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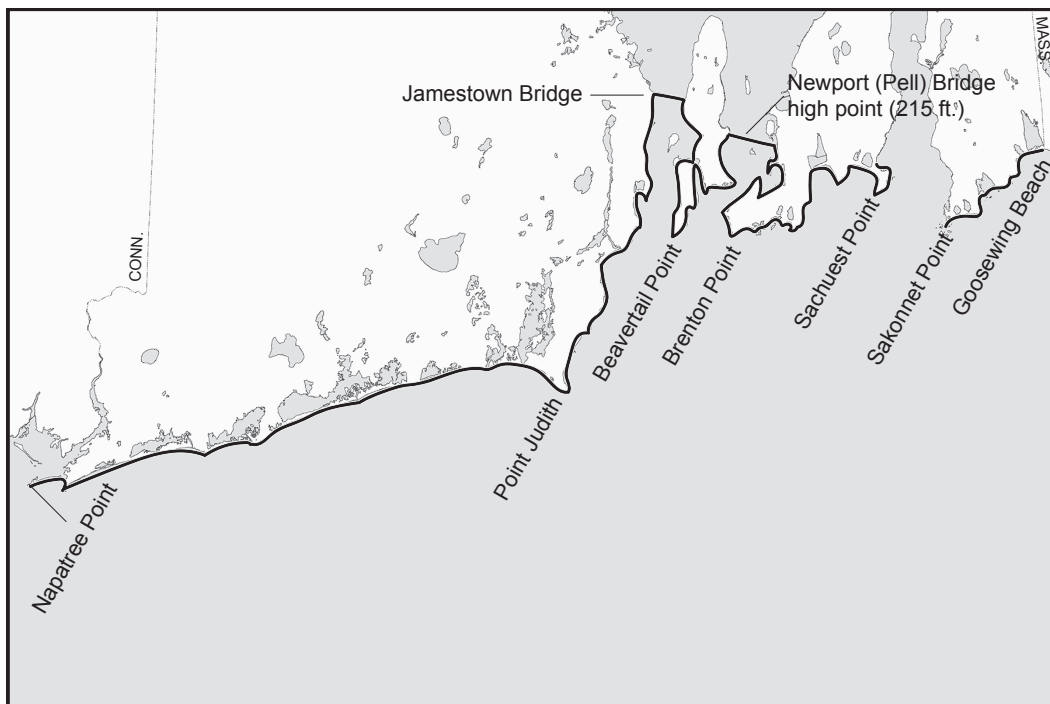
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An Ocean Walk in the Ocean State

A couple covers the full width of Rhode Island

Stephen S. Hale



ONE WINTER, MY WIFE, LYNNE, AND I DECIDED TO REFOCUS OUR habitual weekend walks from random places to systematically tackling the Rhode Island south shore beaches from Napatree Point in Westerly to Point Judith in Narragansett. Most of this shoreline is pleasant walking on sandy beaches. We chose winter because few people are on the beach or in beachfront cottages, and the parking is easier. This section (24 miles) was going to be all we covered.

Then, the next winter, we needed to do some training walks in preparation for an upcoming Tour du Mont Blanc trek, a 100-mile walk that passes through France, Italy, and Switzerland in a circumnavigation of the highest mountain in western Europe. So we thought, Why not just walk the entire south coast from Connecticut to Massachusetts—81 miles—and get the whole Rhode Island Atlantic experience? After all, Rhode Island’s nickname is “the Ocean State,” and its official motto is “Hope.”

We had walked the 78-mile Rhode Island North-South Trail from the south coast in Charlestown to the Massachusetts border in Burrillville, so the coastal walk would give us a way to add an east-west crossing. Living in the country’s smallest state, having moved here from Alaska, we could afford to go “big.” But not in altitude—the highest point is Jerimoth Hill (812 feet) in the northwest corner of the state, well away from the shore. The highest altitude we hit on the shore, other than on the bridges, was about 50 feet.

Three arms of Narragansett Bay (West Passage, East Passage, and Sakonnet River) break the southern shoreline of Rhode Island. We made excursions up the West Passage so we could cross on the Jamestown Bridge and then up the East Passage to cross on the Newport (Pell) Bridge. We had to cross the two bridges during official foot races, as they normally are closed to non-motorized humans.

Many geographic features along the coast have names from the indigenous Ninigret, Narragansett, and Wampanoag tribes. They and their predecessors no doubt walked along a lower shoreline that, as a result of melting Wisconsin Glacial Stage ice sheets, is now offshore and underwater. But the rate of sea-level rise has accelerated in recent decades because of warming from greenhouse gases and has contributed in some places to the loss of hundreds of feet of shore since 1939. Where our grandparents walked is now underwater; where our grandchildren will be walking in the future is currently further inland.

The 81-mile route the author and his wife followed over 29 day trips. ABIGAIL COYLE/

APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB



Napatree Point reaches into the Atlantic Ocean at the end of a mile-long spit, the westernmost point on the Rhode Island Coast. STEPHEN HALE

We walked over the course of two winters—a total of 29 day trips—mostly traveling west to east and doing the whole thing twice because each time we must return to our car. It’s about 42 miles as the seagull flies between Napatree Point and the Massachusetts border at Goosewing Beach. With shoreline indents and projections and our excursions up to the bridges, we walked roughly 81 miles, almost two-thirds of it right on the shoreline.

A fair amount of Rhode Island’s south shore includes state parks, state and town beaches, national wildlife refuges, and holdings of several nonprofit conservation organizations. Regarding our access to the rest of the shore, the Rhode Island Constitution (Article 1, Section 17) states, “The people shall continue to enjoy and freely exercise all the rights of fishery, and the privileges of the shore, to which they have been heretofore entitled under the charter and usages of this state, including but not limited to fishing from the shore, the gathering of seaweed, leaving the shore to swim in the sea and passage along the shore; . . .”

As in other coastal states, this free access of the people has been hotly contested. We were curious about how much of the walk we could do along the actual shoreline, which we hoped to maximize by planning our trips for low tide. We only resorted to the roads closest to the coast when steep, rocky sections or developed areas precluded staying below mean high water, the upper limit of public access. Occasionally we'd have to plan our walk to avoid being trapped by a rising tide in some area where there wasn't an easy inland way around. For some sections, we didn't know ahead of time if the line would "go." But we had "Hope."

Napatree Point to Point Judith

Sandy beaches, with a few rocky headlands, comprise this section. One of the striking features on this south coast is its highly productive salt ponds. They lie inside the barrier beaches on the glacial outwash plain up to the Charlestown Moraine, which was laid down by Wisconsin-era glaciers. Four of the larger ponds have human-made, rock-lined breachways to the sea; others have natural breachways that flood only on high spring tides or storms. Had it been summer and slack tide, we might have swum across the breachways. As it was, we started and stopped our walks at the breachways, keeping in mind the time we had a wild ride in our two-person kayak out the Charlestown breachway on a strong outgoing tide smack into large standing waves.

We started the walk at Napatree Point, the westernmost spot on the Rhode Island coast. Napatree is at the end of a lovely mile-long sandy spit sticking out west from Watch Hill. An old fort at the end makes a good spot to watch for merlins and kestrels during their fall migration. There used to be houses on this spit, but the 1938 hurricane washed them away. One family rode their house across Little Narragansett Bay to Connecticut.

Leaving Napatree, our goal was quickly thwarted by a ripped, fenced, developed section that forced us up to an inland road. Soon we were able to get back down to the shoreline at East Beach in Watch Hill, an attractive barrier beach with no houses and no roads and the Maschaug and Little Maschaug salt ponds lying behind. Then we came to Misquamicut ("at the place of the red fish" in the language of the indigenous people, probably referring to Atlantic salmon) with its heavily developed shoreline most of the way to the Weekapaug breachway. This shoreline holds a state beach, a town beach, some ripped shore

in front of houses, a golf course, and an amusement park. All quiet in the winter.

Next, we walked the beach between Weekapaug Point and Quonochontaug (“black fish”) breachway, a beautiful, crescent sandy beach framed by rocky headlands with a sand road inside the barrier beach but no houses. Quonochontaug salt pond lies inside. We admired the large, rolling beach cusps, formed when the interactions of waves coming from different directions deposit sand and pebbles in triangular mounds as much as two to three feet high. The high barrier beach, with secondary dunes and pitch pines, is typical of natural barrier beaches. These dunes provide important habitat and are instrumental in protecting the shore from storms.

The appealing East Beach (as appealing as the one further west) lies outside Ninigret Pond west of the Ninigret breachway. (Ninigret is named after the indigenous chief Ninigret.) A proposed nuclear plant here in the 1970s was never built. We found blocks of peat with clams bored into them. Many slipper shells lined the beach; the rest was a coarse, soft sand that made the walking slobby. Then we went along the beach outside Green Hill Pond, which connects to the east end of Ninigret.

Most days on this section we could see Block Island lying about ten miles south of us. Some days, it seemed to be moving around, tethered to the sea-floor by an anchor. On cold winter days the refracted light makes it look like two islands, separated by the low land around the Great Salt Pond. Some day in the future, given sea level rise, it may well become two islands. Now you can see to the east of the island the five towers of the Block Island Wind Farm, the first offshore wind farm in the United States and the start of an energy source that will help lessen the rate of sea level rise.

Trustom Pond is the first national wildlife refuge that we came to. It is the only undeveloped large salt pond in the state and is one of the few sections on this south coast with no road behind the barrier beach. This is about where, relative to the waters offshore of us, we crossed from Block Island Sound to Rhode Island Sound. In summer, you can see sandpipers that nest in the dunes scurrying down a receding wave to feed on small crustaceans and other tasty prey, then dashing back up again in front of the next wave. Piping plovers are listed as threatened on both federal and state endangered species lists. Under the philosophy that it’s not necessary for humans to take up all the beach in the summer when plovers are struggling to survive, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service puts up snow fences on this and other beaches to protect the nesting area from people and their dogs.

Further east, Moonstone Beach is named for the smooth, round, white, moon-like stones of quartz found here (not, as might be thought, for the smooth, round, white bottoms of people back when this used to be an informal nudist beach). We found a few old tar balls, possibly left from the *North Cape* oil spill in 1996, when that oil barge broke loose from its tugboat in a fierce storm and washed up on this beach.

Then we came to the ever-changing Carpenter Beach. This is a summer colony of thirteen to eighteen rows of tightly packed beach cottages with a history of being hammered by the sea during nor'easters and hurricanes. This is being exacerbated by sea level rise, which has taken a toll on much of this coast. People on the waterfront enjoy a beachside cottage for a while, then the beach erodes (or the cottage is damaged or taken out by a storm) and they leapfrog back to the furthest row inland. Meanwhile, the row of houses that was just inland of them on the beach becomes the new waterfront property. It's like hikers breaking trail in deep snow where the leader steps aside, lets everyone pass, then joins the line at the end. The person that was just behind the leader is now at the front and has a clear view of untracked snow.

Farther east, the South Kingstown Town Beach also has had to move its pavilion back away from the shore. We could see where the receding sandy shoreline had exposed an underlying layer of peat from when sea level was lower and this area was a salt marsh. The ocean was in a fierce state, with large, confused waves breaking on shore. Like sandpipers, we had to scurry up and down the beach, sometimes very quickly, to stay out of reach of the strong wash. A little further east, the Matunuck ("lookout") developed area also keeps getting pounded by storms. Here, some of the shore had been ripped, and the town put in a hardened seawall to protect the houses and road.

Next, we arrived at East Matunuck State Beach and the village of Jerusalem. The fishing village of Galilee lies across the Point Judith Pond breachway. Galilee is the top port on the East Coast for commercial squid harvests. Rhode Island became the only state in the country with an official state appetizer in 2014 when it gave squid (called calamari when you eat it) that honor. In recognition, we stopped to eat some. A rotting sea turtle carcass lay on the Roger Wheeler State Beach, which curls inside the stone jetties of the Harbor of Refuge. We ended this section at the Point Judith lighthouse, a place where we always feel an appreciation for the raw power of the sea. We were happy that we had been able to do most of this section right on the shoreline.

Point Judith to Jamestown Bridge

Much of the shore in this section is steep and rocky, and in places it can be tricky to find walkable shoreline below the mean high water mark. We walked on the shore from Point Judith to the north end of Scarborough Beach up to Black Point. Then from the Bass Rock Road public access along the granite shore to the dramatic granite bedrock at Newton and Hazard Avenues. We came across a dead seal and rescued a horseshoe crab stranded in a high tide pool. We walked along the Narragansett seawall and along Narragansett Beach to the mouth of the Pettaquamscutt (“round rock”) River. This body of water is actually a long, narrow estuary, and I’m always intrigued by its upper end that has—like some Norwegian fjords—a 45-foot-deep basin with a shallow sill and a permanently anoxic (no dissolved oxygen) saltwater layer below ten feet or so.

North of here, a path to the sea on a preserve of The Nature Conservancy, and the adjacent Fort Varnum military property, made it possible for us to do some shoreline walking to both the north and south. It’s an attractive section with rocky shoreline interspersed with cobble beach coves and, offshore, the stubble of the lighthouse on Whale Rock washed away in the 1938 hurricane. We walked along Bonnet Shores Beach and then from the north end of Bonnet Shores along the shoreline to the University of Rhode Island’s Graduate School of Oceanography. During World War II, a submarine net stretched across the West Passage from here.

Next, we went along the cobbly shore to the village of Saunderstown (where we lived) and to Casey Point. I often commuted to work on this 1-mile stretch or on the 1.5-mile inland road. One year for fun, I commuted using ten different methods of nonmotorized transportation—five by land (walk, run, bike, ski, roller blade) and five by sea (kayak, paddleboard, swim, row, sail). To the north, we left the shore and walked along the path of the old trolley known as the Sea View Railroad, wending our way through Casey Farm and the Plum Beach neighborhood. A farmhouse door at Casey Farm has a bullet hole left during a skirmish between the colonialists and British troops during the Revolutionary War.

Jamestown Bridge to Newport Bridge (Conanicut Island)

We ran across the Jamestown Bridge one April during a 10-kilometer over-and-back road race. At the top of the bridge, we hit an altitude of 135 feet above sea level. Coming back, snow flurries driven by a strong northwest

wind made us grateful for the guardrails. On Conanicut Island (named after Canonibus, a chief of the Narragansetts), we walked the shore south between the two bridges, first walking on the west shore from the Jamestown Bridge to Round Marsh, the salt marsh that nearly bisects the island. I am fond of this pretty marsh, having collected benthic invertebrates here during the Rhode Island Natural History Survey's annual Bioblitz in 2012.

Next trip, we walked on coastal roads to the shore at Sheffield Cove and along Mackerel Cove Beach. Then along the road to the dramatic Beavertail State Park and back, with side tours over to Fort Getty and Hull Cove. Beavertail Point has a steep, rocky shoreline and a nice clifftop walk on the west side that reveals hidden coves. Hull Cove had gotten oiled during the *World Prodigy* oil spill of 1989. A walk from Mackerel Cove Beach, along coastal roads on the east side of the cove to Fort Wetherill and then along the east shore roads, brought us to the Newport Bridge. The scenic Fort Wetherill State Park, with its rocky cliffs that continue deep underwater, is a popular scuba diving site. Old gun batteries make interesting exploring. During World War II, a submarine net stretched across the East Passage from here to Newport.

Newport Bridge to Sachuest Point (Aquidneck Island)

One November day, we ran the one-way, 4-mile race over the Pell Bridge from Jamestown to downtown Newport on Aquidneck ("on the island") Island. This was the high point of our journey, 215 feet. Several people took a quick stop at the top of the bridge to take pictures. There has been at least one proposal of marriage here. The bridge's towers are 400 feet above sea level—almost half the height of Jerimoth Hill—and are visible from far out at sea. Once again, we thought it was a pity that this and the Jamestown Bridge are not always open to walkers and bicyclists. If the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco is any indication, such a path would be well used and appreciated.

Our first walk on this island was the delightful Newport Harbor Walk from the east end of the Pell Bridge to King Park, and around the Fort Adams peninsula. It highlights why Newport is one of the sailing capitals of the world. A statue of Rochambeau, who commanded the French troops in Newport during the American Revolution, graces King Park. We wished that all the Harbor Walk could be right on the waterfront, like the waterfront promenades in many other cities, but in places this one weaves out and back on piers, often blocked from the water by hotels, condos, and private wharfs. The Fort Adams peninsula in Newport called for further exploration. Joseph

Totten was the chief engineer in charge of building Fort Adams in the 1800s. In his spare time he took dredge samples from the bottom sediments of Newport Harbor to look for mollusks. He became one of the first malacologists in the United States and in the mid-1800s described several species never seen before. As a benthic ecologist, I feel a kinship with him whenever I visit Newport. The fort has stories about the French fleet coming into Newport Harbor during the American Revolution and how the British and French fleets offshore were about to do battle but were interrupted by a hurricane. In 1916 (before the United States entered World War I), a German submarine came into Newport Harbor for an unexpected visit, then went out and sank six non-neutral ships south of Nantucket outside U.S. territorial waters.

Next, we walked from the south end of Fort Adams out around Ocean Avenue. This spectacular piece of rocky shoreline has a state park and several points where the shore can be accessed. We walked out around the Castle Hill peninsula where, in 1874, Alexander Agassiz of the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology built one of the first marine biology laboratories in the United States.

Cliff Walk, a national recreation trail in a national historic district, is a 3.5-mile path along the east shore of Newport that passes several of the ornate mansions of the Gilded Age from the late 1800s. This is one of the prettiest footpaths in Rhode Island, albeit one of the most civilized; the northern part is paved but the southern part has a rugged rocky shoreline.*

Walking the length of Cliff Walk at sunrise on New Year's Day was an annual tradition for Lynne and me for several years. It gives us a good excuse not to stay up to midnight the night before. We argue that midnight is an arbitrary time, but sunrise is clearly a visible event launching the new year.

After this, we walked from the north end of Cliff Walk, along Easton's Beach, on the coastal road to Second Beach, also known as Sachuest Beach (stopping to look down into Purgatory Chasm), along Second Beach, then around the coastal path of the Sachuest ("at the mouth of the outlet") Point National Wildlife Refuge, where we saw several striking harlequin ducks and a snowy owl. Then we dropped down to the shoreline and walked to the north end of Third Beach. The way further east was blocked by the Sakonnet River, the easternmost of the three arms of Narragansett Bay.

*In 2022, storms and accompanying coastal erosion led to a section of the Cliff Walk collapsing. Walkers can take a detour around this section.

Sakonnet Point to Goosewing Beach

Back on the Rhode Island mainland, we walked along the south shore from the impressive Sakonnet (which means “haunt of the wild black goose”) Point to Goosewing Beach and the Massachusetts border. Points that stick out into the Atlantic Ocean—Napatree, Judith, Beavertail, Brenton, Sachuest, Sakonnet—draw the eye. These points formed when the low valleys between ridges were flooded by a postglacial rising sea. Points draw wave energy and influence currents and tides. They also draw people who build lighthouses or forts or homes on them. During World War II, 16-inch guns at Fort Church on Sakonnet Point and Fort Greene on Point Judith controlled the seas from Martha’s Vineyard to Long Island.

This section is best done at a good low tide because some rock-hopping is needed. Riprap adorns the shore in front of several houses on the west end. It’s a charming section of the Rhode Island coast, with several small rocky islands just offshore. Unlike the south coast on the western mainland that is mainly sandy beaches, this one is mostly cobbles, boulders, and bedrock, with a few small sand or pebble beaches, until you get to the sandy Goosewing Beach. We walked by the nest of an osprey that had included plastic rope as a construction material. Tide pools contained healthy-looking seaweeds and eelgrass. Salt ponds (Briggs Marsh, Little Pond, Tunipus Pond, and Quick-sand Pond) line this area, some with natural breaches and some more brackish-looking. One day, sand had plugged the Briggs Marsh breachway; on the next trip, a strong current ran out, the result of heavy rain the past week. We stepped over a dead whitetail deer in a rocky area.

When we reached the spot on Goosewing Beach where my GPS said we had arrived in Massachusetts, I drew a line in the sand with a stick. We celebrated completion of the journey with a bowl of quahog chowder in the village of Little Compton.

WALKING IS THE BEST MEDICINE, GOOD FOR BOTH BODY AND MIND, AS HIPPOCRATES said. And it’s a chance to explore both our inner and outer worlds, as Thoreau said. Adding the beauty and majesty found at the edge of the ocean stirred up our senses and our sense of wonder—feeling the soft sand moving underfoot and the wind on our faces, rubbing a smooth moonstone in our hand, smelling the salt air and rotting seaweed, hearing crying seagulls and the breaking waves—some days gentle, other days ferocious—seeing the changing color of the sea from slate gray to blue-green and the changing sea state from smooth to agitated, being more aware of the sky and clouds.

The size of particles walked upon (whether clay, silt, sand, pebbles, gravel, cobble, small rocks, boulders, solid bedrock) and how well sorted or mixed they are affects the ease of walking. The geological term *rugosity*, meaning complexity and roughness, of the walking surface affects difficulty and time needed to traverse it, even when there are few major elevation ups and downs. I have always felt that the rugosity of trails would be useful to include in hiking guides. Walking on firmer sand left by receding tide and waves is easier than the soft, dry sand further up the beach. Cobbles and rocks require constant attention to your next step. Slick, wet algae on smooth rocks can slide you into the water.

We are drawn to edges. On land, we like to walk on the shore and look at the sea. At sea, we like to look at the shore. Edges are dynamic with different worlds on either side and mixing in between. Transition zones between different habitats (ecotones) can have higher biodiversity and productivity than the habitats to either side. Sandy beaches constantly change, sand sloshing back and forth with waves, moving offshore during the storms of winter, building up in the gentle waves of summer, and moving along the shore with the longshore drift.

With the ocean on our starboard side and barrier beaches on our port side, we had no navigational difficulties on this walk. The only mildly confusing things were two “East Beaches” seven miles apart and the spot where Winnapaug Pond is connected to the sea by the Weekapaug breachway. And other than poison ivy and deer ticks, there’s not much that can hurt you on the beach in the winter—the sharks are in the water, the bears are inland. The most dangerous thing is slipping on steep, slippery rocks or getting swept off the rocks by rogue waves, which sometimes happens to shore fishermen.

During these winter walks, people and wildlife sightings other than seabirds were few. Whenever we hit rocky or salt marsh intertidal areas, we could find barnacles, other small crustaceans, worms, clams, and snails. But the lively summer sand beach creatures such as fiddler crabs and other small crustaceans were mostly dormant down in the cold sands of winter. Boring clams could be found in the holes they made in washed-up timbers. We’d often see rafts of sea ducks just outside the surf zone riding incoming swells, along with several other species of seabirds.

There could be other ways to make this journey. At Land’s End, the southwestern-most point of the United Kingdom, an amusing exhibit shows all the ways people have gotten from Land’s End to John o’Groats at the northern tip of Scotland—603 miles as the crow flies, 874 by road, 1,200 by off-road

paths. Notable “end-to-enders” have done it walking barefoot, running backward, skateboarding, swimming, hitting a golf ball the entire way, and walking nude (that one kept getting arrested, but he eventually made it all the way). And in New Hampshire, people have climbed all 48 peaks of the White Mountains more than 4,000 feet high in creative ways such as being on each of the summits at midnight, doing each one in all twelve months of the year, climbing each from all four points of the compass, and climbing each one of them 48 times.

But no matter how one completes this journey, the rewards are many. We saw the well-known highlights of this coast but also discovered many delightful gems we wouldn't have come across in our normal walks. And always, we were accompanied by the magnificent Atlantic Ocean in all its varied moods.

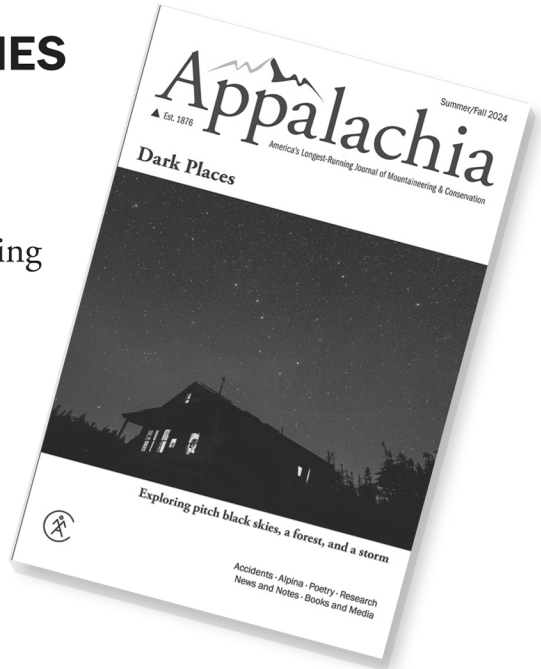
STEPHEN S. HALE is a marine ecologist and writer. His science-related work has been for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the Graduate School of Oceanography at the University of Rhode Island, and the Atlantic Ecology Division of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. He and Lynne now live in northern Vermont.

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