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# 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 untrammelled 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.

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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.

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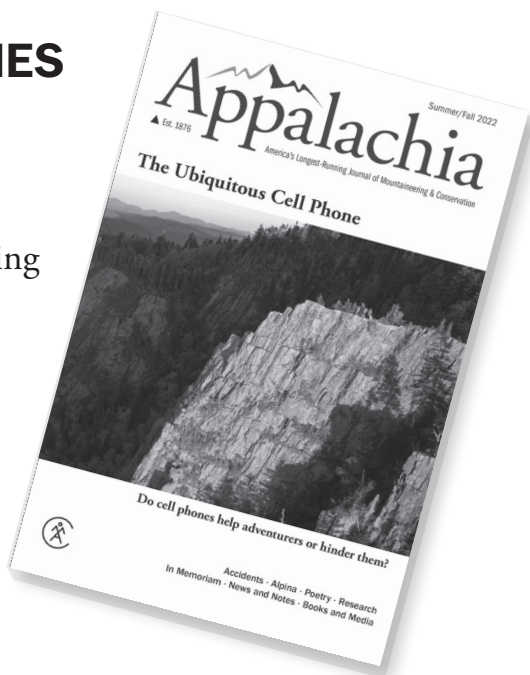
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