

THE COLD RIVER

At a moment I consider the nadir of my high peaks experiences, I stood on the summit of Mount Donaldson and couldn't see a thing. My eyes were squeezed shut with stinging tears of sweat and citronella, my head pounding, my heart racing, my lungs gasping. It was eighty-plus degrees, the black flies so thick in the air I was inhaling one every few minutes, my mouth so dry they were sticking to my upper palate. To worsen matters, I was halfway through a course of antibiotics that had enervated me from day one. I never should have gone on the hike in the first place, but we were four peaks away from becoming forty-sixers and needed three of the Swards. So what it's a little hot and buggy and I'm not feeling too well? We could always bail out and trudge dispiritedly back to camp, like we did the last time we tried to climb the Swards.

I finally dried my eyes with a tissue, got the tearing and blinking under control and looked straight out at a handful of widely scattered cumulous clouds, small and billowing and dazzlingly white, riding at anchor in a cerulean sky. The view from Donaldson took my breath away soon as I got it back, as the nadir of my high peak experiences somersaulted into revelation. The foreground fell into the abyss, dropped two thousand feet almost vertically into Ouluska Pass, loomed up massively eight miles east as the Santanoni Range arching across the blue distance. And down there in the middle ground, way below me, in a broad swath

of intense chartreuse, a gleaming ribbon of silver curled through the Cold River Valley, which was dappled with cloud shadows I initially mistook for a handful of widely scattered, pure stands of conifers among the lighter hardwoods. The illusion brought a smile to my face and raised a question in my mind: what was it like down there?

My curiosity hopelessly piqued, I simply had to find out.

A year later to the day, as I lay all but fully reclined in a marvelously comfortable backpacking sling chair, I stared up at a black sky full of stars during the peak of a world-class Perseid meteor shower. The Milky Way looked like a long thin cloud on the other side of the stars, and over the course of two and a half hours we saw almost seventy meteorites incandesce in the ether. Dramatic persistent trains, long vaporous tails of ionized atmosphere glowing surreally brightly in the starlight, followed eight or nine of the meteors across a good ten degrees of sky. Three of the vapor trails hung suspended a fugitive few seconds among the stars, like Cheshire Cat contrails.

We were spread out loosely in the middle of the Cold River on a large, smooth shelf of rock immediately below Miller's Falls, the steady roar of which I mistook for the sounds of all those stars and galaxies racing inexorably through space. Fifty feet to my left, in the corner of my eye, white water at the base of

Miller's Falls glowed in the starlight like a cataract of fireflies. To my right a pure darkness of hollow gurgles and the hissing static of a fast, shallow section of river. Except for ecstatic yelps and sidelong glances when we spotted a good shooting star, we were silent and staring at the firmament for the better part of three hours, during which time our eyes adjusted so well to the moonless blackness we could see each other clearly by the ambient light of the stars. I never realized how distinct a shadow starlight can cast until I looked over at my wife and saw her head and shoulders silhouetted on the luminous granite shelf she sat almost fully reclined upon. I could tell even from her shadow she was smiling. We all were.

We were smiling at the outrageousness of our luck, hopelessly besotted by the beauty of the Cold River Valley.

We backpacked the Northville-Placid and Ward Brook Truck trails from Long Lake to Coreys, a thirty-two mile journey we decided to do in eight days, the better to take time to stop and look at the waterfalls, cast for trout and stay up late watching shooting stars and other heavenly phenomena. We timed the trip to coincide with the Perseid meteor shower, actually convinced two of our dearest friends to join us and spent eight straight rainless days in the Adirondack backcountry. There were no black flies, a few mosquitoes, clear skies virtually all

the time. We bought new state-of-the-art rain suits for the trip, never took them out of our packs.

Like most things of extraordinary beauty, the Cold River Valley looks even better close up than it does from a great distance. And it had looked so good from so many great distances we couldn't help but go there. Santanoni, Panther, Donaldson and Emmons all have stunning, El Grecoesque views of the Cold River valley, which had become, over the course of a couple of years, one of those places I knew even from afar would eventually become intimate. And I was right. It was for us and our friends our longest backpack to date, neither of us having ever spent more than six days in the woods. Halfway through this trip we were going to be sixteen miles from the nearest road, and so we planned for every possible contingency except a flat tire.

The Northville-Placid/Ward Brook Truck trails from Long Lake to Coreys is a textbook cross-section of Adirondack sensibilities and landscapes. Extremely accessible to motorboats and snowmobiles, with a lovely trail right beside it and lots of nice campsites, Long Lake, to the south, can get very crowded. We hiked north along it for four miles before the crowds of organized young campers and the whines of outboard engines faded. The trail head at Coreys, to the north, at the end of a long washboarded road impassable in winter, never gets too crowded. Noah John Rondeau, the famous Adirondack hermit, lived for three

decades on a knoll overlooking the Cold River almost exactly halfway between Long Lake and Coreys.

Eager to journey from more society to less, we only stayed a night at Rodney's Point on Long Lake, figuring we would do better to allocate more time to the Cold River proper. And we were right. The Cold River drains into Long Lake, which is actually an extremely wide section of the Racquette River. The trail north from Long Lake runs away from and back to the shoreline, and then heads into the woods. About two miles before Shattuck's clearing, the site of a former ranger station with a commanding view of the Swards, the trail descends into the woods and passes through an enormous, incongruous, luxuriously pure stand of white pine, the result of a fire. The woods are lovely, dark and deep, and they end in a beautiful vlei full of birds in early August. A male Canada warbler in full color, taxi-cab yellow in the piney shade, lit on a twig fifteen feet to my right and bobbed gently as I smiled.

Black-throated blue and yellow-rumped warblers called and scolded and flitted in the bushes just beyond the pines, which ended as abruptly as they began, their deep shade giving way to a clearing all but dizzy with light. Smooth as a mirror, the water in the vlei formed a perfect Rorschach image of half-fallen trees leaning at every which angle, ashen filigrees of long-dead twigs and branches, spindly stands of flowers and patches of slender grasses indistinguishable from

their reflections. Just beyond the vlei, a meadow of tall grasses glowed a brilliant yellow green in the sunlight; and beyond the meadow, the trail led into a woods lined with tawny cotton grass and closed gentians a deeper purple for the shade.

The trail continued wound through the woods to Shattuck's Clearing and then descended steeply to Moose Creek. The suspension bridge high over Moose Creek shakes no matter how still you stand on it or how slowly you walk across. The trail beyond the bridge climbs and descends through a pretty woods and then climbs slightly again to another, far more stable bridge that crosses the Cold River above a fast, white flume that falls into a dark pool enclosed in a grotto formed by giant boulders. Just beyond the bridge and a hundred yards further downstream, empty lean-tos awaited our decision.

We chose the slightly downstream lean-to, which sits on a rise slightly over the river and has a spectacular view upstream. Wide and shallow and full of rocks and pools, the river curved sharply to the southwest around the spit of land behind our lean-to, so that the myriad sounds of the stream seemed to come from all directions at once. After dinner and a magical dip in what I dubbed the "Cold River Grotto," we retired to our lean-to, talked about the day and started tumbling, individually, into sleep. One of my hiking buddies was snoring quietly, one breathing heavily, the other silent. I slid out of my wife's and my double sleeping bag and went around to the back of the lean-to one last time before

calling it a night, only to realize, with a start, that those continuous pulses of lightning in the cloudless sky were the Northern Lights. I woke everybody up immediately and we watched the auroral display for twenty minutes. Pale curtains of white light would suddenly appear among the treetops and undulate like gauze among the stars.

The next day, as our friends relaxed in the lean-to and swam in the Cold River Grotto, my wife and I hiked two miles upstream to Big Eddy, a round, five acre pool below a pair of furious Cold River flumes. Although it shares a name with a former muffler mogul from the Bronx, Big Eddy is a textbook example of a current flowing backwards against the mainstream. Delicate swirls of bubbles graphically outline the currents and counter-currents of Big Eddy, where I decided to try to catch my first trout; no mean achievement for a boy from the Bronx. I casted a half dozen times into the foamy curlicues of Big Eddy, reeling my line in slowly, trying to think like a trout.

As I readied myself for my seventh cast, I looked down over my left shoulder and experienced a piscine epiphany: why hang out in a shallow series of eddies when there's a deep, cold pool right at the base of the flumes at the head of Big Eddy? So I lowered my line straight down into the pool and dangled my hook and night crawler directly in front of an overhanging shelf of rock. Pow! I no sooner focused on the end of my line than a golden blur of a trout nailed it and

took off downstream. My reel whirred like crazy, I turned toward the curlicues of foam. I gave the fish plenty of line, cranked it in slowly, tried to prevent my face from cracking in a smile. It swam right into my net. I had even brought along a shallot and a some olive oil to sauté a trout if I caught one; and if I was a hero for showing up in camp with a fresh brook trout dangling from my line, I was a hero of genius for having brought along the ingredients to cook the sleek creature properly. Big Eddy woulda been proud of me.

Next day we hiked three and a half miles to the Seward Lean-to, slipped out of our packs and walked down a few yards to Miller's Falls, which I pronounced at the time the most beautiful place I had ever seen in the Adirondacks. When you walk out of the woods near the base of the falls, giant shelves of sand-colored granite jut into smooth sections of black water streaked with the reflected green of sunlit leaves and the cobalt blue of the sky. Above the falls, a series of giant beige boulders shimmer with the light of water moving around them, and beyond them the Santanoni Range rises dusty blue in the distance.

So we stayed and gawked at Miller's Falls for a few minutes and went back to the lean-to, where a mixed flock of butterflies descended upon us. Over the course of the next hour, white admiral and Compton's tortoise-shell butterflies swarmed all around and landed on us, craving, we realized, the perspiration and

salt on our exposed skin. The effect of a fluttering flight of butterflies lighting on our thighs and forearms and faces was decidedly unreal, and we managed not to laugh at the playfulness of the scene until a white admiral landed on one of our noses--mine. We swam in the lovely pool at the base of the falls until early evening, then changed for dinner and the stars.

From Miller's Falls the trail follows the Cold River fairly closely, past the Ouluska Pass Lean-to and Noah John Rondeau's Hermitage, and then veers into the woods until it junctions with the Ward Brook Truck Trail, which runs from Coreys to Duck Hole, another spectacularly scenic spot. We stayed in one of the Cold River lean-tos just beyond the junction, and smack in the middle of hanging our bear bags, my good friend Don announced he had to lay down immediately, bears or no. We had actually brought with us one of those thermometers that you tape to your forehead for a reading, and it read 104 degrees.

In keeping with our Cold River karma of incredible luck, Don spiked his fever at the optimum time, our next to last night in the woods. He spent a full day resting and rehydrating at the lean-to and packed out without incident the following day. As he lay sleeping, the rest of us walked down a steep embankment to the river to wash and fetch water for dinner and breakfast; and as I knelt on a rock in a pool just below the confluence of Moose Creek and the Cold River, the play of light on water stunned me.

The terrain sloped so sharply down to the river, and the forest grew so thick and tall right from its banks, and the sun was so low, that we and the river and just about everything but the sky was in a giant shadow. The only thing catching sunlight was a brilliant green slash of tallest treetops upstream and overhead. They looked pretty enough, if not pretty enough to pause for; but when I knelt fully over the river to draw water, their reflection jolted me like an electronic flash on the retina. The beshadowed valley snapped on like a light in a dark room, changed instantly from a vague and rocky river to a luminous field of electric chromium green, stippled downstream from each invisible rock with cobalt blue curves of turbulence reflecting the sky.

As our friend recuperated next day, my wife and I hiked to Duck Hole, another stunning study in reflections, and the following day we started for Coreys. Just when we figured we were metaphorically out of the woods, the trail descended into a small pond no less than a quarter-mile wide. We studied the trail map intensely, wondering how the mapmakers could miss such a large body of water, only to realize, as we should have immediately, that beaver activity had created the pond. So we took off our packs and boots and I, the longest of leg among us, hiked slowly into yet another gorgeous reflection. At the flood's deepest point, where the water came up to the middle of my thighs, a gigantic, electric green dragon fly landed on my shoulder, and winked.