

Bob Marshall Great Wilderness: Diary of a Trip, September 2008

John Davis

Conservation Director, Adirondack Council

Mid-afternoon 10 September 2008, I commenced a modest escape into a great wilderness complex – the Bob Marshall Great Wilderness, as originally proposed in the Adirondack Council’s 1990 report, *2020 VISION, Volume 2: Completing the Adirondack Wilderness System*, and soon thereafter endorsed in New York State’s Open Space Protection Plan. Named after the great wilderness explorer and advocate Bob Marshall, son of early Adirondack Park champion Louis Marshall, the Bob Marshall Great Wilderness proposal builds on the work the younger Marshall himself did while studying to become a forester at New York’s College of Forestry in Wanakena, beside Cranberry Lake, NY. Marshall rambled far and wide, visiting scores of remote ponds and mountains south and east of Cranberry Lake, and later did the first comprehensive roadless area review in the United States. Marshall found about 380,000 acres of road-free land in the Cranberry Lake to Beaver River area. The Council’s Wilderness proposal encompasses the roadless acreage Marshall identified plus some ecologically important and undeveloped lands adjacent.

This Wilderness proposal has been advocated under different names, including Oswegatchie Great Wilderness in the state’s Open Space Plan, and with slightly differing boundaries. By any name, though, the block of wild, mostly road-free forest and wetland, stream and lake, between Routes 3 on the north, 30 on the east, 28 on the south, and the Blue Line on the west is one of the East’s greatest wildlands, biologically, scenically, and recreationally.

My plan is to ramble through this western Adirondack wildland (mostly hiking on trails, but sometimes bushwhacking to remoter sites, and inflating my pack-raft any time water travel is convenient) to learn the country better, see what are the threats to it, and seek opportunities to better protect it. I’ll enjoy peace and quiet in the designated Wilderness Areas – Pigeon Lake, Pepperbox, and Five Ponds – but also deliberately detour into Wild Forests.

I begin at the Cascade Lake trailhead, off the road to Big Moose Lake, north of the hamlet of Eagle Bay. Early on, I chat with several other hikers, returning from enjoyable trips to the falls at the east end of Cascade Lake; but once north of Cascade, I gain solitude for the remainder of the day and enjoy the rare privilege of several hours with no unnatural sounds (broken at dusk when two airplanes fly high overhead). The trails in the Pigeon Lake Wilderness are heavily beaten to accessible popular sites, and muddy in places; but away from the roads, the trails generally assume a fine footpath quality. They

pass through classic Northern Hardwood forests of beech-maple-birch with smatterings of spruce and hemlock. Some of the Sugar Maple and Yellow Birch are of primeval dimensions, whereas relatively few spruce here attain such grandeur – the result of long-ago logging of softwoods, quite likely, and recent ravages of acid rain. A fawn bolting away wakes me from these unhappy speculations.

A short detour to the western bay of Queer Lake affords me a distant view of a pair of loons. Next stop is equally lovely but only partially protected Mays Pond. The Adirondack Nature Conservancy has made possible the state acquisition of the western, privately-owned side of this serene pond, for addition to the Wilderness; but so far, Long Lake town officials are blocking the deal.

A thick bushwhack eastward takes me to a yet wilder pond, where I take a quick swim and then set up camp. I'm treated to sights of dragonflies and mergansers, as the sun sets, then, after dusk, calls of Common Loons and later Coyotes. This little-known pond has a Beaver dam at its outlet, as do so many Adirondack ponds, but the predominance of spruce and pine along its shores now may limit the Beavers' use of it. The dam does look maintained, though. Do Beavers eat Hobblebush; are they sallying forth from the pond to find their food, or did they move on after completing the dam?

9/11/08 Fog from the pond obscures sun till about 8 this morn; and fog-soaked gear delays departure till 9. Predicted frost did not quite happen here, though the low wasn't much above freezing. The bushwhack back to the trail and Mays Pond is easier now that I know how to avoid the blow-down thickets. I take a couple more photos of Mays Pond, now with a loon gently dappling the calm morning light. A kingfisher momentarily breaks the silence with its staccato call.

I head north again on the easy-going footpath. A left at the next junction takes me along and then across Constable Outlet. Here one treads privately owned land on which the state has apparently acquired a recreation easement along the trail. I see frogs along the wet parts of the trail, and occasional toads in drier areas. Mushrooms still abound, from rains heavy enough for the Old Testament earlier this summer, some of the wilting fungal fruiting bodies imparting a rather mildewed air.

My first wrong turn (which cost me at least an hour and a couple hundred kilocalories of precious food) happened where the easement trail hit the access road. National Geographic's Adirondack maps are usually accurate and helpful, but here #745 failed me, by not showing a road all too easily mistaken for the road to a public access dock on Big Moose Lake. Eventually I realized I was going too far east, so backtracked and finally found the public put-in. I inflated my pack-raft with the bellows-bag, tied my pack inside, and paddled west. Near the south shore, I saw three loons – a hopeful sign that the worst of the acid rain (bad enough to kill fish) may be past. Being nearly surrounded by private land, Big Moose Lake is heavily developed, unfortunately, but most of the camps do at least have a thin screen of trees between home and water.

Climbing out the other side and westward, I found the little hand-written sign indicating the trail to Billy's Knob and Squash Pond. The knob affords vistas from a rock outcrop out over Big Moose Lake and south into the Pigeon Lake Wilderness and Fulton Chain Wild Forest, whose wooded hills advance nearly unbroken to the horizon.

Squash Pond maybe took its name from its odd shape, which could be seen as two squash on a vine. The second, western lobe of Squash Pond is especially lovely, as Beavers (two of whom I saw) have trimmed much of the vegetation around its perimeter, opening the views and facilitating walking. I glimpse a Snowshoe Hare in its summer tawny pelage, bounding quickly to invisibility.

The Beavers' trimming is much appreciated as I've now left the marked trail (which veered south at first Squash, perhaps back to the road along Big Moose's north shore) and am bushwhacking north through Fulton Chain Wild Forest, looking for potable water and aiming toward Twitchell Lake. Secluded little Silver Dollar Pond apparently attracted but did not keep a hermit some time back, judging by the hefty tarp lean-to littered with old pots & pans. Good place to hide, this would be. Nearby, I find a small spring and slake my thirst. (Purification filters and/or tablets are advised for hikers throughout the over-developed US these days, sadly; but when I find a remote spring, I'll sometimes indulge in the pleasure of drinking water straight from the ground.)

I hit the road to Twitchell Lake a mile southwest of its shore, and walk that dusty mile in a wave of melancholy: Dear friend and Park champion for decades, Anne LaBastille is for the first time in memory missing a summer at her beloved cabin north of here, due to health concerns.

I reenter Fulton Chain Wild Forest west of Twitchell Lake; then at next junction turn right, back into Pigeon Lake Wilderness, toward Beaver River. (Left goes to Razorback Pond.) Before the junction and continuing left beyond it are truck tire tracks on the wide trail. So far as I know, this is not a designated handicapped access trail, and so motorized vehicles should not be allowed.

Oswego Pond is grander than the map showed, with Beaver flooding forcing a trail re-route. Father north, I find a pond where only a stream is shown and then only a stream where a pond is shown – busy Beavers diversifying the forest! I also find fresh sign, tracks and scat, of Moose and Black Bear in this part of Pigeon Lake Wilderness. The flooded trail slows me down again; the lack of the mapped pond impels me onward, and I settle later for a quiet campsite in hardwood forest near a west-draining rivulet a couple miles south of Beaver River. Big trees shelter camp – birches, maples, beeches, and here even some big spruce.

9/12 Day three defies the forecasters, with rain beginning slowly about 8 then seizing the day by noon. Walking north to Beaver River in sprinkles is pleasant. The White Pine grove just inside the Wilderness boundary south of the settlement is impressive, and I wonder about its history. Presumably, the original softwoods along most of the Beaver River were logged out long ago; but some of the pines in this stand are tall enough (over

140 feet, I'd guess) that they must be many decades old. I'll ask my Eastern Native Tree Society friends if they can shed any light on this fine pine stand.

The hamlet of Beaver River is one of the most remote in New York. Camp owners and the few people who stay year-round drive many miles of dirt roads (Number Four and Stillwater) to the frontier development and boat launch on the west end of Stillwater Reservoir, then take a ferry, often with their cars to the west end of the Flow Road or all the way to Beaver River hamlet. If no one has yet written a novel about Beaver River (just call it *Stillwater*, Mr. Banks), the setting should soon prove irresistible. In Beaver River, I bought enough food to keep me going till the weather would allow me into my pack without soaking it.

Walking the Flow Road was proving pleasant enough, apart from a couple sights of ATV trespass into adjacent Independence River Wild Forest; but the rain and wind were picking up, so when a kind family came driving along and offered me a ride the last mile to the launch and then across the reservoir where they were headed anyway, I gratefully accepted. Paddling against the ten-knot winds with rain pelting my face seemed pointless when a motorboat was going the same way.

After thanking the family, I exited the western Stillwater encampment and headed for the dam – bureaucratically, if unconstitutionally, maintained by the Hudson River-Black River Regulatory District. Crossing below the ominous warning signs and that concrete barrier to water, fish, and paddlers, I got on the jeep road that goes north toward Raven Lake and divides the Pepperbox Wilderness from the Five Ponds Wilderness. Of course, ecologically and ethically speaking, this road should be closed and the Wilderness Areas united. A small inholding on Raven Lake precludes that possibility for now. Fortunately, the Raven Lake inholders appear to be more respectful than some, and are staying on the designated way with their motor vehicles. Traffic is rare enough that bears don't mind risking a dump in the access road here and there, and the scats show the bruins to be living largely on fruit, especially Black Cherries, this time of year.

Past Shallow and Jackson Ponds and Raven Lake, the way north becomes an unmarked overgrown old logging road, with several junctions and many mires keeping a hiker confused and wet. Thank goodness, my compass and waterproof map get me safely to Bear Pond. The last half mile or so before reaching Bear Pond, I'm stumbling along trespass ATV tracks, well within designated Wilderness, if I read the map aright (boundaries not well marked). Private inholdings are generating motorized abuses of nearby public lands.

I force my way northward finally reaching Watson East Triangle Wild Forest's "main haul" road, the infamous Bear Pond Road – generator of numerous motorized incursions deep into Forest Preserve. I wonder about finding one of the probably-illegal hunting camps one occasionally encounters back where hunters can drive but law enforcement is scarce, but cannot remember any near enough to reach before dark. A damp night in a tiny tent will be my fate tonight.

Detouring off the haul road onto the trail to Upper South Pond, I find continued heavy motor vehicle use and hence nasty mud wallows to wade through. Looks as if now DEC is cracking down on ATV trespass, the off-road motorists are switching back to trucks. I leave the muddy trail on a side path and soon fortuitously find a fine, if soaking, campsite near the Middle Branch of the Oswegatchie River.

9/13 It was the best of days; it was the worst of days. This fourth day included superlative paddling, sad witnessing of damage to the land from off-road vehicles (ORVs), and hellishly thick bushwhacking.

After wringing and shaking as much water as possible out of my gear, I inflate my packraft and take off down the Middle Branch Oswegatchie, unsure where I'm beginning or even whether the river will be navigable this high up. (National Geographic map seems erroneous about Bear Pond Road in relation to the river; Nat.Geo. maps are generally good, but bring local topos as back-ups.) Suddenly grateful for yesterday's rain, I skim just over the top of rocks in riffles and make good speed, for a meandering river. Stopping briefly to admire Brindle Pond, river right, I espy two Canada Jays and a Red-tailed Hawk. Beavers clearly are maintaining, may even have created, Brindle Pond.

I stop again just before the Middle Oswegatchie resumes its generally northerly flow, after a westerly mile. Here, just upstream of some rapids not shown on the map, the river crosses the trail to Grassy Pond. I hustle on foot to trails off Bear Pond Road where ATV damage was documented years ago. Looks as if to some degree off-road motorists have heeded the Department of Conservation's (DEC's) virtual (but still not final and official) ban on ATVs on the Forest Preserve. Instead, the off-road motorists are intruding into the Bob Marshall Great Wilderness complex in four-wheel drive trucks. ATV use is down, thanks to DEC's overdue law enforcement; but ORV use continues to ruin trails, scar the land, and give gunners and trappers easy access to prey.

Back on the river, peace and sunshine return and I enjoy an easy couple hours of paddling small riffles (after walking the boat through the one difficult rapid), then a narrower deeper channel, and finally a broad and braided water-course meandering through sedge and alder plains. Truly, the Middle Branch of the Oswegatchie, once away from the ORV routes, is a Wild and Scenic River, as recognized under New York's Wild, Scenic, and Recreational River System. In places, it feels even wilder than its main-stem sibling, as the latter is a deservedly popular paddling route. Along the river, I saw Beaver and Muskrat sign aplenty, heard one Beaver lunge & plunge into water to escape my fearsome five-pound boat, saw ducks, geese, Northern Harriers, blooming asters, turning Red Maples, and many plants of boreal and hydrophilic affinities. As such scientists as Jerry Jenkins and Ray Curran have discussed in talks and papers, the Oswegatchie and a few other northern and western Adirondack rivers are unusual this far south for their open plains, where sedges and alders and ericaceous shrubs dominate and spruces and larches are set well back – some places, hundreds of yards – from river banks. In contrast, rivers in less boreal places generally have trees crowding right to the banks, as have the Oswegatchies farther downstream.

The bushwhack east from the river (taking out just above the first rapids since the tricky bend after the Grassy Pond Trail) was a painful reawakening from this blissful paddle. I'd failed to recall that Five Ponds Wilderness is not only characterized by old-growth forest – usually relatively easy to bushwhack through, on account of full canopy minimizing undergrowth, Hobblebush notwithstanding – but also by the great blow-downs of 1950 and 1995. Forest hit by the 1950 storm is nearing maturity again, but 1995 blow-down areas are now jungles of downfall and thickets of spindly little birches, painfully punctuated by young spruce (fourth only to Stinging Nettle, briars, and Poison Ivy in Adirondack uplands as undesirable for bushwhacking). In the end, the forest mob is merciful, though, and after a three-hour thrash, I reach the lean-to on Cage Lake ahead of the next rainstorm.

The lake and nearby wetlands are serene. I hear an unfamiliar bird from the Beaver flow behind camp. Could it be a rail of some sort, one of those rare and elusive wetland birds?

9/14 South wind resumes overnight, after humid mild cloudy still of yester-eve, keeping temperatures warm (low about 60) but bringing more rain. I'm grateful for the lean-to, allowing me to hang gear and stay dry. The camp register, last signed about two weeks ago, carries a lively little debate on whether or not the ATVs up the trail past Buck Pond are menaces or useful tools.

I take a quick jaunt up the trail to Buck Pond. Sure enough, ATV trespass into the Wilderness, past the Buck Pond inholding, continues as if DEC were unaware of the problem, or afraid to confront the trespassers. What should be a nice footpath continuing north from Buck Pond to Youngs Road, south of Star Lake, is instead a linear mud pit. The consequences for wildlife from ATV trespass are even worse than the consequences for the hiking public. Motor vehicles in wildlands crush plants, stress wild animals and disrupt their natural feeding and travel habits, and give easy access to people with guns and traps. Fisher, Pine Marten, River Otter, Mink, Black Bear, Bobcat, and hopes for recovery of Eastern Cougar and Gray Wolf may all be diminished by the motorized access that effectively shrinks these sensitive species' refuges.

More happily, in the many Beaver flows, swamps, marshes, and bogs near Cage Lake, I see numerous frogs, some of them Pickerel or Mink, I think, and a Yellow-spotted Salamander. Later, above the Main Branch of the Oswegatchie River, I'll see a portly and resolute Snapping Turtle.

The hike from Cage Lake to Wolf Pond leaves the ATVs behind. Wolf Pond is a sublime place: big enough to be a 'lake' in other areas; nearly as far as you can get from a road in the East (sadly, as the crow flies, that would only be about five miles); fringed with boreal bogs in some sections, stately wind-flagged White Pines in others; quiet but for the wind and waves ... Here the trail turns from generally southeast to generally northeast, Wolf Pond being the southern end of an otherwise great south-north hike marred by the damage near Buck Pond.

I've hiked the trail between Main Branch Oswegatchie and Wolf Pond several times, and always the song "Magical Mystery Tour" comes to mind. One is walking through forest primeval here, a splendid cross-section of the largest remaining single block of original forest in the Northeast, 50,000 acres fortuitously spared the ax and dam of yesteryear and now protected as Forest Preserve. Others more eloquent have described this forest better than I could, so I'll just offer a few more brief descriptors of how I see this ancient Eastern Temperate Deciduous/Coniferous Forest: huge Yellow Birches, Sugar Maples, Black Cherries; columnar White Pines, Red Spruces, Eastern Hemlocks; kaleidoscopic variety; fern carpets; gnarled old trees, cool and moist (even today, when reemerging sun has pushed temperature up near 80); convoluted micro-topography on top of rolling hills and snaking eskers; trees of all ages and stages ... the world as it should be.

I reach the Main Branch about 4, enjoy the dark slow waters a few minutes while downing carbohydrates, then hasten northeast on trails toward Cat Mountain. The Oswegatchie Plains, past which I stride, has also been well described by biologists. It's a huge wet mostly open mysteriously beautiful place, full of sedges and shrubs and sprinkled with small trees, especially pines and cherries.

North from the Plains, the hike remains lovely, with some lingering old growth despite long-ago logging in the area and more recent blow-downs. I'm thankful to the rangers who diligently cleared this trail again after the microburst of 1995 leveled much of the adjacent forest.

I reach a campsite on Glasby Pond by 6, and quickly scamper up nearby Cat Mountain. Views from atop are as wild and grand as one can find on any 2000 foot peak in the East: forested hills and ponds stretching to the horizon and no civilization in sight! A howling south wind and curiously warm temperatures remind me that Hurricane Ike is churning somewhere far to the south, but I erroneously assume said storm could not send its effects this far north so soon after landfall on the Gulf Coast (which I'd heard forecast on the Weather Channel while I was at the store in Beaver River).

9/15 The howling south wind kept me awake much of the night. Fortuitously, my campsite is sheltered by thick spruce forest on this south side of Glasby Pond. Had I foolishly camped on the north side, my tent would be flattened now and gear strewn into the trees. Rain has resumed. (Later today I learn from a hunter that after visiting extreme damage upon parts of Texas and Louisiana, the great storm Ike traveled north through the states at 30 miles per hour, hence the startlingly fast arrival here last night.)

I resist the temptation to walk out to Wanakena and hitchhike home to warmth and fresh food. The twenty-five mile day begins with a hike down to Janacks Landing on Cranberry Lake. There I take advantage of the lean-to to drain some gear and inflate my boat. I begin paddling north down Dead Creek Flow mid-morning. Soon I'm wishing I were in my Hornbeck canoe, but then I imagine dragging that boat through three miles of blow-down, and I remember why these quick light boats are unsurpassed for pond-hopping but cannot take rough rapids or long bushwhacks like the slower but lighter and compressible pack-rafts can. Moreover, the little raft takes me a good eight miles in three

hours, with help from a west wind after I turned right out of Dead Creek Flow. The low clouds and fog precluded seeing far, but I did see some loons, ravens, gulls, and trees turning color while I paddled these scenic – if artificially exaggerated (Cranberry Lake was doubled in size by a crib dam originally built in the early 1900s and since replaced by a concrete dam)—stretches of flat water.

The ironic insult to this otherwise rhythmic paddling is military over-flights, out of Fort Drum. I paddled the equivalent of four times across Lake George without seeing or hearing a single motorboat; but overhead, military jets were roaring past, worsening our nation's addiction to foreign oil, heightening our insecurity. Ironic, too, it seemed, to see the winsome little private cabins and biological field station that so far have resisted displacement by the sort of garish shoreline development that demands so much of this foreign oil and is spoiling more and more Adirondack lakes. Despite the jets and dam, much of Cranberry Lake is still old-fashioned, thank goodness.

When I finally landed my raft and resumed hiking, I was again reminded why Bob Marshall, who did many of his forestry studies and forest rambles around Cranberry Lake, loved this country so. Marshall was wont to rank peaks and hikes and the like; so I'll step back and say the Middle Branch Oswegatchie wilderness section is one of the top ten river paddles in the Adirondack Park; and Cat Mountain is one of the top twenty summit views in the Park. Returning to the present, the hike from Cranberry Lake's East Inlet to the junction with the trail back east to Chair Rock Flow is one of the Adirondack top forty trails. Much of the forest appears to be old growth or nearly so. Ponds, Beaver flows and meadows, and bogs bespeckle the gentle hills. Brooks gurgle past. Huge Black Cherry trees carpet the trail in fruit – some of it partly digested in bear scat, all of it collectively giving off a pleasant scent of fermentation. Venerable and gnarled Yellow Birch and Sugar Maple stand beside their faster straighter conifer cohorts, White Pine and Eastern Hemlock. Like the more famous Five Ponds hike, this Curtis Pond—Dog Pond trail section of Cranberry Lake Wild Forest is a forest primeval magical mystery tour.

The magic begins to wane by the time the Chair Rock Flow trails enters from the right, southwest. The trail now goes east-northeast through younger forest and follows old roads. ATVs have trespassed, apparently at least in part from the primitive roads DEC maintains west of Horseshoe Lake. The old road/new trail I'm now walking eastward toward Horseshoe Lake is obviously still used by four-wheel-drives, too. The young forest bespeaks a manipulated past. Over the lovely upper reach of the South Branch of the Grass River is a new bridge – made wide enough for ATVs – and just east of that a locked gate. West of here the road/trail is the dividing line between Cranberry Lake Wild Forest and the Bog River Primitive Area; now it divides the Primitive Area from Horseshoe Lake Wild Forest.

Later I find a nice campsite north of Horseshoe Lake. Temperatures drop sharply over night as the rain clouds finally clear.

Before dawn Tuesday morn, a loon and then a Barred Owl call in the new day. Bright sun is soon pushing temperatures up into the 60s, with a west wind, in a classic late summer day. Sun finally begins to dry mildewing gear.

I walk north along the old railroad tracks, trying to decide what should be done with this old line (as if I had the authority!). Keep it open as a footpath, I soon enough conclude, after walking past wetlands and Beaver flows that could be damaged by increased motor access. For the sake of the land, wildlife, and people's health, I suggest the Remsen-Placid rail-line become a west-east footpath across the Park. Indeed, perhaps it should be our part of the North Country National Scenic Trail, instead of the controversial route the DEC and National Park Service are proposing south of here (which may include some trail mileage in presently roadless and trailless areas).

The wetlands along the tracks are especially gorgeous in the shimmering sunshine with Red Maples taking on their eponymous color, through foliage, as they do in spring through flowers. Two mixed species flocks of birds, including a Nashville Warbler, forage near successive wetlands. High overhead near Tupper Lake soars a Bald Eagle.

This wonderful tour of the wilds between Old Forge and Tupper Lake (which ended pleasantly, if anti-climatically, when I reached roads and was kindly offered rides east by fellow outdoors-people) left me many strong impressions and not one shred of doubt that a huge wilderness – upwards of half a million acres in size if possible – ought to be honored forthwith and designated as soon as politically possible. We can quibble over names and boundaries, but let it at least encompass the Cranberry roadless area that Bob Marshall mapped and newer Forest Preserve lands in the vicinity and be of sufficient size that all native species – including Eastern Cougar, Canada Lynx, and Gray Wolf – can thrive here. Then can New York make true claim to having the ultimate hikers' and paddlers' destination in the eastern United States and the greatest northern hardwood-conifer wilderness in the Western Hemisphere.

Copyright © 2008 by John Davis

[Home](#)