

The Cohos Trail, New Hampshire

Contributed by Donn Ahearn
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Total, enveloping silence, the kind you only get in true wilderness. Silence that is a sound, silence that presses on your eardrums.

If a firefly groomed an antenna I'd have heard it. If two of my ear hairs had touched, I'd have winced. Only a couple of minutes after a loon chorus that sounded so boisterous my first thought was, coyotes. TOTAL silence. REAL silence. You can count, on one hand, the number of times in your life you've heard it.

And I was standing on somebody's freaking deck. And they were home.

Here I was, at the end of a long day on the road, in a place that couldn't have been much more removed from the Maryland suburb I'd left. For one thing it was sweater weather; the previous night in Riverdale, I had sweated when I blinked, never mind exerted. For another, I'd just heard loons. Not gonna hear that too often where I come from. I was on Big Diamond Pond, in the northern reaches of New Hampshire's northernmost county, Coos, newly arrived at the backwoods respite known as Sportsman's Lodge. But it was as if everyone on Earth had left, and kept a few lights on for me. Presently: "Donn?" A rustle of dogs, a bark. Well, somebody had stayed. Lucky for me, because I was planning to spend the night here. I am not ready to go backpacking before the day I have planned to do it. Silly thing, civilization.

Sportsman's Lodge is not the kind of place folks just find. OK, a couple of "drive-bys" (it's a deadend road, but fishermen drive those when they end at big lakes) actually did stop and stay while I was there; but generally you have to know about it to even get near it. The Cohos Trail was how I knew about it. One of the country's newest long-distance hiking routes, the Cohos (Coe-oss; that's how you pronounce the county's name too) goes roughly 162 miles, from the White Mountains to the Canadian border up above the Connecticut Lakes. All but about 12 miles goes on trail; the remainder is remote walking on roads and snowmobile trails with plans afoot to get those miles onto real footpaths once approvals are obtained. Camping arrangements are scant (along much of the route it's still illegal); mileages can be correspondingly long. You can walk about 120 miles of the distance without encountering a town of any size. It was my intent to do about 50 miles of it, all townless. Roger and Linda Glew, the friendly proprietors of Sportsman's, were to drive me to my trailhead near Stark Village, NH; I would walk back to them (they're about a mile off the trail proper). On the way I would see some of the remotest and prettiest country in New Hampshire, if not in New England. I'd pass water sources, every now and then. I'd be on a trail that was well marked, pretty much, kind of. And I'd be for the most part in places where it would be more likely for me to see a moose than to see a person.

So I'd been told.

I'd picked up the maps, on a lark, at Pinkham Notch down in the White Mountains back in October. I do that sort of thing, don't mean nuthin' by it. If you'd told me I'd be using them less than nine months later, I'd have laughed at you. But then I decided that I wanted to spend a week of the annual New England vacation walking off some accumulated indolence and cabin fever. The Hundred Mile? The Mahoosucs? A week in Baxter? (Note the focus on Maine.) Then I remembered those maps. Hmmmmm. My preliminary scans were of the southernmost end of the Cohos, shared with existing trail systems in the Whites. Then I snapped out of it. Heck, hadn't I even done a stretch of that, long before it went Cohos? Wasn't that stuff sort of, you know, been there? Shouldn't I set my sights a bit higher? Up the maps I went - and then I found Nash Stream Forest. I'd heard of and even seen a picture or two of its geologic centerpiece, the Percy Peaks, heard also of its remoteness and quiet, and remembered thinking, this place seems pretty cool. Well now it had a hiking route, the first ever straight through its entire length. Done. But where to finish. The next map took care of that:

Dixville Notch, home of the first people in the United States to vote in each presidential election since 1920. All, like, two dozen or so of them, right there in The Balsams Grand Hotel at the stroke of midnight. Right, mountains too, check, and vertiginous cliffs, check, including Table Rock, a serious contender for the finest - and scariest - perch in all New England from which to catch a view. I wasn't, after all, going up there to vote. I had other democratic prerogatives in mind.

Like, for example, getting sandbagged. I figured out the side trips along the route I'd planned and guesstimated, three days. Then I looked at the actual mileages. Whoa. The Cohos maps are on a slightly different (read: Western) scale from most Eastern maps I'm used to. OK, uptick that to four days for like 40 miles. (Presume more than ten miles a day, right off the blocks, for a route you've never done in steep mountains - particularly one that announces itself as rugged and remote - and prepare for trouble.) Then Pete Castine, one of the Trail's major players with whom I'd been in correspondence, weighed in. Knowing that Sportsman's was doing my shuttle, he suggested the planned route of someone else who was going through my section. OK, additional mileage, about ten more miles, that would take me out of the Notch, straight to my waiting car at the Lodge. Irresistible bait: I wouldn't have to shuttle both myself and my car, and I'd have a safe place to leave all my stuff, not just at some trailhead! Four days, fifty miles. Done. That stiff climb out of Dixville, no problem. Twelve-plus miles a day? Please. Bring it on.

See how easy things can be in the comfort of an armchair at home? Me too.

{mospagebreak title=Part 2}

Advice to anyone planning a trip on the Cohos Trail: don't stay at Sportsman's Lodge on Big Diamond Pond.

You will not want to leave.

It's backwoods living the way we all could do it, all the time. There's, um, plumbing. And dogs that actually behave. (Border collies have this unnerving tendency to look at humans like they think we are pretty soft in the head.) And really nice people: Roger and Linda and nearby camp owners and local gadabouts and movers and shakers, daily. All polite, all fun to talk to and even more so to listen to, probably a better source of North Country news than the newspapers. And food. And loons calling at night; keep your windows open. (Don't need a/c up north; it comes with the package.) And fresh breezes, on a huge deck, whenever you want them. And some nice walks in nearby woods. And moonrise over the pond. And did I mention loons calling at night? Won't hear that too many places on my Cohos route, much less at home. And did I mention food? Big-screen TV Red Sox games are included, too; you could be at Fenway. And a comfortable bed, and I'm not the easiest, although OK not the hardest, to please there. And you are going to do WHAT in the morning?

Well, to start, on the fateful morning of Monday 2nd July I had one last big breakfast, complete with coffee (boy was THAT a mistake, sleeping outside and eating dirt would have put me in the right frame of mind). I shared this meal with Mary, from downstate, another hiker who had already sectioned the Cohos once, and can't seem to get enough of it. Mary was going with Linda Glew up to the trail's northern end at Pittsburg to hike south. I figured her cheerful get up and go, all by itself, would be worth ten miles a day. Off I went with Roger Glew to my trailhead, at the foot of Nash Stream Forest just outside the picturesque little village of Stark, NH. . Other than having one of the prettiest covered bridges anywhere, and having been a friendly neighbor to a German POW camp back during the Last Big One, Stark has kept pretty much to itself. Good for it. Didn't see a Seven-Eleven or a Starbucks, both signs of Creeping Too Much Civilization.

Not that I needed either. In fact, breakfast, and did I mention coffee? was so filling that when Roger made his obligatory stop at the Dunkin' Donuts (a sign of Creeping Too Much Civilization) in the small town of Colebrook, I didn't even go in. I DIDN'T EVEN GO IN. This is Not Me. I still can't believe it. I mean, maybe I wasn't thinking here. This was going to be the last Dunkin' - never mind the last faucet, the last flush toilet, etc. - for I thought FOUR DAYS. Didn't make a move for the car door. Just sat there waiting for Roger. (I STILL can't believe it. Not even a cup of coffee. I almost can't go on here.) We got my first glimpses of the Percy Peaks as we rolled into Groveton. Wow is all I can tell you. There are many mountains in New Hampshire - heck, in the West - that won't grab you the way the Percys do when you first see them. All dark-clad in conifers and smooth-domed rock, boom into the clouds above everything else. I thought: I'm going up THOSE? Maybe we should stop a minute here and think. But naaah. Too late for that.

Well, we had ourselves a picturesque time finding that trailhead, for sure. Looks easy on the map, but the ground can be a funny thing. THIS IS THE COHOS TRAIL, STUPID is not a sign one sees too many places in the Great North Woods of New Hampshire (Le Grand Bois du Nord in French, Not Much Civilization Up Here in English). I'm not so sure this is not the way it should be; if the Cohos becomes AT du Nord, or even Long Trail Ouest, maybe not so good, n'est-ce pas? Anyway, put some petrol in yer pack; driving around could happen. We finally spotted (I should say Roger did, great nail out the passenger window, i.e., mine, nice job by me, huh) the telltale CT marker: an evocation of the Percy Peaks, in wood, with the bold yellow CT, which you will occasionally see along the trail if things are going well and you actually are on the CT. I had been cautioned before coming up: that can be a serious issue. Paying attention is required. The Cohos is largely a cobbling together of existing routes of numerous kinds, not excluding moose paths, with interstices of cut trail. Translation: the long flat grade you've been on for two miles may have stopped being the CT about a mile and three-quarters ago, where the latter went off on that tight tunnel through the spruce that you were daydreaming, and utterly missed. Blazes are at a premium here; this isn't the AT, where you can see five white blazes, spread out like a poker hand, on trees immediately in front of you much of the time. With a pounded footpath that honestly makes the blazes almost unnecessary.

Anyway. So here I was. Roger seemed reluctant to just drive off. I assured him things were OK, and pretended they were. And of course, for now, I was right. A pleasant stroll through shady hemlock woods to start, then over a powerline cut, then back in the shade along a nice grade, then that first watch-for-it quick cut off the grade and up the slope into Bald Mountain Notch. Sunny. Breezy. Big beautiful tan garter snake, about as big as they get, almost in the gap, and one of the biggest toads I ever saw before that. Biting bugs: there, but not too. I paused in the Notch, feeling quite nicely ahead of schedule despite the late start.

{mospagebreak title=Part 3}

Rowell Brook showed up, well, sort of where I was expecting it to, a recent bridge (definite overkill, appreciate this on the Cohos because you will not see it often) spanning my first water source.

You fill bottles whenever you pass something like this on this trail. For a footpath through very well-watered country, the Cohos doesn't have very many places that are easy to dip a bottle, never mind where you would want to dip one. Most are out of sight, shrouded by dense vegetation or underground, the gurgle you hear the only sign. Moose have walked in most of the rest, rather recently, imparting, shall we say, a distinctive color and taste. (You can test the latter. I sure didn't.) By this time, I was still feeling good, noting where I file such things that the climb of the Percy massif was coming pretty soon, and that those contour lines seemed to be, well, rather bunched, wot?

Then the climb began. I can't tell you exactly where I first saw moose sign on the Cohos Trail. I can tell you that after that point, it was rare NOT to see it. In fact, I have never seen sign of any animal, on any backcountry trip in my memory, anywhere near as dense and virtually ubiquitous as moose signature on the Cohos. Bear tracks on the Thorofare Trail in

Yellowstone: OK, close but not quite. No, in fact. Not near. It's pretty clear, from what I saw, which species uses the Cohos the most, and it isn't the species that conceived the trail. The Alces Alces Turnpike would be a good alternative name, if someone decides to get really creative. I was in open woods of spruce and fir, with a generous understory, very much less than halfway through the climb to the Percy col, when I decided I had passed, already, the moose-spoor total of my entire previous life. Right about then: a commotion ahead, around a bend. A quadruped, moving; a big stick snapping; hooves. About five seconds of noise, then silence. By the time I'd rounded the bend, there was no sign the animal had been there at all. I'm pretty sure it was no horse. That would be the only moose encounter of the walk.

Unless there was one on my back. I had decided, pretty much last minute, that, sheesh, I might want to be prepared for this walk. A little extra food. A tent, not a bivy. Um, teeny bit more food. OK, the load-monster pack, not the ultralight; most of that extra pack weight is suspension, which will come in handy. Stove and pot (I usually have someone else sherpa those for me, hee hee; or I take those, she takes shelter). Hmmmm: this means beefing up the boots too. You're getting the picture. On that Percy climb was where it occurred to me that carrying quite a bit more than I have on most all of my trips for, oh, the past four years might be a factor. I think the weather was trying to help me out some. A smiling sun was nice, but meant heat; so clouds would frequently pass over Mr. Sun and sprinkle some cooling rain on Moose Pack and me. Just when I'd be thinking, please, no drencher, it's the first day here, the clouds would break and the warming sun would return. I'm not sure I ever really liked it as much as, in retrospect, I should have.

A little scrambling in shade; an edge along a precarious ledge (Moose Pack); into the Percy col. A voice, two; kids, gone. So others are up here. I drop the pack. The sun's out. I detach the top pocket, with my day gear; strap it on, attach the bottle, and up South Percy. Steep. Clouds roll in again. Crap. A sprinkle. Have faith; all day has been like this. Hey, this trail definitely does not get used often. Multicolored lichen and leaves, some of it right in the footway; the spruce get smaller; out comes the sun again; a view opens up on the left. Then out of the forest and onto the ledges at the summit. Whoa, this is a view. The only thing blocking out any of what looks like, pretty much, the whole world is big mountains, close up, the stirring bulk of North Percy across the way, slick layered ledges ominous as fangs. Long Mountain (it certainly is) is pretty much the eastern horizon. Christine Lake spreads out on its right. Big looks out to the villages in the valley and hills, big ones, the White Mountains beyond. Lots of stuff. High point of the day and not just altitude. I'm doing great.

That dissipates quickly. Back at the col, cheerfully on my way, I bypass the wooden sign saying essentially "To North Percy;" I've decided one Percy is enough, let's stay on schedule and have a leisurely camp. Um, does the Cohos have orange blazes? Thought I'd read it might in spots....right? First compass bearing looks correct. Did I pass something...don't think so...the way gets very steep and slidy, and I actually take a couple pratfalls...hand-over-hand down a belay rope strung over a steep slab...suddenly, there it is, the Nash Stream valley, spreading out below me, the way headed straight down there. That is wrong. Out with the map...and no room for all the expletives deleted for your convenience at this point. "To North Percy" was the main Cohos, the distinctive change-direction blaze partly obscured by the sign but visible. Thinking it was the spur to the summit, I'd headed off on the Percy Peaks Trail, which, well, ain't the Cohos.

All this gets figured out back in the col, in a hailstorm, about an hour plus of good hiking time gone on the detour. The hailstorm actually feels good compared to the sweat and the lost time...and passing the North Percy spur, which I would have had plenty of time to climb in the sunshine, with less work than I'd just done for nothing. But after that the rain settles in to stay. By the time I reach Percy Loop Camp, my destination, I am too tired – psychologically, probably, as much as physically – to do anything but pitch the one-man, crawl inside, and sleep.

{mospagebreak title=Part 4}

Percy Loop Camp isn't a bad place. The pit toilet might benefit from a window or two to let in light; take your headlamp.

The tent platform presumes you brought nails; oh, that's a pound or two I was glad to do without. (I pitched on the bare ground next to the platform. The tight-packed slats wouldn't even let me loop a guy line.) Water is nearby (and moose are using it too, albeit quite dainty about it). And it's down in northern hardwoods. I was getting a bit of Spruce Fever and enjoyed the change. The rain subsided to an all-night drip; as comfortable as I was, I paid a middle of the night visit to the outhouse, just because - remember when you'd hold it as long as you could? Boy, I do - and saw the moon up. The morning brought sun; I didn't know it but the rain was over for the trip. All I wanted to do was pack and walk; I barely ate a scrap last night and I wasn't hungry now either. (Must have been those omelets at Sportsman's. I can't otherwise account for this.) More water. Always do that on this trail.

The Cohos continues downslope on a long gentle grade, one of its easiest stretches. You rarely see a blaze, but there's little doubt where you are or where you're going. Many moose have preceded you. But it's a good tread and an easy ramble through lush hardwood forest. The early sun and the birds, Long Mountain Brook singing off to the right, were pure Shenandoah. I was starting to think that the Nash Stream Road never really needed to show up at all; I'd be happy. Then I heard a car, rock-tossing range. (Don't tempt me.) The road is of course gravel, and it isn't driven a lot but you'll probably see a car or two. The Cohos follows it. You're going to do worse road walks than this, probably your next one. The road's lined with tall spruce and you get looks up to nearby mountains, especially long Stratford, off to your left, and big Sugarloaf, ahead and to the left. I was contemplating a climb of the latter; I'd heard, indifferent trail (old jeep road, growing in) but killer view. I could handle that. But first there was business. The Cohos departs the road in two places, just because. (They're trying to get it all off the road, and someday I'm sure they will. But now you're on it for about two miles.) The departures are gorgeous walking and worth it for that alone; plus on any road that gravel tread can get to one after a bit. But they hadn't exactly been brushed out recently when I arrived, and I was really wondering in a couple spots (did I say, rare blazes? I think I did; it's a Cohos theme). No real trouble; the road isn't far, but they were pretty enough that I stuck them out and was glad I did. Presently came a side trail. I'd been wondering whether I wanted to bother with Pond Brook Falls. But that pack has a way of telling you to drop it for that f-word. A rutted gash went dankly into the woods, not a very impressive way to start. It would take me a few minutes to realize I'd just made the best decision of the trip.

Pond Brook Falls seemed down, even with the rain. But it's such a huge expanse of smooth rock that it would take a true torrent to come even close to covering it. And it's a water catcher in just the right places. I thought I'd be reduced to just looking, but when I got to the top of the falls - you just have to go, it's one of the most inviting little climbs you'll see - I saw the top cascade pumping, a volume I wouldn't have expected at the bottom. Then I saw why: a big basin below the cascade, and a triple Jacuzzi off to river right. Now THIS is what I'm talking about. Everything came off and I mean everything, and I went in. That water is deity-invoking cold; a minute is agonizing. So you get out. But you go back; you have to. Whew did it do the trick. I needed it. I mean, it wasn't even noon yet, and I needed it. This is one thing about the Cohos. You can let that few-blazes, is-this-the-route? thing get to you if you don't watch out. You worry about it, too much, way more than you should, I can see looking back. Because you're not thinking, am I lost? That never happens, OK, not to me it didn't. (To others, well, it has.) You're thinking, how many times am I going to be doing this today, scanning for the next blaze, or just wondering when I'll see one, and how much time/sweat/anxiety will it cost me? And that was happening to me, and Moose Pack didn't hurt.

But it sure ain't the AT. And even though, by the time I got to the Sugarloaf cutoff, all I wanted to do was put on the bug net and rest for a year (I settled for a half-hour), I can tell you that, right there on the ground, right then, I was sure glad of that.

{mospagebreak title=Part 5}

So on it went. A gorgeous day, really.

Leaving Pond Brook Falls was tough, borderline awful. Crossing Nash Stream on a snowmobile bridge, like being in Alaska, big ridges, tall spruce, bugs and all. Passing up Sugarloaf: easiest decision of the trip, after a long pull on snowmobile and ATV routes that, although prettier by quite a bit than it sounds, involved the usual where-the-heck-is-the-next-blaze? shenanigans. It seemed so typically Cohos that the trip's toughest routefinding problem came at the gated intersection of a snowmobile trail and a passenger-car-drivable ATV road. No sign could I see of where to go, at a place where one was desperately (OK, in my own personal opinion, by me, at that moment) needed. Left on the ATV route seemed out; compass said that. Right seemed plausible and maybe even likely; but should it be a flat-slightly-downhill incline like that, when I should be going up to Sugarloaf Arm? That tossed me. I alternately fumed and scanned for some minutes (seemed like an hour but almost certainly not a quarter of that) for what I was sure was the blaze signaling a cut trail into the woods. But nothing, until I found the teenytiny wooden arrow - faded yellow on a camo brown block - nailed to a tree telling me, yup, your instinct about the road was correct, proceed! And soon enough, that road started doing what the compass and map said it should.

In retrospect I blame myself. (Thinking too much, a potentialcrippler.) But. It was around here that I also started thinking something else, something I'm not sure the Cohos folks can do much about. That almost-invisible arrow had very likely been part of a bigger, more elaborate signage. On an ATV road, which we know can get driven by folks who know little about anything other than ATVs - but who LOVE souvenirs! So there it is. When the trail isn't restricted, for considerable stretches, to foot travelers, your signs can go on permanent vacation. I found myself wondering many times after that whether such stickyfingers activity wasn't responsible for THIS latest fix I was finding myself in. Usually, I'm only worried by the physical: overexerting; carrying too much; not watering up. But on no other trip I have done - well, OK, I might be able to come up with exceptions but they will be few - did the psychological play such a large role. I was probably oversensitized to the potential difficulties, looking back. But each time I was stumped for a couple minutes I was thinking: how many more like this are there gonna be?

But again, it sure ain't the AT. And if I did it again - and I probably would, because it makes the AT feel like a two-lane blacktop - I'd probably breeze. But I think I made the first time tougher than it needed to be. Not that a caution isn't advisable here. Lots of people do thruhikes of the AT as their introduction to backpacking. NOT advisable here. You need to bring to the Cohos a cool head; the maps (NOT the USGS topos; fine you can have them too, but the TCTA map set for the Cohos is utterly essential), and a compass. (Yes. Soon - sigh - the TCTA maps will have GPS coordinates. There. Satisfied?) And - most important of all - experience in getting out of routefinding fixes. Get into those, and out of them, with more experienced people before you come here on your own. Because "trail magic" means something completely different here from what it does on the AT.

Back to the moose. Because I was headed into real moose country now. First was a side snippet to a gorgeous vista of Nash Stream Bog. In 1969 this was a lake, a reservoir that burst at the seams one stormy night, driving the dam inspector up a tree (imagine spending a night like that) and draining the pond completely. Now it's loaded with all kinds of wetland plants, cattails and reeds and rushes and willows and tamarack and spruce and cottongrass and sundews and I'm sure pitcher plants although I couldn't see any. A raptor went overhead; can't remember now whether accipiter or falcon but one of the two, species, fuggeddaboutit.. I passed the side trail (marked by a clever Satan's head carved into a wood block) to the Devil's Jacuzzi, the description of which made my dip at Pond Brook sound like a sponge bath. Maybe I just couldn't believe that, maybe I felt I had time to make - I wish I hadn't felt so much that way this trip - but I bypassed it. And I wasn't even feeling I really wanted to stop, which, I guess, is OK. Next time. (There may be one. And one great irony of this remote route is that numerous of its highlights make very reasonable dayhikes.)

A couple more headscratch moments in log staging areas and old clearcuts; some bugspray and the headnet; then Nash Stream Road (one more little roadwalk) came to its end, and the ascent began to the Headwaters, an area described in ways that made me feel I was getting there at precisely the right time of day. Quiet reigned supreme, and one thing I was sure of was that I'd be up there alone.

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A long break on the Headwaters start was needed. So I took one, time be damned.

It was around five, and the way I felt at the moment, I was pretty certain I wasn't going to reach my intended objective, Baldhead Leanto, by the end of this day. There had been quite enough headscratcher moments for me, and I was about to enter an area renowned (to the extent that anything on the Cohos Trail is) for a couple of doozies of the genre.

This is why you carry a tent, I thought, plopping down Moose Pack to take a turn as Moose Pillow. Little food, little drink - boy I hope that next water source is running, so far they all had been - and a little map read, and it was up and at 'em again. Especially the up part. Not, mind you, that the Headwaters Trail is truly steep. But my hill gears - usually more than equal to what I'd been seeing - were decidedly below recent par for me. For whatever reason - accumulated psychs and buzzkills (where IS THAT (*&!&^!^%! BLAZE!!!!) , accompanied by heat, hydration deficit, Moose Pack, bad snacks (I had already decided that if I ever saw another handful of [no libel suit needed, besides their intentions were good] again it would be too soon), whatever - I wasn't boogieing the way I'm used to. I wasn't more than routinely panicked by this; it didn't seem to reflect some sudden malaise. I just wasn't boosting it the way I'd expected to. It wasn't the lotus-eating I tend to do on weekends either; I felt myself, if anything, to be pushing harder than normal. And heck, couldn't that have been the problem, right there? Ballplayers call it "pressing," and you know, they may have something. Well, que sera, sera. Into the Headwaters.

They call it Cathedral Meadow; Cohos founder Kim Nilsen says it reminds him of where you'd expect to see in the flesh those catalog photos of women in big sunhats and peasant dresses, romping with their daughters, baskets full of wildflowers. When anybody ever finds out where Cathedral Meadow is. Well I can see where that image came from. I was certainly there under the right conditions: acres of tall waving grasses, all asparkle under the slanting sun with the Northeast Peaks, some of the biggest mountains in New England that almost no one ever sees, framing the picture. (Bunnell, formerly known as Blue, one of the Northeast Peaks, is the highest in New Hampshire outside of the White Mountains.) On almost any other day Moose Pack would have hit the ground again, but I just kept going. (Heck, maybe it was fear of having to lift Moose again if I dropped it. What prompted me to load up so for this walk, I may never know.) Moran Meadow was long, narrow, and oh so inviting; but I knew the route went up the grade to the right and declined the invitation. Up the grade with tight, dense mixed forest on both sides, low second growth and a big sky above. Things started to get moist and moose presence more and more obvious. The gurgle of water was almost omnipresent but the sources shrouded in dense veggies; I was holding out for the next Bona Fide Fillup.

And then came Muise Bowl, the reason for the trip. And it justified everything - the rain the hail the heat the psychs the bugs the bad snacks having to leave Pond Brook Falls the missing or nonexistent signs the mythical Next Blaze...everything was forgiven.

OK, check that, nothing so dramatic. Then again.

Muise Bowl was golden. Literally. The light was perfect, gilding it seemed everything it touched including the air itself. There might have been 15, 20 species of birds singing. At least. No mammals that I could see. But if wolf and deer and bear and fox and coyote and moose and lynx and bobcat and snowshoe hare and fisher and marten and porcupine and sasquatch had been walking around in the open, nuzzling each other as they casually passed, it wouldn't have looked or felt a bit unusual, a bit out of place. I might have just said, yep, how 'bout that. Muise Bowl might actually be the closest

to the Garden of Eden I have ever felt, on any walk I have ever done, in any place I have ever been. No way I can account for this, except, that, as Nilsen says in his idiosyncratic guide to the trail, it was peaceful, so peaceful. One could not imagine anything bad ever happening here, to anyone or anything, ever. No wonder there was a small, freshly painted, beautifully-carved sign that had just - almost literally, I think it might have been late June - been not nailed on, but tucked in a tree, proclaiming the place. The sign looked as if God might have put it there. This, buddy, is Muise Bowl, and I'm pretty darn proud of it.

Catch it in the rain, pal, or with 140 mosquito bites driving you nuts, or with a crop of blisters and your last meal disagreeing with you, and don't come to me, you're on your own. But my God. I will remember Muise Bowl, I bet, after I have forgotten everything else about the Cohos Trail, should that ever happen. Even the Percy Peaks, mighty and gorgeous as they are, didn't hit me where Muise Bowl did. I'm pretty certain that, however I do it, I will, that is will, get back there.

There it was, water, at the bottom of what amounted, in this gentle rolling country, to a canyon. I took my time stocking up on the fluids, trust me there. I got up thinking, camp, in the first place I am able to pitch this tent. But I had reckoned without Bulldozer Flat, or Gadwah Notch.

{mospagebreak title=Part 7}

You know, it occurs to me, I should have told you what Muise Bowl was.

No, NCAA Division III doesn't play its championship game there; it's a high mountain amphitheater, surrounded in the main by its namesake, Mount Muise (3,610 feet) and the Gadwah Notch country.

Good. Glad I cleared that up. (You knew that, right?) Whatever it was, it was one of the most beautiful places I've been. Who knew Bulldozer Flat would be too.

I'd heard the Flat was an old log staging area, blasted and still growing back in...actually, I'd heard that was a process that hadn't really gotten so much started yet. But the views from it were supposed to be grand, and almost all of peaks that most people in NH never see. But still, it sounded, um, bulldozed. I was in an area of the Cohos where camping is, technically, illegal. And one does not want to take a decision to do this lightly. Future trail access depends on users doing the right thing. But I was thinking I was not going to get much farther than that. And if you're gonna do something like that, what better place to do it than in a sacrificial former log yard?

Then I got there. The Flat wasn't blasted at all. No, there weren't trees on it, or grass, come to think of it no so-called higher plants at all.. But it wasn't the grey-brown strew of debris I'd expected; it was white, with several species of lichens, none of which I'd ever seen before. Covered with them. It was so beautiful that the view out, indeed grand, only somewhat registered. I was too busy looking down. I couldn't camp on this. I'd be committing murder, genocide. I started scanning around the edges. There I found more sundews than I had seen in my entire previous life, grand total. Bulldozer Flat was a garden. I really hadn't expected this. It might look weird to some people. But I saw something here I shouldn't mess up, rules or no rules. That's my rule. I decided to keep going. I wasn't sure where I was going to stop, but

not here.

The last stretch of the climb, into Gadwah Notch, got progressively wetter and wetter. Gadwah's a funnel, the Cohos footway pretty much the only way through. The Cohos website says that this stretch "can be wet if we've had a moist summer. This section of trail is slated for some ditching to help dry it out. Some ditching was done late June, 2007."

Cool understatement. They must have done that ditching in a submarine. Or used moose, whose tracks were ubiquitous in a bog for which "quicksand" is an overstatement - unless you're carrying a moose on your back. There was no way to avoid knee-deep or deeper, except by stepping quickly - which would spare one leg, drench the other. This stuff was, um, rich. I'm not sure ditching with a bulldozer would have helped; Gadwah Notch is a bog, period. More sundews, and more and more. I couldn't avoid them; I felt awful, but they were in the footway...um, wait a minute here. I had followed a Cohos blaze to get where I was. But it looked suspiciously old. Then I saw another one, on my right, not intended for me where I was. And there was a trail, coming in from an angle - the Cohos, with log puncheons visible as far back as I could see. I was too disgusted with myself to follow it back to see where I'd screwed up. Not sure I could have avoided more than some of the muck, but that would have been nice. I tried, hard, to notice the silence, the peace, the dead spruce and the tall, isolated live ones studding the forest around me, the primeval beauty of one of the wildest places in all New England. But it was kind of hard to ignore, well, me: top half vaguely human, bottom half Creature From the Brown Lagoon.

And then two things hit me. (1) I wasn't going to camp until I shed as much of this muck as I could. (2) Baldhead Leanto, an impossibility about an hour ago, now seemed makeable.

Off I went, on my fastest stretch of the trip. I suddenly had Blaze Radar. There are a lot of twists and turns through Gadwah, and you are warned, from Cathedral Meadow on up and through, to really watch where you're going lest a moose trail lead you miles off course. But I was negotiating the convolutions of the Cohos like an Indy racer. The sun was dropping in the west; it might have occurred to me somewhere in here that tomorrow would be the Fourth and there might be some fireworks somewhere out there tonight. But at least I was getting a light show, and the high forest was gorgeous as I left the drainage of Nash Stream behind. Indeed, as many times on this Cohos trip, I was astounded that I wasn't stopping for scenery that kills my pace under normal circumstances. I just wanted to move; a "Baldhead or Bust" sticker on my forehead might have been appropriate. All the water and food I needed; a tent in my pack; the world is home. Wherever I stop. But I knew where I wanted to.

Darkness, of course, disputed me. I always hold off on the light as long as I can; most people have no idea how good their night vision is, because they never give it a chance. But when I started hearing the distinctive crumpcrumpcrump of an Independence Day grand finale - coming I'm pretty sure from the vicinity of Dixville Notch and unfortunately invisible - it occurred to me that I might want to get out the headlamp. That involving a stop, hey, let's do that too; I have all night here. Some food, some water, some water puro, little map read. OK. Up. I had made the decision, the Cohos being what it is, to stop the moment I started having excessive difficulty finding the next blaze. That did take some time. I did, finally, give myself more of a start than I needed too, following what seemed a track, no blazes, that petered out to nothing. OK, I said, here, right in the trail. I was bivying, teeny footprint, no one would ever know I'd been here. And I figured it more likely that a 747 would request clearance to land here than that a human on foot would pass through. I would have bet money, or at least all of my bad snacks, on it, because throughout this walk it was a pretty good bet.

{mospagebreak title=Part 8}

Second-best decision of the trip: stopping the push for Baldhead Leanto.

I awoke in the middle of the night to hear the same total absolute on-the-moon silence I had heard, um, well, on the deck at Sportsman's Lodge. And when I finally crawled out of the tent with the daylight, I found myself in a, well, majestic spruce-fir forest. (It took me about twenty seconds to find the next Cohos blaze. I'd somehow missed it. I was so happy.) It was the kind of place, once again, that one simply does not want to leave. So I didn't, for a while. And once again, I did not so much as seriously consider bringing out the stove. And nope, I hadn't done a hot dinner either. I'd actually packed an extra freeze-dried meal. And two packets of hot chocolate for each night. Why did I do this, again? A jet engine would actually have done me more good than that stove and that to-be-hot food did me. Unless one wants to count them as exercise weights, that is. I just didn't feel like it; on neither night did I feel up to it and on neither morning did I need it.

Packup was less chore than rumination on solitude and the wild. Good for that. I pushed off for Baldhead Leanto at a stroll, consciously going as slowly as I could, and was there within a half-hour or so. You bet I hung out there. Nice spot, the view taking in the southward terrain all the way to Mount Washington. One of the best pit crappers of my lifetime, with big screen windows letting in the breeze, the sunlight and live video of the waving spruce and fir. Give me a pile of magazines and I'd sit there all day. I snacked and enjoyed for, oh, an hour maybe. The Cohos pitched dramatically downhill after that, with the usual headscratcher moments and a blowdown or two. Then it started undulating through forest alternating between softwood and mixed northern hardwoods, grasses, mosses, lichens and ferns alternately enlivening the understory. I felt a thousand miles away from anybody, and nothing but the trail itself tried to disabuse me of that notion. And the usual dozen or so more headscratcher moments.

At Kelsey Notch, a "major remote intersection" on the map, I started in earnest toward the trip's last summit, Dixville Peak. I passed what looked like a beaver version of a log staging area: lots and lots of big, obviously-beaver-chewed sticks, just lying inexplicably high and dry next to the trail. Did I say last summit? Oh yeah. I could tell that I didn't have either the legs or the stomach for the big climb out of Dixville Notch to hit tonight's ostensible objective, Panorama Leanto. Given that name – and oh I was assured it is – for me not to want to even shoot for it says all I think my brain needed to hear from my body. I pretty much knew that the Notch was gonna be the end of the line. This game was never about endurance tests, not for me, and I could see on the map and feel in my legs that that would be what it would be reduced to by the time that climb started. Que sera, sera; besides, now the scenic climax of Table Rock would be, well, a climax, eh? And now I could toss in another day of scenic driving and relaxation. Bummed? I was pumped. Let's get this done!

But first there was this little matter of Dixville Peak. The Cohos settled into an ATV roadwalk, albeit without the ATVs, or any other humans for that matter. A ruffed grouse pulled her lookit-me-broken-wing act; I could hear the kids peeping away off in the trailside veggies. Some moose tracks, but of course! And steadily expanding views backward, south, over the course of my route. The views from the south side of Dixville had been extolled in the guidebook; well they were nice but I wasn't feeling inspiration to write home or anything. And man was this a grind (maybe that was it). I don't care how quiet it is, climbing steep vehicle ruts isn't Wilderness Experience where I come from. My legs and lungs were saying, no more after this, right? Actually, they weren't even thinking they'd have to do this if they'd just politely give out on me. I am talking major grind here. Dixville's summit was an anticlimax; somewhat trashed, way rutted, and of course beautiful. All downhill from here. Good thing; water was getting kind of low.

After that, it was down over ski runs (the big, four-to-five-star Balsams Resort Hotel operates a ski area) and snowmobile trails, some flat some steep much of it boggy (I'd seen my fill of bogs, for sure). And beautiful: old twisty birch, tall spruce and fir, wetland grasses aplenty, spittlebug nests seemingly on every blade.

Then Table Rock. Let me tell you. Table Rock was as advertised. Every visitor to Dixville Notch has to come up here (stiff

little climb from way down there) to see what the big deal is about. It may look cool from the road. But mamma mia, up here you can see this is a notch! Looks like a saw cut it, two mighty strokes and done. You are on a cracked and split and clefted fin of rock, jutting way out from the mountainside, the last dozen or so yards with a titanic drop an arm's length or so to either side. If you are not in love with heights, your palms will tell you that here, buddy. Careful there, doubly so on a windy day. It's a wowser.

Then down to the road – long and steep, with Moose Pack seemingly trying to beat me there – and then up the road through the Notch, to the Balsams Hotel and trip's end. I lie down on close-cropped grass, a view of the Balsams across its pond, right next to one of those gotta-love-em tourist landmark signs regaling with the story of Dixville and the midnight-vote tradition on Election Day. OK, up. A raven flies out, a morsel of trash in its beak. I follow its flight path and see a little hutch, two trashcans overflowing...and the faucet and fountain out of which the Balsams' signature brand of bottled water flows, for passerby sampling, twenty-four-seven. Eureka! If I'd seen something like this on the Cohos, I might never have left. Sloshing, I finish my pull to the hotel. None of the five-star resorters seem in the slightest nonplussed at my appearance (and smell no doubt); they've seen it before. The staff cheerfully – with a slight hitch, totally my fault too – connects me with Roger Glew back at Sportsman's Lodge. I go outside, lie on the manicured lawn, and watch Biblical storm clouds gather over my intended route from here. Heh heh, I think. Beer's gonna taste good tonight.

{mospagebreak title=Part 9}

Two days of sightseeing and relaxation before meeting the family in Maine.

A drive up to the Canadian border at Pittsburg, through the scenic Connecticut Lakes. A stop at a true end of the line; the dam at the end of the gravel road to East Inlet, Second Connecticut. A car comes up behind me. Maryland plates. I walk up to him; looks like we're pretty far from home, eh? He says: what part of Maryland? I say, Hyattsville. He replies, essentially: walking distance. Steve Rogers, of Mount Rainier, outdoorsman in general and fly fisherman in particular, is on his way up for lots of the latter. He's here to meet friends. I tell him I've been on the Cohos Trail. He says: I know a couple of pretty big players on the Cohos; good friends of mine, planning to stop by and say hi. I say: who? He replies: Pete and Lainie Castine. I tell him I'm having dinner with them tonight at Sportsman's. OK, THAT is a small world. Steve can't make that; but we make arrangements to get in touch down the line. (Done.)

Pete and Lainie are a pleasure to meet. We compare notes over dinner (they're of course astonished to find out that their friend "Woodman" is in town, more or less). I tell them, I hope, that they should be proud of their trail, and that the trials and tribulations are, and should always be, par for the course for the Cohos. I remember frequently, in some sort of jam or other, thinking about what it took to think of that trail, and to put it through so that somebody could take just three days to see the variety of wonderful country I did. (I'd planned four, for the same exact stretch. Hmmm, not so bad after all.) The Cohos never wants to be any more, or less, than it is; the people who want that experience will come, and, inevitably, there will be more of them every year. Here's hoping none of them ever finds AT du Nord, or Long Trail Est – whether they want to, or not. If I didn't have more vacation to do elsewhere, I don't think leaving Sportsman's, or Coos County, would be possible. But, with a deep breath, it is.

Maine? God. Wonderful; Mount Desert Island may be – have I said this here? – America's best place to take your family. We meet at Thurston's Lobster Pound in Bernard, an hour ahead of schedule, literally arriving simultaneously – an hour early, even though I hadn't gotten their voice mail message (damn cell phones) saying let's do that. The week is full of fun stuff. Walks hikes and bikes. Mom and Dad get one paddle in, with little Kevin on Somes Sound. The kids' first porcupine, up on Penobscot Mountain; their first snapping turtle, below one of Rockefeller's bridges on the Witch Hole carriage loop. A luna moth on the men's bath in the campground; don't see one of them every year. The kids also nearly get killed (as do one or two of the adults) in Dad's mountain-bike expedition to determine the status of Breakneck Road – foot trail? Or Bike

Extravaganza? – since the maps can't seem to agree on it. (If you have an ATV, it might be a road. A jeep or a truck, not so sure. On a bike, the name is spot on.) Lobster, in rolls stews or just plain steamed. New restaurants (there are more!) New roads to drive, new places to stay, coming and going, new ways to get there.

I want to go back.

(No kidding.)