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More than Meets the Eye

Step-by-step, exploring Connecticut's Great Mountain Forest

David K. Leff



IT'S BEEN CALLED MAGICAL, A SLICE OF EDEN, AN ANTEROOM TO MIDDLE Earth. Some people discover a pantheistic spiritualism among the trees, rugged hills, and ponds. Others find a church where God is ever present. There are those for whom it's a primeval paradise, a place of adventure, beauty, or peace.

Enchantment may arise from coming face to face with a bobcat or moose or finding respite from daily cares in a place where, save for an occasional overflight, there are only natural sounds—a chatty brook crashing over mossy rocks, a raven's croaky call, or wind rustling treetops. In a thickly settled region of the country, there's something seductive and rare about feeling “alone in the middle of nowhere,” on entering a place vast enough to almost frighten with the possibility of losing oneself, yet small enough to know well. Few enter Great Mountain Forest without intimations of awe.

Great Mountain Forest is some 6,300 acres of trees, swamps, ponds, and a bog straddling Norfolk and Canaan in Connecticut's northwest corner. Underlain by rough, erosion-resistant metamorphic rock sculpted and scratched by the glacier, the land ranges in elevation from 1,200 to 1,700 feet. A few places dip as low as 700 feet in areas of limestone bedrock, the residue of ancient seas. Slopes, ridges, and bottomlands are thick with trees: such mixed hardwoods as sugar maple, beech, and yellow birch in cooler spots, oak and hickory dominating drier, warmer sites, all often dotted with islands of white pine. Red spruce, black gum, and soft maple grow in swamps, and steep ravines are darkened with towering hemlocks, some of which were saplings when the Pilgrims set foot on Plymouth Rock. Conjure an image of the Black Forest, a dark fairytale wood, or a temperate jungle and you have a sense of Great Mountain Forest.

Located in an area known as the “Icebox of Connecticut,” the forest seems orphaned in latitude, with plant and animal species such as black spruce and moose that are usually found farther north. Perhaps a little less than wilderness, there's a breath of wildness in the air. The earth seems fresh from the hands of the creator, full of mysteries.

With thousands of uninhabited acres in the fourth most densely populated American state, Great Mountain Forest is a place apart. Sure, a few unpaved roads wind through the woods and a sprinkling of seasonal cabins, a fire tower, and a few other simple structures are tucked into the landscape, but the forest

Ledges rise near Bishop's Cave, deep in the 6,300-acre Great Mountain Forest in northwestern Connecticut. TOM BLAGDEN

seems virgin, feral, untrammled. It's a place that seems, as one person put it in a humorous oxymoron, "where the hand of man has not set foot."

Nothing could be further from the truth. Human use has left scars exceeded only by glacial action. But, like the great mile-thick ice sheet, human occupation has changed the face of the land, and it's deepened the forest's story with a narrative of exploitation and abuse, repentance, resilience, and recovery.

Native Americans had a light touch, and except for an occasional arrowhead, left little evidence of their presence. Eighteenth-century colonial farmers foundered on bony land with thin soils lacking nutrients. Stone walls and cellar holes are their legacy, lingering like lithic ghosts. Sawmills and a forge also had their day, harnessing brooks and swamps for waterpower. They've left telltale dams and sluiceways now hidden by vegetation that beckon to awakened eyes.

Nineteenth-century ironmasters turned Great Mountain into an industrial forest, repeatedly cutting trees to produce charcoal for smelting iron ore. The great woods were reduced to brush and slash in a bleak landscape of almost unbreathable air thick with smoke from slowly smoldering domed piles of stacked wood. Hundreds of rounded, flattened areas carved into uneven slopes still mark these collier hearths. Kick away leaves and duff to reveal blackened ground and crumbs of charcoal still firm enough to use to draw a picture.

Locals must have snickered early in the twentieth century when wealthy New York businessmen and rod and gun enthusiasts Frederic C. Walcott and Starling Childs began purchasing the burned-over, worn out brushlands abandoned by a declining iron industry. Even though they paid rock-bottom prices, the men seemed naïve city slickers, their dreams of a restored landscape of forest, ponds, and wildlife a bizarre fantasy. But trees slowly grew, the partners released deer and waterfowl, and many creatures found their way back.

Childs's son Ted Childs continued to buy land (until his death in 1996 at age 90), becoming the state's largest individual landowner. He experimented with silvicultural techniques, began taking weather readings in 1932, invited scientists to do research, and hired foresters to manage the land, make maple syrup, and harvest timber. In 2003, Ted's widow, Elisabeth, sold development rights to the State of Connecticut, ensuring most of the property would be protected in perpetuity from being split into house lots or fragmented with paved roads. After her death a few years later, both the easement and other lands were conveyed to a newly revitalized nonprofit Great Mountain Forest Corporation, which had been formed in the 1960s and remains dedicated to sustainable forestry, natural resource conservation, science, and education.

Great Mountain Forest is home to some of the most unusual and sensitive ecological communities in the region. They become ever more precious as the climate changes. The forest hosts more than a score of rare or endangered plants and animals. The land harbors historical sites and archeological treasures, including old cemeteries and dry-laid stone cellar holes. It hosts a cave where a holy man dwelled in the 1950s, and the remains of an early 1800s village deemed by a local minister a “hamlet of heathens, living in intellectual, moral, and spiritual darkness.” Within the forest’s borders is the location of a brutal nineteenth-century murder, and a twentieth-century military plane crash.

Innovative scientific research on tree regeneration and growth, wildlife management, and invasive species has long been a part of the forest and is ongoing. Wandering in the woods, one occasionally stumbles on areas marked with surveyor’s flagging, fencing, or tagged trees indicating not lot lines or septic test pits but the plots of researchers, some of whom have been returning to the same sites for half a century or more. Among the trees, Yale’s School of the Environment maintains a rustic outpost that has brought generations of students to the forest.

Timber cutting, witch hazel harvests, maple sugaring, and weather data collection continue to define this “working forest” as distinct from parks and preserves. Hiking, cross-country skiing, deer hunting, and other pursuits are part of the forest’s relationship with humans. Often in the environmental vanguard, Great Mountain Forest has sold carbon credits, a promise to sequester carbon and combat climate change by promoting tree growth for the next century, perhaps in atonement for decades of charcoaling.

How will a warming climate affect this sensitive island of northerly habitat? Will such invasive insects as woolly adelgid suck the lifeblood from hemlocks and leave much of the forest barren? Can invasive plants such as Japanese barberry be controlled so they don’t suppress native species, reduce tree regeneration, and make the woods impenetrable? The forest is always changing, and at an accelerating rate since the middle 1800s. Questions regularly appear that better define problems, and problems continue in search of solutions. The forest forces managers to look not with a yearly budgetary timeline, the five-year increments of strategic plans, even the decades-long life cycles of capital assets. The forest is patient, measuring time in centuries.

To appreciate this forest, or any other forest, a person needs more than to be told about it. The best way to experience these woods is slowly, step-by-step, exploring marked trails as well as remote and little-known precincts

with knowledgeable companions whose imaginations are engaged. I've spent many days in all kinds of weather traveling with people annealed to this landscape, people who know its trees, swamps, and wild creatures, who are in love with its hilltops, ravines, and ledges. By following these tangent footsteps, the essence of this place is slowly revealed. Connect the dots and a map in both time and space, a topography of nature and human striving reveal themselves. It's a means of exploring that can connect us to an immense rainforest or the woodlot down the street.

First Encounter

I was transfixed as I looked through an irregular opening in the woods surrounded by twisted, ragged trees and tangles of highbush blueberry and



Tobey Bog is ecologically out of place, the author writes, "a subarctic fragment stranded about as far south as possible. There was something elemental, almost primal in its shaggy appearance." ALDEN WARNER

buckthorn where the ground had a spongy trampoline feel. Sun poured down on a somewhat rounded glade of sphagnum so richly textured in heathered green and reddish highlights that it recalled a shag carpet of the 1970s. The roundish space gave a dome-like appearance to the late summer sky, as if it were a huge oculus in a massive rotunda. And although the area was washed in light, contorted vegetation accented by clusters of scraggly black spruce made it seem gloomy.

The suddenness of this unexpected visit to Tobey Bog no doubt amplified my fascination, as did the irrepressible enthusiasm of my guide and friend Leslie J. Mehrhoff, an expert botanist possessing the Darwinian soul of an old-time naturalist. With Les behind the wheel on U.S. Route 44, we were on our way to explore a steep slope of ancient hemlock and pine in Sages Ravine, little more than a dozen miles distant. But he abruptly made a turn so sharp it would have thrown me into his lap save for my seat belt. “I have to show you something amazing,” he said with a wild laugh and face-stretching grin. After several quick turns on back roads, he killed the engine on a rutted dirt track beside a pond. I had no idea where I was.

I was just shy of 30 years old when Les introduced me to Great Mountain Forest via the bog, perched in the northeast corner of the sprawling woodland. Bearded and ebullient with unbridled contagious joy for the natural world, he was then the state biologist with the Department of Environmental Protection and would go on to head the herbarium at the University of Connecticut. His shirts always had a chest pocket into which he’d tuck his trademark botanist’s hand lens, worn on a thin strap around his neck. I never saw him without it, even when wearing a jacket and tie.

At that time I was a legal and policy advisor to the Environment Committee of the state legislature working on endangered species bills. Les rightly thought some field experience would help me craft the relevant legislations and keep interested senators and representatives informed. Besides, getting out among the trees would be fun. He was correct on both counts.

We started walking on a faded woods road in an area called the “North Forty,” and soon found ourselves wandering through a cathedral of tall old-growth hemlock and pine, some of which had stood about four centuries. Growing among them were huge 200-year-old yellow birch, black cherry, and beech with its smooth smoke-gray bark. A canopy of greenery was high above, and we were among trunks that stood like columns on a classical building. Steeply angled shafts of filtered light poured onto the ground as if through a church’s clerestory windows.

Difficult as it was among such eye-catching sylvan giants, I quickly learned to look down as well as up because of the uneven, hummocky ground.

“Pillow and cradle,” Les called the shallow depressions paired with elevated mounds of earth. “When a huge tree blows down,” he explained, stroking his beard professorially, “its roots are torn from the ground leaving a hole called a cradle. Decades pass, tree trunk and roots decay and disappear, but clinging soil and stones remain in a pile—that’s the pillow.”

Lumpy ground kept the area from being plowed, and upturned tree roots revealed a virgin ash-gray soil layer below a surface of humus. Although hemlock bark was valuable in the nineteenth century for commercial leather tanning, Les speculated that these trees weren’t cut because the rough terrain made harvesting too difficult.

We were on private property, but Les assured me he had an open invitation from the landowner. Les spoke of Ted Childs with reverence, a kind of benevolent overlord, protector of forests and creatures. He was a man of great wealth and probity who harvested timber from the land, but who knew its principal value could not be measured in board feet.

“I’m not sure what will happen to the forest when Ted is gone,” Les said in a low voice, a brief cloud of worry stealing across his face.

It took a while adjusting to the eternal gloaming beneath the tall conifers, but we soon left the big trees and crossed a small stream in an area of scrubby pole timber and brush that was flooded with so much light it stung my eyes at first. A narrow wooden boardwalk led more than 50 feet into the center of the five-acre bog. The ground wobbled with each step, and I momentarily walked drunkenly, soon gaining what Les called my “bog legs.”

Energized with childlike wonder, Les pointed out a host of plants, blurted out a mantra of Latin and common names—*Andromeda polifolia*, bog rosemary; *Osmundastrum cinnamomeum*, cinnamon fern; *Kalmia angustifolia*, sheep laurel; *Chamaedaphne calyculata*, leatherleaf; *Arceuthobium*, dwarf mistletoe; *Larix laricina*, tamarack; *Acer rubrum*, red maple. He even knew the names of sedges, and though he took pains to point out distinctions, the grass-like plants all looked rather the same to me. Walking outdoors with Les was like being with Adam in the Garden—he knew the name of everything. Even more, if he saw a particular plant, he could tell you what kind of soil it grew in, the light and moisture regime of the place, and the other plants and animals with which it was likely to be associated.

With a laugh, Les jumped on the walkway and watched a wave roll out across the soggy moss carpet and shake nearby shrubs. We were standing atop



Two pitcher plants in Tobey Bog open for insects, which they need for nutrients. TOM BLAGDEN

about 30 feet of decayed organic matter, a fibrous and gelatinous layer floating on water above a sandy bottom. The bog is a legacy of the glacier that left a large chunk of ice below earthen debris. It slowly melted, and over time the bog formed in isolation from aboveground hydrology resulting in a nutrient-poor wetland where plant matter accumulates more quickly than it decomposes, leaving squishy, partially decayed material below the floating mat.

Les delighted in pointing out sundews and pitcher plants, carnivores that lured insects and slowly digested them for nutrients the bog could not provide. “They turn the usual relationship between plants and animals upside down,” he said with a grin.

The bog was not just another landscape, it was a world unto itself where the usual ecological rules did not apply. Sundews sprung from low rosettes with leaves shaped like tiny handheld looking glasses. The tiny leaves were fringed with hair-like cilia tinged with a sticky substance that glistened like dew in the sun and captured insects like flypaper. Pitcher plants also grew from rosettes, their tubular leaves with alluring lip-like edges, and sides



The author, left, takes a break near Canaan Mountain with forester Ralph Scarpino.

JODY BRONSON

threaded with purple-red veins attracting insects into the digestive-fluid-filled tubes. They were strange and otherworldly.

Named for Revolutionary War sergeant Jesse Tobey lest he be forgotten, Tobey Bog is stark, but peaceful, a spot where a mystic might come to pray and seek enlightenment. Ecologically it was out of place, a subarctic fragment stranded about as far south as possible. There was something elemental, almost primal in its shaggy appearance, a rough, unfinished piece of creation. My uninvited return on a foggy autumn morning later that year amplified the feeling, and surrounded by mist, I felt as if I had walked into the dawn of time. Tobey Bog has a moody magnetism that draws me back, and every visit is different.

How could a place so extraordinary exist so close to where I lived? With Les as my guide and Tobey Bog as my portal, I grew intrigued by the possibilities of wonders near to home.

“You could spend years and never tire of wandering around this forest, never see it all,” the genial botanist assured me.

Les has been dead for well over a decade, but I think of him every time I set foot in Great Mountain Forest. “Coming in here is like falling in love,” he told me. “Over and over and over.”

Bird's Eye View

Standing on Stone Man, a rocky pinnacle on the shoulder of the Canaan Mountain massif, all forester Ralph Scarpino and I could see were green rises and ridges to the horizon, an undulating, uneven ocean of trees. We could look east, north, and south into the heart of Great Mountain Forest and across the state's largest roadless area. But for our view of Wangum Lake, a reservoir with an earthen dam built in 1890, and a slice of limestone quarry in North Canaan, it almost felt as if we were among the early European explorers. The region was known in colonial times as the Greenwoods, a moniker again apt after over a century of tree regrowth following a roughly equal period of rapacious cutting and burning to make charcoal for the once thriving iron industry. But despite the feel of virgin forest where trees held our attention, we knew that tucked within the ravines, and hidden beneath a canopy of leaves, were additional natural wonders and cultural curiosities, some familiar, others that we were eager to see.

With the hulk of Canaan Mountain at our backs, we had the widest possible terrestrial view of Great Mountain Forest, though we actually stood in

Housatonic State Forest. We'd taken the two-mile-long Iron Trail from the forest's land along Canaan Mountain Road, just north of the West Gate and the nineteenth-century Greek Revival farmhouse that hosts organization offices. Back in iron industry days, much of the trail was an artery of travel for the many charcoal makers working on Canaan Mountain. The old cart path once extended down to Beckley Furnace along the Blackberry River a few miles distant. Colliers hauled a few supplies up the rugged slopes and brought their charcoal down the mountain to fuel the iron furnace.

Ralph and I were following in the footsteps of those long-gone colliers, who'd left the mountain when the furnace went forever cold in 1919. We started out under tall trees in open woods with glades of ferns sparkling in dappled sunlight, and then entered an area dominated by hemlocks.

Ralph spent decades as a forester with the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. A friendly companion, easy to talk to, and with a quick wit, he's knowledgeable about trees, timber, and ecological relationships. His first visit to Great Mountain Forest was on state business in 1977. He met Ted Childs and his forester Darrell Russ, who was assisting them with implementation of a timber stand improvement grant. Since then, Ralph has returned many times, both on work assignments and for the sheer pleasure of being in the forest. Like many others, he's developed a deep attachment to these woods.

Soon we descended to Sweetwater Brook, the reservoir outlet, which twists through a narrow valley. The water ran clear and musical as it tumbled over rocks, and crossing took us from Great Mountain Forest to state land. Delineated on maps and fraught with all sorts of legal consequences, the very notion of a boundary seemed absurd where the brook clearly connected topography and natural communities.

Moisture and dank soil scent rose from the ground. We were in a sublime spot bathed in a greenish light, with some upturned trees. A bear had recently shredded a dead, barkless trunk, no doubt foraging for insects. Above the scratchings were rectangular holes chiseled by pileated woodpeckers. The stub of a once grand tree now looked like an ersatz totem pole. On the forest floor, Canada mayflower bloomed in places, but starflower, a mark of early spring, had gone by.

As we climbed through the brook's narrow, lumpy ravine, a barred owl called repeatedly: *hoohoo-hoohoo, hooho-hoohooaw*. "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all?" the bird seemed to ask. It's a ghostly sound that hung and echoed in the humid air.

“That’s the voice of the forest, telling us something,” Ralph said with a warm smile and a laugh to match.

“Too bad we’re not smart enough to understand,” I replied.

We continued to a place where the world seemed tilted in every direction, the landscape in chaotic riot, in an argument with itself over which way to go. Then, to our left, just before the path steepened, Ralph pointed to an unnaturally flattened, rounded spot about 25 feet in diameter and sparsely covered by herbaceous plants but oddly treeless.

“A charcoal hearth,” I said softly, walking over and kicking away the leafy duff, exposing blackened ground peppered with tiny, charred fragments.

A nineteenth-century collier had leveled this spot, stacked a mound of wood (called a “pit”), and after lighting it, lived beside the smoldering pile for about two weeks while it slowly transformed to charcoal. Colliers carefully watched day and night, making sure the pile did not catch fire and burn the charcoal to ash.

Charcoal is a form of carbon made from charring or baking wood by limiting the fire’s oxygen. It fueled iron furnaces, the dominant nineteenth-century industry of the area, including a few just west of the forest along the Hollenbeck and Blackberry Rivers, among them Beckley. Furnaces could consume 350,000 bushels of charcoal each year. Old growth of mostly hardwood might produce more than 40 cords per acre, and when cut again after 25 years, maybe half that amount. With three cords of wood yielding 100 bushels, it took between 300 and 600 acres to keep a furnace in blast.

Iron companies once owned about 80 percent of what is now Great Mountain Forest, and charcoal was produced on surrounding lands as well. Colliers left hundreds of blackened circles in the woods as well as an extensive network of trails and haul roads. Occasionally, there’s a crude stone fireplace, where a collier set up his lean-to or hut and kept a fire for warmth and cooking.

“Look at all the multiple trunked hardwoods around here,” Ralph said with a wave of his hand, evidence that young stems sprouting from the stumps of large, felled trees had been repeatedly cut for charcoal-making, a technique called coppicing.

Having gained most of the elevation, we came to a series of bald spots revealing bare ledge. Somewhat rounded and surrounded by thickets of stunted pine and scrubby oak, they felt like outdoor rooms. Sun poured into these openings, reflected off gray rock, sparkled in places with mica flecks. We looked in vain for deer-shed antlers, sometimes found on these ledges because

rodents that usually gnaw the calcium-rich bone fear open ground where raptors might swoop down for a meal.

Often edged in low-bush blueberries, these areas feature reindeer lichen in dense tufts several inches tall, growing like tiny gray forests of tangled branches. There were clusters of mounded pincushion lichen, leafy rock tripe lichen, and other lichens. Mosses, grasses, and small shrubs grew in irregular cracks in the rock where soil and moisture collected.

It wasn't long before we reached Stone Man, a five-foot-tall, column-like cairn of irregular rocks tattooed with lichen. He'd stood there as long as anyone could remember. No one knew who had named him, but the moniker fit perfectly.

Perched on a high point, we nevertheless stood on the exposed basement substructure of once great mountains worn down by glaciers and eons of erosion. With few exceptions, the rough-textured Canaan Mountain Schist that sparkled even in thready sunlight was Great Mountain Forest's bedrock, giving shape to all we saw, though hidden mostly beneath a skin of humus and vegetation. More than a stone armature providing form to the countryside, it played a significant role in determining the soils, plants, and animals of the area. It set the stage for human endeavors.

The limestone quarry, barely visible to the north, reminded us that two small areas in the westernmost reaches of the forest and around Tobey Pond are underlain with marble, primarily calcium carbonate composed of ancient marine creatures and sediments from primeval seas. This bedrock produces rich soils conducive to farming and a wide variety of vegetation, some of it rare. Though marble bedrock is common in the nearby Housatonic Valley, only these two slim slices occur in Great Mountain Forest.

Perhaps nothing so omnipresent in our lives as the geology beneath our feet is so little noticed or understood. It affects where we live, the configuration of roads, the location of farms and factories. Geology is destiny. Geology structures our spatial environment, and it is a window into deep time. Reading rocks often reveals a constant succession of changes so slow, distant, and vast, it defies common perception.

Half a billion years ago, the land that is now Great Mountain Forest began as eroded particles from ancient mountains deposited on an ocean's continental slope. It was far from the forest's current location on the globe, and in a Caribbean-like climate. The sediments eventually coalesced into sedimentary rock. Fifty million years later, a volcanic island arc and a continent called Laurentia crashed together with incredible violence that folded and thrust up

the sedimentary formation. Under great heat and pressure, it was transformed into towering mountains of hard, erosion-resistant metamorphic rock. Over millennia, additional continental collisions further recast and moved the stone, forming the basis of the cragged Canaan Mountain Schist on which we stood. Birthed in water, transformed by fire and pressure, it was up to ice to finally sculpt this landscape.

About 300 million years passed before the next great change was brought on by a series of glaciers descending from the north, separated by warming periods. At times over a mile thick and carrying rock and debris from distant places, the ice sheets ground down and polished the rugged hills. These ice sheets scoured valleys, shaping them in accordance with the relative hardness of the underlying rock. At its height 21,000 years ago, the most recent glacier had largely disappeared about 5,000 years later, leaving in its wake a barren landscape of bare ledge and rocky debris. Material that fell from the ice as it melted became the basis of till soils that dominate the area—an unsorted, random mix of stones, gravels, and sands. Meltwater lakes formed behind dams of ice and sediment. Among them was Glacial Lake Norfolk, of which Tobey Pond is a minuscule remnant.

The stark beauty of dwarfed trees caught our eyes, twisted branches bon-saied by wind and tangled roots snaking over the ledges in search of soil and moisture.

Still, the lichens most intrigued me. Lichens are pioneers, among the first living things to appear and persist after the glacier's retreat. Ever since, they've played a role in soil-making by secreting acids that slowly, ever so slowly, break down rock. Usually, a minor element of the landscape clinging in splotches to tree bark and rocks, here they luxuriated in thick, uneven patches of subtle greens and grays where nothing else dared grow. The flat, two-dimensional ones plastered to the ledge sometimes looked like starbursts, topographical maps, or pointillist paintings. Leafy types with rosettes or wrinkled edges reminded me of origami.

A partnership of fungi and algae, the former provides structure while absorbing moisture and minerals from soil and rock, while the latter supplies carbohydrates by photosynthesis. Despite their fragile appearance, lichen can be tough and long lived, thriving in the harshest environments where little else can live.

We sat down for a snack and swapped stories. Ralph is a good, big-hearted tale-teller, and listening to him is a pleasure in an age of loud, insistent voices. We chatted about family, politics, and people we knew, laughing heartily at our own foibles.

The vast area of green space before us seemed to invite expansive thoughts. At about 6,300 acres, Great Mountain Forest is a large piece of preserved land for southern New England. But adjacent and nearby properties expand the protected area. State forest, a wildlife management area and a state park, land trust, The Nature Conservancy, water company, and sportsman club properties keep an extensive landscape relatively natural. Great Mountain Forest is the hub of an asymmetric wheel of conservation lands where water-courses and ridges connect, wild things prevail, and people are merely visitors. Only on a map are divisions visible. The view told a different story.

Gazing into the rucked countryside, the conversation necessarily turned from rocks to trees. Once supervising Connecticut's wildfire program, Ralph was particularly astute at reading contours, elevations, soil moisture, and forest composition. Having crafted snowshoes and restored wood-and-canvas canoes, he envisioned the inner beauty of individual trees, the flow of grain, the color and density of wood.

Far below us was a cornucopia of species and sylvan relationships. Dense stands of white and red oak, basswood, yellow and white birch, sugar maple, beech, and other hardwoods were patched with dark green stands of spruce and hemlock. Occasional pine clusters rose like sentinels in uneven tiers above the rest of the canopy. A breeze picked up, putting limbs and leaves in motion until it felt as if we were on the prow of ship in a swelling sea.

"Hard to believe that little more than a century ago, this view was just a tangled, burnt over and brushy wasteland with few mature trees," Ralph said.

Knowing this history, what we saw seemed almost an illusion, the forest's return and resilience a miracle. At least momentarily, it buoyed us with faith in the future, that despite the ongoing threats of climate change and invasive insects the forest would persist.

"It gives me some hope," I replied. "On a sweet day like this, it's tough to think otherwise," I added, though we both knew there were imminent perils that could do more harm than the woodchoppers of old.

Despite our elevated perch with spacious views to the horizon, distance enforced a kind of myopia. By tramping through the woods on other days, we realized how much more we'd seen just wandering among the trees, looking at soils, water, and light. Hidden in folds of the countryside, ensconced in narrow valleys, and concealed by ridges were bottomlands full of red spruce and mystery, glacial boulders, hemlock stands four centuries old, brooks and beaver ponds, scientific research sites, ancient stone foundations, and creatures from turkeys to bears to moose roaming under cover of treetops.

“I can imagine Ted Childs climbing up here in the 1930s and seeing a forest thick with young trees greening a place desolate after decades of repeated cutting and fires,” Ralph said. “Maybe he had an epiphany on this spot. Maybe all the new growth energized him with a vision of what this forest might become.” I sighed, nodded agreement. A raven croaked hoarsely as its shadow moved across the uneven ground. We picked up our packs and headed down.

This was not a place of a few grand, iconic features, but a subtle, complex work of natural art and relationships filled with details that could consume more than a lifetime to experience and apprehend.

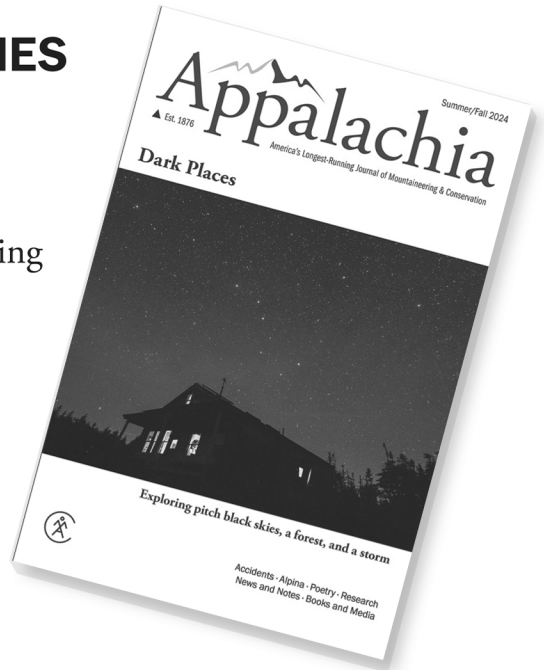
DAVID K. LEFF was a writer from Collinsville, Connecticut, who earlier in his career was deputy commissioner of that state’s environmental department. He wrote often for this journal. This is an excerpt of a longer work about Great Mountain Forest he was writing when he died in May 2022 at the age of 67.

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