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## The Northeast's True Hundred Mile Wilderness?

When it comes to wilderness, does federal designation matter?

Devoted New England backpackers, my wife and I first entertained this question after learning that the United States Congress had added the Wild River drainage to the White Mountain National Forest's five existing wilderness areas. Unfurling and connecting our trail-worn New Hampshire maps on the floor of our one-bedroom Manhattan apartment, a powerful possibility grabbed hold of our imagination: Could we fashion a one-hundred mile hike, on established trails whenever possible, through the Whites' official wildernesses? If so, how would it compare to a trek on Maine's famed but not officially designated Hundred Mile Wilderness, at the same time of the year and in a comparable amount of time? Not only did we have our next journey, but also a compelling face-off for the Northeast's true wilderness experience.

Wilderness is as hard to define, though, as it is to find. What is the goal? No people? No roads? No human intervention? Appropriately, we turned to the Guy and Laura Waterman vision of wilderness. That is, could we find *solitude* in a beloved region that attracts millions of annual visitors? Could we find *inaccessibility* with major state and national highways truncating these six wilderness areas? Could we find *difficulty* amid painstakingly maintained stone steps and trail ladders? Could we find the *spirit of wildness* in the face of manipulation?

Armed with these questions, we walked into the wild.

### Day One

#### Caribou-Speckled Mountain Wilderness

##### Trail Mile 10

Almost on cue, it starts raining. *I'm not going to just roll over. If you want this, you're going to have to fight for it.* It may have been sunny in Bethel, Maine, thirty minutes earlier, but as we crawl out of the car to begin our assault of White Mountain wilderness, a tempest is brewing. The wilderness is asserting itself, portending a difficult week ahead.

The weather is just the beginning. This is not Pinkham or even Kinsman Notch. Forget the quaint New England lodge or the spacious parking lot with privies. Just finding the Miles Notch Trailhead is a *coup*. Assuming you select the correct fork at the graveyard crossroads in West Bethel, the last two miles on the one-lane logging road make the approach to the Moosilauke Ravine Lodge feel like I-93. The poor fellow from the bed-and-breakfast who agreed to drive us mutters, "Thank God this is a rental," each time the muffler meets rock. Finally spotting the tiny WMNF placard indicating that this is indeed the trailhead for the westernmost wilderness area in the Whites, we find ourselves, oddly, at the brink of a four-acre clear-cut. Not exactly an image to conjure up notions of wilderness.

Pack covers secured, we head south through the minefield, less mindful of our lofty goal than of negotiating our way through stumps, debris, and mud in order to locate the trail. We eventually cross what we believe is Miles Brook, but as we're surrounded by softwood slash, we can only hope we're in the right place. A tense ten minutes of uncertain navigation brings double Eureka! Not only have we found the trail and a healthy hardwood forest, but we've found the perfect place to begin a wilderness trail. Without a doubt, the unnerving location of the trailhead and its rough first half-mile will suppress future hiker traffic. And the active logging, the antithesis of wilderness, provides the perfect juxtaposition.

Just north of Miles Notch, a hand-chiseled wooden sign announces our entrance into the Caribou-Speckled Wilderness. Before we can snap the requisite picture at this symbolic cartographical boundary, lightning flashes overhead. With no AMC hut or shelter to run to, we huddle beneath a cluster of striped-maples, sitting on our packs, shivering underneath our rain jackets, hugging our knees to keep our legs dry. The pelting rain drowns out all other sound.

We've backpacked together long enough to read each other's thoughts: What are we doing out here? Are you feeling as lonely as I am? Do you want to walk back to town before dark? To say we feel overmatched by nature is an understatement. But isn't that the point? Haven't we just found the wilderness we seek?

Then magic. The rain slackens. Heading east on the Red-Rock Trail, we crest a hemlock ridge with the perfect tread-way. Squishy underfoot, the twisty path is narrow, barely as wide as the human frame, and seems, judging by the moose and bobcat scat, frequented almost exclusively by the four-legged variety. Its Vibram virginity allows the forest floor to rise with annual decomposition. The trail is on the brink of natural reclamation, yet sees just enough foot traffic – perhaps a dozen people a week – to maintain viability. Equilibrium prevails.

Ambling along this euphoric ridge, occasionally dipping into birch cols with ferns reaching our waists, I am stunned that in a decade of crisscrossing the Whites we've never visited this Eden. Peering into the fog on the highest peak in the range, I have the reason. At 2900', Speckled Mountain lacks the increasing grandeur of the parallel ranges to the west – the Baldfaces at 3600', the Carters at 4800', the Presidentials at 6200'. If the Carters are Washington's neglected younger brother, then Speckled-Caribou has to be the forgotten pet hamster. The sense of solitude is indeed inversely proportional to the drop in elevation and distance east from Washington. It's also in between worlds. We're in Maine, oxymoronic for those who equate the Whites with New Hampshire. With too many exciting alternatives, coming to the Caribou region demands a deliberate choice. Your hiking sensibilities have to have evolved enough to ignore the hedonistic impulse to revisit the Franconia Ridge.

## **Day Two**

### **Wild River Wilderness**

#### **Trail Mile 22**

At our stealth campsite near the infant Bickford Brook, we rise with first warbling of an ovenbird. Two major crossings loom 1500' below. While fording the Cold River tests our traditional wilderness skills, traversing paved Maine 113 jeopardizes our wilderness vision and day-old solitude.

We ford for two reasons. Unlike having no choice in crossing four roads and a cog railway in linking these wilderness areas, we do control whether we use bridges. As fording is the more primordial, more difficult option, it's a no-brainer. Second, using a bridge in this instance would require significant road walking. As contact with asphalt has to be kept to fleeting seconds, we must bushwhack on this wilderness "trail" several times.

After drying our feet and re-lacing our boots, we sprint across Maine 113 before rush hour, neither seeing nor hearing a car, then bushwhack along the north side of Basin Pond to avoid the campground and boat launch on the far shore. The mist rising off the pond feeds the illusion of human-free nature.

Heading perpendicularly for the Baldface Range on the Basin Trail, the feeling of solitude faces a double-threat: we are now not only in New Hampshire, we're also one range closer to Washington. But we may be safer than we realize. Switch-backing up to Rim Junction, a low pass on the ridge, we have adopted an unfamiliar, western hiking style akin to the John Muir Trail in California's Sierra Nevada which treads pass to pass, rarely summiting peaks, never running ridges. With grand views, the high passes feel like summits. Eastern backpackers, by contrast, clamor for the ridge trails – Appalachian, Franconia, Meader – out of vista necessity. Briefly cresting wooded ridges only to plunge into their vast, featureless inter-regions does little for most Northeastern hikers. At least initially.

The dilapidated Blue Brook shelter and a few empty tent platforms along Spruce Brook compromise the palpably wild character of this infantile wilderness area, but we luck out and see no people, raising interesting questions: What if it were Saturday? What if it weren't raining yesterday in Caribou? Is this solitude irregular?

## **Day Three**

## **Great Gulf Wilderness**

### **Trail Mile 36**

Animal encounters are conventional wilderness barometers. Ask any Northeastern enthusiast to define wildness, and she'll mention loons and moose; we saw both the previous week in Maine, trumped only by the fisher near Gulf Hagas.

But wild behavior from less charismatic creatures is equally telling. Near No Ketchum Pond, a mother grouse, hissing loudly, charges within inches of us, retreating to her chicks after we retreat in fear. We've experienced such grouse behavior before only in Quebec's remote Chic-Chocs. We give this feisty anomaly a wide berth.

Crash! Moments later, a bruin bushwhacks onto the trail and dashes away from us. Our first White Mountain bear-sighting ever! Its healthy flight instinct distinguishes this bear from its people-acclimated brethren we've met in Yosemite and Shenandoah.

At Perkins Notch, we pause at the lightly trodden Rainbow Trail, which climbs to Carter Dome. We reluctantly spurn this inviting path, abiding by another self-imposed rule: no 4000-footers on this trek. While this approach may be desolate, 4832' Carter Dome is bagged frequently from other directions. While peak-bagging disperses hikers into unfamiliar corners of the range, it renders such summits increasingly familiar. Sit atop the most isolated high peak – Owl's Head or Cabot – for a few summer hours, and you'll enjoy spirited conversation.

We enter boulder-strewn Carter Notch with the stealth of deer hunters. Lethal to our mission, it houses an AMC hut (even if one of the least visited). As luck has it, our midday, midweek arrival leaves the camp deserted. Even the caretaker is out re-supplying. We sign the log, "In Search of Wilderness – One Hundred Miles from Caribou to Sandwich", succumbing to the odd urge to leave evidence of our purported solitude trip.

Leaving the notch, we reluctantly – despite being proud former Georgia to Mainers – walk a brief section of the magnetic Appalachian Trail. Its wide, beaten tread-way is the antithesis of our new "reclaimed" paradigm. Our sacrilegious act proves a jinx, for our fifty-four hour people-free streak ends on a bog-bridge next to Carter Pond. An initial urge to resent this solitary hiker vanishes when we pass four guys wading in the Nineteen-Mile Brook shortly afterwards.

Time to reflect. The solitude we've crafted thus far in this bustling range is encouraging. The previous week from Monson to Abol Bridge in Maine's Hundred Mile Wilderness yielded over a hundred people, including eight large groups. While that person-per-mile average is far better than typical backpacking trips in the Whites, we're shattering that number this week. To be fair, Maine's trail never crossed a paved road, but it did intersect four improved logging roads, all providing day hiker access, and an active railway (the midnight train whistle at Wilson Stream Lean-To bearing proof). An even more jarring moment occurred at pristine Jo-Mary Lake, where the sound of loons one minute was replaced by a hydroplane the next.

Back to New Hampshire. If we faced piranha yesterday at Route 113, we face crocodiles at Route 16 today. After waiting for a lull in the incessant traffic, we leap into the breach like a couple of wildebeests, feet hitting pavement fewer than eight times. The ensuing half-mile bushwhack takes nearly two hours due to thick underbrush and intense fords of the Peabody's twin forks. Fortuitously, this delays our arrival at the Great Gulf Trail until early evening, thinning the day-hiking crowd. We pass only four more hikers, but do nearly trip over several tents. For a potentially devastating day, seeing only nine *Homo sapiens* is a victory.

### **Day Four**

#### **Dry River Wilderness**

### **Trail Mile 51**

The crux awaits. Mount Washington's urban summit cone separates the Great Gulf and the Dry River (two of the Northeast's finest wildernesses) more effectively than Scylla and Charybdis. To preserve the continuity of this backpack, we have no choice but to navigate through and hope for survival. The wilderness anathemas are abundant: radio towers, cars,

parking lots, a food court (with its admittedly tantalizing chili), a cog railway, and throngs of people. Expecting to have Washington to ourselves in any month (let alone August) is as naïve as expecting solitude in Central Park.

To give ourselves a fighting chance, we employ the Waterman philosophy. As Guy and Laura illustrate in *Wilderness Ethics*, ninety percent of the hiking crowd gravitates toward one or two trails up the popular peaks (in this case, the Tuckerman and Ammonoosuc Ravines, both half the mileage and requiring 1000' less elevation gain than our Great Gulf ascent and Dry River descent), while almost no one uses the first three hours of reliable people-free daylight. Thus, if you choose the right trail and leave early, even the most visited peak can beget solitude.

The headwall trail proves a time-swallowing adversary, however. It is a linear 1600' scramble in under a mile, literally straddling a waterfall for short stretches. It slows us to a rock climber's pace; we left at sunrise to beat the first cog, but its whistle and noxious coal plume – hovering above Lake Spaulding – herald our defeat.

Yet we're too absorbed in this 5.3 climb to mind. William Hart, who also built the insanely wonderful Six Husbands Trail, understood the nexus between difficulty and wildness. At an hour when hundreds of people switchback up Tuckerman, we encounter no one. Pulling ourselves up onto Bigelow Lawn is akin to lifting ourselves up onto the Grand Traverse in the Shawangunks.

Our unconventional assault of the Northeast's most celebrated peak – “The bodies in this car conquered Mount Washington without actually standing on the summit” would be our bumper sticker – requires that we forgo the chili and run a mile down the Gulfside toward Jefferson (eleven backpackers passed), then contour south beneath the summit on the Westside. Although we can relax on this mostly ignored trail, the expansive above treeline view replete with a grand hotel, ski resort, and pastoral Lancaster country force us to contend with a sobering reality: Nearly all Northeastern panoramas reveal evidence of man, even if bucolic. Mount Bond in the middle of the Whites comes closest to the primeval vistas associated with Mount Kaweah in the Sierra or Gannett Peak in the Wind Rivers, but its access trails are human highways. If you want to feel completely alone, forget treeline.

For the final leg of the Washington challenge, we opt for the longer Davis and Camel Trails as opposed to the shorter but congested Crawford Path. Heads down as if searching for Labrador Tea, or some equally obscure alpine flower, we pretend we can't see the scores of people milling around Lakes of the Clouds or those climbing the intervening quarter mile of talus. It begs the question of who counts – people passed or people seen. We opt for the former. Counting the latter would squash our Maine total in an hour.

Gazing over the Dry River Valley at the Oakes Gulf headwall, it's indisputable that this 6200' behemoth, despite inherent problems, spawns wilderness. Its drainages are vast, creating the anonymous realms fundamental to solitude. Miles of nondescript spruce and birch stand below us.

Four miles down, now lost in the chasm we just peered over, we've become part of the forest, of the inter-peak region. Our only rivals are an intrepid father-daughter tandem heading for Washington.

At our Dry River campsite, we relive this exciting day, relishing our survival. Like hares scampering from burrow to burrow under an eagle's aerie, we necessarily tempted fate before plunging back into the forested abyss.

## **Day Five**

### **Pemigewasset Wilderness**

#### **Trail Mile 70**

Washington was a thrilling mid-point, offering the week's peak elevation, difficulty, and crowds. Looking forward, another potential bookend of solitude awaits.

Darting across yet another highway, a mid-hike crisis seeps in. Are we not heavily contriving this sense of wilderness, mirroring the problematic nature of prescribed wilderness

areas themselves? Just as deeming nature “wilderness” is a conspicuously human act, we conspicuously avoid summits and pretend people seen but not passed do not exist. Now we’re heading for a sliver of the most visited wilderness area in the Whites, the Pemigewasset. Why? Bounded by fifteen 4000-footers, this beloved area is, in Roderick Nash’s famous words, “in danger of being loved to death.” It even has its own visitor center.

Heavily wooded Owl’s Head, in the middle of the Pemigewasset, is the appropriate destination, but its 4023’ elevation ensures more daily traffic than a week on Speckled. Plus, its approaches are heavily traveled. So, for the first time on this trek, we compromise, choosing not to traverse the breadth of a wilderness area, instead grazing the Pemigewasset’s remote southeastern corner. Before this contrived isolation, we contend with a contrived three mile bushwhack sandwiched between Route 302 and the Conway Scenic Railway.

As we climb under old-growth spruce to windswept Nancy Pond, however, we repeat the mantra of this hike: Why haven’t we been here yet? With the Southern Presidentials a mere stone’s throw away, the question is rhetorical. The mature trees mirror our maturing hiking psyche.

A ledge at Norcross Pond furthers our wonderment, providing an unexpected view of Bonds’ eastern slope. While hundreds feast on the western side of this range each summer day from Franconia Ridge, only dozens know this underbelly (only four others so far today). The carpeted descent toward Stillwater Junction, softened further by the late afternoon’s filtered sunlight, belies its logging past.

To continue our contrived streak of sleeping within the actual wildernesses, we pitch our tent in a dry gully a few hundred feet from imposing Carrigain Notch, the borderland. The sun sets two hours earlier tonight, discomfotingly comforting.

## **Day Six**

### **Sandwich Range Wilderness**

#### **Trail Mile 86**

It’s a sloppy morning. After rolling up a tent saturated from three overnight thunderstorms, we trudge along the boggy Sawyer River Trail, often shin-deep in mud. Forging the burly, bridgeless Swift is an ablution.

We feel like Survivor Man at the Kancamagus, the last paved obstacle of the journey. Maybe we are too wet, or perhaps we’ve successfully found wilderness and are hence intrigued by this asphalt anomaly, but this time we actually linger, mesmerized by a loud eighteen-wheeled beast chugging toward Kancamagus Pass, water spewing from her tires. Part of us wants to be inside the cab, heading somewhere dry. We are tired and hungry. The metal bear seems as humbled by this wilderness as we do.

Twice losing our way on the Livermore Trail, we feel truly lonely for the first time since Miles Notch. Even in sunshine, this could be Walden. Or Anchorage Bus 142 on the Stampede Trail. Who would believe this was once a busy thoroughfare connecting Waterville with the Pemigewasset logging camps?

Topping nondescript Livermore Pass, my eyes blur from countless shades of green, sharpened by the dark fog. This overgrown trail limits the scope to a few square feet of forest, allowing us to see the proverbial forest for its mosses, lichens, and ferns amid ancient rockfall. The road to wilderness stops for botany and geology.

We could spend an entire week in this intoxicating piece of forest, but Mount Tripyramid’s rugged South Slide, buffering the western edge of the Sandwich Range Wilderness, beckons. We yearn to hike the even more difficult North Slide, but doing so necessitates crossing two 4000-footers. The rules of the game dictate our every move.

Paradise strikes again: the Kate Sleeper. Her earthy sign, visible only when descending the slide and barely wider than the spruce trunk it hangs from, is so inconspicuous that the Wonalancet Club must hope you miss it. After an initial steep drop, Kate becomes pure boreal bliss, snaking along the finest of all the forgotten trails of this hike. We wend our way through

sunlight balsam heaven, never having to break stride, but feeling compelled to tiptoe in this cathedral.

Kate's a guilty pleasure. We selfishly want her all to ourselves, knowing that "getting the secret out" undermines her sponginess and incomparable solitude. So why ever write about it?

### **Day Seven**

### **New Hampshire Route 49**

### **Trail Mile 100**

Clambering over a maze of uneven boulders around clandestine Flat Mountain Pond, we agree that on the Appalachian Trail this gem would enjoy rock-star status and have an improved, dull trail to boot. The only soul within miles that we know of is, not surprisingly, a peak-bagger on Whiteface.

Sandwich Dome's 3993' elevation means that two boreal chickadees our only company. How different the mountain would feel were it seven feet taller. With wild views into the bowls of the Whites extending to Baldface, six days distant, Sandwich is a worthy Katahdin. We loiter.

The five mile descent via Smart Brook (the most obscure route on this already lonely mountain) makes for a fitting end. Twisting our way atop brown carpet, stopping only to negotiate blow-downs and to admire mossy, car-sized boulders, we have found the Red-Rock Trail's double, book-ending the week. To enhance the symmetry, Smarts abruptly dead-ends in a clear-cut, just minutes from Route 49, belying one-hundred miles of near contiguous wilderness.

Making a beeline for Waterville Valley, we have little interest in debating whether we have found the authentic one-hundred mile wilderness trail. Hot showers and food take precedence. Once satiated, however, we reconsider the question and answer affirmatively.

It goes beyond the math (which the Whites won handily, twenty-seven people passed to one-hundred and twelve in Maine). It transcends the complicated "Which-is-truly-wilder?" calculus and the problematically qualitative "Which feels wilder?" consideration. Ironically, it's the contriving, the heavily bemoaned "game" that gives the victory to the Whites, and, more importantly, yields pragmatic implications for actually preserving wilderness. Just as most designated Northeast wildernesses attempt to restore old-growth, this trail restores the imagination.

Ecosystem-minded opponents of federal wilderness areas rightfully criticize "freeze-framing" nature, and while such artificial places are perhaps imperfect vehicles, they do get us thinking about wilderness. For wilderness to exist in the mind, it needs nurturing. Challenging its very essence is a good start. To its detriment, Maine lacks such controversy.

Moreover, a true wilderness trail can never become a static destination for the masses. Maine's storied past proves self-effacing. It's too easy for the hiker; if he wants wilderness, he knows where to go, without having to *think* about where to go. He never creates a destination. Numbers skyrocket. Shelters rise.

Since New Hampshire lacks a celebrated wilderness trail, and since most of the wilderness areas don't make the greatest hits album, coming to Caribou *et al* involves self-sacrifice. In the few popular wildernesses, avoiding the hordes demands creativity. The heavy lifting is left to the individual.

A true wilderness trail is thus metaphorical, amidst which the process of discovery trumps any actual route. Like wilderness itself, it is constantly in a state of becoming, each success inspiring other possibilities – such as the new goal already taking shape on our apartment floor, this one linking the Whites' wildest non-wilderness areas from Carr Mountain to Albany Notch. One preferred trail replaces another even before overuse becomes an issue. And once abandoned, by choice or necessity, a route reclaims itself, perhaps to be used again. This process guarantees dispersion, minimizing hardened campsites and orange-peel-littered summits.

Guy Waterman understood this game brilliantly, always seeking the next project that would take him to ever more remote corners of the Whites. He offers a story of constant movement, of process over destination. Like Guy, we must emulate true wilderness by constantly

evolving, from traversing Franconia Ridge to peak-bagging to exploring forgotten trails to climbing technical routes to becoming ephemeral visitors of nondescript backcountry. If we play the game right, evidence of our visit vanishes almost instantly. I therefore write about Kate, Livermore, and Red-Rock with confidence. Those inclined toward our route have already evolved, and the few who come will not stay long.

William Wordsworth played the game too, understanding that wilderness resides in the imagination; he called a primeval experience on Wales' Mount Snowdon "the perfect image of a mighty mind". If we can dream up that perfect new route, constantly finding wilderness in familiar areas, then our beloved peaks and valleys just may feel, if not be, forever wild.