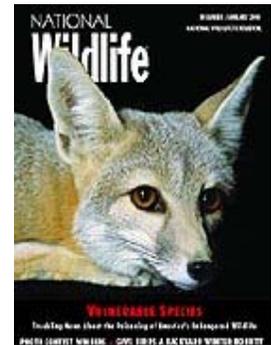


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**Special Places***By Douglas Rooks***Mesmerized by a River in Maine**

**FLYING OVER EASTERN MAINE**, you can easily miss the singular beauty of Washington County. The inland mountains look long, low and uninviting. But this seemingly unexceptional stretch of country contains one of the longest and finest free-flowing water journeys in the Northeast, rivaling the famed Allagash River for remoteness and technical challenge. It's hard to believe that this place--where bald eagles are easier to spot than people--is only a five-hour drive from Boston.

The five Machias lakes and the 75-mile-long connecting river, which extends north before looping south around Washington Bald Mountain, can be traversed in a few days, especially during spring's high waters. But as I found out when I canoed through this region for the first time, a paddler has to be able to turn almost on a dime to avoid being pinned against large boulders. After several hours of navigating deceptively tricky rapids, I ended up at the foot of Fourth Machias Lake, where a gale-force headwind ended my paddling for the day.

The Machias (the Indian word for "bad run of water") is situated in the Northern Forest, the country's largest remaining tract of woodlands east of the Rocky Mountains. It was once a major migration route for the Passamaquoddy Indian tribe, which spent the winter fishing on the coast and the summer hunting and trapping in the interior woods. Their ancestors left striking petroglyphs on cliffs at the river's outlet along the shores of Machias Bay.

Like most Maine rivers, the Machias was the scene of massive timber cutting and log driving in the nineteenth century, when the state was briefly the "lumber capital of the world." Today, most of the loggers and all of the dams are gone. The last dam was removed in 1973. Since then, the banks have regenerated nicely, and the river now has the look of a wilderness stream--one that the Northern Forest Alliance, a coalition of conservation, recreation and forestry organizations, is trying to preserve. "The region's assets are irreplaceable," says Karin Tilberg, the organization's Maine director. "The Machias headwaters lie at the heart of the Down East Lakes region, which have some of the state's premier rivers and pristine lakes."

For a long time, paper mills owned the land, but now the bulk of the Maine woods is owned by investors who are more likely to parcel and sell tracts for development. "Because the area is so remote and wild, there's still a lot of pristine spots and miles of lake shoreland that make it very attractive to people looking to build a second home," says Eric Palola, director of NWF's Northeast Natural Resource Center.

Already Bangor Hydro, a major electric utility, wants to run a transmission line that would bisect the river basin. It proposed cutting a new corridor through the forest, which contains an abundant and diverse array of wildlife. Bobcats, martens and fishers, along with deer, moose, beavers, mink, otters and muskrats, all call this place home. "Such diverse habitat also provides for unparalleled outdoor recreational experiences," says Dave Tobey, an outfitter and Maine guide who has lived in the region for decades.

Conservationists are also concerned about the health of the area's riparian zones, which provide crucial habitat for the Atlantic salmon. Recently designated a federally listed endangered species,

the salmon historically ranged south to Maryland's Chesapeake Bay but now survives only in a handful of Maine rivers. Other rare species in the vicinity include short-eared owls, black terns, sedge wrens and a considerable variety of aquatic plants. One marsh upstream from Machias Lake hosts insects identified nowhere else, including the gorgeous Tomah mayfly.

To help protect these and other species, the local Down East Lakes Land Trust is currently negotiating major habitat purchases in the Grand Lakes region to the north of Machias basin. To the east, an international commission is seeking conservation easements and purchases on the St. Croix River, the boundary between Maine and New Brunswick. To the south, the tidal and mid-river sections of the Machias are the focus of salmon protection efforts, with \$2 million in federal Endangered Species Act funds already pegged for habitat protection.

The question is whether these efforts will be big enough--and happen soon enough--to safeguard the region. As I discovered firsthand during my days on the river, anyone who spends any time here can't help but see why it's so important that this rare bit of wilderness be protected.

During my trip, I made a mid-morning stop by Trafton Rock--an extraordinary glacial boulder jutting some 30 feet above the water, which was probably a landmark for long-ago travelers. Nearby, I tasted the over-wintered cranberries, still juicy and sweet. The next afternoon I was running Otter Rips, a short but thrilling section of whitewater once famous for epic log jams.

Camping is unofficial, but it isn't hard to find a good site. On Third Machias Lake, I camped on land high above the water and on eye level with a bald eagle's nest in the distance. With no signs of human activity, I felt I had stepped into an earlier century when I took a short walk to the far side of the island. Swallows skimming the water to catch mayflies provided the only movement at sunset. At dawn the next day, the water was glassy and calm.

When I remember the Machias now, I think most about that island. But I also recall how mesmerized I was by the intricate patterns of eddies on the river, the shimmering face of the rock ledge and the sandpipers flitting about me. Now that I know all this exists, I can't imagine losing it.

*Writer Douglas Rooks has been a journalist in Maine for more than two decades. To learn more about the Northern Forest, see [www.nwf.org/northernforest](http://www.nwf.org/northernforest).*

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