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Tracking Thoreau Through Maine's 'Grim and Wild' Land



Ethan Gilsdorf for The New York Times

WOOD AND WATER Mount Katahdin as seen from the Abol Bridge Campground.

By ETHAN GILSDORF

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FEW places in the United States can honestly be described as wild, let alone “stern and savage.” But those words, which Henry David Thoreau used to describe the north woods of Maine a century and a half ago, stand as true and tall as evergreens even today. The region remains vast and remote, the “continuousness of the forest,” as Thoreau put it, still “uninterrupted.”

An average of four people per square mile live in Piscataquis County, the heart of the 3.5 million-acre timberland stretching from Moosehead Lake, 70 miles northwest of Bangor, to the Quebec border. The landscape is blanketed with black and white spruce, white pine, red and jack pine, and balsam fir, and strewn with secluded lakes and rivers. “If you look at a satellite photo of the eastern U.S., there’s a big black spot,” said Karen Woodsum, director of the Sierra Club’s Maine Woods Campaign. “That is the Maine Woods, an island of unbroken forest.”

Thoreau’s “The Maine Woods,” first published in 1864 (composed partly of articles he had written earlier for periodicals) and still in print, is an insightful reporter’s picture of a rugged wilderness the moment before being irrevocably altered by armies of loggers. Today the virgin forest seen by Thoreau is gone; trees have been cut, regrown and harvested again. “It’s a working forest,” Ms. Woodsum said. But modern travelers — hikers, campers, hunters, fishers, canoeists or back road wanderers — will still find, as Thoreau did, a land “more grim and wild than you had anticipated.” It’s also pin-drop tranquil, teeming with wildlife and, in places, challenging to reach.

Following Thoreau into the Maine Woods is hardly a new idea, but it is becoming easier. Last year, the Thoreau-Wabanaki Trail was inaugurated, delineating and celebrating Thoreau’s passage on

routes that Penobscot Indians had used for thousands of years. And this year, the Appalachian Mountain Club released its revised edition of J. Parker Huber's long out-of-print guide, "The Wildest Country: Exploring Thoreau's Maine," chock full of maps that pinpoint his best guesses at where Thoreau camped each night.

Thoreau traveled by foot, canoe and the flat-bottomed boat that French explorers called a bateau. When I set out this summer to trace some of his footsteps and paddle strokes, I went mostly by car and kayak. Guides led him — backwoodsmen on his first trip, in 1846, and two Penobscot Indians, Joseph Attean and Joe Polis, on expeditions in 1853 and 1857. I traveled solo, armed with a Maine Atlas and Gazetteer that details every potential wrong turn. He slept in a tent or under his canoe. I stayed in a cabin, an inn and a campground with showers and electric hookups.

I started in Greenville, on the southern shore of Moosehead Lake. Given the lake's size, 120 square miles, I half-expected lakeside mansions and screaming power boats. But virtually no houses are visible from the shore. The Northern Forest Canoe Trail overlaps Thoreau's route, and paddlers and many local residents are wary of a proposed plan by a private developer to build 975 new homes and two resorts on and near the lake that would nearly double the town's population.

But for now, Greenville is a gentle mingling of locals and tourists. With its handful of moose-themed craft shops and float-plane operators, it feels more like a crossroads than the lake's southern gateway and biggest town. North on either shore are smatterings of inns and campgrounds. Lily Bay State Park, on the eastern side, offers simple lakefront tent and R.V. sites.

I took the 15-minute water shuttle from the hamlet of Rockwood, about 20 miles north of Greenville, to Mount Kineo, a loaf-shaped, rocky peninsula jutting into Moosehead's midpoint. Once ashore, I climbed the Indian Trail, probably the same path Thoreau used when he camped there. From the fire lookout tower, I took in a 360-degree panorama.

"It's the most beautiful view I have ever seen," Mr. Huber told me. "I don't know why — it makes me cry to think about it." As Thoreau described it, the lake spreads out "like a gleaming silver platter at the end of the table." Baxter State Park and its high point, Mount Katahdin, dominate the view to the east.

Mr. Huber, 68 and a retired college administrator from Brattleboro, Vt., traveled in these woods 16 times since 1974, using Thoreau's text as his guide. "There were only a few places I got lost," Mr. Huber said. "I couldn't have done it without him."

Shannon LeRoy, programs manager for the Appalachian Mountain Club's Maine Woods Initiative, accompanied me for a paddle on small Second Roach Pond, about 45 minutes north of Greenville, but expressed a fondness for Moosehead Lake. "The big water is soul-cleansing," she said. "There's something mystical about it." She and her husband sold their sporting camp on Second Roach, Medawisla, to the club in 2006. (Thoreau wrote about "medawisla," or loons, which his guide Joe Polis claimed were "a sign of wind.")

I stayed in one of the camp's rustic cabins and got a good flavor of the backwoods, as well as a taste of the camp's home-cooked meals. The Appalachian Mountain Club aims to purchase a 28,000-acre tract that would create a land corridor linking other conservation land south of Medawisla to Baxter State Park.

THE old-time loggers waited until winter, when frozen rivers gave them usable pathways, to get their oxen and equipment into the primeval woods, as Thoreau explained in his book. But you can

travel the core of Maine's commercial forests on 31,000 miles of private roads that timber companies have built. On the Golden Road, the main east-west thoroughfare, you'll hit checkpoints, much like border crossings, where you'll be asked for your name, car tag number and reason for your visit. Pay a fee of \$10 to \$20 and you're on your way. But go slowly: most of the roads are unmarked, unpaved and ruled by logging trucks (which have the right of way). Driving an S.U.V. or truck with four-wheel drive is best; the ruts are unkind to the average sedan. And don't forget a detailed road map.

You'll often see nothing but green thickets of young spruce and fir, in whose shade ferns, lichens and mosses thrive. You might spy a moose munching in a murky bog, or a bear dashing across the road. Be sure to plan ahead for gas and provisions. One "last chance" spot to buy them is Kokadjo ("Population: not many," a sign declares). The trading post serves as a store, a diner, a bar and a moose check station. The woman behind the counter might flip bacon on the griddle behind her while ringing up your fuel purchase. A short trip on the logging roads is enough: I found bouncing along them somewhat monotonous after a couple of hours.

Another way to take on the woods is by canoe. Garrett and Alexandra Conover of North Woods Ways lead Thoreau-themed expeditions. Mr. Conover noted the loss of big trees; he wasn't pleased with some of the cutting. Yet over all, he said, the Maine Woods, is "still pretty remarkable compared to other developed places," and aside from the disappearance of woodland caribou, the wildlife — loons, eagles, otters and fisher cats — resembles what lived in Thoreau's day.

The Conovers' trips follow Thoreau's route where the Penobscot River dumps into the northern tip of Chesuncook Lake. By kayak, I explored these backwaters, significantly more isolated than Moosehead Lake, and saw many canoeists singing as they paddled. Some choose to end their primitive camping trips at the Chesuncook Lake House, where guests are treated to the fine cuisine of Luisa Surprenant, who runs the inn with her husband, David, near a site where Thoreau stayed in a log house on Sept. 18, 1853.

Living on this pristine lake, the Surprenants raise their own bison, lamb and pigs and home-school their children. They usually have no telephone service (though oddly, their satellite Internet does work) and the only way to arrive is by boat, float plane, snowmobile or foot. "We like it without the road," Ms. Surprenant said. To get to their lodge, I parked my car in the woods where the logging road petered out, strapped on my pack and hiked for two miles.

To sample higher, rockier country, take the Golden Road just west of Millinocket, toward the entrance to Baxter State Park. Softwoods give way to birches, beeches and blueberries. Broad, open views of the mountain can be had at Abol Bridge (again, it's "Thoreau slept here" — in 1846). Terminating on 5,267-foot-high Baxter Peak, the Appalachian Trail's final 100 miles run through here. So do chugging logging trucks.

"I've been dreaming of finishing this for a while," Mark Dudzic, 54, of Columbia, Md., said one July morning as he neared the end of the trail, which he had been hiking in stages since 1995. He marveled at Thoreau's having hiked here, and that he almost reached the summit of Katahdin: "How could he have done this without any equipment, or freeze-dried food?"

For Thoreau, Katahdin was "the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth." The Maine Woods were a wake-up call, a place to "Talk of mysteries! — Think of our life in nature, — daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, — rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world!"

On his deathbed (he died at 44, of tuberculosis), Thoreau's final words were: "moose" and "Indian." This land had made an impression on him.

Remarkably fresh and unspoiled, it can still make one.

If You Go

Henry David Thoreau's "**The Maine Woods**" is still widely available. J. Parker Huber's book, "**The Wildest Country: Exploring Thoreau's Maine**," (\$19.95) can be bought from the Appalachian Mountain Club (amcstore.outdoors.org) or in stores.

A **Thoreau-Wabanaki Trail** map can be purchased at www.thoreauwabanakitrail.org. **The Maine Atlas and Gazetteer** (\$19.95, DeLorme) is sold in gas stations and convenience stores in Maine.

Cabins at the **Medawisla Wilderness Camps** (near Kokadjo; 603-466-2721; www.outdoors.org/lodging) start at \$99 including dinner, bed, breakfast and trail lunch; self-service cabins cost \$47. Kayaks are free.

At **Northwoods Outfitters** (5 Lily Bay Road, Greenville; 866-223-1380; www.maineoutfitter.com), canoes and kayaks are \$25 a day and up. Guided and self-guided trips are available.

Lily Bay State Park (13 Myrle's Way, Greenville; www.maine.reserveworld.com; 207-695-2700 or 207-941-4014) has campsites near Moosehead Lake. For non-Maine residents, the charge for a hookup site is \$25 a night.

North Woods Ways (2293 Elliottsville Road, Willimantic; 207-997-3723; www.northwoodsways.com) runs multiday, guided canoe trips including a five-day Thoreau's Maine Woods trip for \$1,030.

Built in 1864, the **Chesuncook Lake House** (www.chesuncooklakehouse.com, leave message at 207-745-5330 or e-mail info@chesuncooklakehouse.com) has rooms and cabins from \$120, including meals and use of canoes and kayaks. Transportation to the inn, which is inaccessible by car, can be arranged by boat, snowmobile or float plane.

Abol Bridge Campground in Millinocket (www.campstorent.com/abol.htm), offers waterside sites with hookups for \$20, a small store and access to hiking trails.