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Skyline Sketches: The Last Backpack

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The Last Backpack

We slowly made our way down the mountain, his hind feet dragging behind him. I knew this would be our last hike together. It was a solemn walk back to the trailhead where we had parked the truck the previous day. I reflected on the days when we were inseparable trail partners. In a couple of hours, we would be home and with him by my side, I would store his backpack in the basement. He would never wear it again.

We had named him Rufus. He came to our family by way of the Shop and Save Supermarket in New Hampshire. My wife, Nancy, and I were leaving the store when we noticed a young boy with a box of tiny, furry puppies. Nancy looked into the box and couldn't resist picking up one of those little puff balls. She held him close, tucked him under her coat, jumped into our car, and we headed home. Although we already had a dog, Molly, this little black-and-white fur ball would be going home with us.

Rufus grew to be a big, goofy, fun-loving dog. He was the perfect family dog, protective, gentle, and quiet. He loved to ride in the car with his head hanging out the window, ears flapping in the wind. He had an innocent and simple air about him and enjoyed quiet times alone as if meditating on his



Rufus on the Basin Rim Trail, Evans Notch, New Hampshire. GORDON DUBOIS

next meal. Nancy referred to him as the “uncarved block” in reference to *Tao of Pooh*, by Benjamin Hoff (Dutton Books, 1983). Along with these qualities was his passion for hiking in the mountains of New England. He was strong and determined. He carried his backpack filled with his food, treats, water, and the Frisbee he found on the slide of Mount Flume. He always stayed on the trail, never venturing off to follow the scent of a rabbit or the tracks of a moose or deer. He never hesitated to follow me on a trail, never complained that his feet were sore, or whimpered about missing home. He just wanted to trek along a forest path with me by his side.

We hiked together for many years, usually just the two of us. We always enjoyed being together, alone in the wilds of the White Mountains. He wasn't loath to take on a new adventure: climbing ledges, fording streams, even hiking after sunset with only a headlight illuminating the path ahead. Our best times were spent together as when we lay in the tent, listening to the sounds of the forest as it slowly went to sleep.

Over time, Rufus began to slow down. Long-distance hiking had taken its toll on his aging body. His strength was ebbing along with his eyesight and hearing. He no longer leaped with enthusiasm when I shouldered my pack, but would rise slowly from his slumber, gaze at me with droopy eyes begging to go. After a few hours of hiking, he would slow down, straining to keep up with me. His gait became measured, and he needed frequent stops to rest and regain his composure. I would frequently have to remove his pack and load his gear into mine. However, his spirit never faltered. Rufus was not one to give up on his love for an adventure in the mountains.

I had to modify my hikes. Besides fatigue, Rufus began to experience hip dysplasia, a condition that is common in large-breed dogs. He would trot along beside me and suddenly his hind legs would collapse. He struggled to lift himself off the ground and needed me to give him a boost.

Eventually, there came the day when I realized his hiking days were over. I thought we needed to take one more backpacking trip together. On a crisp autumn day, with the leaves turning red and gold, we loaded up the truck and headed off to Evans Notch. When we arrived at the Basin Trail I loaded Rufus's pack onto his back, threw mine over my shoulders, and began the slow tramp along the trail. It was early morning. The sun reflected off the emblazoned leaves, the sweet smell of smoke from the campground and the scent of decaying leaves on the forest floor filled the air. Rufus was trotting along the trail, happy to be in the woods again. His nose to the ground and his ears flopping with each stride.

About a mile into our hike, he began to slow down. His carefree trot turned into a belabored gait and soon he stopped, shook his head, and plopped his body down on the ground. He looked up at me and his eyes said to me, "Take this blessed pack off me, it's killing my back." Off it came. I hitched his pack to mine and we were off again.

We climbed steadily along the trail aiming for the Blue Brook Tentsite. I knew my dog's body was hurting and aching, but his heart was strong and his spirit wouldn't falter. By midafternoon, we made it to our campsite, an ideal location nestled in a stand of fir. In the past, Rufus would spend hours scouting the woods, checking out a hollow log, or lifting his nose, sniffing an odious scent. Today Rufus lay down under the trees and fell asleep, his body spent. It was a long and arduous day. I questioned if he could hike tomorrow.

As the sun dropped from view and darkness settled around us, Rufus crawled into the tent. He snuggled up next to me, laying his warm body across my sleeping bag. I stroked his soft ears listening to a barred owl hooting "who cooks for you" in the distance, a wood thrush singing good night with his flute-like call, and a coyote summoning his mate. Rufus looked at me with his droopy eyes, his lids slowly closed, and he was soon asleep. My heart grew heavy as I thought about the many times I had lain with him, after exhausting hikes and wonderful escapades. Now this was the end, the concluding act of numerous journeys in the mountains of northern New England.

The next day the sun rose bringing warmth and light into our tent. Rufus arose with renewed vigor. We downed our breakfast, broke camp, and began another day on the trail. Rufus started strong, trotting along at his usual pace, wagging his tail, ears flopping, nose in the air, and his tail wagging. He seemed energized to be on the trail again, but as we climbed to the ridgeline of the Basin Rim Trail, Rufus's pace began to slow. His energy seemed to be sucked out of his body, and then he stopped dead in his tracks. He turned his head to me and with his expressive eyes seemed to say, "I'm tired. Can we turn around, head back off the mountain, and go home?" I knew Rufus couldn't climb to the summit of Mount Meader. I reluctantly turned around. Rufus sauntered behind me, happy that I called off the summit climb. I'm sure his mind was on the comfortable cushion in the back seat of my truck.

As we made our way back to the trailhead, memories of previous hikes flooded my memory. There were so many wonderful experiences with Rufus: The swim together in Long Pond, the night he kept a bear out of our tent near Norcross Pond, the Northern Presidentials traverse, the winter trek of North

Twin Mountain in four feet of snow, and that time he found a Frisbee on the Flume Slide Trail. These memories I will always cherish. Our last backpack will remain with me as a testament to the unbroken bond between Rufus and me.

Rufus's condition continued to worsen during the following year. He struggled to stay upright, dragging his hind legs across the kitchen floor to eat. He spent much of the day sleeping, his breathing became irregular, and his eyes lost their vibrant sparkle. I had to hold his hind end so he could walk outside to relieve himself. We learned from his veterinarian that his body was riddled with cancer.

On January 11, 2007, Rufus succumbed to the inevitable. Seventeen years have passed, and I still miss him. I will cherish forever the memories of our exploits—we were inseparable hiking partners. Whenever I am packing my backpack, I remember Rufus waiting by the truck. Anyone who has had a steadfast partner like Rufus knows that the emptiness left by the death of a loving dog never goes away. It remains like a hole in my heart, but as I wend my way down a forest path, his spirit is by my side, ears flapping, nose in the air, and scanning the trail ahead. In his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* Milan Kundera wrote, “Dogs are our link to paradise. They don’t know evil or jealousy or discontent. To sit with a dog on a hillside on a glorious afternoon is to be back in Eden, where doing nothing was not boring—it was peace.”

—Gordon DuBois

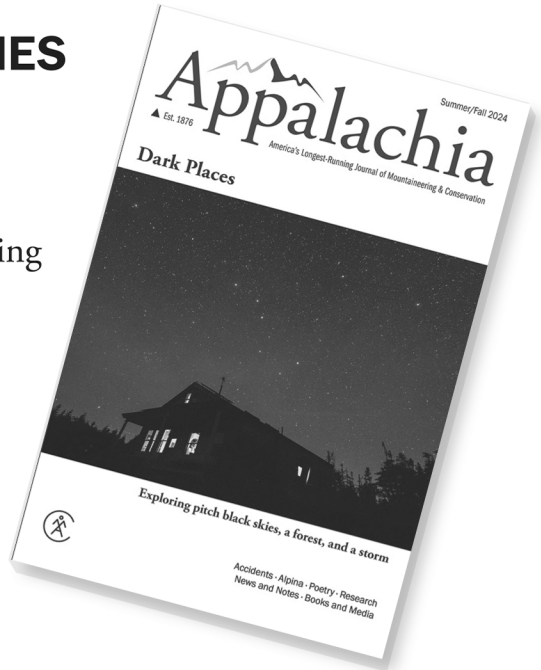
GORDON DUBOIS lives in Newport, Vermont, with his wife, Nancy, and their two dogs, Parker (who isn't a hiker) and Lucymea (who is). Dubois maintains trails and teaches wilderness skills for the Green Mountain Club. He has published in *Adirondac*, *Senior Hiker*, this journal, and Danville, Vermont's *North Star Monthly*, in which a version of this appeared last year.

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