

*Waterman Fund Essay Winner*

# One Tough Gal

*Why have the ideals of femininity  
been deemed something far from wild?*

**Dove Henry**



*Editor's note: The winner of the eighth annual Waterman Fund Essay Contest, which Appalachia sponsors jointly with the Waterman Fund, explores assumptions we make about men and women in the backcountry. Dove Henry, who has built trails and cairns for four years, asks why people flinch at the sight of a woman working in wild places, as if her presence runs counter to nature. Her thoughts on this intrigued the essay judges and we hope they will change how you view workers in the backcountry. Next year's essay contest will be announced in the spring. For more about the Waterman Fund, see [watermanfund.org](http://watermanfund.org).*

MY PALMS AND FOREARMS FELT FRAGILE, SCRAPING AGAINST the jagged rock I carried to my half-built cairn. I added the stone to my growing pile of material and looked at the structure for a moment, contemplating where to place the new piece. People like to talk about feeling insignificant in the face of a starry sky, but I think looking down at the earth offers a much closer dose of perspective. There is nothing like a billion-year-old rock to remind you of your own brevity. The Adirondacks are full of them. As a geological event, the formation of the range was actually more recent than what formed other Northeastern ranges, which belong to the older, eroding Appalachians. The Adirondacks are still moving up. They stand at the southernmost part of a shield that forms the ancient core of the North American continent: all Precambrian rock stretching up through Quebec into Greenland. New Yorkers refer to the region as the North Country, which I always liked because it reminded me of the Bob Dylan song about the girl with the warm coat and the long hair, *where the winds hit heavy on the borderline*.

Behind my cairn and beyond the summit of Algonquin Peak, layers of altitude colored the landscape. The gray summit of Wright Peak emerged boldly from a band of spiky, dark pines, which bled into the mixed deciduous forest below. Birch leaves glittered shades of green and gold in the wind. One of my favorite parts of hiking an Adirondack peak is experiencing the terrain change— noticing the birches and maples trail off into conifers, stumbling across larger and larger patches of gleaming bedrock, feeling the wind pick up and the temperature drop in a crescendo toward the summit. I love that

*Dove Henry with Zach Campbell (left) and Tom Schafer, standing next to the 7-by-7-foot crib bridge they built on Andy's Creek in the central Adirondacks.* COURTESY OF DOVE

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exhilarating moment when you begin to escape from the treeline and catch the first glimpses of the world below you.

The day was so clear I could even see the lighter green of faraway fields and black of asphalt roads, cutting distinctly human lines and angles in the distance. A middle-aged man and his two daughters hiked past me a few yards away.

“You go, girl!” he shouted at me, smiling.

I politely smiled back. This was my second summer working on a trail crew in the Adirondacks, and I had heard that phrase before. I liked it better than, “Do you need some help with that?,” which I have also heard on occasion. But even this man’s well-intentioned words bespoke a subtle and deeply ingrained condescension that has become familiar to me as a woman working in wilderness areas.

I looked away from the summit, towards my three male coworkers building their own cairns below me. They were the only humans I could see, but they seemed to belong to the terrain, as if they were composed of the same stuff. Each man wore pants softened and stained by earth, and each was shirtless, baring torsos browned by the sun and hardened by labor. I watched one place a rock on his almost-finished cairn, which stood at least to the shoulder of his 6-foot-4-inch body. I bet no one ever asked him if he needed help.

Humans measured and built the roads, fields, and towns I could see from the summit of Algonquin Peak, imposing hard lines of human order on an otherwise chaotic landscape, making it usable. James C. Scott describes these techniques of reduction from a historical and political perspective. “In order for officials to be able to comprehend aspects of the ensemble, that complex reality must be reduced to schematic categories,” he writes. “The only way to accomplish this is to reduce an infinite array of detail to a set of categories that will facilitate summary descriptions, comparisons, and aggregation.” Scott calls this “legibility.” Humans have constructed similar schematic categories to make sense of their own bodies and minds—to make the wild human landscape legible.

But the natural world has often proved too dynamic and powerful for our efforts to control, know, and order it. It heaves up through the asphalt of roads, makes its soil dry and unusable after too many seasons of the same crop. It eats away at the ideas and expectations we have for particular categories of people—categories, like gender, that we have created to know and control

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1. Scott, James C., *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. (Yale University Press, 1998).

each other. So many of these ordering systems that we hold in our heads are stripped away by life in the wilderness, where the disorder and infinity that underlies everything is left in its raw physical form. The wildness exists also in human-built areas, just beneath the veil of order. You can see it creeping up through the cracks in the sidewalk.

People often react peculiarly to the sight of a woman working in wilderness areas. It often surprises them, or confuses them. It concerns others—the idea of a woman out in the backcountry, all by herself. In my four seasons working for the Adirondack Mountain Club, as few as three and never more than five women have worked on the sixteen-person trail crew. Trail-building requires directly and deliberately altering land that we otherwise try to protect from the human hand, and this makes it a unique form of stewardship. Of course, the trails themselves, and structures along them, were carefully designed and created to minimize human impact on wilderness areas. Stone staircases anchor soil in steep areas that would otherwise become gullies. And water bars prevent erosion by diverting water off the trail. The job demands a tremendous amount of physical strength and stamina. On this front, men generally have an upper hand, given their taller, larger frames. However, physical strength means little if one does not understand how and when to use it. Like all forms of stewardship, trail-building also requires intelligence and humility.

Humility is essential to wilderness stewardship, and it is an uncommon virtue in the civilized world. Understandably so—towns and cities are crowded with our own recent fingerprints and footsteps. It's easy to forget that, at one time, we were not here—that things were not the way they are now. It's easy to look around and think, *Yes. We built this. I am part of this. It is here because of me and it is here for me.* But once, here, protozoa lived and squirmed and photosynthesized in hot, algae-filled seas in the most inhuman ways. The moon loomed so close to the earth that it pulled the tides 1,000 feet high. And magma squeezed through sediment deep in the alien regions at the center of the earth. Working on top of Algonquin, I was reminded of it every day by the thick, raised ribbons of igneous rock that glistened darkly on the summit. The veins were even harder than the anorthosite they cut across, even more impervious to the weather. They humbled me as I felt the ancient rock beneath my hands. Worn down by eras of creeping sheets of ice, the rain, the wind, and now my own fingertips. By comparison, my fingertips seemed infinitesimal, my whole body a soft, warm, fleeting organization of matter.

The sunlight ebbed, and I watched my shadow lengthen across the bedrock of the summit. My cairn grew, though not as quickly as I had hoped.

The physical lack of human order becomes very apparent when working with native materials to build a structure such as a bridge, stone staircase, water bar, or cairn. Each piece of lumber or stone has its own set of irregularities, requiring extensive adjustments and readjustments to sit stably on what is probably an equally irregular surface. There is nothing that can be measured, and little that can be cut to fit perfectly—no squares or rectangles or other easily nameable shapes. It's more interesting that way, I've found. Working with dimensional lumber always requires some form of dense monotony—measuring and sawing decking, chiseling identical notches all morning and afternoon.

I ran my hand across the surface of my current problem stone, feeling the sections where it swelled and sharp spots where it had cleaved, taking note of each nub, lump, and depression. It takes a special type of knowledge to work with native materials. And it takes an extraordinary amount of patience.

“FOOOOOO!”

I heard my co-worker and crew leader howl from the base of the summit, signaling the end of our workday. The sound evaporated quickly in the great expanse of air. The sun was now low in the sky, and I felt a sudden chill as a gust of wind cooled the sweat on the back of my neck. I pulled my hair out of its ponytail to keep my ears and neck warm. My nostrils filled with the smell of campfire smoke. Woods perfume. Hurriedly pulling my fleece over my head, I abandoned the harsh rocks and wind of the summit for the comforting trees below.

During our five days building cairns, our crew of four camped at MacIntyre Falls nearly two miles down slick rock slides, roots, and steep cobble from the work site. That week on Algonquin remains in my memory with the stark clarity that comes from being on an exposed summit. Each day felt like an inhale and exhale, moving up and out of the woods with the sun, watching it carve across the sky as the day swelled with the morning. And then it would recede, and we would descend into the forest again, accelerating the darkening day. The hike each morning and evening was long enough to get lost in thought, and I became completely entrenched in my own brain on the way up and down. There are wild and distant places inside us all.

On the way back to camp, I meditated on the remarks I had heard that week. My co-workers and I encountered more hikers in one day working on Algonquin than we did in a whole week at most of our projects. My female presence seemed to run contrary to many people's expectations of the workers

they expected to encounter in the wilderness, and their expectations of the women they might encounter in the world. “You’re one tough gal!” an older man had told me that afternoon, resting his elbow on his knee to catch his breath on his way up the steep summit. *Yes, I am pretty damn tough*, I thought to myself. *A lot tougher than you and most of the men I’ve seen this week*. A feeling of childish indignation swelled in my chest as I remembered the moment. It felt kind of like the day I learned that I couldn’t play baseball anymore because girls played softball in junior high. Why did my presence on the summit make me a tough gal and not just plain tough? Why is a woman working in the wilderness more rare and impressive than a man doing the same thing?

IF ONE LOOKS BACK ON THE HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF WILDERNESS, it is not particularly surprising that men dominate careers in public land management and wilderness stewardship. The history of American wilderness is, like many histories, full of men. In the American environmental imagination, it was born as a place explored and managed by rugged frontiersmen with “fine, manly qualities,” in Teddy Roosevelt’s own words. These wilderness men lived a “hard and dangerous” existence outside of civilization, he wrote in 1881. Wild lands required men who were “brave, hospitable, hardy, and adventurous.” Well into the 21st century, the concept of wilderness has proven difficult to extract from what many still regard as traditionally masculine qualities—gritty toughness and physicality, fearless independence and strength.

Just as wilderness is a place historically regarded as masculine, so too have the ideals of femininity been deemed something far from wild. As long as mainstream expectations of the ideal female body persist—that it should be well-groomed, clean, soft, hairless, and delicate—wilderness areas will appear hostile to the physical work of female bodies. Although the last half-century has witnessed American women moving out of the home and into the workplace, we probably picture the financially independent career woman more often with lipstick and heels than with biceps and boots. Her independence and power are not derived from the strength and power of her body. The movement of women into the workplace has largely occurred within the confines of cushy civilized places, where structures exist to ensure the populace can meet its physical needs with some level of ease and comfort. Instincts are displaced. People live at a distance from their bodies as wild entities.

But living and working in the wilderness catapults even 21st-century human beings back into their animality. Just before we reached camp, my friends and I paused to rinse our hands and faces in the pools of icy water below the falls. I sat and straightened my legs, reaching toward my muddy toes to feel my back stretch and my hamstrings tighten. I could feel the change in my calf muscles after a few days up and down Algonquin, and my leg hairs had become bleached and softened by the sun. My stomach felt hollow with hunger after the hike down, and I suddenly realized I was ravenous. The most prominent sensations during a trail crew workweek are not specific to gender—hunger, exhaustion, heat, cold, disappointment, or satisfaction at the work and weather. After a few weeks in the woods, far from the memory and history that saturates human-built places, I think I identify more as a human or even as a mammal than I do as a woman specifically. It becomes very apparent how the reductive categories of gender—the qualities we ascribe to men and women and the summary descriptions we provide for each—are just as human-built as the roads that traverse a dynamic natural landscape.

The most obvious duality out there is that between what is human and what is not. And after some time living and working in the backcountry, it becomes clear that even the line between the human and the wild is also an invention. In remote outdoor areas, we become more astutely aware of the wilderness that remains within our own bodies and minds, regardless of the gender we experience culturally. It is not that this wilderness within us is absent when we live and work in places other than protected lands—far from it. But the human-built world so often serves to stifle or shun the wild. It is difficult to revel in the beauty of what is unknowable within ourselves when it is so profitable for others to claim to us that it is known. To face our own wildness, and to embrace it, is to be a true steward of wilderness.

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DOVE HENRY grew up in the woods of the northern Catskills. She earned her degree in environmental history at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. In summer 2015, she was working her fourth season on the Adirondack Mountain Club's professional trail crew.