

SHORT  
CARRIES »

## A PIECE OF THE PARK

### Scenery everybody wants

BY ANNIE STOLTIE

**HALF MY LIFE AGO** I spent summer weekends at a family camp on Lake Ozonia, with perch-catching extravaganzas, epic campfires and other multi-generational traditions. After that, while renting a place along Lake Placid's Main Street, tourism—crowds, gift shops and parking tickets—dominated my surroundings. Next stop was a solitary farmhouse near Black Brook, not a neighbor in sight but Whiteface looming in my windows. From there I landed in Jay, a river-valley hamlet where the sun always seems to shine.

Despite these experiences—and what I'd call a continuing Adirondack education—I'm still from away, native to a place just beyond the Blue Line. So why my sense of ownership over land that's not really mine? Why the wash of sadness when

I drive through, say, Wilmington, and there, where the view of the Stephenson Range is best, lies a leveled swath of forestland, a bulldozer parked where a foundation awaits? That plot just might be someone's dream, the reward of decades, maybe even a lifetime, of hard work. But without the trees it looks naked and vulnerable, even jarring—like a long-time beard-wearer just after he's shaved. And I know that whatever rises in that spot will probably interrupt what was a stunning, unobstructed landscape.

I can't blame people for wanting a piece of the park. Nature shapes us, it changes us. It releases the squeeze of a chaotic world. It reminds us what matters most.

But is it possible to love this place too hard, whether we're here for a weekend or a lifetime?

More than 3,500 sets of boots on the trail—like what happens on Mount Marcy in August—threaten alpine ecosystems. Caravans of cars snaking along our spiderweb of roads spit exhaust and, in icy weather, require salt that pollutes waterways. New homes on remote shorelines or tucked far

from towns and hamlets require additional roads that chop up forestland, harming wildlife. Backcountry building contributes noise and light pollution as well as sprawl that's a turnoff to visitors seeking a wilderness experience.

That's enough to crush the cabin-in-the-deep-woods fantasy that lures so many people here. And yet, backcountry subdivisions, such as one on former Boy Scout property at Woodworth Lake, in the town of Bleecker, still happen. At press time 16 of the 1,119-acre Woodworth development's two-dozen lots—some up to 145 acres—are already sold, and they've been available just a couple of months. Environmental groups are unanimous in their opposition, citing, among other threats, the subdivision's sprawling design, its impact on shorelines and surrounding state lands. Meanwhile, at Whiteface Outlook—an 80-acre development of 29 lots in its first phase, with sublime views in the heart of Wilmington—only a handful of houses have been constructed. The development was approved without controversy by the Adirondack Park Agency a decade ago. Its "clustering" design—lots close to one another and one road connecting them all within an established residential community—follows the less-invasive style of building that environmentalists favor. Most of Whiteface Outlook's lots are smaller than two acres and sandwiched in succession. That doesn't seem to be what people want.

How best to live here without disrupting the delicate balance of human and wild landscape? That's our enduring challenge and what makes this place so different from New York's Green Lakes, Niagara Falls, Taughannock Falls, Letchworth and Taconic State Parks, where gates, admission fees and hours of operation separate people and shared public space. A better name for our park might be the Adirondack Territories—land that's far from cohesive, that is, for better or worse, a disparate jumble of classifications, economies, ideologies and rules.

Adirondack dreams are here to stay. But can we realize them without ruining things? Nobody wants to damage something they love. 🌿

PHOTOGRAPH FROM ISTOCK

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## WHY THEY STAY

**Soaked, shell-shocked and still here** BY ANNIE STOLTIE

**JODIE FREDERICK'S** birthday cake had been baked and decorated, ready on a platter in her new refrigerator. Frederick's family had planned a party that also celebrated the success of her recent hip replacement.

But there wouldn't be any kind of celebration. That day—August 28, 2011—Tropical Storm Irene dumped seven inches of rain on the northern Adirondacks, saturating the High Peaks and pummeling the river valley settlements below. With floodwaters gauged at 18.5 feet, about seven feet above the riverbank, it was one of the worst natural disasters to hit the region since the freshet of 1856 swept away mills, homes, livestock and human lives.

At 4:45 the next morning, when it was safe for Jodie and her husband, Wayne, to navigate the scattered debris back to their property, they were met with such devastation, Jodie “cried like a baby,” she says. The Fredericks had lived in their circa-1913 two-story home since 1996, raising three kids beneath its roof.

Just 10 days before Irene hit, the Fredericks had finished exhaustive repairs to their Au Sable Forks home. In April an ice jam had clogged the Ausable River, forcing it over its banks, filling the Fredericks' house with a foot of icy water that shorted appliances, heaved hardwood floors and ruined the Sheetrock, which absorbed the moisture like a sponge. Now their house “was completely trashed” again, says Wayne.

This time, four and a half feet of flood-



water had punched through windows and doors, soaking everything, leaving their possessions in tangled heaps. The refrigerator, where Jodie discovered her smashed birthday cake, was upended. The oven was full of water. A molasses of mud and oil coated everything.

The cleanup was frantic. “The goal was to get everything out of the house,” says Wayne, “to dry what you could.” It took a day for mold to appear.

AU SABLE FORKS IRENE FLOOD PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK HOBSON

“It's a sinking feeling to watch your belongings from the past 25 years being picked up by a backhoe and taken to a dumpster,” he says. But “we worked from daylight to dark to get it done.” Completely “shell-shocked,” it wouldn't be until later that reality set in—that a neighbor's swimming pool was wrapped around a tree; that firefighters, dodging propane tanks, had pulled people and pets from rooftops; that the community would never be the same.

Today the Fredericks' house is again rebuilt, but, nearby, a half-dozen empty, grassy plots mark where there were structures—“where people once lived their lives, sometimes generations' worth,” says Wayne. And the stink of Irene, says Jodie, even five years later, lingers. “When it rains, you can smell that smell.”

“Funky and earthy,” adds Wayne.

It's a reminder.

So is the culture of flood victims: Around here you won't find Sheetrock or carpet in homes—just wood. Birth certificates and other cherished items are kept upstairs. “Every time it rains,” says Wayne, “you get that feeling in the pit of your stomach—oh no, not again.”

So why do they stay?

The Fredericks live in what's known as the Jersey section of Au Sable Forks, connected to the hamlet's main street by a one-lane bridge. “Jersey Swamp,” as Jodie jokingly calls her lower part of the neighborhood—a block below “Jersey Heights”—is in the Ausable River floodplain, beside a pinch-point in the river. That corner, says Wayne, “is the worst part of the river, especially for jams.”

In three decades the Fredericks have been affected by just two floods, but the town of Jay—which includes the hamlets of Au Sable Forks, Jay and Upper Jay—has endured years of high-water events. Since 1925, 11 major Ausable River floods have been recorded, but water overtaking roads and seeping into basements is an accepted, and frequent, part of living here.

These communities, after all, rose around the Ausable. As with most 18th- and 19th-century settlements, river power meant prosperity, fueling lumber mills and tanneries.

While Au Sable Forks has a proud

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history, it's a flash in the timespan of the river that runs through it. For more than 10,000 years the Ausable has dutifully gouged the earth, pushing along the sediment for which it was named.

"Rivers are dynamic, they change all the time," says Tim Mihuc, director of the Lake Champlain Research Institute. "One of the comments I often receive is, 'My river is changing, it's meandering here, moving there—I want it to be like it was.' But rivers don't care when you bought the property. People want to put rivers in a static mindset. You can't—rivers erode and deposit."

Irene has been labeled a "500-year flood." That doesn't mean it'll happen every five centuries, but that there's a .2-percent chance of a similar event occurring in any given year. An Irene repeat could, hypothetically, happen tomorrow. And North Country weather records show that since the mid-1900s, storms are wetter; the number of storms dropping more than two inches of rain in two days has doubled.

Recently, the Essex County Department of Community Resources held a meeting at the town offices in Au Sable Forks to address the town and county's challenges post-Irene, to present the findings of a grant-supported survey. One proposal was a new bridge and a lower Jersey buyout, allowing the river to swell naturally, beyond its bed. Though that scenario, due to its multi-million-dollar price tag, is unlikely, Wayne is indignant.

In 2011 his house qualified for a Federal Emergency Management Agency buyout, but—unlike 40 town of Jay homeowners—he didn't take it because, he says, "You wouldn't even get half of what your house is worth." Plus, that scenario would erase close to 20 homes. "Where would we go?" he asks. "The more people you buy out, the more people who leave. And there goes the town."

It's complicated. "Every nail you hammer, every board you put up—it's your home," says Wayne. "People stay here because this is where we live, this is where we want to live." Yet one more big flood and "we're done," says Jodie. "I don't think I have the emotional fortitude to do this again."

Still, the Fredericks want the river to make that decision for them. 🍷



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# SEASONAL DISORDER

When the only constant  
is change

BY ANNIE STOLTIE

**THE WOODCHUCKS DISAPPEAR.** It happens gradually, the family of “Woodys,” as my kids call them, no longer sunning themselves on the boulders that ring our backyard. It’s not until a week of unconsciously scanning the lawn from our stairwell window that we realize they’re gone—and we know they are. By early fall they’re blobs the size of obese housecats, ready for suspended sleep.

The flash of cars and trucks speeding down our hill to the Jay covered bridge is gone too. This summer it was cramped chaos at the bridge’s parking areas—fishermen and swimming-hole regulars were joined by swarms of Pokémon GO gamers, led to our landmark by their devices. These people were easy to spot: smartphones held in front of faces or handlebars or dashboards as they captured pretend creatures in a virtual world. They came at all hours, the cockpits of their cars lit up in deep night, disturbing the usual blackness.

In August, two dozen vehicles in our hamlet were ransacked—iPods, cell phones, loose change and jewelry stolen from driveways along Route 9N all the way down to the covered bridge. I was quick to blame the Pokémon players who seemed so indifferent to our landscape—our *real* landscape. When I told a friend in law enforcement that the syringes in my glovebox—an emergency stash for my child with a medical condition—had also been snatched, he dismissed my theory and said, “Welcome to heroin. The person who did this likely lives within a mile of your house.”

Things change.

Bits of burgundy color the tips of maples. The Woodys pick up the signal. Wild turkeys do too. Drive a rural road and you’ll see them scrambling, the adults distracted troop leaders, their poults too close to the shoulder, not sure where to go or what to do but urgently aware that something’s

TAMARACKS BY GEORGEANNE GAFFNEY, WWW.GEORGEANNEGAFFNEY.COM

supposed to happen.

Ask just about anyone around here—until it’s time to dust off skis—and they’ll lament the coming cold, pushing tank tops to the back of the drawer, already missing the ice-cream stands that shutter after Labor Day. The past has taught us that summer is a blink, to squeeze the swimming, gardening, socializing and staying up too late by the campfire into a sliver of time. When it’s over, the pace slows and bins of sweaters and blankets are brought up from the basement.

Last November it stayed unseasonably warm. A black bear, out past its late-fall bedtime, sprinted across the Northway, near North Hudson, and collided with my friends’ Subaru. Into December, ski hills—unless sprayed by man-made snow—stayed naked. On Christmas Eve some Adirondack hamlets hit a record-breaking 60-plus degrees, as surprising as a morning cocktail. People played golf. They posted selfies on stand-up paddleboards. Outerwear was shed in giddy celebration.

Then came the uneasiness. Winter carnivals, pond-hockey games and fishing derbies were canceled. Was it El Niño or Arctic oscillation or just a peek at our future?

I’m old enough to remember North Country winters that required snowsuits over Halloween costumes and plows that pushed snow into roof-high slopes. Sometimes it snowed in May.

Scientists report that in the future we’ll have less snow and ice; winters will shrink, as they have the last century. We’ll pack the season into a crack while warm weather will dominate with stretches of sameness.

Everything will change.

Our forests. Our economy. Even regional small talk like, “Cold enough for ya?” And then there are the Woodys. As the air chills, *Marmota monax* begin hibernation, their heartbeat slowing to five beats a minute. That portion of their life cycle is followed by waking in March, for love. What will happen to them?

This year’s winter could bring blizzards, ice storms, heat waves—right now it’s anyone’s guess. The hard part is what comes later—saying goodbye to what might not come back. 🌲

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