

2011

## The Long Way Home: Human Nature on the Herd Path

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### Recommended Citation

Woodside, Christine (2011) "The Long Way Home: Human Nature on the Herd Path," *Appalachia*: Vol. 62: No. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol62/iss2/2>

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## Human Nature on the Herd Path

THE LONE RIDGE CALLED OWL'S HEAD IN NEW HAMPSHIRE lies covered in balsam fir 4,025 feet above sea level. Nine miles from asphalt, standing hidden between the Bond and Franconia ranges, it's famous for the dread it inspires. Deep in the federal Pemigewasset Wilderness, getting lost rises to near the top of the list of what could go wrong. You know a woman who paid her daughter to go along. The final mile straight up tramples a herd path through an overgrown rock slide, marked by conflicting cairns, crushed plants, and the remains of blown-down trees. It feels as if the fascination of the hunt for the Owl's Head summit amounts to disrespect.

When you finally go, you expect it to be as lonely as the underground peakbagging community has told you in multiple war stories spouted off on the other summits. You leave Owl's Head for almost the last of your 48 mountain-summit trophies because you expect it to be the worst. This Thursday in mid-September brings with it an appropriate, driving rain.

Every moment in your hiking life has prepared you for the task of jogging in eight miles and crawling the final one; for checking the ridgeline and scouting your way up; for spending all day alone and wet. Nothing can prepare you for the reality that this peak is awful not because it's remote but because of the way people have left their marks here.

You trot for hours to the bottom of the ridge. You find a small cairn that isn't supposed to be there—Wilderness rules forbid an official trail here. You turn up the treed-in rock slide that soon yields to an open slide. You claw your way up the loose rocks and around boulders.

A path others have slashed through mats of moss and lichen veers north. You might miss this trail, but only if you were dozing off. You need no signs or blazes, no compass to find the top. Even large blown-over trees can't hide the trail that is not supposed to be there, lying chiseled into the vegetation. You help it stay so.

The herd path branches into multiple scars. Trudging along the ruts, time compresses into one wet, despicable moment. The mountain didn't ask for this. You did. You tell yourself you would not have slashed such direct routes into the side of a mountain deep in a federal Wilderness Area. You go beyond what used to be considered the summit to what you now trust others to tell you—with signs that also aren't supposed to be there—is the real summit. Here lie more balsam fir.

About face, and you circle around an extra loop just as everyone before you ambled in confusion before diving back down the mud to the rocks.

Yes, it's awful, because this is what people accept until the day comes when federal Wilderness regulations forbidding new trails, signs, markers, and trail maintenance change and someone is allowed to cut a less eroded route from a better direction.

You wake up the next morning with a sharp pain in your right shoulder. You remember a few mistakes on the rock slide, following a constellation of cairns (unofficial, of course). On the rolling boulders you would not wait for good judgment to take over, because this is not a place for common sense.

Owl's Head amazed you, making you into someone who values the good that people ought to do in navigating wild lands. It made you question which is more wild: carefully graded trails, or rogue trenches? It made you cringe with embarrassment at what people are capable of without "rules." It made you promise yourself never to go there again. It made you cherish your awful day, because you know you should have left Owl's Head alone.

I'M FROM NEW JERSEY. MY ANCESTORS WITH NAMES LIKE Fuhrman Woodside spent hundreds of years farming in places no one ever heard of, down near Vineland. My father delivered milk in the 1930s in Trenton, and he met my mother at the shore. I can still remember how the mud and rocks smelled in my Princeton backyard.

Many of us who have become mountain people learned to interact with the struggles and weather and stillness of nature in the plains and low hills of the Middle Atlantic. People think they have to leave New Jersey for an intense wild experience. They're wrong.

—Christine Woodside  
*Editor-in-Chief*

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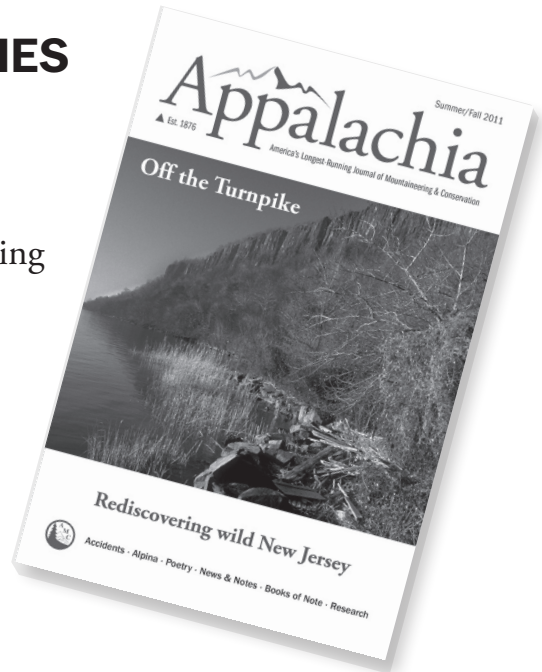
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