

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

John Schuber

Discovering Adirondack

by Terra Osterling

Editor's note: The following essay was the grand prize winner in DEC's Great Stories from the Great Outdoors contest.

It is an October morning, surprisingly cold, but drenched in the bright sunshine of early autumn. I am about to hike my first mountain trail: Baker Mountain near Saranac Lake, deep in the Adirondacks. My husband, having some experience in the High Peaks region, is wise to allow me to set the pace; I move slowly and deliberately along this upward, rocky path.

Ahead there are places where the very bones of the Earth poke through: straight white birches, exposed roots—the sinews of the trail. Boulders covered with patchy moss are like giant, green-furred animals. Laying my hand on one is like petting a sleeping mammoth, I imagine: a reverent and awesome moment. I keep moving up the trail, drawing energy from the mountain itself with every brush of pine and thud of boot on rock.

At my first ledge, gazing out over jeweled lakes surrounded by bursting autumn, I feel something inside me is complete. A puzzle piece thought long lost is found and fitted into the waiting void. The sunshine here is different, the air is different, and I am different. Everything is “more,” including me.

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Over the next three years, I hike Rooster Comb, Owl's Head, Baxter, Poke-O-Moonshine, Cascade, Hurricane and Phelps. I can't think of another circumstance where I would walk for six hours in silence, uphill, then back down, often in intermittent rain, and be elated to do it again the next day. When I am on a trail, time ceases, and on a summit I stretch out on bare rock with nothing between me and the blue dome of sky above.

Often a summit is the picture of hospitality: flawless sky and the Great Range laid out in a patchwork of autumn, majestic pine, and blue-green lakes. Other times the summit provides a spectacular view of a thunderstorm moving across a valley. Wrapped in wild gusts, I watch mist gather upward from forest far below, rising into clouds, then drifting across peaks and over valleys. And one time I climb directly into a cloud, the wind made of icy pin pricks as a silver curtain draws over the vista, leaving

me alone with altitude-stunted spruce and fir. Both the trees and I cling to the mostly bald peak for dear life.

The person I am on the mountain trail is alive in a way that does not exist in the “me” of flatland life. It is as if, in a dream, I find a lovely room in my house that I never knew existed. With each hike I am drawn deeper into the embrace of the Adirondacks. Every footfall marches me closer to a place where the creation of the earth and the creation of humanity come together. I miss the mountains as soon as I cannot see them.

Terra Osterling lives with her husband Mark in Irondequoit. Her favorite Adirondack hike so far is the trail to Hurricane Mountain.

