of the officers were then diverted to another incident, and CO Josiah Towne continued from the Skookumchuk to Lafayette's summit, then back down to the Garfield Ridge Trail, where he met up with the four hikers. Towne escorted the party down the Skookumchuk.

Meanwhile, Murphy drove to the trailhead lots for the Lincoln Woods, Falling Waters, Skookumchuk, Garfield, and Galehead Trails. At each, she talked with hikers, explaining the situation and offering a description of Cal. At 7:15 P.M. Murphy received word of a call from Catherine C., who said that she had found Cal that evening at the Garfield Ridge Campsite and that, upon determining his name, decided to call. Catherine said that Cal could stay with her and her hiking partner for the evening, and she hoped that someone would retrieve Cal the next day so that they could continue their hike.

Murphy then returned to meet with the four hikers at around 8:45 P.M. and explained that they would need to hike to the campsite and bring Cal back out the next day. They agreed and, a little after 3 P.M. on the 20th, Murphy heard that the group had accomplished this.

That evening Murphy interviewed Cal on the phone and learned his story of his time missing. Cal's description of his night alone in the woods on the side of Mount Garfield reads like an otherscape. Cal had a light, but no gear, and he "didn't know what he's doing." He did hear yelling for him, and he yelled back but no one seemed to hear him. He thought the yelling came from a place he'd already been by, but he didn't try to go back because he didn't want "to get more lost or hurt." He thought it was after midnight when he fell asleep beneath a large tree. When he awoke in the morning, Cal went first downhill, then turned and climbed back up, arriving finally at the Garfield Ridge Campsite where he spent much of the day. Late in the afternoon he walked up the trail toward Garfield's summit and on the way met Catherine, who asked if his name was Cal. Catherine and her companion then guided Cal back to the campsite, gave him food and water, called NHFG, and made a plan to shelter him for the night.

**Comment:** CO Murphy's official report hews close to the facts as gleaned from interviews and it is plainspoken. But it contains description of a remarkable failure in group dynamics. The group's pace over the two initial days of their hike and their noting how tired Cal seemed suggests a slow shakeout after their 1,100-mile drive from Indiana. That three of them went ahead to set up camp as they neared Garfield Pond is typical of a group with fatigued members. That they chose to camp where it is not officially sanctioned also points to their unfamiliarity with, and perhaps a lack of research into, their route

But from that point on, it's hard to fathom their response. After they returned to Cal and Cy to help them over the last short distance by shouldering their packs, the three then left the brothers again. Cy then left Cal. And in this short distance and time, Cal seemingly vanished. Still, the other four made dinner, listened to their music, and called out into the woods for Cal. Then, they made the inexplicable decision to turn in and wait until morning. That left Cal in the woods without his sleeping bag or any other supplies. Even with the good weather on the 18th, that's a chilly evening at 4,000 feet.

When their morning search along the Garfield Ridge Trail yielded no sign of Cal, they called for help. And then, as help arrived, they walked down from the ridge. This left Cal somewhere on Mount Garfield, possibly for another

night. That Murphy's alerts to hikers that Cal was missing helped bring Catherine to Cal's rescue was a piece of good fortune for Cal and the group. Yes, they climbed back to get Cal the next day, but should they ever have left?

Two final thoughts: Splitting up, especially when a group member is deeply tired, is a bad idea, even when a campsite is near. But such decision-making is common among groups that have no agreed-upon leader. Going into the backcountry as a group asks that group structure be determined before hitting the trail. Many of us have experienced how easy it is to get off-trail and lost even in short stretches of our mountains. Once lost, it's also easy to land in Cal's state of mind where one "doesn't know what he's doing."

### **Tragic Tree**

On May 26, 2021, at 9:15 P.M., NHFG received a call from Angela M. saying that her husband, Edward M., age 50, was four hours overdue from a three-day hike on the Carter Range and in the Wild River valley. Edward's itinerary had him climbing up from the Bog Brook Trail to Carter Dome, then along the Carter Range to Mount Moriah, from there looping down the Kenduskeag and Shelburne Trails to the Highwater Trail and Wild River Trail, through Perkins Notch, and back to his car. An ambitious 34-mile backpack, but one within Edward's capabilities as he sought to complete his New Hampshire 4,000-footers.

NHFG Lt. Mark Ober returned the call and learned Edward's intended route and his progress until noon on the 25th, when Edward had posted a picture of himself atop Mount Moriah on his Facebook page. Ober calculated the miles of Edward's intended route and thought that, given only 2.3 miles covered on the morning of the 25th, he might simply be behind schedule. He suggested that they wait until the 27th before starting a search. Ober asked that Angela let him know if Edward had not emerged by noon on the 27th.

On the 27th at noon Angela called saying that she'd still not heard from Edward, and Ober summoned COs to begin a sweep of Edward's intended route. By early evening the COs had covered much of the intended route without sign of Edward. Ober then called Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue to ask for volunteers to cover the Kenduskeag Trail to its juncture with the Shelburne Trail. While he awaited response to this request, Ober heard a garbled report issuing from CO Matt Holmes, who had been assigned the Highwater Trail as it ran south to the Wild River Trail. Holmes tried again a little later, and at around 7:30 P.M. New Hampshire State Police called Ober,



reporting that COs Holmes and Levi Frye had found Edward dead at the Spruce Brook Tentsite.

Ober then shifted the mission to recovery and to figuring out what had happened to Edward. He contacted medical examiner Sally Zankowski, and, after Ober described the location, she gave permission to retrieve Edward's body provided that the scene was fully documented by photographs. The COs, now four in number, did so, and then they packed up Edward's gear and readied his body for pickup by a New Hampshire Army National Guard helicopter. The Black Hawk helicopter arrived at around 9 p.m. and transported Edward's body to Berlin, where Zankowski and Ober conducted an examination to determine how Edward had died. That examination and photos and descriptions from the COs who found Edward pointed to a freak tragedy. It was clear he had died from trauma when a tree fell on him, almost certainly on the 26th. What seemed likely is that Edward had pulled into the tentsite late after a long day and begun to set up camp. That setup included his sleeping hammock, which he strung between two trees, one of which was a dead spruce. When Edward put his weight on the hammock, it broke the dead spruce off at the base, and the body of the tree fell on Edward, killing him. When the COs arrived, they found Edward beneath the tree.

One further bit of evidence solidified Zankowski and Ober's assessment: Angela was able to open Edward's phone, and it had a short video clip of the tentsite when Edward arrived. The clip was taken at 7:58 p.m. Ober then speculated that Edward had arrived at or after dark and set about making camp. He would have traveled 12 miles that afternoon and was likely tired. That it was after dark was clear also from Edward's having a headlamp on when he was found. It's likely that he didn't recognize the hazard of the dead tree in the dark, and when he sat on the hammock, the tree fell on him.

**Comment:** Primary to what I have to say here is an expression of sadness and condolences. To Edward's family first, of course, and then to those who responded and helped bring Edward out.

Sleeping hammocks are more and more popular in a variety of settings; checking the trees to which they are strung is a good reminder to self. Trees don't figure near the top of a hiking worry-list, but an awareness of what's above seems good practice, especially when you plan to stay in one spot for some time. Our eastern trees, often given stony soil for nutrients and grip, seem—if you survey the wreckage of our woodlands—a little more prone to shedding and falling than some of their more well-founded cousins in other regions.

## In Deep

An evening call on July 28, 2021, alerted NHFG Lt. Ober that 59-year-old Nancy B. was overdue at Lakes of the Clouds Hut. Nancy and her son David R. had set out from Madison Spring Hut at 8:30 that morning with a plan to hike separately and meet at Edmands Col before continuing on to Lakes. David would climb the Star Lake Trail up Mount Adams and descend to the col, while Nancy would take the Gulfside Trail. The pair set out together on the Star Lake Trail, and beyond the lake, where the trail diverges and aims for Mount Adams, Nancy went left on a trail that she identified as the Gulfside Trail. David questioned the choice, but Nancy had an Appalachian Mountain Club map and had hiked in the Whites before, so he assumed she was right. An experienced hiker who knew she needed to keep her blood sugar balanced, Nancy had set out with pack full of lunch, energy bars, and minimal overnight gear.

After waiting some time at Edmands Col, David got a text from his mother saying that she was OK but moving slowly. Another text at 11:30 A.M. asked that he come back and join her so she wouldn't be hiking alone. David left his pack at the col and tracked back along the Gulfside Trail toward Madison Spring Hut. For the next three and a half hours David searched back and forth along the trail, asking others he met if they'd seen anyone who matched his mother's description. She didn't answer his texts, and he assumed her phone battery had died. At 3 P.M. David returned to the Madison hut and asked the crew for help. During a break from their prep for the night's guests, some of the crew walked with David to where David had parted from his mother that morning; instantly, they knew she'd taken the Buttress Trail, apparently not seeing the small sign marking it. Very steep and difficult, the Buttress Trail also leads down into the Great Gulf Wilderness.

The Madison crew had to decide about an impending search while operating under the significant pressure of dealing with David's worry about his mother—and serving dinner to a full group of guests. They consulted AMC's on-call search-and-rescue coordinator at Pinkham Notch Visitor Center and learned that a team would not be coming until the next morning. The hut crew made the decision to send two of their members down the Buttress Trail to look for Nancy. (Though all AMC hut crew members have basic SAR training, they operate on an "at-will" basis during rescues, not as a formal SAR team.) Knowing that Nancy needed regular access to food and not knowing how long her supply would last, the crew felt (in the assistant hutmaster's words) "like there was a very strict time limit on the search, and we were the only ones" prepared to go out. The responsibility fell to them.

As darkness covered the Presidentials, the two crew members descended the Buttress Trail. Some seven-tenths of a mile down from the Star Lake Trail junction, their headlamps picked out a cell phone lying in the trail. They quickly confirmed the phone was Nancy's. Lower down, where the Buttress Trail crosses an open talus slope, the searchers spotted a blinking red light. Estimating the light to be at about 4,000 feet of elevation, the crew members guessed that Nancy had started up the Six Husbands Trail to return to the ridge, but after searching Six Husbands up to 4,500 feet, they found no sign of Nancy or the blinking light. As they returned to the hut via the Buttress Trail after more than eight hours of peering into the darkness, the searchers shouted Nancy's name repeatedly but guessed that the rushing water and dense vegetation of Jefferson Ravine muffled their voices.

On the morning of July 29, Ober set up a search command at Pinkham Notch. There, he learned of the light the searchers had seen on either the Six Husbands or Wamsutta Trails and that they'd found no one there. Fortunately, the weather was mostly benign with light winds, although cooler than normal—the temperatures for the 28th and 29th averaged 6 degrees below the norm of 50 atop Mount Washington.

AMC offered two teams, and Ober deployed them to search two trail loops: first, Gulfside, Great Gulf, and Wamsutta Trails; second, Gulfside, Sphinx, Great Gulf, and Six Husbands Trails. He also contacted AVSAR's Mike Pelchat and Diane Holmes, who volunteered to search the Chandler Brook, Great Gulf, and Madison Gulf Trails loop. Ober then drove to the summit building on Mount Washington to provide searchers and summit staff with a photo of Nancy they could show to hikers.

Earlier, Ober had also asked David to walk down from Madison Spring Hut so Ober could review more details of the pair's planned hike. He picked David up at the Appalachia parking area and drove back to Pinkham, filling David in on search details as he drove. From an interview conducted at Pinkham, Ober learned David's story from the 28th, and important facts about Nancy's hiking experience (some, but not as ambitious as their current plan) and equipment (equipped with enough gear and supplies for one or more nights out). David was also certain that his mother would not try to climb back up the Buttress Trail once she realized her error; he thought she would try to walk out on the Great Gulf Trail.

By 3 P.M. all the search teams had completed their loops, finding no sign of Nancy. Ober made plans to expand the search, summoning three COs with extra COs and NHANG's Black Hawk helicopter on standby. As the

three COs were about to start their searches, Ober received a call saying that two hikers had found Nancy on the lower part of the Sphinx Trail. One hiker would stay with Nancy and hike slowly out, while the other was already on his way out to get help. Over the next few hours, Ober positioned COs and an all-terrain vehicle nearby, and over time COs and David arrived to help walk Nancy to the ATV. By just after 6 P.M. everyone was out, and Ober had a chance to interview Nancy and learn what had happened.

Nancy said she thought something was off when she kept descending. She checked her map then and realized she was on the Buttress Trail. She told Ober, "There was no way I was going back uphill, so I was trying to get to the Great Gulf Trail and hike out." Where the Six Husbands Trail meets the Wamsutta Trail, Nancy got off track trying to find the Great Gulf Trail. The going grew thick and scrubby, and somehow Nancy lost her map. As it grew dark, she stopped, got out her blanket and wrapped up for the night. During the night she thought she saw lights and flashed her headlamp in response, but nothing came of it. When daylight returned, she kept moving, keeping the West Branch of the Peabody River on her left, but she was still off-trail. In mid-afternoon, she finally saw a cairn, and, as she neared it, the hikers who rescued her appeared.

**Comment:** While Nancy proved resilient in her attempt to remedy her initial trail-finding error, her mistake occasions a thought about maps. I am a fan of paper maps and the context they provide, and Nancy was equipped with one of the best. But to be useful, maps must be read fully (read, studied) and synched with the terrain they describe. A careful check of their day's planned routes on the 28th would have told Nancy and David that as they emerged from Madison Spring Hut, Nancy's intended route, the Gulfside Trail, ran up the slope to the right, while David's Star Lake Trail tracked to its left, up toward the col between Mount Madison and Mount John Quincy Adams. To keep to their plans, they needed to separate right near the hut. As they walked companionably up the Star Lake Trail, they were already in trouble. By the time an alarm went off for Nancy, she was already partway down one of the hardest trails in the range, where she didn't feel capable of reversing herself.

That, over time, Nancy also lost her phone and then her map is unfortunate, but not surprising. Being lost, especially off-trail, has a way of stripping you of your composure and equipment; that Nancy keep her composure is to her credit. Even as she was never far from a trail in the heavily peopled July Whites, Nancy's experience would have felt increasingly singular and isolated. She did well to keep trying.

Nancy was not the only hiker this past summer to find herself barred from the Presidential ridge by the steep walls that guard the exit from the Great Gulf Wilderness. The Buttress, Six Husbands, and Madison Gulf Trails are some of the most notorious paths in the range for a reason, and hikers should only consider them if they are confident on minimally marked trails that involve steep scrambles over wet rocks and roots. The Madison Spring Hut crew dealt with nearly a dozen incidents of hikers who became stranded, disoriented, or injured while coming to the hut via the Madison Gulf Trail, which involves many unmarked river crossings and a quarter-mile headwall section involving some Class 4 rock climbing and crossing through what is at times a running waterfall.

### Visitors' Tales

Here are two stories of trouble on Mount Washington. Each describes a way in which the seemingly modest Whites can surprise those who don't know them.

**At Altitude.** At 6 P.M. on July 28, 2021, Victor J., age 49, and his cousin Joseph left the Appalachia trailhead parking area to begin a Presidential Traverse in celebration of Joseph's 40th birthday. Victor had flown in from Utah, where the mountains comb the sky. The pair spent the night at the Valley Way Tentsite and in the morning climbed Mount Madison and then on over Mount Adams, dropping then down to Edmonds Col. On Mount Jefferson's summit cone, Victor slipped and injured his ankle. After a short assessment rest, they decided to abandon their traverse, and Victor hobbled down to the Gulfside Trail. As the day waned, the pair stopped and set up their tent near Sphinx Col, about two miles from the Mount Washington summit.

The forecast for 30th was not promising—cold rain, with rising wind. Victor and Joseph knew of the rain, but the wind later surprised them. The pair spent that day pinned down in their tent by the weather and Victor's injured ankle. During the afternoon the wind rose and broke one of their tent poles, collapsing the tent. After 4 P.M., Victor texted his sister in New Mexico, saying that he would need a rescue; his brother-in-law in turn called Mount Washington State Park requesting help and giving Victor's coordinates. That information was forwarded to NHFG, and at 5 P.M. Lt. Ober began a response, texting and calling Victor's number with no answer. Then Ober turned to the AMC and asked that they try sending some of the crew from Lakes of the Clouds Hut to help Victor and Joseph and assess the situation.



At around 6 P.M., AMC's SAR coordinator called Ober saying the high winds and heavy rain had turned the searchers back. When Ober checked the observatory website again, the winds were sustained at 55 MPH and gusting to 77; windchills were predicted to drop into the teens.

Ober then called Victor's brother-in-law in New Mexico and learned that Victor and Joseph were well equipped and were trying to shelter for the night. Ober let the brother-in-law know that he wasn't going to send rescuers into this stormy night. Ober then got a text from Victor saying, "Cannot walk well enough to get to Sphinx Trail. We are just off Gulfside. Tent was coming apart in winds so moved 20 yards north down off trail. . . . Hopefully sense of humor and what we have will be enough. Have a feeling it is going to be a cold night. Hopefully we'll see you in the morning." After one more text exchange, Victor and Joseph settled in partially shielded by a boulder to endure the night.

July 31 dawned with the observatory recording a temperature of 32, sustained winds of 53 MPH with gusts to 75, and 50 feet of visibility. Ober arrived at the Mount Washington Auto Road at 6 A.M. and learned that a rescue crew from AMC's Lakes of the Clouds had left to reach Victor and Joseph a few minutes earlier. At 8 A.M. volunteers from AVSAR and four NHFG COs set out from the Auto Road. Via radio, they and the Auto Road rescue crew learned that the AMC rescuers had reached Victor and Joseph with warm, dry clothing.

At a little after 9:30 A.M. AVSAR's rescuers arrived, and emergency medical technician Mike Pelchat evaluated Victor's ankle, then taped it and began an attempt to walk him out. Joined by the COs, who had spotted ATVs as close as they could, the rescuers made steady, albeit slow, progress. Around noon, as they reached the Cog Railway track, a train chugged up; Pelchat stopped the train and asked for help. The conductor then took Victor and Pelchat on board for the final steep climb to the summit. Everyone else followed by trail.

**Comment:** It's of note that this incident took place right after Nancy B.'s venture described earlier ("In Deep"), and in that short span the weather shifted from benign summer to threatening chill. Victor and Joseph's overnight in a driving storm on the 30th would have been life-threatening had they not been well equipped, fit, and determined.

Slips are the most common source of injury, and when the injury feels severe, it can take the assessment, reassurance, and assistance of a skilled rescue team to get someone moving again. That AMC, AVSAR, and NHFG were able to offer that help got Victor up and moving slowly toward safety. Getting a ride for last half-mile on the Cog Railway was good fortune for all.

In an interview with Ober, Victor said, “I came here thinking that my house is at higher altitude than these mountains.” He allowed that he hadn’t expected the Whites to be such tough mountains.

**Into the Wilderness.** A few days later, and not far from where Victor and Joseph endured their storm, Jimmy Doug S., age 66, of Whitney, Texas, found his own brand of trouble. At 9:30 A.M. on August 3, Jimmy Doug set out from the 2-mile marker on the Auto Road with a plan to follow the Appalachian Trail to Mount Washington’s summit, where his wife would pick him up. At the first junction, rather than following the AT to the Osgood Trail and then climbing over Mount Madison, he saw a sign saying “Mt. Washington” and thought, *That’s where I’m going.* This set Jimmy Doug on the Great Gulf Trail, which also leads to Mount Washington. He said later that his Guthook hiking app (since then, aptly for this incident, renamed FarOut) didn’t advise him differently. Jimmy Doug headed into the Great Gulf Wilderness.

The Wilderness is, by intent, not heavily signed, and Jimmy Doug later complained about this. Still, he kept using his Guthook app and working deeper into the Great Gulf. As the day began to wane, he had reached the headwall, and his reading of his app sent him up. At some point on the headwall, Jimmy Doug got off trail, and the sharply angled terrain slowed him. Darkness came on.

Jimmy Doug was to meet his wife, Katie, atop Washington. Now he texted her that he was stuck, afraid to go up or down and without a light; she called 911. When NHFG CO Sgt. Glen Lucas spoke with Katie, she explained the day’s plan and said that Jimmy Doug was stuck and had poor reception. Lucas plotted his coordinates, which placed Jimmy Doug on the Gulfside Trail, but Katie was unable to hike down with a light and couldn’t get someone else to do it. After looking at the weather (a mild forecast with no rain), Lucas advised both Katie and Jimmy Doug that he “found no reason to call out a rescue team when the only issue was his not having a light.” Both said they understood, and Jimmy Doug prepared to sit out the night in his poncho.

Lucas got a 7 A.M. call from the State Police saying that an emergency beacon had been activated near where Jimmy Doug had been during the night. These coordinates came from the headwall north of the Gulfside Trail. Lucas headed for the Auto Road, summoning CO Eric Fluette to join him. While the COs drove, Lucas asked Mount Washington State Park (MWSP) to send someone down to the coordinates from last evening, and they agreed. The employee found no one on the Gulfside Trail.

Atop Washington, Lucas sent Fluette down toward the Gulfside Trail and put in a call to AVSAR, as the morning coordinates indicated Jimmy Doug was on a cliff. AVSAR's Pelchat said he would start their way with technical help in case it was needed. Then, Lucas followed Fluette down toward the headwall. Fluette and the MWSP employee looked for a route out to the coordinates, and Fluette began to call out for Jimmy Doug. Getting an answer, Fluette then worked out a way to reach Jimmy Doug and then guide him off the headwall to the Great Gulf Trail.

**Comment:** CO Lucas recommended that Jimmy Doug be billed for the cost of his rescue. This is no surprise. Not having a light or a map won't get you much sympathy in the rescue community. Relying on a phone app that



*New Hampshire Fish and Game Conservation Officer Eric Fluette, on the right, rescues Jimmy Doug S. on the headwall of the Great Gulf on August 3, 2021. NHFG/SGT. GLEN LUCAS*

provides little context leads often to route-finding trouble. Perhaps it is true in this region that all trails lead to Mount Washington, but the terrain they pass over varies wildly. A paper map illuminates that variety. Also, Jimmy Doug's intended route over Mounts Madison, Adams, Jefferson, and Clay asked for more than he had to offer.

I leave the final word on this incident to Jimmy Doug's wife, Katie. She was listening as Jimmy Doug disagreed with CO Lucas's analysis that part of his trouble on the headwall stemmed from not having a map. Jimmy Doug kept extolling his Guthook hiking app, saying, "It works great for me." Katie looked over and said, "How did that work out for you?"

### **Baby, You Can Drive My Car**

On the morning of August 31, Philip P., age 71, and his daughter Megan C., age 43, set out to walk up the Mount Washington Auto Road. On learning that walking is not allowed there, they revised their plan, setting out up the Great Gulf Trail, but still hoping to get to and walk along the Auto Road. Working without a map, they questioned hikers they met and were directed to the Chandler Brook Trail, which climbs ruggedly out of the Gulf to a meeting with the Auto Road near the 4-mile mark.

The pair carried few supplies, but each was toting some past medical problems, and Philip was wearing old boots. On the steep trail, Philip began to sweat profusely and falter; the soles of his boots began to come off. At the same time, they got off-trail, and then Megan's GPS—their only navigation system—died. Megan tried to call 911 but couldn't get service. She decided to leave Philip to find a signal, advising him to "just go downhill" if he felt worse. Megan took with her their thin supplies of water and food. Philip's only equipment was a sweatshirt.

A little after 1 P.M. Megan reached 911, and the call found its way to NHFG Sgt. Lucas, who spoke to Megan a little after 3 P.M. Using the coordinates of her call, Lucas plotted her position and talked Megan back to the Chandler Brook Trail and told her how to reach the Auto Road. She did this and was able to flag a tour van and get a ride down to the Glen House.

Getting enough information to search for Philip took some time. At a little after 9 P.M. NHFG COs Lucas, Holmes, and Frye convened at the Mount Washington Auto Road. Lucas and Holmes prepared to drive up the Auto Road to the juncture with the Chandler Brook Trail, where they would hike down to look for Philip. At the same time, a MWSP employee was hiking up

from the Great Gulf. Frye would interview Megan for more information and stay in touch with the searchers.

At 1:24 A.M. on September 1, CO Holmes called down saying they had found Philip and that he was alive. He was now at the junction of the Great Gulf and Chandler Brook Trails and had responded to the whistle of the MWSP searcher. Frye then brought his ATV up the Great Gulf Trail to Osgood Trail, where he met the rescuers and Philip, who had walked slowly out. Everyone was out by 6 A.M.

**Comment:** The COs' interviews with Megan and Philip described a curious mix of stubborn determination and disregard. Philip—described by his daughter as “very stubborn”—really wanted to walk on the Auto Road, even after being told it was illegal. Despite being unfit and ill-equipped, he and his daughter devised a plan to reach the road via a very demanding route, where eventually they encountered real trouble.

To get to the scene of their trouble, the pair relied on advice from passing hikers and a GPS, which eventually ran out of battery. Without a map and with few supplies, they were in deeper trouble when they got off-trail a number of miles into the wilderness. Then, even as Philip's boots began to fall apart, they kept on. Even the worst-equipped hikers usually know to turn back when their footwear fails. Once in trouble, the pair shifted to the modern default—let's call for help. Except that they couldn't get reception in the sharp valley of the Great Gulf.

And so they felt forced to split up. A more prudent plan would have been to follow Megan's advice to Philip and go downhill together, at least initially. Philip clearly did so once left on his own, and he eventually found the more traveled Great Gulf Trail, though it seems to have been too late to get help from any passersby. NHFG recommended that they be charged for this rescue.

### **Colder Shoulder**

October 30 wasn't a day to draw one out. At least that must have been on Michael P.'s mind as he sat beside the Isolation Trail in the mid-afternoon, waiting for his three friends to return from Mount Isolation's summit. Nearby Mount Washington averaged 34 degrees that day, and 1.74 inches of rain fell.

Sometime after 4 P.M., when the three friends returned, Michael was gone. As they followed the Isolation Trail down toward its junction with the Rocky Branch Trail, where they would turn east toward their car, the friends kept finding evidence of Michael's preceding them—a plastic bag of soggy



clothing, some candy wrappers. Those indicators then ended, and the friends continued on, making the turn onto the Rocky Branch Trail and arriving at their car in the early evening. Michael wasn't there. The group called for help.

At about 8 P.M., NHFG Sgt. Alex Lopashanski learned from them that Michael, age 31, was a novice hiker and didn't have a phone or light. Though he did have rain gear, Michael had fallen in a stream earlier and was likely still wet. Lopashanski reasoned that Michael had likely missed the turn east and gone straight, or south, on the Rocky Branch Trail. Lopashanski summoned two COs, Joseph Canfield and Benjamin Lewis, and met them at the Jericho Road trailhead. Canfield and Lewis headed up into the night at 10:30 P.M. An hour later they reached Rocky Branch Shelter #1, found no one, and kept on up trail, calling out and flashing lights as they climbed. The cold rain intensified.

By 2:30 A.M. the ruckus of the river made voice-searching difficult, and the COs also could not cross the rising water. They turned back. Lopashanski then needed two more COs, Christopher Brison and Frye, to search the eastern section of the trail, and at 6 A.M. they started up from the trailhead on Route 16. At 8:30 A.M., Brison and Frye were turned back at a river crossing. Meanwhile Lt. Brad Morse had called Lopashanski to say he would relieve him and that he would begin gathering more help for the search.

A 10:22 A.M. phone call ended the search. Michael was at Patch's Market in Glenn, having weathered the night under some rocks near Rocky Branch Shelter #1 before walking out to Jericho Road in the morning.

**Comment:** What might have been a more relaxed search during the summer gained urgency in the wet cold of late October. That urgency was compounded by the torrential rain of the 30th and 31st, when the nearby observatory recorded more than 5 inches of rain with temperatures hovering in the 30s.

Even though the three friends who left Michael to complete the climb of Mount Isolation had been assured he'd wait for them, leaving a novice hiker alone in the cold rain was a bad plan. Anyone who has waited while wet and cold knows that time slows, that one wants to get moving again, if only to warm up. It's easy to imagine his thinking: *I'll just begin retracing my steps and meet them at the car.* That he left an initial tracery of gear and candy wrappers indicates that he expected to be followed. But the tracery ran out before the turn to the east, and Michael missed that lone turn, went on into the early darkness and then the long, wet night. By the time his friends reached the car and found Michael missing, they'd guaranteed a long, wet night for the COs called out to search.



## COVID Knock-on Effects

We've all grown used to the way the old normal dwindles in the rearview mirror, replaced then by a landscape with familiar outlines and unfamiliar practices. That, of course, has been true for mountain rescuers, whose practice has always involved close contact—with those they would help, and with each other. That would be even truer for the specialists from Mountain Rescue Service, who come to retrieve us when we are stuck on a cliff or moored to woe on high-angled ground.

I emailed longtime volunteer and former president of MRS Rick Wilcox to get his take on COVID-19's influence in and on his group. As has been true with many groups, MRS has had to ask a number of questions and make transitions during the two years of the pandemic. Chief among the questions were figuring out which personal protective equipment (PPE) gear was needed “to go safely on a rescue mission” and what to do when you encounter other teams or accident victims who were not following government PPE guidelines. “Do you leave a rescue scene when another team is not following government guidelines?” he asked. Not everyone agreed, and some MRS members decided not to go and risk bringing COVID home to their families and friends.

Then, “While we were having all kinds of discussions about what to do, things opened up and people that had been cooped up headed for the hills. Fish and Game were maxed out. We at MRS were getting a call a week for litter carries. Inexperienced hikers who were out of shape seemed to sprain an ankle and need rescue every week.” While litter-carrying is a necessary part of rescue work, it's not the best use of highly skilled climbers, nor is it what many signed up for. Turnouts for those sorts of missions declined some.

A final challenge arrived when Steve Dupuis decided that, after five years, he needed to step away from being president. MRS then continued the work Rick and Steve had begun—recruiting new team members, thereby making the team younger, rejuvenating it. Michael Wejchert took on the leadership role, and, according to Rick, “He has done a great job bringing the team back together . . . and adding another six young climbers to the team. The team is stronger than ever.”

Wejchert (a climber and writer who serves on the Appalachia Committee) responded to my email with a few thoughts that dovetail nicely with Rick's:

As a team we do our best to adhere to the changing environment and CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] and state guidelines. Of course, these are always in flux, but we're decent at thinking on our feet! Put it this way: our phones are on.

I've always considered MRS's job as assisting Fish and Game and the MWAC [Mount Washington Avalanche Center] in whatever capacity we could. Sometimes this means a high-angle rescue or heading into technical terrain above treeline in winter. Other times it means hiking up South Moat in summer to help with a litter carry. We have an array of skills and we are always on call. Nowadays, larger teams like the Lakes SAR and Pemi SAR shoulder much of that load and that's great. I will say, too, that what I consider "my" generation, the folks in the 25- to 40-year-old range, are doing a fantastic job and are taking more responsibility in the organization. Paired with the wealth of knowledge and experience already on MRS, it's a pretty cool thing to see, and we look forward to growing alongside the organizations we work with often.

—*Sandy Stott, Accidents Editor*

—*Scott Berkley, Assistant Accidents Editor*

# Alpina

*A semiannual review of mountaineering in the greater ranges*

## Barry Blanchard Is Injured

The renowned Canadian mountaineer Barry Blanchard received a serious head injury in August 2021. Blanchard, who has survived many falls, near-falls, shredded ropes, avalanches, and other alpine hazards, slipped on some concrete stairs in Saskatchewan and was taken to a hospital. Although he seems in for a long recovery, he was making good if slow progress by the beginning of 2022. He had returned to gym climbing and had even been ice climbing with fellow alpine legend Steve Swenson.

While wishing Blanchard well, you might look at his book *The Calling* (Patagonia, 2014). It is an engaging and often frightening chronicle of extreme climbs in the highest peaks and in his native Canada.

## Karakoram

**Sani Pakkush.** This formidable peak (6,953 meters) was first climbed by a German party in 1991, via its Northwest Ridge. There were no other known ascents before 2020. In that year the French duo Pierrick Fine and Symon Welfringer established a difficult route on the formidable South Face. It required a lot of hard mixed climbing and four bivouacs, two of them very uncomfortable. This splendid achievement was awarded a *Piolet d'Or*. Photographs suggest a number of even harder, rockier routes to the right of this one.

**Tengkangpoche** (6,487 meters). The previous Alpina described an attempt on the formidable North Pillar of the Karakoram peak. The route was completed in October 2021 by two British alpinists, Matt Glenn and Tom Livingston. Generating a bit of controversy, they used some of the gear left in a cache partway up the mountain by their predecessors. Theirs was a major achievement in any case.

## In Memoriam

**Rick Allen, 1954–2021.** After a storied career, the great Scottish mountaineer Rick Allen died on July 25, 2021, in an avalanche on **K2** (8,614 meters), while attempting a new route on the Southeast Face. His partners, Jordi Tosas of Spain and Stephan Keck of Austria, escaped with only minor injuries.

Rick's greatest triumph was on the Mazeno Ridge of Nanga Parbat (8,126 meters). This astonishing feature, some six miles long, had been tried by some of the greatest climbers, including Doug Scott and Voytek Kurtyka. The ridge lies around 7,000 meters and is no gentle snow slope: It is studded with subpeaks that must be climbed or bypassed. There is no practical



*Rick Allen on the first ascent of the Mazeno Ridge on Nanga Parbat in Pakistan. SANDY*

ALLAN

way off until one has done the ten kilometers all the way to the Mazeno Gap. About five kilometers across is aptly named the *point of no return*. Allen tried the ridge without success in 1995. Americans Steve Swenson and Doug Chabot were first to make the entire traverse (2004), but they did not continue to the summit. So in 2012 Rick returned with his frequent partner, Sandy Allan, along with Cathy O'Dowd, Lhakpa Rangdu Sherpa, Lhakpa Zarok Sherpa, and Lhakpa Nuru Sherpa. After they traversed the entire ridge, four of them descended by another route and were soon relaxing far below. Sandy and Rick headed for the summit, more than 1,000 meters higher. After a failed attempt, they battled their way to the top. Rick broke the way up the last section, despite his exhaustion. The effort took a toll: On the way down he was slow and incoherent. Sandy had his own problems: He hallucinated Charlie Brown's dog Snoopy and a witch flying by on her broomstick.

They did get down safely. It had been a tremendous achievement, which earned them a *Piolet d'Or*. At the time of their ascent, Rick was 59 years old, Sandy 57. This harrowing experience is the subject of Sandy's book *In Some Lost Place* (Vertebrate Publishing, 2016). It is also described in the Alpina section of this journal (Summer/Fall 2013).

Rick also established a new route on the South Face of Ganesh II and a very challenging direct line on the North Face of Dhaulagiri (8,167 meters) in 1993. He was the only Westerner on a team of Russians and had studied the language in preparation. He and Sandy climbed a new route on Pumori in 1986. Allen climbed Everest in 2000 after two previous attempts.

Much later (2018) Rick tried to solo a new line on Broad Peak (8,047 meters) and disappeared. Thought dead, he was spotted high on the mountain by a drone and rescued by humans.

After he survived exhaustion on Nanga Parbat and near-death on Broad Peak, you might think that Rick would retire from the big mountains. Instead he went to K2. When he died there, he was 68 years old.

### Nepal Himalaya

People looking for a (relatively) easy 8,000-meter peak have for years chosen Cho Oyu (8,201 meters). But the "easy" route lies in Tibet, and that route has for some time been closed by Chinese authorities. **Manaslu** (8,163 meters) has become a popular substitute. It lies entirely in Nepal and is protected from the politics of other countries. Last autumn 371 made the top. Or did they?



Along with some other 8000-ers such as Shishapangma (8,013 meters) and Broad Peak (8,047 meters), Manaslu had its actual summit questioned. In these cases many climbers have stopped short of the highest elevation, which is accessible by a precarious ridge traverse.

Manaslu was first climbed—to the *real* summit—by a Japanese party in 1956. Most subsequent parties stopped short of the final ridge. Late in September 2021, Mingma Gyalje Sherpa, known as Mingma G, led the way down right (west) from the forepeak of Manaslu, traversed from a lower point, and then climbed to the summit. The accompanying photograph shows climbers on the forepeak, with Mingma's descent, traverse, and upward route to the top. Note that the left (east) side is even more intimidating than the west.



*Mingma Gyalje Sherpa, known as Mingma G, leads a group of climbers to the true summit of Manaslu.* JACKSON GROVES

## Denali

Climbers returned in great numbers last spring. As early as May 21 Denali Mountaineering Rangers issued a warning: “We have seen a disturbing amount of overconfidence paired with inexperience in the Alaska Range. While climbers may have a good deal of experience at elevations up to 14,000 feet in the Lower 48, the remoteness and extreme weather we get in the Alaska Range make the experience here more challenging and dangerous. Please do not underestimate conditions, take the time to acclimatize, and do not ascend too quickly. We have already had several SAR events related to HAPE [high altitude pulmonary edema] this year.”

Only three days later on the West Buttress came an episode that gained national attention when climber Jason Lance used a satellite communication device to call for a helicopter rescue, claiming that he and two companions could not descend because of hypothermia. In fact they could and did descend, but only after the other two spent hours persuading him that they could. Lance was charged with three federal misdemeanor counts for making a fake call. According to court documents, he claimed the Park Service was obliged to assist them because “we’ve paid our fee.”

The proliferation of communication devices raises many ethical issues discussed elsewhere in this journal.

## Ecuador

**Avalanches.** Of all mountain hazards, avalanches are probably the hardest to anticipate. Many of the world’s best climbers have perished in them; Rick Allen (see earlier) is only one of them. You can dig test pits, monitor radio warnings, and still get buried. And even if your party has shovels and avalanche beacons, you may still not get out. And avalanches occur on even the most familiar routes. The volcano **Chimborazo** was once thought to be the highest mountain in the world. At 6,268 meters (20,564 feet), it is not even the highest in South America. Its summit, however, is the farthest from the center of Earth, because of its closeness to the equator. Although its easier routes have relatively few technical difficulties, all high snowy peaks can be dangerous. In 1993 ten climbers were killed in an avalanche on the standard West Face route—described in Yossi Brain’s *Ecuador: A Climbing Guide* (The Mountaineers, 2000) as “one long slog.” Last October, in nearly the same place, another avalanche claimed the lives of six climbers.

## Caucasus

In a 2005 interview, Boris Tilov, chief of the Mount Elbrus rescue service, told interviewer Alex Trubachev that “on the average from 15 to 30 people perish every year on Elbrus.” In 2021, one fierce snowstorm took five lives. Alan Arnette reported on his blog that more than 70 people worked to rescue the other 14 members of the group, who said the storm had surprised them even though bad weather had been predicted.

Elsewhere in the Caucasus, several hard routes were opened. Of special note: on the Northwest Face of the rocky, gorgeous twin-peaked **Ushba** (4,710 meters). In September 2020 local climbers Archil Badriashvili and Giorgi Tepnadze found 1,700 meters of very hard going, some of it overhanging.

This may not be the best time to venture to the Caucasus. The region has a history of crime, with tourists often the victims. Climbers too. One party reported this about Mount Ushba on summitpost.org: “We were totally robbed right at the base of Ushba route, while sleeping in the Base Camp. The thieves got everything—climbing gear, clothing, cameras, documents, leaving a group almost naked.”

—Steven Jervis  
*Alpina Editor*

## Annapurna III, Southeast Ridge

On November 6, 2021, three Ukrainian climbers, Mikhail Fomin, Nikita Balabanov, and Viacheslav Polezhaiko, completed the coveted first ascent of the Southeast Ridge of **Annapurna II** (7,555 meters), in Nepal. The objective had rebuffed some of the world’s best climbers on expeditions stretching back 40 years.

Although several parties have reached the summit of Annapurna III, the soaring 2,300-meter spine of ice, rock, and snow of the Southeast Ridge was an alpine puzzle of the highest order, requiring a full battery of mountain skills. British climbers Nick Colton and Tim Leach were the first to try the ridge back in 1981. They reached a high point approximately 1,000 meters below the summit before retreating. Other expeditions with high-profile climbers have tried and failed in the years since, including a 2016 team led by the late Austrian alpinists David Lama and Hansjörg Auer. Before the Ukrainians’ ascent, the last time the mountain had been climbed was in 2003, when Ian Parnell, Kenton Cool, and John Varco, all of the United Kingdom, did the first ascent of the Southwest Ridge.

As with the Lama-Auer expedition, Fomin, Balabanov, and Polezhaiko took a helicopter to Base Camp. From there they acclimatized on surrounding peaks before starting up the Southeast Ridge. The route breaks down into three distinct pieces: a 1,300-meter buttress of icy couloirs and moderate rock to start, a 1,000-meter steep rock wall with poor rock quality in the center, and (after the Southeast Ridge proper) a final 500-meter snow slog to the summit. The difficulty stems largely from the complexity and size of the route. The Ukrainian trio had already tried the Southeast Ridge once before, in 2019, and realized that it would take a prolonged effort.

This time, they prepared for battle, took as much as they could fit in their packs, and committed to a full-on alpine-style siege of the wall. In total they spent 18 days on the mountain. By the time they were picked up by helicopter—a bit shy of their Base Camp, which they came back to dismantle later—Fomin had lost 27 pounds, Balabanov 30 pounds, and Polezhaiko 38 pounds.

—*Michael Levy*  
*Assistant Alpina Editor*

---

---

## **The Traveler**

### ***North of Katahdin***

No trail atop The Traveler, so  
in hot sun and a sharp breeze  
I bushwhack thick krummholz  
of stunted spruce, stumbling  
in tangles of small, crooked trees  
that grab legs, scratch arms.

Reaching the gray scree slope  
of fractured rhyolite, hardened  
remains of a long dead volcano,  
I tiptoe from rock  
to rock, the knobby summit  
a few hundred feet above.

To one side, a flash  
of white, and I walk to a scattering  
of bleached moose bones—  
skull gone, but a dozen ribs,  
a couple femurs, scapula, broken  
mandible, glistening pelvic bone.

Why had a moose strayed  
so high, so far from food  
and shelter? Driven mad  
by brainworm? Seeking relief  
from heat and blackflies?  
A broken leg? Disease?

And why did I struggle up a  
mountain  
of middling height without  
peculiar features, rare views?  
Skipping the peak, I kneel beside  
the bones,  
picturing the lumbering animal  
picking its awkward way up.

Now, forty years on, a femur  
on my shelf at home haunts  
with questions. And what of the  
old-time  
woodsmen who named the  
mountain  
that traveled with them  
as they chased logs downstream?

*David K. Leff*

---

---

DAVID K. LEFF is the author of six nonfiction books, three volumes of poetry, and two novels in verse. He served as the 2016–2017 poet-in-residence for the New England National Scenic Trail. He is the poetry editor of *Connecticut Woodlands*, the quarterly magazine of the Connecticut Forest and Park Association. He is the former deputy commissioner of Connecticut's environmental department.



# Research



*Mountain golden heather lives in only seven places in North Carolina. Erosion from altered water flows and climate change have reduced its habitat more. Scientists believe that this plant might be able to survive in the north.* EMILY WHITELEY



## **Northbound: Climate Change and Rare Plant Conservation in the Appalachians**

Flowers in Concord, Massachusetts, are opening about eighteen days earlier than they did in the 1850s. Spring is arriving as many as twenty days earlier in the southern United States. Birds, butterflies, and frogs are breeding four to eight days earlier per decade, and many bird species are spending winters farther north. Entire terrestrial biomes such as grasslands and temperate forests are shifting northward, toward the poles or higher elevations. As many as half of all species are on the move, some as quickly as ten miles per decade.

Climate change is causing complex impacts to ecosystems worldwide. Plants and animals, faced with rapidly changing conditions, have been forced to either adapt or move, while threatened or sensitive ecosystems face severe challenges or extinction. Alpine plant communities, for instance, already occupy the highest available mountain habitat and may be at risk of extirpation from rising temperatures and shifting treelines.

Researchers and conservation agencies monitoring at-risk species across the Appalachian Mountains may soon need to take a more active role, such as directly assisting species on their journeys. The geologic and evolutionary history of the Appalachians may make them conducive to such an approach, but can people help wild species in that way? Should they?

### **A Chain of Islands**

The Appalachian Mountains were formed between 400 and 270 million years ago when collision of the North American and African continents pushed huge masses of ancient sedimentary rocks westward along the continental margin, piling them into a long chain. Further stresses split them across the Atlantic and folded them into the mostly northeast–southwest trending ridges that exist today, stretching 1,500 miles from northern Georgia to Canada. Peaks across the region routinely rise higher than 4,000 feet and higher than 6,000 feet in a few places.

Four times over the last 3 million years, great ice sheets advanced from the poles, gouging and scraping many of the Appalachians' characteristic landforms and features: gaps, notches, kettles, and erratics. The southernmost extent of ice across eastern North America stretched roughly along what is now the New York–Pennsylvania border across to Long Island and Cape Cod. When the ice retreated about 14,000 years ago, it revealed a landscape with climatic conditions similar to northern Canada today. First to colonize were

tundra species such as grasses, sedges, mosses, and lichens, which adhered most closely to the glacial boundary. They were followed by shrubs and conifers, then finally by temperate deciduous forest. But latitude is not the only influence on plant communities. Climate also changes significantly with elevation, and that same stratification of plant communities can be seen along elevation gradients in the Appalachians. A good rule of thumb is that every 1,000 feet of elevation gained is roughly equivalent to traveling 500 miles north.

In the north, tundra plants (termed *arctic-alpine*) still persist on the highest peaks of New York (geologically non-Appalachian), Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine where exposure to extreme wind, cold, and ice largely excludes all but the hardiest species. Northern alpine ecology, then, is driven by small differences in microtopography—the sheltering effects of rocks, depressions, or snowpack. Cushion and tussock plants, for example, have aerodynamic shapes that allow them to colonize open environments on windward slopes. Herbaceous snowbank communities, however, rely on the cover of late-melting snowpack for frost protection and are mostly found on leeward slopes or in depressions where they are sheltered from the worst conditions.

The southern Appalachians differ from the north in several respects. First, because they were never glaciated, plant communities there are ecologically “older.” Southern species coevolved over a longer period than northern ones did, filling niches and increasing biological diversity. The southern Appalachians are considered a global biodiversity hotspot. Nearly all forest herbs endemic to the eastern United States live in southern forests, and diversity drops off significantly north of the area where ice sheets last covered the land.

Second, the south is warmer, and plants do not have to deal with some of the more extreme conditions encountered in the north, such as a truncated growing season, rime ice, and frost. Elevation stratifies plant communities as in the north, but summits are less commonly open. Southern summits instead tend to resemble northern lowlands and lack the cold- and wind-adapted tundra species.

Last, the plant communities. Above treeline (red oak and American beech) on southern summits is a mix of stunted conifers (red spruce and Fraser fir), heath balds, and grass balds. Though considered a rare and threatened community type, grass balds can be found on summits and upper slopes from Georgia to Virginia. They are usually dominated by mountain oatgrass

(*Danthonia compressa*), sedges (*Carex brunnescens*, *C. flexuosa*, *C. pennsylvanica*), and assorted forbs, some of which are found only in that habitat. Though not considered a true alpine community, climate seems to play a role in the persistence of grass balds on the highest summits of the southern Appalachians, preventing the establishment of trees and shrubs (although fire, historical disturbance by native peoples, and more recent use as pasture could be contributing factors in some areas). Several other unique or rare community types also exist at high-elevation seeps, rock outcrops, and talus slopes.

Regardless of their geologic history, mountaintops worldwide act according to Island Biogeography Theory. That is, plant communities on peaks across a region resemble each other, but miles of inhospitable lowland habitat separate them. Rates of emigration and colonization of plants and propagules (such as seeds or pollen) across those gulfs determine plants' survival and extinction, as does the distance to suitable neighboring peaks. (Habitat size also affects the number of species living there.) High-elevation communities along the Appalachians are a chain of habitat islands rising above a sea of lowland forest. Their isolation and relative stability have allowed a high degree of diversity and regional endemism. But, of course, the seas are rising, changing habitats at all elevations.

### **Mounting Risk**

The high rate of climate change occurring, combined with habitat fragmentation caused by human development and agriculture, may trigger a major extinction crisis in the coming decades. High-elevation and alpine plant species are particularly vulnerable to warming or extreme weather because they survive in small ranges or highly specific habitats. Fires, floods, and hurricanes are becoming more frequent and more intense as the climate warms, which could bring irreplaceable losses to isolated populations. They would suffer unless they have high genetic diversity (that is, many individuals with a wide range of inherited traits). But scientists know little about whether these isolated groups of species have the genetic diversity to bounce back from such disturbances.

Plants typically move over long periods of time as climates change. But the world's alpine areas are warming faster than other areas, and scientists fear that plants may not be able to keep pace. Being cold-adapted, many alpine plants have long life spans and typically migrate slowly over many generations. Northeast alpine species, for example, have been through several cycles of glaciation and recolonization and are considered somewhat hardy to slow,

natural climatic shifts. Southern species, lacking that history, may not be so adaptive. Already, grass balds in the southern Appalachians are being invaded by shrubs and trees; models predict as much as 93 percent habitat loss for endemic high-elevation lichens in the southern Appalachians; even lowland trees may not be able to adapt or migrate at rates sufficient to track their preferred climatic envelope.

Researchers and conservationists must work to better understand how climate change will affect mountainous and high-elevation plant communities throughout the Appalachians. They must plan for the inevitability of migration—identify core habitat for threatened species and areas that may become habitat in the future. They must also continue to protect migration corridors—contiguous parcels of suitable habitat that allows for natural migration—between those habitats. Of course, even if suitable habitat awaits farther north, many high-elevation species have limited seed dispersal capabilities and may lack the ability to migrate. Protecting migration corridors may therefore prove crucial. The Yellowstone to Yukon Initiative, for example, is a nonprofit collaboration of government agencies, concerned groups, and individuals working to protect a 2,000-mile-long stretch in the greater Rocky Mountain ecosystem. Elk, wolves, deer, and waterfowl migrate along this corridor, and it is a viable route for plants that need to move north. The Nature Conservancy's Cumberland Forest Project aims to create a similar migratory "escape route" along 253,000 acres of land from Tennessee to Virginia. In addition to storing immense amounts of carbon, the tracts would allow the natural passage of plants and animals on their journey northward. However, that effort is focused mostly on lowland habitats, not high-elevation areas.

Will the Northeast be prime habitat for southern high-elevation species in 20, 50, 100 years? Will species use corridors set aside for migration? How quickly can they get here? Will they? Such initiatives may not be enough, and if it turns out that species cannot adapt or migrate or that natural migration will not be sufficient, we must also consider other options.

### **Can Humans Help Species Move?**

Managed relocation (also called assisted migration) is a strategy wherein people "assist" poorly dispersing or threatened species to move north as the climate changes. Climate change's unprecedented challenges have led scientists to consider taking up this still largely theoretical practice. Proposals typically involve moving climate-threatened species beyond their native range into

new geographic regions where they have not lived before but are predicted to survive in the future as the climate warms.

Such projects could take many forms. Whole plants could be transplanted between locations. Seeds could be collected and planted directly in analogous northern habitats or first germinated in a greenhouse. Plants could remain in cultivation in greenhouses for a longer period until natural conditions in northern sites become suitable. Seeds or genetic material could be stored and deployed in the event of experimental failures or extinction or be bred with other plants to create climate-resilient genotypes. Then there is the question of scale. Should we go big, moving species to the northern limits of their projected future range once, which would cost less but be risky, or should we emulate natural migration by moving them in a series of shorter steps, which would cost more and be less risky? Do we wait until the last moment, or do we act before they are threatened?

Using managed relocation would require appraising several complicating factors. Researchers must make sure that any action does not harm or further endanger southern source populations. Transplanting live individuals, for example, risks depleting or further stressing natural populations, should it go poorly. Moving seeds poses less risk and working with genetic material almost none. Relocation can also threaten genetic diversity if not done carefully.

How confident are we that it will work? Can we trust our ecological modeling to guide us such that species will be secure in their new homes? Do suitable habitat analogs exist (or will they exist) in northern sites? What about soil and bedrock chemistry, interactions between fungi and plants, the length of days, ways to ensure that seeds germinate, and necessary weather factors such as low clouds providing necessary moisture for plants? No relocation habitat will be perfect, but will it be good enough?

We must also make sure not to harm northern plants in the process, either through disrupting where they grow or introducing disease. Initial attempts would be experimental—small, isolated, controlled, and highly monitored. Locations would be selected so as to minimally disturb existing populations or where the existing community is widespread or not threatened. Recent research indicates that southern species are unlikely to become invasive if introduced in the north. Within North America, species prone to high population growth rates and rapid spread have most likely already done so thousands of years ago. The repeated glaciation of the Appalachians caused several cycles of shuffling and reorganization of North American flora, and the communities themselves have not been isolated for long enough for additional



invasive interactions to have developed. There are also indications that the north is still recovering from those cycles and is not yet “saturated.” Ecological niches remain to be filled, and southern species, which share evolutionary heritage (and many genera, for example, *Amelanchier*, *Carex*, *Houstonia*, *Juncus*, *Nabalus*, *Potentilla*, *Vaccinium*, and so on) may occupy them nicely. Before release, greenhouse or laboratory studies could be conducted to ensure that hybridization with northern species is not a possibility and that no outside pathogens are present.

Aside from our technical understanding, the biggest pushback against managed relocation might be aesthetic. The colors and structures of our high-elevation communities might change. Transplants might seem “unnatural.” Our public discourse on conservation is still largely beholden to twentieth-century conceptions of wilderness derived from sense of ecological harmony or “purity.” But we now know that that no such time ever existed. Native peoples have been a factor shaping the land (such as fire and selective cultivation) since their first arrival, and the Appalachians are still in flux following the radical changes of the Ice Age. Human hands are already implicated in the current extinction crisis, so we shouldn’t fear additional interventions if it would save species. Wouldn’t it be better to muster what effort we can to mitigate or undo some of the damage?

### **Struggling Southern Plants That Could Persist in the North**

Consider some of the species that have the potential to benefit from managed relocation:

Spreading avens (*Geum radiatum*) is an endangered species known from only eleven locations in North Carolina and Tennessee. It grows on exposed, cool, humid high elevations, primarily in the crevices of northwest-facing cliffs, but also at the base of talus slopes or openings in heath balds on isolated summits. It doesn’t spread easily, and hikers and rock climbers have collected and disturbed it. A study found that between 53 and 83 percent of current habitat for the species is likely to become unsuitable by 2080.

Heller’s blazing star (*Liatris helleri*), a threatened species, lives in just 27 locations in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia, totaling about 3,000 individuals. It grows on open summits and in full sun on rock outcrops, cliff ledges, and rocky openings in heath balds at elevations between 5,200 and 6,200 feet. Heavy recreational use of the rocky cliffs has put this plant in serious decline.



*Gray's lily lives on Roan Mountain and might survive in the north as the climate warms.* WADE HARRISON

Mountain golden heather (*Hudsonia montana*), a threatened species, is known to grow in only seven locations in North Carolina. It can be found in shallow soils over quartzite or mica/gneiss rock ledges, usually where bare rock transitions to heath balds, at elevations of 2,800 to 4,000 feet. It is losing habitat because of climate change and erosion caused by alteration of water flow.

Gray's lily (*Lilium grayi*), a species of special concern, lives in acidic soils in moist meadows, bogs, and seeps on the Roan Mountain massif and Blue Ridge Mountains in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia. Pollinated by hummingbirds, this plant is threatened by overcollection and the encroachment of shrubs and trees.

Some southern mountain plants not federally listed but potentially threatened by climate change include the Roan Mountain rattlesnakeroot (*Nabalus roanensis*), clustered goldenrod (*Solidago glomerata*), umbrella-leaf (*Diphylleia cymosa*), and Schweinitz's ragwort (*Packera schweinitziana*). A warming climate could significantly affect the Roan Mountain rattlesnakeroot.

An irony of modern conservation is that avoiding the upheavals of the Anthropocene may require additional, more intensive interventions. Yes, managed relocation might change the composition and function of some ecosystems. But since extinctions are permanent and irreversible, that decision is one that some managers might be willing to make. Managed relocation will never be a substitute for land protection or a sustainable global climate policy. Rather, as one study said, it is a “prudent, proactive, inexpensive strategy . . . to help maintain forest resilience, health, and productivity in a changing climate.” As conservationists and researchers begin to develop priorities and guidelines for protecting rare and threatened species along the Appalachian corridor, we should consider it another tool in our kit.

---

KEVIN BEREND is an environmental scientist in Buffalo, New York. His master's thesis for SUNY Brockport, about plants and snowmelt on Mount Washington in New Hampshire, led to three articles in the journal *Rhodora*.

---

---

### Pacific Creek

I slip my fingers around you  
in the cold-water current;  
hook removed, you remain  
still in my hand.  
I have you—  
for this moment,  
water rushing,  
then you are gone  
from my hold.  
You hide in the shade  
of underwater stones  
for what seems like forever.

*Francis Lunney*

---

---

FRANCIS LUNNEY's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Southern Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Salamander*, and *Outside Bozeman*. One of his poems is part of the Poetry in the Park installation at Edmands Park in Newton, Massachusetts. WCAI radio broadcast him reading his poem "Resurrecting a Songbird" in 2016. He lives in Salem, Massachusetts.

# In Memoriam

## David Roberts

David Roberts, who elevated adventure journalism more than any American writer, died on August 20, 2021, after a long battle with throat cancer and emphysema. He was 78.

Born in Denver, Colorado, in 1943, Roberts first found climbing as a teenager living in Boulder. Tragedy—a theme he would explore throughout his writing career—followed soon after these initial forays. In 1961, while Roberts and a grade-school friend named Gabe Lee ascended the first Flatiron above Boulder, their rope became snagged. Both climbers untied and Lee climbed down, unroped, to free it. As he soloed back up to Roberts, the rope dangling in sloppy coils around his body, Lee tripped and began tumbling down the gently sloping slab. Roberts watched as Lee bounced to his death. Though the accident did not temper Roberts's drive for climbing, it haunted him his entire life and served as the opening scene in one of his most famous essays, "Moments of Doubt," about the risks and rewards of climbing.

As an undergraduate at Harvard University in the early 1960s, Roberts completed a string of daring ascents in the Alaska Range with a coterie of other students from the Harvard Mountaineering Club. Few were as dogged as Roberts, whose track record can be compared only to that of Bradford Washburn, serving then as a mentor for the young Harvard alpinists.

The most enduring of Roberts's routes—the Harvard Route, tracing the serrated, flawless natural architecture of Mount Huntington's west face—culminated in another tragedy when Ed Bernd, the youngest of the four climbers, clipped into his rappel wrong and fell to the glacier as Roberts watched. The exact details of the accident, remembered only through the haze of exhaustion and seen only in the gloaming twilight of the Alaska Range in summer, will never be known.

Roberts's book about the climb and accident at first failed to find a publisher, though now *The Mountain of My Fear* (Souvenir, 1969) is rarely omitted from lists of mountaineering's greatest reads. The poet W. H. Auden wrote to the young alpinist saying, "Your book is one of the finest of its genre I have ever come across."

After another frenzied decade exploring the Alaskan wilderness, Roberts turned his attention to writing full-time. In all, he penned 32 books and countless



articles. Fueled by infinite curiosity and the considerable firsthand experiences of his early climbs, his pieces on such subjects as Reinhold Messner plumbed the emotional depths of adventure. These stories compelled because ultimately, Roberts wrote about humans: his articles chiseling away towering, legendary



*David Roberts climbing the south ridge of the Angel in Alaska's Revelation Mountains, in 1967. MATT HALE*



figures until they became recognizable. Though his stories just so happened to have desolate polar outposts or 7,000-meter-high camps as their set pieces, their protagonists became flawed, knowable ones when treated by his deft pen.

Roberts brandished a challenging, confrontational side (you could call it snobbery, and many did) that I always found endearing, though it caused dinner guests to groan into wine glasses and climbing partners to crawl up tent walls. He could flip through the annals of his brain to mine an obscure Brooklyn Dodgers stat or Shackleton diary entry or stanza from Frost or Dickinson. I'd compare Roberts to Wikipedia, but this would have rankled him. After all, Wikipedia is often wrong.

In 2015 on a trip to Alaska, Roberts felt a tickle in his throat that turned out to be stage IV throat cancer. His doctors gave him less than a year to live; this stretched to six. Roberts hated comparisons between climbing and cancer, but I hope he might forgive me just one. He greeted each day with the grim resoluteness of a high-altitude climber, tasked with plodding toward an impossible summit but determined to try, nonetheless. This quest, to squeeze each living moment of its last drop, led him and his wife, Sharon, on climbing trips and visits to rare ancestral Pueblo ruins and vineyards in the south of France. In those six final years, he wrote three books and lived lifetimes—trudging uphill despite it all.

When Roberts succumbed to emphysema on August 20, 2021, he had completed what would be his final work, a study of forgotten polar hero Gino Watkins called *Into the Great Emptiness* (Norton), due to be published in spring 2022. Sharon once told me David couldn't travel or explore until he had completed a draft of his latest book. Having reached this apex, secure in the knowledge that a manuscript awaited editing upon his return, he would turn his mind to the trip at hand, happily wondering what lay around the next corner in some desert canyon or the next page in some forgotten polar diary. With that in mind, I hope he is out there somewhere: needling uncertainty, asking the hard questions; an adventurous soul never ceasing, in one way or another, to explore.

—Michael Wejchert

---

MICHAEL WEJCHERT is a climber and writer based in North Conway, New Hampshire, and a member of the Appalachia Committee. He and David Roberts co-authored the foreword to the anthology *No Limits But the Sky* (Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2014).

---

## Morning on the River

Shuffling downstream through mist,  
boots stirring up nymphs and stoneflies.

Suddenly, a gulping swirl, a hard tug.  
The fisherman sets the hook.

The green line tears the river surface  
like the sound of paper ripping.

The rod tip bows to the brook,  
heaves and swells.

A dragonfly alights on the taut line,  
a raven watches from a sweeper.

The salmon swings across the current,  
plows through a stretch of ripples,

trying to throw the stubborn hook—  
silvery sides flashing in the porcelain light.

The old man leans back, smiles  
as line peels from the whirring reel.

So early in the morning, there is no one else on the river,  
no other sound—

only the gray fog rising, the raven's stoic gaze,  
the river's babbling song.

*John Smelcer*

---

JOHN SMELCER's poems about the natural world have appeared in *Appalachia* for a decade. His poetry books include *Indian Giver* (Leapfrog Press, 2016) and *Raven* (Leapfrog, 2019). His fishing poems have appeared in *Gray's Sporting Journal* and *Yale Angler's Journal*.

# News and Notes

## **The Appalachian Mountain Club Names Susan Arnold Interim President**

The Appalachian Mountain Club's Board of Directors has appointed Susan Arnold, AMC's vice president of conservation, as interim CEO. Susan took the role of interim CEO on January 3, 2022, after the departure of President and CEO John Judge, who left for a new position as president and CEO of the Trustees of Reservations. This is a historic moment, as Arnold's appointment marks the first time AMC will be led by a woman in the organization's 145-year history.

Arnold has been with AMC for more than eighteen years and is well positioned for this leadership role. She has been a key player on many of the organization's high-profile accomplishments in recent years, including AMC's expanded recreational offerings in New York and ecolodges in Maine's 100-Mile Wilderness.

"I'm honored by the opportunity to continue to advance AMC's mission of fostering the protection, enjoyment, and understanding of the outdoors," Arnold said. "From trail maintenance to education programs in public schools to science-based advocacy, AMC is at the forefront of ensuring some of our most treasured natural resources are here for the use and enjoyment of future generations."

AMC's Board of Directors has established a search committee to find a permanent leader for the organization. More details will be available as this leadership transition progresses.

"Susan's more than eighteen-year tenure as a senior leader within AMC makes her uniquely positioned to steer the organization during this transition," said Elizabeth Ehrenfeld, the board chair. "This is an exciting time for the organization and Susan will be able to continue the tremendous forward momentum we have experienced in recent years."

—AMC

## **Shelter at Imp Campsite Restored Using Historic Techniques**

Choosing restoration over replacement in fall 2021, the Appalachian Mountain Club Trails Department repaired and rehabilitated the shelter at Imp Campsite

in the Carter Range of the White Mountains. For eight weeks, a collective of AMC staff, contractors, and partner organizations carefully disassembled and restored the native-log shelter, which was originally built in 1980 by the AMC trail crew.

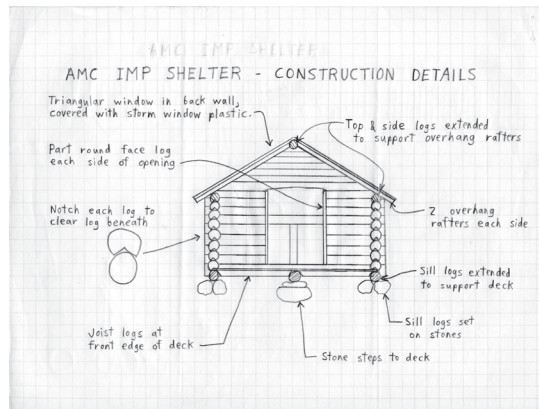
Cradled between North Carter Mountain and Mount Moriah, Imp Campsite is a fairly quiet place, a stopover for Appalachian Trail thru-hikers or occasional

camp groups as they traverse the Carters or circle through the Wild River Wilderness. First established as a hunting and tramping camp from nearby Gorham, New Hampshire, the general location of the site and the shelter has shifted over the years. The current shelter stands about a half-mile or so from the previous locations. Earlier creative and unique shelter design options included the original tiny bark and spruce pole lean-to and a shingled barn-like structure with a hinged door.

The compelling reasons for repair over replacement were a combination of the historical value of the shelter and the simple reason that the majority of the shelter was in excellent shape. Imp is one of three of the original “Mahoosuc style” shelters build in the 1970s and 1980s. They are called Mahoosuc style because the first one built this way went up in the Mahoosuc Range at Gentian Pond Campsite. The other from that era is the shelter at Carlo Col Campsite. The shelter at Guyot Campsite, positioned between Mount Guyot and the Bonds, was originally built in that style, but it was torn down and rebuilt in 2019.

To construct the original shelters, AMC trail crew members harvested, hauled, peeled, notched, hewed, and assembled the shelters from locally harvested spruce and fir trees from around the campsite.

Before Imp, all the logs of the shelters were only flattened and stacked with crude notches at the corners. In 1976, John Nininger had a seed planted in his



*This 1980 sketch details construction of the Imp shelter, the first the Appalachian Mountain Club trail crew built using a Swedish technique of joining the logs. The shelter was in good enough shape in 2021 that the restoration team reused its original floor joists.* AMC

biome (so to speak) after one week working on Carlo Col Campsite. In 1980, he had just completed his fourth year on the AMC trail crew and had for three years been practicing ancient skills of log building dating back to the fifteenth century in Scandinavia. The trail crew leader, John McIntosh, invited Nininger to share his recently acquired skills with the crew. Thus Imp shelter became the first shelter in the Whites to be built using the Swedish cope full scribe technique, raising the bar for all shelter work going forward as well as increasing the potential longevity that could be expected. By 2021, the pudding had proved itself. Imp shelter had stood up to the test. A full replacement was not needed. Imp could be saved. The hewing, scribing, and notching of each row of logs was done by hand with axes and hatchets, and traditionally is all that is needed to hold the logs together. Screws were used (spikes originally) as additional reinforcement with oakum stuffed into the coped joinery for backup sealing.

Only the lowest course of logs, the very ends of the roof logs, and the shingled roof itself showed any signs of decay. The rest of the logs were merely weathered on their exterior surfaces after 40 years of high-altitude battering. The Trails Department sat down with Nininger and Hawk Metheny (New England regional director of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, which manages the Appalachian Trail in that area) to design a plan for repair and rehabilitation that would reuse the logs.

During the same 40 years that Imp had been shielding hikers from storms, Nininger had been progressing his skills building numerous log homes throughout the Northeast and beyond, and in 2007 he began contracting with AMC for shelter replacements. His Wooden House Company work can be found across the White Mountains: Besides Guyot already mentioned, he built shelters at Kinsman Pond Campsite (2007), Eliza Brook Campsite (2010), Garfield Ridge Campsite (2011), Speck Pond Campsite (2016), and the Dartmouth Outing Club's Moosilauke Ravine Lodge (2017), all of them unique in design.

The Imp shelter project started simply: removing the roof. Following that, every step grew increasingly complex and involved real-time problem solving. Next came the process of disassembling: labeling logs, creating a backcountry equivalent of a crane to lift the gables into the air, then cautiously squeaking and prying each row apart from the spikes holding them together, and arranging the logs for re-use.

Previous restoration efforts and new shelter replacements had used milled lumber to rebuild the floor system. For Imp's restoration, the team decided to reuse the original log floor joists reinforced with new sills and the central



summer beam, all of cedar logs harvested in Vermont close to Nininger's business. Pre-notching of the replacement logs in Vermont made for efficient use of time onsite after being flown in. Each old log joist was then re-notched into the new sills.

Each 40-year-old hand-hewn log was given new life using the techniques Nininger deploys in any full-scribe construction project. The rows are stacked in place, Nininger walking up and down by hand tracing or "scribing" the lines to ensure each row fits snugly beneath the log above. In place of axes, Nininger and his work partner Adam Miller used lithium-ion battery powered chain saws—quiet, clean, and powerful. When the notch is fitted, and the log slides into place, it feels like the two logs are sucking each other closer together. It is a method that maximizes what a log has to offer. When these notches slip into place, it is nothing less than magic.

Minor but important structural shifts for the shelter included lifting it a foot higher into the air on rock cairns, eliminating contact with the ground and promoting air flow. The porch is now a step down from the inside floor, offering additional air flow. The final cap to the shelter was a roof of red cedar, the same style of shingles pulled off only a few weeks prior.

Backcountry construction projects are never easy or straightforward. There is no permanent electricity source, there is no "inside" to do things if it's raining, and it is so easy to lose tools and hardware amid the forest duff. The nearest hardware store is a 4.8-mile hike before you even get to your car. Log construction always benefits from a crane, whether land- or helicopter-based, to place each log directly into the notch without nicking a curve, but a crane could not be used at the Imp site. While the restoration effort of Imp represents sophistication of methods and technology, the crew still faced the same conditions of the original construction crew.

Special mention goes to AMC Backcountry Campsite Program Coordinator Joe Roman, AMC Campsite Program Field Coordinator Brianna Russell, Wooden House Company's Nininger and Miller, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, and White Mountain National Forest. The project was funded partly by the Appalachian Trail/National Park Service, also the source of funds for previous shelter projects.

—Sally Manikian  
*News and Notes Editor, with thanks to John Nininger*

---

*News and Notes Editor's note: Imp Campsite was the first campsite where I worked as a backcountry caretaker in 2007, launching my career in the AMC Trails Department. In*

*fall 2021, knowing this project was going on, I wanted to make a trip to the site but not in a way that interfered or put me in the middle of any construction decisions. I also wanted to make a trip to the site on a beautiful weather day, relatively easy to do as I only live a few miles from the trailhead.*

*On September 20, that day came, and despite my best efforts to leave my desk and my day job, it was almost 1 P.M. when I pulled into the trailhead with one of my dogs, Gemma. The last time I had hiked to Imp had been in 2015, when I last worked for AMC as the campsite program manager, the job Joe Roman holds now. The trail seems a lot shorter when you're not hiking it for work.*

*About a mile from the campsite, I came to a lone backpacker moving slower than I was with a heavier pack. As Gemma approached him, I coughed to make our presence known. He turned around, and as I opened my mouth to ask if my dog could pass off-leash, my jaw dropped.*

*"John?"*

*"Sally?"*

*And so, John Nininger and I found ourselves hiking together, ten years to the day since we had flown into the shelter at Garfield Ridge. A decade that marked extraordinary changes for both of us: the previous year, John had lost his wife to cancer, and I had recently lost my mother. Had I left on time, I wouldn't have shared the last mile of trail with him to Imp, the place where so much began for me. Whether coincidence or a message from the great beyond, being in that place with John, on that day, was nothing short of a powerful reminder of human spirit and love of the mountains.*

## **Echo Lake Camp Turns 100**

The Appalachian Mountain Club's Echo Lake Camp on Mount Desert Island, Maine, marks its centennial in 2022. It started with one of the Appalachian Mountain Club's August Camps in 1922. The site then became Echo Lake Camp. In its first year, Echo Lake Camp was made possible in its location on the southeast shore of Echo Lake by the invitation and cooperation of George Dorr, superintendent of Lafayette National Park, which later became Acadia National Park, and his assistants Ben Hadley, chief ranger, and Henry Smith, ranger. A rough road was put into camp, a site was cleared for tents, and a small cabin was built to serve as a kitchen and later as an office.

The first year was rough. Campers put up tents wherever the topography of the land permitted. The dining tent, with open sides, served as a shelter from the sun but didn't protect campers well from the wind and rain. Zenas "Zeke" Staples, the camp master, said in *Appalachia* (vol. 16, 1924–1926, pages 367–368), "The usual excellent spirit of the campers soon overcame physical discomforts, and they became enthusiastic over the features and attractions



*A group of Echo Lake Campers, wearing brimmed hats, ties, and bloomers, rests during a hike in the 1920s. AMC LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES*

peculiar to the Lafayette National Park.” This enthusiasm resulted in a unanimous agreement by AMC and Lafayette Park that this campsite should be made permanent. The Excursion Committee then appointed a subcommittee with the power to equip and continue the camp.

On July 29, 1922, the first campers traveled to the remote island by steamship, as Irving Meredith recounts in “Twenty-Five Years of Echo Lake Camp” in the June 1947 *Appalachia* (vol. 26 no. 3, page 320). Carl S. Whittier was the leader.

They were up before daylight to transfer to the *J. T. Morse* for the delightful four-hour sunrise sail to Southwest Harbor between the rugged shoreline and the rocky spruce-covered islands. Here they were met by Z. Carleton Staples, who had arrived on July 21 to set up camp. On August 12, the first section returned to Boston and the second section, under the leadership of G. Clifford Hicks, started for camp.

From 1922 to 1933, almost all campers came by boat. They would take the Eastern Steamship Lines boats the *City of Rockland* and the *City of Bangor*, leaving Boston on Friday at 5 P.M. and arriving at Rockland about 4 the next morning. Then they’d change to the *J. T. Morse*, which took them from Rockland to Southwest Harbor, arriving around 9 A.M. They would repeat

this trip in reverse on the way back home. The round trip from Boston to Southwest Harbor cost \$21 and included a stateroom and meals aboard the overnight boat. The *City of Rockland* could take as many as 2,000 passengers and had staterooms to accommodate 700 people. The cost for two weeks at camp was \$35.

In its early days, two-person tents housed as many as 50 campers per two-week section. Without hot water or showers, everyone bathed in the lake. Echo Lake Camp has changed with the times, but has managed to keep its simple, rustic lifestyle for which it is so loved. Today, campers number some 90 per week, and there are hot showers and comfortable tents with beds, nightstands, chairs, and wooden floors. Each week has a volunteer hiking leader, two assistant hiking leaders, a naturalist, and an evening leader. Campers can take part in as many or as few group activities as they wish. They eat their meals in a communal dining hall with no assigned seating. The uniqueness of Echo Lake Camp remains as true as it was in 1922, when an AMC publication reported that the location “is unique in that it combines mountain, lake, and seashore recreation.” About 100 miles of trails extended around the island, giving campers “ample short walks and long tramps.”

The Echo Centennial Committee has planned activities for summer 2022. See [amcecholakecamp.org](http://amcecholakecamp.org).

—Jenifer Burckett-Picker  
Chair, Echo Centennial Committee

### **AMC's Maine Woods Property Certified as an International Dark Sky Park**

The International Dark-Sky Association announced in May 2021 that the Appalachian Mountain Club's Maine Woods property has become the first International Dark Sky Park in New England. This certification is given to land possessing an exceptional quality of starry nights and a nocturnal environment that is specifically protected for its scientific, natural, educational, and cultural heritage or public enjoyment. Because most of the eastern United States has light pollution that prevents pristine views of the night sky, only a few International Dark Sky Parks exist in the region.

The AMC Maine Woods Dark Sky Park lies at the edge of the North Maine Woods, an expanse of nearly 8,700 square miles of largely uninhabited forestland that stretches from Monson, Maine, to the border of

Canada. This region is one of the darkest places remaining on the East Coast and has also been identified as an area of exceptionally high habitat connectivity and climate change resilience. In recent decades, many natural wild places in New England have vanished due to the increase of urban development. Much of the North Maine Woods is owned by timber companies, and although large surrounding tracts of private and public lands are under conservation protection, including land managed by AMC, it continues to be at risk of a similar fate. Alongside nearby Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, which was designated an International Dark Sky Sanctuary in 2020, the AMC Maine Woods Dark Sky Park is an important step in preserving this area and driving future dark sky conservation opportunities.

“While the AMC North Maine Woods region retains its rugged character defined by the enormity of the forest here, it stands on the advancing edge of development that brings with it the end of the dark night sky,” said Steve Tatko, AMC director of Maine conservation and Dark Sky Park superintendent. “I see this designation as a way for the people of this area to re-envision the immense importance of this forest in a way that makes tangible the intrinsic beauty of the night sky we all cherish.”

Since 2003, AMC has acquired and permanently conserved 75,000 acres in the North Maine Woods and 100-Mile Wilderness landscape through the Maine Woods Initiative project. This effort has been centered in active conservation work to develop a holistic approach to land conservation, sustainable forestry, outdoor recreation, environmental education, and now the preservation of the night sky.

AMC has also been a lead partner in the Mountains of Stars public science education and outreach program, which uses astronomy to engage audiences in many aspects of the natural environment, such as dark skies preservation. Every AMC facility is outfitted with telescopes and astronomy education equipment; programs are held daily by onsite astronomy guides at the AMC Maine lodges in the summer and weekly during other parts of the year. Mountains of Stars staff also present to local residents and vacationers by holding astronomy programs at other locations, such as schools and libraries.

“AMC recognizes that the dark sky in the 100-Mile Wilderness is an important natural resource, and the AMC Maine Woods Dark Sky Park designation is an important step in protecting it,” said John Judge, former AMC president and CEO. “The creation of this park goes hand in hand with our

existing conservation efforts in the area and will greatly benefit many species living in this region in addition to providing local economic opportunities by opening the door for astronomy-based tourism. The success of the AMC Maine Woods Dark Sky Park will be supported by a world-class outdoor recreational infrastructure, including three AMC wilderness lodges; nearly 130 miles of hiking, cycling, and Nordic skiing trails; and exceptional wilderness paddling and fishing opportunities.”

The International Dark-Sky Association is a nonprofit organization based in Tucson, Arizona. Mountains of Stars offers astronomy-based programs and activities to help people better understand humankind’s place on Earth and our connection with the environment.

—*Nina Paus-Weiler*



---

---

### The Harvesters

So long as I'm among the living, I'll love  
the ascent, the near hill and the next.  
The moving point in this landscape  
above farm fields and meadows  
is myself. I love my limbs unfolding,  
my legs' strength. I love to feel them, worn  
and stretched. Below, the river's carved  
a curve around a tongue of land.  
It's loosening the pasture fence.  
Hills above crenulate the slant,  
ridge after ridge mounting to the summit.  
I feel as yet untried, as if I could  
remain as I am and keep climbing  
so long as this day lasts, and this terrain.

*Kristen Staby Rembold*

---

---

KRISTEN STABY REMBOLD's collection of poetry, *What Used to be Country* (Future Cycle Press), will be published in 2023 and will include this poem. She is also the author of *Music Lesson* (Future Cycle, 2019), two poetry chapbooks, and a novel. She lives and hikes in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

# Valley and Skyline Sketches

## Eating Outside: Its Pitfalls and Pleasures

Steve Fagin

Paddling hard down New York's East River a few years ago, more than halfway through the 28-mile Mayor's Cup kayak championship around Manhattan, I found myself battling not just other vessels and gnarly conditions through Hell Gate but gnawing hunger.



*Steve Fagin enjoying a plate of black beans in style.*

LISA BROWNELL

It was time to shove down the peanut butter and jelly sandwich that I had lashed onto the deck with bungee cords hours earlier at the start of the race on the Hudson River.

Just as I reached forward for my hasty meal, the wake from a passing barge washed over me, soaking the sandwich in grimy river water that had the color, odor, consistency, and probably, same chemical compounds as used in crankcase oil.

I may have hesitated a second or two, but I was so famished I crammed the sodden mess into my mouth and gulped it down whole, the same way a cormorant swallows a herring.

I wish I could say that was my worst outdoor dining experience. After two days of hiking Maine's

100-Mile Wilderness, I realized, to great consternation, that I had gobbled down more than half of my food, which was supposed to last a week. For the next several days I self-imposed strict rations, squirreling away the last PB&J sandwich I promised myself as a reward on the final day of the hike. I held off eating that sandwich until my last day. The bread was stale and squished, most of the jelly had dried up, and the peanut butter had congealed into a substance resembling wallpaper paste—but even *crème brûlée* served at L'Epicure in Paris could not have been more delectable.

Hunger, of course, enhances the enjoyment of any meal, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, I found that my family and I enjoyed our best home-cooked meals—produce from our garden, meals made with my own maple syrup, and outdoor pizza—outside on the deck I built overlooking a steep hill above Long Pond in Ledyard, Connecticut.

Food tastes better in fresh air. I think of a harvest dinner friends prepared and served outside by a lake in Maine. It was a savory casserole of vegetables just plucked from their garden. Every component exploded in flavor. “What is this wondrous, tasty morsel?” I asked, holding up my fork I’d speared into a tender, round thing.

“A potato,” the hostess replied.

My mouth waters remembering a picnic in the Alpine Garden below the summit of New Hampshire’s Mount Washington. The meal wasn’t lavish, but elegantly simple: salad containing apples, currants, cashews, and celery, topped with balsamic vinaigrette; wheel of Edam cheese; jar of kalamata olive tapenade; and loaf of sourdough bread.

I once spent a couple weeks tramping through the Swiss Alps, subsisting entirely on a jar of cherry preserves and an enormous loaf of a dense, dark, hard-crust bread called walliser rogggenbrot that started out as big as my sleeping bag but by the last day had been reduced to the size of a golf ball.

Oh, wait, I almost forgot: every ten kilometers or so the trails passed an outdoor café, and each afternoon I treated myself to the same lunch: a cheese omelet and tomato salad. I have yet to consume either dish with such gusto and bliss as I did then.

As for the bread, since that excursion I’ve visited numerous bakeries and have yet to sample any loaf as heavenly as that walliser rogggenbrot. Sigh.

Having a cook along on a hike is a luxury I enjoyed on only one other mountaineering expedition—in the Andes.

The day before we departed from a hotel in bustling Santiago, Chile, to a remote trailhead on the Argentine border, five of us, including the guide,

went on a supermarket shopping spree for three weeks of food. Because mules would be carrying supplies for the first week's journey to Base Camp at 13,000 feet, we didn't skimp, loading up on canned goods, fresh fruit, and other bulky provisions. The mountain of provender we purchased seemed as tall as Aconcagua, the 22,841-foot peak we would be attempting to scale.

After Base Camp, the mules departed, and all that food had to be lugged on our backs in increasingly steep stages, marked by higher winds, lower temperatures, and deeper snow. By the time I hit 20,000 feet, I was too wiped out to trudge another step.

Since then, I have been particularly mindful about pack weight. More of a gourmand than a gourmet, and also frugal, I also resist buying high-priced, freeze-dried backpacking meals. On overnight hikes I'm quite content to subsist on oatmeal for breakfast, gorp for lunch, and couscous for dinner.

You don't have to be in the Alps, Andes, Himalaya, or Appalachians to partake in outdoor dining. You don't even have to be camping.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, before we were fully vaccinated and until winter drove us back indoors, my family and I ate most of our dinners out on the deck. Now that the virus has subsided, we still like to take our plates outside. A chorus of songbirds enhances mealtime conversation as well as flavors.

As for cooking outside, for decades I used an ancient Svea stove until I almost burned down a shelter near Pinkham Notch trying to prime it.

Back at home, I've never owned a gas grill or gotten into barbecuing, but I did help build an outdoor pizza/bread oven out of fieldstone. It takes about ten hours to heat up, so is somewhat limited in use.

Making maple syrup for friends, an annual culinary celebration, involves even more preparation—probably as much effort as it takes to host a state dinner at the White House.

In late February, when nighttime temperatures dip below freezing and climb with the sun, the sap also rises. That's when I get busy, drilling fresh holes in maple trees, pounding in taps, and connecting plastic tubes to buckets.

Those first few drops of clear liquid drip represent a recurring miracle: Spring approaches! Life renewed!

For the next few weeks, I make daily rounds—sometimes wearing snowshoes—to transfer sap collected from individual buckets into a couple of 35-gallon containers (it takes 40 gallons of sap to produce one gallon of syrup). If there's snow on the ground, I shovel it around the containers to keep the sap from spoiling; otherwise, I freeze water jugs and toss them in.

I also start heaping firewood near a stone firepit, upon which rests a salvaged section of wrought-iron fence that serves as a grate.

Finally, on the big day, I start the fire about 6 A.M., fill pots with sap, cover them with metal screens to keep out falling ashes, and start boiling.

About eight hours later, when guests arrive, what began as clear, tasteless sap transforms into rich, dark, sweet syrup.

Then, using a cast-iron skillet over the same fire, I griddle pancakes and top them with hot syrup. Ambrosia!

—Steve Fagin

---

STEVE FAGIN, whose “Great Outdoors” column appears weekly in *The Day* newspaper in New London, Connecticut, is author of *Treasures of Southeastern Connecticut* (Pediment Publishing, 2018) and is book review editor of *Appalachia*.

## The Summer Before the Storm

Liana Tsang Cohen

A bellow came from deep in the Tongass National Forest, ricocheting off the trees.

“Back-cut!”

There was a final roar of protest as the chain saw’s teeth met bark, and tan wood chips flew like sparks. Standing a few tree lengths away, I flinched as the Sitka spruce pitched over with a mighty crack, as if the effort to fall were greater than what it took to remain standing all those years.

“All clear!”

Moments later, 24-year old Jase Tweedy appeared, grinning widely behind his reddish-blond beard and clear safety goggles. The chain saw sputtered and quieted into a hum as he readjusted his orange ear plugs, known as “ear pro,” then carved the



*Windfall Lake Cabin, where the crew rested and ate, overlooks the water. U.S. FOREST SERVICE*

hewn tree into sills, shaped like halved cross-sections. Jase set the machine aside and, together, we placed the wooden half-domes along a muddy section of the Windfall Lake Trail. Next, we measured the trail level with a clinometer and a long, flat ruler; the sills would constitute the base of an elevated walkway, so they needed to form a perfectly straight line.

We were kneeling in the mud when we heard a loud whoop. Andres Santiago Velez, Jase's trails colleague, and Matt Adams, the crew leader, emerged around the bend, hauling a milled plank. The four of us had spent the morning scraping chestnut-colored bark off a thick western hemlock to ward away rotting, a hazard for both trail and hiker. From there, Matt and Andres had sliced the tree, newly pale and smooth, into boards, while Jase and I toppled smaller targets farther down the path.

I stood off to the side, crushing fallen blueberries under my boots as the three men struggled to lift the cumbersome plank onto the sills. Succeeding at last, they joined the walkway and base together with screws. Jase stepped onto the sturdy trail, spreading his arms to the sky triumphantly, as if atop a mountain.

It was August 2019, and Matt, Jase, and Andres were trail workers for the U.S. Forest Service in Juneau, Alaska. They, along with crews from the Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation, the City and Borough of Juneau, and a local nonprofit called Trail Mix, split the work of maintaining the city's 250 miles of trails, a subset of which form part of the National Trails System. Their work is necessary in Alaska's southeast region, where rain or snow falls on 222 out of 365 days a year, on average. When the rains come, the rivers swell, the muskeg wilts, and the walking paths smudge into near nonexistence—as was the case that summer on portions of the Windfall Lake Trail following recent storms. I, a registered volunteer and tentative journalist, was tagging along, trying to be useful.

In the late afternoon, we stored tools under a blue tarp and hiked to the end of the trail, where a tiny cabin overlooks the spectacular lake for which the path is named. The crew was on an eight-day "hitch," during which they lived near the worksite to save time; it was hard to imagine a better location for a backcountry stay. A short dock for rowboats split the glassy water below the porch, and beyond that, the lake was silky and unblemished, telling of the sky, trees, and mountains that encircled it for miles. Jase and Andres dropped their packs and made a beeline for the water, despite the high-40s air temperature. I stood on the deck with Matt, a seasoned leader in his 30s who grew up in Portland, Oregon, before relocating to Alaska.



Matt chuckled as Jase and Andres flipped and turned in the water like seals. “They’re young,” he said, shrugging. “Alaska is still exciting for them.”

When the sun flickered over the horizon, tinging the mountains in gold, we prepared dinner together. I sat with Jase in the cabin, slicing green peppers and onions for the tacos. He was a little too lanky for the cramped bench, shoulders tucking inward as he drew the knife back and forth over the cutting board. He tapped his foot as he chopped.

Originally from Steamboat Springs, Colorado, Jase graduated from California Polytechnic State University in 2017. He began his undergraduate career as an engineer because he always had an affinity for “building things,” but later switched to forestry and natural resources, with a minor in indigenous cultures. The courses for his major were a mixed bag: Some held a dated focus on economics, with such topics as clear-cutting and other forms of logging, and others looked at forest management from a symbiotic perspective, teaching techniques for improving the overall health of the environment. At that time, Jase and a group of his friends lived in a six-bedroom house where every Wednesday they held craft nights for as many as 60 people. He said the place became a kind of commune. In 2015, he had his first experience as a USFS employee in Colorado, where he was part of a timber preparation crew. After graduating, Jase worked at a ski resort for a while, and then at the front desk of a hostel in Thailand. Eventually, he found his way back to the USFS, this time doing trail work in Alaska.

Transitioning from timber prep to trail crew fulfilled him. He glanced out the window, grinning. “This is worth taxpayer dollars.”

Andres’s journey to trail work was more circuitous than Jase’s. Born in Oakland, California, he never felt at home amid the traffic and fumes of the city. He attended the University of California, Santa Barbara, but dropped out a year later after getting overly involved in “the party scene.” From there, he hopped from place to place—Cuba, Mexico, Washington, Alaska, Spain, Arizona, Colorado, Montana, and, finally, back to Alaska—hardly returning home for more than two months at a time. With each new location, he gained additional experience and varied adventures: working, first on the “slime line” and later as filleter, at a fish processing plant in Anchorage; building a plane runway for a man’s backcountry wilderness cabin in Yukon Territory (at great risk, in hindsight); removing trees with the Arizona Conservation Corps; becoming increasingly involved in conservation work. Finally, at the end of a six-month period as a trail crew leader in Montana, he spotted the listing to join a USFS crew in Juneau for a season.

He took it, even though his girlfriend chose to remain in Montana fighting forest fires.

“And why come to Alaska originally?” I couldn’t help but ask, wanting to know the magic of a place to which he couldn’t help but return, even if it meant being alone. We were sitting at the same wooden table in the cabin where Jase and I had chopped vegetables the day before. The sun was so low that Andres’s side was almost completely obscured in shadows. I could hardly see his face, but I heard the sheepish smile in his voice.

“Well,” he began hesitantly, “I was really into the movie *Into the Wild* . . .”

Behind me on the bottom bunk, Matt burst into laughter, the bounce of his shoulders nearly shaking the bandana off his head. Andres joined in, as if the wisdom he’d accumulated since then explained why this was so funny. Seeing my confused look, Andres said that many Alaskans hate that movie.

“It convinces young folks to come to Alaska and do something stupid,” Matt added.

“Like trying to get to the bus,” Andres chuckled, referring to the abandoned bus where Christopher McCandless, whose story was immortalized in Jon Krakauer’s bestselling book, *Into the Wild*, took his last breaths (the bus has since been removed from the rugged Stampede Trail in Alaska). “Anyway, not the best reason.”

Despite the questionable impetus behind his initial trip to Alaska, though, the pull of other places on Andres was beginning to weaken. Having now worked a seasonal position for the USFS, he would receive hiring preference next year; after four terms, he’d become eligible to compete for permanent opportunities, a wider range than temporary ones. At 28, he was warming to the idea of a steady job and a place to call home. He was open to a number of more long-term roles—a permanent seasonal trail crew leader, a stewardship position, a supervisor with a conservation corps. Most people can only bounce for so long.

Andres is not alone in his fatigue. The life of a temporary federal worker means resuming the job hunt every six months and never having one’s labor count toward federal retirement programs (although a bill introduced recently could change that). Yet the government relies on a nonpermanent workforce to alter the size of its employee pool based on fluctuating budget levels. Back in 1994, in response to pushes for long-term temporary workers to gain pathways to permanent employment, the federal government established a rule limiting the hours a seasonal employee can work in one year to 1,039. Ironically, the new rule—which the National Park Service did not fully

follow until after an audit in 2018—made things worse. Intending to increase the number of permanent positions without issuing any additional funding, it incentivized agencies to keep many jobs temporary—and strictly limited the hours a worker can complete in a year.

“In the private sector, you could be laid off at any moment, but getting the boot isn’t associated with hitting this magical number of 1039,” Mike Dilger, the recreation and resources planner in Juneau’s USFS office, told me, exasperated. “I don’t think anything good came out of that change.”

Even more so than before, the rule created a workforce that is always on the move. With the 1,039 workable hours up within six months, temporary laborers have no choice but to restart in a different location, unless they are willing and able to get a nonfederal position in the same area. Without job security, or even the guarantee of staying in the community for the rest of the year, accumulating assets becomes a struggle and home ownership can remain elusive. It’s difficult to put down roots.

For the young adventurer, however, this chance to consistently start anew elicits a thrill. When I asked Jase, only four years younger than Andres, how he felt about permanent employment, he shrugged noncommittally. His post-season plan was far more interesting: backpacking in Thailand until money runs low, then applying to more trail gigs.

But whether its fleetingness appeals or detracts, trail work is the kind of job some can’t imagine not doing.

At one point in my conversation with Andres, the sun made a rare appearance through Juneau’s usual wall of gray, entering the room in the form of a golden sheet dappled with dust. For a moment, he was visible, relaxed against the cabin wall, his green eyes looking contented.

“Why trail work?” I asked. The question hung awkwardly—my lack of journalistic prowess apparent, at least to my ears—but I genuinely wanted to know.

“At its core,” Andres replied slowly, nodding as if to dislodge the correct words from within, “I think it’s a little selfish.”

He learned as a young adult that proximity to recreational trails, for running and mountain biking, was deeply important to him. When he was 18, he spent a week in a psychiatric facility, where they prescribed medication and confined him to a space within four walls. Afterward, he went to work at a little restaurant in the Sierra Nevada mountains, in a town with only 200 people. Nestled among alpine lakes, giant trees, and sloping mountains, he ceased his medication, got in better shape, felt stronger and healthier. He

decided then that going back to Oakland wasn't an option. Quite simply, he said, "I needed to be close to the things that made me better."

That summer—as is always the case in our wild places—the fate of the forest around us was in limbo. Former President Donald Trump had exempted the Tongass from the federal roadless rule, which would open more than half of the Tongass to logging and road development. Now, for the Tongass National Forest and its counterparts, the tides are turning, slowly. In June 2021, the USFS announced it would revisit that decision.

That summer, we, too, were in limbo. Andres, uncertain where late autumn would find him. Jase, always roaming, searching for something he didn't quite know. Me, on the verge of my senior year of college, waiting to see which direction my life would take. All of us, blissfully unaware of the encroaching global pandemic. We were all lost in some way; the trail anchored us in the storm.

---

LIANA TSANG COHEN is a writer from New York City who lives in Los Angeles. A graduate of Princeton University, she works in film development. Her writing has appeared in *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Nightingale & Sparrow*, and *The Nassau Literary Review*. She spends her time re-reading young-adult novels, hiking with her dogs, and refusing to throw anything away.



# WRITING FROM THE MOUNTAINS

## A weekend workshop with *Appalachia* journal

---

WRITERS OF ALL LEVELS AND INTERESTS, JOIN THE MOUNTAINS with the landscape of your ideas at AMC's rustic Cardigan Lodge, Friday through Sunday, October 28–30, 2022 with *Appalachia* journal Editor Christine Woodside.

Many writers already realize that their work is not merely an indoor, sedentary pursuit but that the best ideas come in a flash while we are doing other things that have nothing to do with writing. The mountains can deliver this flash. We will help you find it and write it. **This workshop is for writers of all levels—anyone who wants to use the backcountry as a way to tell human stories.**

### *The weekend's package includes:*

- Lodging at Cardigan Lodge in Alexandria, New Hampshire
  - All meals from dinner Friday, October 28 through lunch on Sunday, October 30
  - Instruction and guidance from AMC leaders
- 

CHRISTINE WOODSIDE is the editor-in-chief of *Appalachia* journal. She is writing a book to be published in 2023 by Appalachian Mountain Club Books, tentatively called *The Long Way Home*, about her wilderness life. She is the author of *Libertarians on the Prairie: Laura Ingalls Wilder, Rose Wilder Lane, and the Making of the Little House Books*.

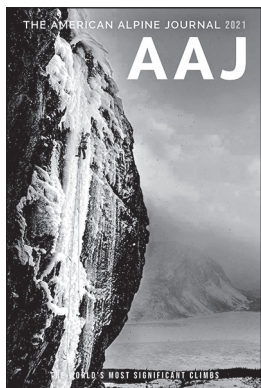
She has hiked thousands of miles, with others and solo, mostly in the East. She thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail at age 28. Her many essays in *Appalachia* have covered rattlesnake poaching, solo mountain climbing, Daylight Saving Time, the founder of the Wapack Trail, and her thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail. Chris edited two *Appalachia* anthologies, *New Wilderness Voices* and AMC Books's *No Limits but the Sky*. She earned a master's degree in history two years ago, teaches at the University of Connecticut, and is working on what may become a book about New Jersey's small farmers at the dawn of the industrial age.

She lives in Deep River, Connecticut, with her husband, Nat Eddy. They have two grown daughters.

ELISSA ELY, who will assist in leading the workshop, is a writer, hiker, and community psychiatrist who lives in Massachusetts. Her many essays in *Appalachia* explore her encounters with humanity on the trails.

For more information and to sign up, visit  
**[outdoors.org/writing](https://outdoors.org/writing)**

# Books and Media

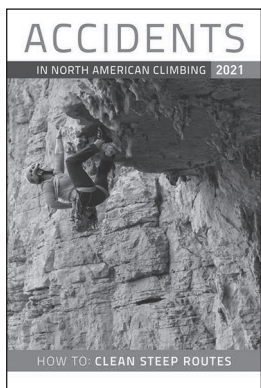


## **The American Alpine Journal 2021: The World's Most Significant Climbs**

*By the American Alpine Club, 2021, 208 pages.  
ISBN 978-1-7356956-2-4. Price: \$35 (paperback).*

## **Accidents in North American Climbing**

*By the American Alpine Club, 2021, 128 pages.  
ISBN 978-1-7356956-4-8. Price: 14.95 (paperback).*



THE PAIRED VOLUMES, BOTH PUBLISHED BY THE American Alpine Club, document the mountaineering triumphs and tragedies of an exhilarating and potentially perilous pastime.

*The American Alpine Journal* uses stunning photographs and gripping first-person narratives to chronicle such breathtaking expeditions as the historic winter ascent of K2 by ten Nepalese climbers, and the exploration of new routes to the top of the Mendenhall Glacier's Suicide Basin in Alaska.

Here is an excerpt from Mingma Gyalje Sherpa's account of the K2 climb:

Before leaving base camp, we had made a plan to stop ten meters before the top and wait for everyone to arrive. Then, all the Nepalese brothers joined shoulder to shoulder and we walked together to the summit, singing the national anthem. . . . There were no individual agendas, only solidarity and a shared vision. When we unite, nothing is impossible, and that's the way it was on K2.

The tales in *Accidents* are cautionary rather than inspirational, recounting the various ways climbers have plunged off cliffs and into crevasses, sometimes to their deaths.

Here is one such description of a belayer who was hit by a rockfall while climbing Utah's Hellgate Cliffs:

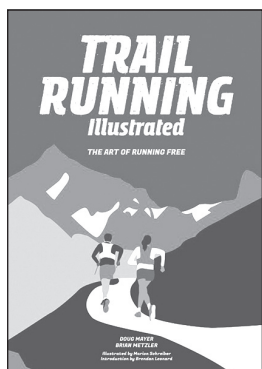


Jake was leading . . . and reached for what looked like a good hold. When he weighted the hold, a torso-sized rock detached from the wall. It split into two pieces, and one of them landed on Avery, knocking her unconscious. . . . She had two broken bones in her right arm that needed surgery, plus lacerations on her forehead and leg. She also had bleeding in her brain, but managed to avoid brain surgery. Jake suffered only minor scrapes and bruises in the fall.

*Accidents* reports that during 2020, there were 176 accidents in North America that resulted in 131 injuries and 33 fatalities. One glimmer of good news: This is fewer than the 220 accidents, 160 injuries, and 40 deaths reported in 2019. The American Alpine Club attributes the decline to the fact that many popular climbing destinations were closed during 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Accidents* is more than a grim collection of mishaps. The book contains helpful information on gear and route planning, as well as medical advice. In addition, each ill-fated account concludes with an analysis of what went wrong, in hopes that mistakes won't be repeated.

—Steve Fagin  
Book Review Editor



### **Trail Running Illustrated**

*By Doug Mayer and Brian Metzler*

*Illustrated by Marion Schreiber*

*Mountaineers Books, 2021, 272 pages.*

*ISBN 978-1-68051-566-4. Price: \$24.95 (paperback).*

YOU MIGHT THINK THAT SOMETHING SO SEEMINGLY simple as running through the woods could be explained in one sentence: Find a trail, put one foot in front of the other, pick up the pace, repeat.

It can't. Doug Mayer and Brian Metzler pack an abundance of useful tips into their informative and entertaining volume. Colorfully illustrated by Marion Schreiber, the book covers everything: choosing the right gear, eating the proper food, finding the best trails, staying healthy, avoiding injuries, developing training programs, and racing ultra-distances.

Some advice goes into mathematical detail, perhaps inspiring the perfectionism in runners: "To find out your stride rate, count how many

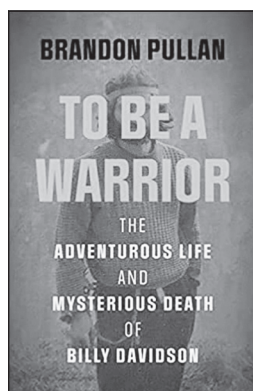
times your right leg hits the ground in 30 seconds, then multiply by four. If you want to experiment with different stride rates, use a metronome track,” they write. “Many elite runners come in at around 180 strides per minute, but keep in mind that your pace at any given time, along with the ever-changing terrain—uphills, downhills, rocks, roots, puddles, mud, stream crossings, and so form—will affect your cadence.”

For the most part, *Trail Running* offers common-sense advice: Don’t overdo training, set realistic race goals, take time off from running every so often, and stay in shape by hiking, swimming, biking, and other activities.

The authors write with well-deserved authority. Mayer, who has written more than a dozen other adventure-related books, has been climbing and trail running in mountain ranges around the world for three decades. He is founder of the tour company Run the Alps and contributing editor for *Trail Runner* magazine. When he’s not in the Alps, he lives within sight of Mounts Adams and Madison in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. He has written often for *Appalachia* and co-wrote the profile series for this journal that became a book: *Mountain Voices* (Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2012). Metzler, author of several running books, is founder of *Trail Runner* and *Adventure Sports* magazines.

They adhere to the book’s prevailing theme: Keep it fun.

—Steve Fagin



## **To Be a Warrior**

*By Brandon Pullan*

*Rocky Mountain Books, 2021, 272 pages.*

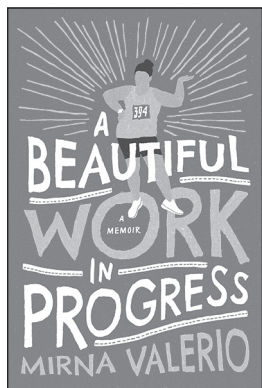
*ISBN 978-1-77160-437-6. Price: \$28 (softcover).*

JOURNALIST BRANDON PULLAN PIECES TOGETHER the nomadic life of Canadian adventurer Billy Davidson, who died in 2002. A somewhat mythic figure, “as ephemeral as the wake from his kayak,” according to a profile of him in *Sea Kayaker* magazine from 2005, Davidson grew up in a Calgary children’s shelter, made first ascents on Mount Yamnuska in

the Canadian Rockies and on El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, and then trimmed all his belongings to what could fit on a 21-foot-long kayak that he paddled up and down the Salish Sea for several decades. The author relies

heavily on Davidson's diaries, which can be tedious to read, with chapters falling into a rut of "he did this, then this, then this." But given Davidson's place in climbing history and sea kayaking lore, this book seems a worthwhile documentation of the Thoreauvian life he chose to live.

—Stephen Kurczy  
Assistant Book Review Editor



### **A Beautiful Work in Progress: A Memoir**

By Mirna Valerio

Grand Harbor Press, 2017, 317 pages including appendix.  
ISBN 978-1-5039-4339-1. Price: \$14.95 (paperback).

IF YOU EVER RUN INTO MIRNA VALERIO—AND if you're a runner, this is a literal possibility—you might recognize her from her social media presence, from REI's film *The Mirnavator*, from her having been chosen 2018 National Geographic Adventurer of the Year, from her feature in *Runner's World*, or from her blog, *Fat Girl Running*. In her mid-40s, she has completed eleven marathons, fourteen ultramarathons, and at least one Tough Mudder obstacle race. And in this ebullient memoir, she lists some vital personal numbers—speed: 11–13 minute mile; shoe size: 11; height: 5 foot 7 inches; weight: 240 pounds. "I didn't want people to pity me because I was fat," she writes. "There was no need."

The first time Mirna ran a mile, it "felt like an asthma attack, a gunshot wound . . . topped with the whipping cream of death." In other words (though hers are evocative enough), not so easy. She was an adolescent; gifted with a roaming intellect and an operatic soprano. But the mile seemed insurmountable.

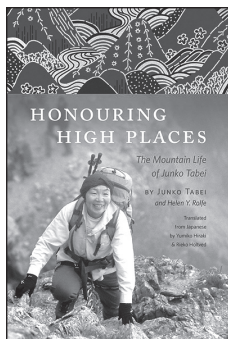
Harder times were to come. Mirna hadn't yet hit the 300 pounds she would reach after becoming a mother and hadn't yet had the episode of chest pain in her early 30s that would lead her to turn her health around. But better times were coming, too. She wasn't yet a music teacher, running coach, NBC celebrity, plus-size model, and cheerer-on of other large women looking to turn their health around. She hadn't started to sign up for the marathons where, to this day, she searches at the starting line for "any Clydesdale/Athena types who might be taking the plunge with me," or the ultramarathons where

she hallucinates, limps, and meditates her way through 50, 60, 120 miles. Back then, she was an overweight Black girl, just trying to run a mile. Today she has crashed through stereotypes about weight, race, and age.

Reading Mirna is like having a 26.2-mile chat (at the back of the race) with someone exuberant, irreverent, occasionally rambling, and admittedly “all over the place, frenetic . . . dipped in different projects, disciplines, and just about anything.” Running brings her focus. “I become the trail and the trail becomes me,” she writes, recollecting each rock, cranny, and mile of just about every trail she has run. They trip her up, drive her crazy, keep her company, and catapult her into joy.

A 300-plus page book is a little like an ultramarathon: it could probably be shorter. But when everything in your 5-foot-7-inch, 240-pound life compels you to share your story—well, length, like weight, is no object.

—Elissa Ely



## Honouring High Places

By Junko Tabei and Helen Y. Rolfe

Rocky Mountain Books, 2021, 400 pages.

ISBN 978-1-77160-527-4. Price: \$28 (softcover).

“AVALANCHE!” THAT YELL IS A RIVETING START TO *Honouring High Places*, a memoir by Japanese mountaineer Junko Tabei, who was buried alive in May of 1975 when several tons of snow and ice fell onto her Mount Everest campsite. Trapped under the snow for six minutes, she was miraculously pulled from the grave by a Sherpa, banged up but without serious injury. Twelve days later, the 4-foot-9 editor and piano teacher from a poor farming family became the first woman to summit Everest as part of Japan’s first all-women team in the Himalaya, at a time when some Nepalese opposed the idea of *any* woman entering their sacred mountains. In 1992, Tabei became the first female to climb the Seven Summits, the tallest peak on every continent. She died in 2016.

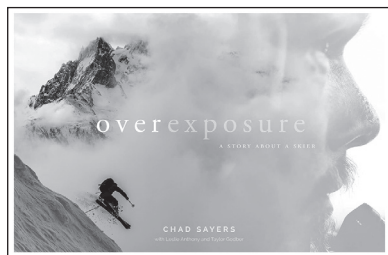
Her memoir seems long overdue. Despite its somewhat dry prose—perhaps because of the English translation from the original Japanese—my palms were sweaty when reading Tabei’s account of navigating through the Khumbu Icefall and up the steep Lhotse Face on Everest. To reduce weight and costs, her team climbed without jumars or other self-arrest devices, even

when crossing deep crevasses and going up icy walls. “Our calves burned and our hands gave way to the bitter cold and intense work of hanging on for dear life,” Tabei writes.

Throughout the book, I was also struck by the supportive role of Tabei’s husband, Masanobu, who had been a mountaineer. In 1968, a year after their marriage, Masanobu lost four toes to frostbite on the Matterhorn, an injury that would prevent him from further mountaineering. He remained fiercely supportive of his wife. Before Tabei departed for her half-year expedition to Everest in 1975, when her daughter was 3 years old, Masanobu exhorted her: “Don’t worry about us. Trust me to provide a good life here in Japan. Focus only on yourself and your team; complete your mission from your heart without regret.” When Tabei returned home, her daughter was wary of the weathered woman standing in the airport. “Noriko, it’s your mom,” Tabei had to tell her daughter, in a moment of understated heartbreak.

*Honouring High Places* is an honest, unvarnished accounting that adds an important woman’s voice to what, thanks partly to Tabei, is becoming a more gender-inclusive sport.

—Stephen Kurczy



## **Overexposure**

*By Chad Sayers*

*Rocky Mountain Books, 2021, 296 pages.*

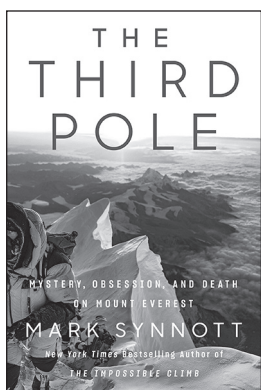
*ISBN 978-1-77160-519-7.*

*Price: \$60 (hardcover).*

THE PROFESSIONAL FREESTYLE SKIER

Chad Sayers is perhaps best known for starring in the gluttonously snowy documentary series *A Skier’s Journey*, which has several hundred thousand views on YouTube. Sayers, who grew up in Vernon, British Columbia, was considered one of the world’s best off-piste skiers when, in 2008, he ditched competitions for the glory, nirvana, and agony of skiing beautiful, dangerous, virgin snow across the world’s biggest ranges. His book is essentially the still-image version of those documentaries, interspersed with short essays by Sayers, who at times comes across as a self-proclaimed ski-shaman tortuously searching for enlightenment as he jets and drives around the world in search of the most badass lines. That said, I couldn’t stop turning the pages.

—Stephen Kurczy



## **The Third Pole**

*By Mark Synnott*

*Dutton, 2021, 448 pages.*

*ISBN 978-1-5247-4557-8. Price: \$29 (hardcover).*

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE I LOOKED UP AT ODELL'S Gully, a 600-foot-tall ice sheet in Huntington Ravine on Mount Washington, without realizing its namesake played a crucial role in fueling the mystery of who was first to climb a major peak on the other side of the world?

A member of the 1924 British Mount Everest expedition, Noel Odell was the last person to see George Mallory and Sandy Irvine alive on their summit push. In the words of Odell, who was observing from far below, the pair was “going strong” within 1,000 feet of the peak, having surmounted a difficult section known as the Second Step on the Northeast Ridge. From there, it would have been a hike to the top.

Odell's sighting has forever fueled speculation that the British summited Everest three decades before Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay made their historic ascent from the Nepalese side. If only there were photographic evidence.

Cue the New Hampshire mountaineer Mark Synnott, who travels around the world in search of that evidence in this new book—a fun, fast, colorful romp from his base in Mount Washington Valley to the Alpine Club archives in London to the bureaucratic slopes of Everest.

Synnott is aided in his quest by a few other eccentric New Englanders. One is historian Tom Holzel, whose Connecticut basement is a veritable Everest archive. On an eight-foot-long map of the mountain's north face, Holzel shows Synnott a tiny blotch where he believes Irvine's body may be preserved along with a century-old Kodak camera that could hold proof of who first stood atop the world's third pole.

Accompanying Synnott is Renan Ozturk, who grew up sailing in Narragansett Bay before finding his footing in the mountains. An accomplished videographer (he worked on and starred in the award-winning film *Meru*), Ozturk signs up to take aerial photographs in the hunt for Irvine.

*The Third Pole* progresses in the vein of *The Lost Explorer* (Simon & Schuster, 1999), in which Conrad Anker told of finding Mallory's body in 1999, and *Into Thin Air* (Villard, 1997), Jon Krakauer's personal account of the 1996

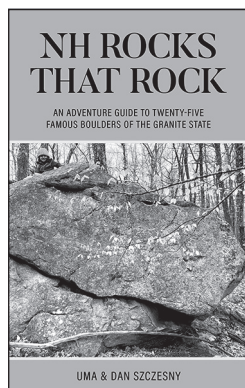


Everest disaster when eight people died. But the stakes are lower in Synnott's book, set in 2019. Of eleven deaths on Everest that season, nine happened on the Nepalese side of the mountain, far from the Tibetan base camp where Synnott was sheltered. Moreover, Synnott's search for Irvine is essentially scuttled by bad weather, red tape, and, potentially, a government conspiracy.

Synnott provides testimonial evidence that Irvine's body may have been secretly whisked off Everest decades ago to safeguard the Chinese Communist Party's official line that the Northeast Ridge was first climbed in 1960 by three Chinese who placed a bust of Mao atop the summit. That point of pride would be undermined if two Brits had completed the route 36 years earlier.

We may never learn the contents of Irvine's camera, but I think there's already a piece of circumstantial evidence that he and Mallory reached the summit, and it's in New Hampshire. A couple years after the duo's disappearance, while Odell was a visiting lecturer in geology at Harvard University (during which time he mentored its newly formed mountaineering club), he made the first ascent of Odell's Gully, then considered the toughest ice climb in New England. One has to wonder: If Odell was able to tame Huntington Ravine, what was a superior climber like Mallory able to achieve on Everest?

—Stephen Kurczy



**NH Rocks That Rock: An Adventure Guide to Twenty-Five Famous Boulders of the Granite State**

*By Uma and Dan Szczesny*

*Hobblebush Books, 2021, 84 pages.*

*ISBN 978-1-939449-16-0. Price: \$12 (paperback).*

THERE WAS A BOULDER IN THE NATURE CENTER near where I grew up. It was towering and mesmerizing to a little me, and it demanded daring courage; an Everest that could not be scaled often enough or with greater triumph.

When I grew up, somehow the boulder shrank down. These things happen. But leafing through “NH Rocks That Rock” by Uma Szczesny (project progenitor) and her father Dan Szczesny (project scribe), the pleasure of ascent returned. This brief guide—prefaced with an essential question: “What

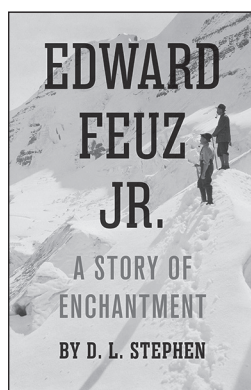
the heck is a rock anyway?”—contains a baker’s two-dozen scalable boulders in New Hampshire. Each has been visited and graded by a 6-year-old climber, surely a unique assessment.

For climbers around Uma’s age, a hiking patch and certificate can be claimed for scaling all 25 rocks. For readers closer to her father’s age, there is a brief geological discussion of the Udden-Wentworth scale, and some scholarly distinctions between conglomerates, glacial erratics, cobbles, and clastics. For any age, there is a list of places where, after a drive or gentle hike, one finds oneself facing boulders with such names as *Nessie’s Humps*, *Ordination Rock*, *Chicken Farmer Rock*, and *Quimby’s Pillow*. Each page comes with GPS coordinates, a description, and a little history or local legend (because in New Hampshire, there is always a story to be told). There are also a few suggestions of what to do around the area afterward because, when all is said and done, how long does it take to climb a rock?

The boulders themselves have lives and stories to tell, too. One weighs 5,000 tons, “the equivalent of 36 blue whales.” Another has its own stone staircase leading to a marble marker from 1862. A third is in the middle of a playground (rock is rock, and technically that counts), and yet another needs a ladder to reach the top.

Here is a topic that has been waiting to be written about for centuries—hidden, you might say, behind a rock. Pack up the children, start up the car. It’s a wonderful family project.

—Elissa Ely



### **Edward Feuz Jr.**

*By D. L. Stephen*

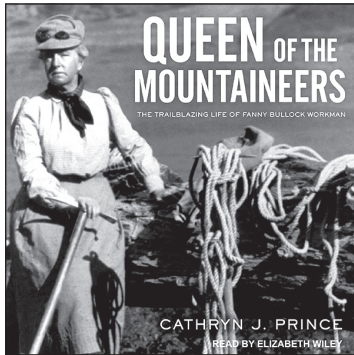
*Rocky Mountain Books, 2021, 320 pages.*

*ISBN 978-1-77160-509-0. Price: \$28 (softcover).*

IN 1903, THE TEENAGED MOUNTAIN GUIDE EDWARD Feuz Jr., of Interlaken, Switzerland, joined his father on a 5,000-mile journey over the Atlantic Ocean and across Canada to help establish a recreational alpine industry in Alberta. The federal government had recently completed its transcontinental railroad, and the Canadian Pacific Railway was attempting to entice train passengers to “the Switzerland of America,” replete with a Swiss-themed village called Edelweiss

and authentic Swiss mountain guides. The most prominent of those guides was Feuz, who worked in the Lake Louise area for six decades and made more than 100 first ascents in the Rockies, including of Mount Sir Sandford, the highest peak in the Selkirk Range. In profiling Feuz, author D. L. Stephen mixes history and memoir, drawing from her family's long friendship with Feuz. The best parts of the book are from those recollections, such as when, at the age of 84, Feuz guided the author's family up The Mitre (at the head of the Lefroy Glacier in Banff National Park) and found himself in the middle of a rockfall. Just as a croquet ball-sized rock was about to strike the author's mother on the head, Feuz leaned forward and lunged his ice axe's metal tip at the stone with a quick jab, deflecting the rock and likely saving the woman's life.

—*Stephen Kurczy*



### **Queen of the Mountaineers**

*By Cathryn J. Prince*

*Chicago Review Press, 2019, 320 pages.*

*ISBN 978-1-61373-955-6.*

*Price: \$28.99 (hardcover).*

*QUEEN OF THE MOUNTAINEERS* DOCUMENTS the life of Fanny Bullock Workman in a readable and informative way. Cathryn J. Prince sets Workman's accomplishments in a historical context that gives fuller meaning to the groundbreaking and record setting that drove this great mountaineer. Along the way, we come to gain a picture of the kind of woman Fanny Bullock Workman was.

Prince begins with Fanny's birth in 1859 into a wealthy family. Her father was governor of Massachusetts. She married William Hunter Workman, a doctor, and the two began a life of adventure. Prince is clear that Fanny had no interest in acting the role society intended for her. She was drawn to wild places and succeeded in spending much of her life in them. The couple made their home in Dresden, Germany, avoiding the strictures of their upper-class background. Their son tragically died at 3 years, and their daughter Rachel was educated in English boarding schools.

From Dresden, in the 1890s, the Workmans began their exploring with long-distance bicycle trips: first Algeria; then Spain in a 2,800-mile trip; next a

14,000-mile ride through India, Burma, Ceylon, and Java; and finally cycling the length of the Indian subcontinent. Two books resulted from these cycling trips that served as prologue for the Workmans' mountain explorations. In 1898, they left for the Himalaya. For each trip they were gone for months, returning to write their books—five in all. Fanny was in demand as a lecturer in Europe as well as America, always accompanied by Hunter, as she called her husband.

For me, this book caught fire with the chapters detailing the rivalry between Fanny and her fellow mountaineering New Englander, Annie Smith Peck. Both women were highly driven to achieve their climbing goals. Both fought for women's rights. Yet, there was no sisterhood between these two women. Their principal rivalry was over who had achieved the greatest altitude. To prove Annie wrong, Fanny sent a team of engineers to Peru to triangulate Huascarán, a first ascent Annie claimed was higher than Fannie's Pinnacle Peak in the Karakoram. Workman laid out \$13,000 to prove that she held the altitude record for women. She did, but not by more than 300 feet. These two women fighting each other caught the press, and editors made a meal of this in 1911–1912, when the proper role for women was to stay at home, be good wives, raise large families, and maintain low profiles.

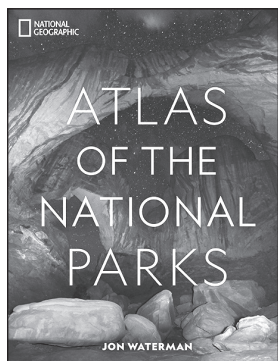
The Workmans' scientific work, especially that on their earliest expeditions, has been criticized for inaccuracy. Their object—other than making first ascents and achieving altitude records—was to measure the heights of the mountains they climbed and map the glaciers. They did the best they could with these measurements, but their equipment was inadequate. They were, however, in the field long enough—from 1898 to 1912—that technical advances improved, and their measurements on the last expeditions, to the Siachen Glacier, hold up well.

The book contains some errors that the publisher has assured us will be corrected in future printings. The two most serious are a mention early on of 33 peaks in the Presidential Range of New Hampshire's White Mountains when the accurate number is 13, and referring to Peck's "five" attempts to summit Huascarán—she climbed that big peak on the sixth try, as she wrote in her own 1911 book.

Prince brings out the Workmans' ability to return again and again to hostile and dangerous landscapes. For months at a time they coped with crevasses, avalanches, steep icy slopes, wind, storms, and biting cold at altitudes between 16,000 and 21,000 feet. In these mountains of northern India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, Bhutan, and Nepal Fanny came fully alive. She was

driven, her husband was a willing follower, and by living a life of her own choosing she became a pioneer for women everywhere.

—*Laura Waterman*



## **National Geographic Atlas of the National Parks**

*By Jon Waterman*

*National Geographic Society, 2019, 432 pages.*

*ISBN 978-1-4262-2057-9. Price: \$65 (hardcover).*

THIS IS MORE A CABINET OF WONDERS THAN the traditional map-filed atlas. It aims to go deep and leave nothing out and presents an amazing potpourri of text and graphics packed into more than six pounds of glossy paper—perforce, a mix of identities and purposes, of reportage, inspiration, cartography, homage to nature, and so on.

It begins with a panoramic review of the National Park Service's scope and mission, then segues to serious discourses on a wide range of topics: plate tectonics, geology, climate change, wildlife shifts, archaeology and paleontology, human impacts on the environment, and park visitor experience. Then the treasure chest opens: a series of ten-page spreads on 33 of the better-known parks: each with a map, a one-page stunning mega photo, 1,000-plus words of supporting text (a mix of instruction and entertainment), and several smaller photos and illustrations. These go as far to the experience of *being there* as a book can do. I was astonished by the audacity of its scope and agenda! Its gargantuan footprint. Its reach into the geological past, the record of hunter gatherers' and Indians' land-use customs, wildlife, history of controversies in parks' creations, diversions into alpinism, threats of endangerment, and more, much more.

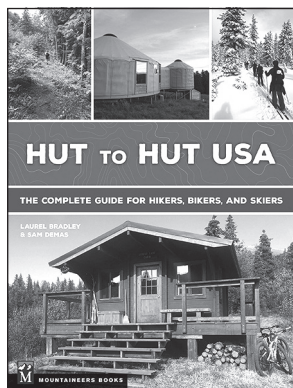
Bringing up the rear are 22 of the less notable parks of the system, which are treated with one page each with a map, text, and photo. Nothing in the book's text and captions lack for verve and color. This for instance, in the introduction, which gestures to both the massiveness of the continent and the reach of the NPS locations: "As the Milky Way burns across the dark skies of Death Valley and the northern lights finish shimmering above Denali, the first sunbeams hit the continent at Acadia. Bats wing their way back into the

Mammoth Cave, the bison herds stir at Yellowstone, and the Colima warbler trills its first song at Big Bend. . . .”

The book’s designers also demonstrate imaginative storytelling. In addition to deft layout and the blazing double-page, high-resolution photo reproductions, there are lower key and subtle moments. I was charmed—as children would be, too—by the hand-painted panoramas of the flora and fauna of Joshua Tree, the Everglades, Olympia National Park, and others, each with taxonomic captions, as on a stick-on magnet board. I should also mention *two* good indices, a vanishing feature of modern publishing.

Finally, there’s the *cui bono* question. (Who benefits?) Libraries are the obvious target. However, the average citizen lacks a bookshelf that is 14 by 11 inches and may be deterred by the \$65 list price. (I found one on AbeBooks for \$54.03 with free shipping; used copies are starting to show up here and there). In the event you do not buy the book, the next time you are in a bookstore, curl up in a corner with it and browse for a couple of hours. I guarantee you’ll find Jon Waterman an inspiring shaman and guide to the parks’ experience.

—John Thackray



### **Hut to Hut USA: The Complete Guide for Hikers, Bikers, and Skiers**

*By Laurel Bradley and Sam Demas*

*Mountaineers Books, 2021, 334 pages.*

*ISBN 978-1-68051-268-7. Price: \$29.95 (paperback).*

AMERICA’S FIRST BACKCOUNTRY HUT WAS constructed by the Appalachian Mountain Club in 1888 at Madison Spring, below Mount Madison in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Its purpose was safety rather than recreation; in fact, it was posted, “Not for Pleasure Camping.” But the hut was a convenience for many hikers, so much so that AMC stationed a keeper there in 1906 who collected a modest fee and, on his own initiative, prepared meals for guests. This might appropriately be considered the beginning of the club’s contemporary and remarkably popular system of eight huts that stretch more than 50 miles across the White Mountains.



The AMC huts are also the beginning of a diverse system of American backcountry huts that started slowly, but that have advanced rapidly over the last few decades and are now scattered across many of the most coveted destinations of hikers, bikers, and skiers, including New York and New England, the North Country, the Rocky Mountains, the Sierras, the Pacific Northwest, and Alaska. Laurel Bradley and Sam Demas focus on sixteen hut systems, offering firsthand descriptions of their locations, attractions, and amenities. The book includes helpful maps, photographs, contact information, and logistics. The authors even offer a series of suggested itineraries and helpful advice on preparing for hut-based adventures.

American huts take many forms—repurposed historic buildings, yurts, purpose-built structures—but they are generally simple shelters that offer outdoor adventurers comfort, convenience, and the companionship of like-minded people. These huts are symbols of the importance a growing number of Americans place on being outdoors and appreciating the nation's great natural and cultural landscapes. The huts are manifestations of the way in which the outdoors is being integrated more broadly into American culture and democracy, expanding the spectrum of recreation opportunities. *Hut to Hut USA* is a smart, attractive, and engaging book that broadens the bandwidth of options for hikers, bikers, and skiers and gives due credit to the AMC for its pioneering role.

—Robert Manning

# Hidden Surprises

**S**TORIES IN THE NEXT *APPALACHIA* WILL EXPLORE HIDDEN MYSTERIES AND surprise encounters with wild animals in wild lands.

Gathering these stories, I've been struck by how rare it is for explorers to come in close contact with wild creatures, big and small. We are in their territories. The animals hide. We see their tracks and scat. We smell them. When we see them, it's usually just a glimpse.

Stories next issue will explore the difference between the trailside zoo bear and wild bears on the Appalachian Trail in New York, the heartbreak of two dead wood thrushes in town, bison galloping past tents, and meetings with eland antelopes.

Bill Geller explored off trail over more than 40 years in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Read his story next time of these trips. He and his brother took full packs when the leaves were off the trees, clearing visibility. They had no place to be so could locate remote landmarks they'd always wondered about, places below the Bonds, Mount Carrigain, in Lincoln Woods, and in other areas.

Rick Spedden will tell the gripping history of the Appalachian Mountain Club's whitewater canoeing pioneers in the early twentieth century. They include his parents, Rush and Betty Spedden, and a former *Appalachia* editor, Marjorie Hurd, who saved herself heroically when her boat capsized in a fast river.

James Mason, a member of New Hampshire's Upper Valley Wilderness Response Team, will write of a harrowing rescue in 2009 on the Franconia Ridge in the White Mountains.

Alaskan writer David Stevenson will consider appearances of "the white death" (avalanches) in literature.

Also next time, we will publish the winning essay of the Waterman Fund Essay Contest, generously sponsored by the Waterman Fund. This contest introduces writing about wilderness by emerging writers.

Join us next winter for these and other stories. Follow us on Twitter @AppalachiaJourn or email me to stay in touch.

I am delighted to announce that two mountain people and writers, Derick Lugo and Laura Waterman, have joined the Appalachia Committee.

—Christine Woodside

*Christine.woodside@gmail.com*

---

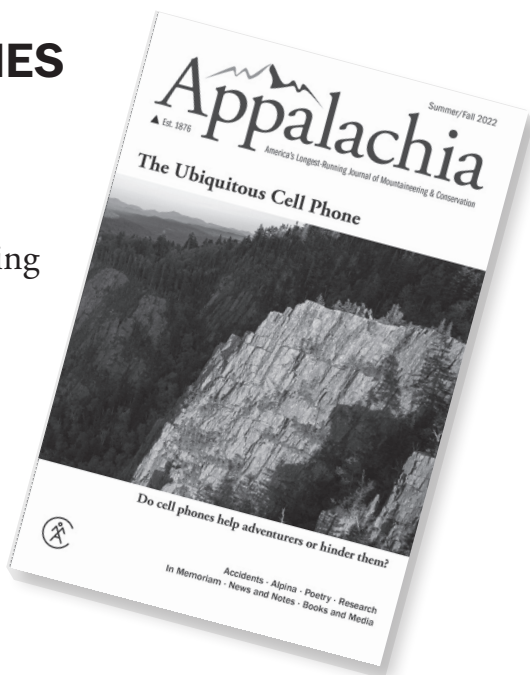
*"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber*

---

## SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit **outdoors.org/appalachia** for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at **outdoors.org/appalachia** or call 800-372-1758.



Subscription prices valid as of June 2022. Prices and offers subject to change without notice. For the most up-to-date information, visit [outdoors.org](https://outdoors.org).



Appalachia  
Appalachian Mountain Club  
10 City Square, Boston MA 02129

## Add to your collection!

ORDER BACK ISSUES OF *APPALACHIA* AT  
[OUTDOORS.ORG/AMCSTORE](https://outdoors.org/amcstore)

Since 1876, the Appalachian Mountain Club's journal, *Appalachia*, has delivered inspired writing on mountain exploration, ecology, and conservation; news about international mountaineering expeditions; analysis of Northeastern mountaineering accidents; and much more.

### In this issue of *Appalachia*:

#### **Do Cell Phones Belong in the Mountains?**

A 24-mile journey with a 1-year-old suggests a quieter mountain way

#### **Never Lost**

On the Pacific Crest Trail before smartphones, a hiker never had to choose

#### **Why Does No One Climb the Palisades?**

Just north of New York City, a glacier-exposed cliff tempts a climber

#### **A Life Lesson in Denali Park**

A grizzly bear follows a camper

#### **COVID-19 Exposes a Wilderness Myth**

A Long Trail trek is not about retreating from towns and community

#### **Debate on the Salmon**

A rowdy river humbles two foolhardy canoeists

**Also:** A kind ranger. A septuagenarian climber ponders aging. Outdoor dining.



\$10.95 US

Sales of AMC Books and *Appalachia*  
fund our mission of protecting the  
Northeast outdoors.