

The Torch of Preservation

By Tyler Socash

I observed reality through the plexiglass. Did the other passengers on American Airlines Flight 1920 notice? My vantage point from row 12, seat A, was eye-opening. More and more, the marks on the landscape came into view: buildings, highways, on-ramps, parking lots, cul-de-sacs, an amusement park, suburbs... Endless suburbs. Humanity's reach seemed boundless, unchecked. When you zoom out the microscope, the view from 30,000 feet is just as staggering as it is startling. "Where has the wilderness gone?" I asked myself rhetorically as we left the east coast behind. Nervously reaching underneath the seat in front of me, my carry-on was still there. The contents of my pack weighed heavily on my mind; a burden I felt unworthy to bear.

Continuing our ascent, we entered an uneasy turbulence. I rolled onto my side, shaking back-and-forth between worlds. Just a dream? Clouds whisked by the aerodynamic wings as I suddenly felt uncomfortable, chilled. A brisk wind was waking me up. Teeth chattering, muscles aching, I reluctantly opened my eyes after insufficient sleep. The imaginary white cumulus clouds outside the airplane were replaced by a tangible veil of snow that coated my bivouac. While brushing it away, I felt my Granite Gear backpack by my side. The contents therein were the impetus for this very adventure. Darkness hung low beneath my bivouac under the balsams. Not yet dawn, but I had awoken with perspective and a reaffirmed mission...

Twenty-four hours earlier, the scene on the shores of Wolf Pond was outwardly tranquil, yet internally tense. The newly-purchased Boreas Ponds Tract loomed in the distance, without a discernible sound in the hushed November air. We had yet to embrace any fair share of hardship or challenge at this point. It was a cold camping trip, to be sure, but as cold as we expected and at a front country site that we could manage. Pete Nelson's hearty pasta dinner from the night

before, combined with Brendan Wiltse's extra oatmeal packets, fueled my internal furnace. Our campfire had cooled to ash, but memories of the rising flames still flickered in my mind. It was time to leave.

“Are you ready, Tyler?” Brendan rightfully questioned, adjusting his lens. Recovering from an injury, Brendan would go no further today, but he graciously offered to capture the departure. We had a collective message to share about the very Adirondack wilderness in front of us.

“I'm excited!” I replied with youthful exuberance. The mountains keep us young. "How heavy is it?" The tone in his voice sounded concerned as he snapped a photograph.

“I hope it's heavy enough.”

Extending my arms backwards, I centered the weight on my shoulders and tightened the straps. Our pro-wilderness statement was neither sumptuous, nor grandiose. It was simple. It sat snugly in a bundle at the base of my backpack. The idea of it greatly outweighed the package itself. We were aiming to make the biggest statement possible.

Scrambling to get gear together before sunrise, Pete was optimistic. “This bushwhack will be rooted in the spirit of wildness!” he exclaimed. This would assuredly be the more difficult path, which was exactly the point. Only the Adirondack Park Agency has the power to classify the quiet land in front of us. Their main stumbling block with the classification remains that old logging roads penetrate the tract, which allegedly diminish the wildness of the region. Couldn't these old roads re-wild? That's the belief of the Adirondack Wilderness Advocates, and it was Gulf Brook Road that we would intentionally bushwhack around.

Maneuvering through the thick sections of blowdown was easy for Pete's dog, Henderson, but laborious for taller hikers. Sometimes ducking low, other times stepping high, we

navigated by compass through the evergreens around Wolf Pond. An ardent explorer off-trail, Pete assisted me on this first segment of the journey. I was glad to have such spirited company.

“The trees are stately out here,” Pete reverently stated as we marched past a grove of ancient cedars. Trees are sacred in the Adirondacks, protected on public lands as *Forever Wild*. The ones we admired would only be getting bigger thanks to these Constitutional protections, and next to their trunks we typically found the path of least resistance.

Entanglements behind us, we stayed on our bearing and passed by Andrews Brook Tributary, the first of many Value-1 wetlands that are ubiquitous across the Boreas Ponds Tract. These waterways are important harborers of New York's state fish – the beleaguered brook trout. Shouldn't sensitive habitat protection always supersede recreational wants? As cautiously as I could with a cumbersome pack, I skirted the fragile soils and darted back up into the hardwoods, wondering if these waterways would receive the protection they warrant.

When Pete and I finally emerged onto the dirt road, it was time to split. Pete headed south to walk four miles to the nearest public road. Henderson eagerly scampered after him. I turned north.

“Let's do this,” I spoke aloud with resolve.

As a 31-year old with no activism experience, I honestly wasn't exactly sure how I arrived here. Growing up in the Adirondacks, I was predisposed to going outside and enjoying nature, but defending the wilderness? I never could have been predicted that something like the intricacies of land classification would spur me into action. As far as I can tell, 99% of activism involves getting on your feet. Otherwise, how will anyone know what you stand for? Incapacitated? Use your writing, your voice, your photography or any medium that aids in expressing your beliefs with passionate conviction. I began deploying all tactics.

At 9:07 a.m., I arrived at the eponymous Boreas Ponds themselves. This marked my fourth visit in the past year. I'm drawn to this very spot, not because of the view, but because of the challenge it currently presents. A small window to the north showcases the tallest peaks in the state, but it's admittedly not any more spectacular than views you can get elsewhere. With 6,970 miles of public road that crisscross and dissect the Adirondack Park, accessibility is most assuredly abundant. More expansive views of the Adirondack High Peaks are available along Route 73 in Keene, Route 30 in Tupper Lake, Route 28N in Newcomb, and most notably of all, along the Adirondack Loj Road outside of Lake Placid. The views themselves aren't special, they are found everywhere, but how you attain the view at Boreas Ponds makes the experience memorable. The undertaking adds significance.

Further along the old logging roads that skirt the wetlands, I was impressed by nature's recuperation. The anti-conservation groups tout humanity's might across the Boreas Ponds Tract. "How can this place be wilderness if it has thirty miles of logging roads, two dams, and multiple culverts?" That very battle cry sounded at every public hearing hosted by the Adirondack Park Agency. Thankfully, the indefatigable resiliency of our natural world is indifferent to our supposed road-building prowess and glorious gravel pits. Without constant investment and maintenance, these shall inevitably fade.

Remnants of aging roads became choked with understory. Northern white-cedar trees and head-high balsam firs reclaimed what will always be theirs. Using the compass once more, I headed northeast at every vague junction. Through gaps in the trees, the lofty height of Mount Marcy jutted out above, and the soft tracks of a red fox were visible below. Enough time had now passed from the front country campsite at Wolf Pond to feel completely immersed in

wildness. There are so few places remaining in the northeast where this sensation can be achieved. Aren't these places worth saving?

My route intersected with the marked trail to Panther Gorge at 11:52am. Deftness was required as I moved across the icy planks through Marcy Swamp. My boot broke through the ice on one occasion, lacking the nimbleness of the snowshoe hares before me. This was the backcountry now, and mistakes would be magnified under such circumstances. I paused to change layers, socks, refuel, and rehydrate. My back muscles were instantly thankful for the brief respite. Sweat. Aches. Pains. Today's experiences were imbued with a real sense of adventure and elan. It was the perfect day to fight for a wild space that provides a challenge.

The snow-covered trail ahead led ever upwards into the High Peaks Wilderness. There is a special magic found within certain locations on the planet: walking through the concourse to enter an expansive stadium, the controlled-sprint ending at the living room on Christmas Day, and the same goes for crossing a boundary into a wild space. It's a grand gesture of modesty to allow the mysteries of nature to prevail. For when we build a road into every once-remote pond, and when we pave our way to the top of every mountain, what have we lost in the process?

During the climb, I was constantly reminded that I wasn't alone. The weight of the pack ensured that. Up ahead, something else on the ground caught me off guard. I bent down low to take a closer look at the claw mark. "Black bear," I confirmed for myself. The tracks were the size of my hand, and the animal was obviously ambling in my direction of travel. Perhaps the bear was on one final stroll for sustenance before winter? Not knowing the bear's intent heightens the thrill. My heart rate elevated at the thought of encountering megafauna on my wilderness journey. The fresh imprints couldn't have been more than a few hours old. Wildlife.

Wonder. Magic. After having the privilege of ambulating all morning, I had both mentally and physically arrived in the mysterious wilderness.

Climbing more steeply now, I rehearsed alternative speeches in my mind on the hike out of Panther Gorge. Finding the right words wasn't the only problem. Deciding which ones would inclusively represent this revival of Adirondack wilderness advocacy was tougher. I was on my way to the Adirondack Park Agency in Ray Brook, NY. The Agency commissioners would decide the fate of Boreas Ponds, and perhaps this wilderness walk from the Ponds themselves would be a gesture that could ignite their imaginations? We had to change their minds. They were convening the next morning, and by 1:36pm, I had only just made it to the highest pond source of the Hudson River. Our wilderness gesture, sitting silently at the base of my backpack, had just made it to Lake Tear of the Clouds.

Verplanck Colvin, Bob Marshall, Paul Schaefer, and Grace Hudowalski had all witnessed the wild splendor of this high-elevation lake. We have the great privilege of recreating in the mountains that they worked so hard to preserve. Their integrity and dedication begat our fortunate legacy. I was proud to be following in the footsteps of such tireless wilderness champions. Giving up was not an option. While reaching the highpoint of the journey well before nightfall was comforting, more snow than predicted coated the upper-elevations at Lake Tear. I had to don microspikes to safely negotiate the terrain and to maintain my pace. The sun was shining, though, and with that bright sky came an indispensable optimism. We were going to do it.

Darkness fell just before I reached Henderson Lake. Wilderness advocates from Rochester, Craig McGowan and Dianne Yale, inspired by the movement to save Boreas Ponds, greeted me at a

lean-to along the water at 6:05pm. I was the grateful recipient of the much-needed calories and Ethiopian brew that they provided. The walk was so much more than the 27 miles covered so far. Craig and Dianne provided me with a spiritual rejuvenation – a reminder that so many people are passionate about our rare, wild spaces.

Hope. When the path darkens, we cling to it. Pathetically so, at times. As public land protections and environmental regulations began to rollback, I grasped for hope. But hope doesn't reach back. The hand reaching for hope captures air. You have to grab a pen, a camera, a picket sign. The Boreas Ponds controversy has enveloped my world for the past year, and I fully embraced it. Who do we turn to when times get tough? Verplanck Colvin, Bob Marshall, Paul Schaefer, and Grace Hudowalski aren't around anymore to carry the torch of preservation. If not you, *who?!?* *You* have to rise to protect our wild spaces. *You* have to speak for the denizens who can't speak for themselves. You have to do this. You can provide that hope.

Fear. Without it, we can't be spurred into action. I embraced the fear of losing Boreas Ponds to motors in an increasingly civilized world. I also faced fear during the penultimate segment of this wilderness walk. At Hunter Pond, while scurrying through a boulder field, ice let loose from an escarpment on MacNaughton Mountain next to the trail. The midnight crash was hair-raising, causing me to shout unexpected expletives. On a journey epitomized by silence, this was my climactic moment.

Adrenaline coursed through me, invigorating my pace. Everything intensified. My hips were sore, my lower back irritated, shoulders tired, and I was angry. Angry that we had to do this. Angry that the intangibles of wildness aren't inherently valued in our society. Angry that most green groups turned their collective back on remoteness, on silence, on wildlife habitat along Gulf Brook Road. Angry at the myopic views of others who refuse to imagine a more wild

future for the Park. How much more wildness do we have to lose until we are unified in our desires to protect land?

Walking onward along the Northville-Placid Trail, I saw something that instantly calmed my nerves. It was exactly what I needed to see during these darkest hours. In the center of the trail were the unmistakable tracks of a moose. Gigantic tracks. Moose are making a comeback across the Adirondacks. Nearly extirpated, they have rebounded. Of all the iconic Adirondack species, this one is perhaps the most elusive. Yet here we were, walking the same wilderness trail together, only hours apart.

Following these tracks was an emotional moment for me. This is exactly what we are fighting for. Impassioned people have to fervently defend wilderness whenever and wherever it is warranted. Moose weren't invited to the Adirondack Park Agency meetings, so we have to speak on their behalf. This is exactly why a wilderness classification matters. There is value in remote wildness. I was witnessing it. I had fully experienced it. I had come to fully understand it. It's more than just a place a place on a map, for non-human species, it's home. At 3:30am, I was happily fatigued. Unfurling my bivy sack beneath the branches of the low-hanging balsams, I dropped next to my backpack, and it started to snow.

A world of white surrounded us. Back on American Airlines Flight 1920, the pilot announced we would be making our descent towards Denver International Airport. Just a dream? "Please remain seated," the monotone voice reminded us over the intercom, "and keep your seatbelt fastened." Pressing my face against the plexiglass, I could see them below the clouds: Longs Peak, Pikes Peak, and the Flatirons in Chautauqua Park. This is reality, not a dream.

Over the years, developments have marred the prairie between the airport and Denver. Staring at the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains is a sight to behold, but the urban sprawl in

front of it is yet another example of diminishing national wildness. Did the other passengers notice? It has happened imperceptibly since the settlement of Jamestown in 1607. In 2018, less than 1% of the United States east of Denver is classified as Wilderness. 99% of land east of the Rockies is accessible by motorized vehicles. This is why land classification in the Adirondacks matters.

As we descend, I learn that I'm missing the final Adirondack Park Agency meeting for the Boreas Ponds classification. I had intended to be there, but the decision was moved a week ahead of schedule. The outcome? I encourage you to look it up on your own. Ask yourself a few questions: What could have been done differently? Which groups helped preserve the spirit of wildness? Which groups actively defeated wildness? How can I get involved to ensure a wilder future for our planet, and the other non-human species who call it home?

Back at the northern border of the High Peaks Wilderness, darkness hung low beneath my bivouac under the balsams. It was 5 a.m., and I was adjacent to the Averyville Road trailhead. Brushing the snow off my bivy sack, I reached out for my backpack. Familiar voices called out to me in the distance.

Pete was there! And Brendan! But they were not alone. Waking up early on a Thursday morning to surprise me were other Adirondack Wilderness Advocates. My friends from the Adirondack Mountain Club were there: Seth Jones, Bobby Clark, Kayla White, and Tom Manitta. Shelly Cihan was there as well. Shockingly, my friend Jesse Cramer drove all the way from Rochester to participate. Most importantly of all, Pam Socash, my mom, was there too.

One by one, we all took turns carrying the backpack along the 6-mile road walk to Ray Brook, NY. We all shared this burden of ensuring a wilder future for the Adirondacks and the

world. This backpack went forty-seven miles through the Boreas Ponds Tract, the High Peaks Wilderness, and arrived at the Adirondack Park Agency doorstep in just under twenty-four total hours. May the walk never get any shorter.

Following the Pledge of Allegiance, the Chairman of the Board called me to the podium, backpack in tow. At the end of the speech, I unbuckled the pack. Lifting the bundle took some care. 1,882 individually signed petitions were hoisted into the air, all asking for a full Wilderness classification for the entire Boreas Ponds Tract. We were never alone on this wilderness walk.

The silence as the petitions were lifted was deafening.

The torch of preservation had been lifted, and now it is yours to carry.