

Saving the North Woods

Nothing like this has ever been attempted anywhere....

by Ted Williams

At least the fish were still there. It takes more than oily marinas, motorboaters, partyboaters, waterskiers, jetskiers, parasailers, windsurfers and second-home developers to deplete smallmouth bass, the resilient bread-and-butter fish of Downeast Maine. And, insulated as they are by 40 feet of epilimnion, lake trout—"togue" in Mainespeak—were nearly as prolific as they'd ever been. With the increase in angling pressure more landlocked salmon were being stocked, so, if anything, they were more abundant than in the days when this watershed was wild.

The 20-foot, square-end Grand Laker canoes used by the guides had been replaced by low-slung, glittery bass boats powered by enormous, time-conserving outboards. There used to be almost 50 guides in the 13 towns between Grand Lake Stream and Forest City—more guides per surface acre than anywhere else in Maine, or New England, for that matter. Now there were none. There had been more fishing and hunting lodges here than anywhere else in the Northeast. Now they were out of business. But who needs guides when you can propel yourself with a foot-operated trolling motor and find fish with a sonar unit that beeps like a tipped-over telephone? And why travel almost to Canada for lodge-based, guided suburban bass fishing when you can do it yourself an hour by air out of New York, Boston, Chicago, Philly, Detroit or Atlanta?

Although some species of wildlife were on the way out, white-tailed deer had undergone spectacular recovery now that all the "no trespassing" signs had reduced hunting pressure. And while the economy had crashed after the guides, lodge owners, loggers and forest-products workers moved away or went on welfare, and after the Baileyville pulp and paper mill went belly up, the dollars were now pouring in (or, more accurately, out) as multi-national corporations developed the former Georgia Pacific holdings, starting with the valuable shore-front property.

As I gazed up along the Farm Cove Peninsula from Leen's Lodge, I saw a phalanx of trophy houses. Twelve miles down the lake they faded into the summer haze, betrayed only by their docks, diving rafts and moored boats.



The 20-foot, square-end Grand Laker canoes used by the guides.

I encountered all this last July—but only in a “daymare” as I studied the North Woods and contemplated its future from a float plane en route from Bangor to West Grand Lake. After a 30-year hiatus, I was returning to this sacred land of lakes, streams and woods as the guest of the Downeast Lakes Land Trust and the New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF). There was still time to save it all, but the window of opportunity was closing fast.

Out on West Grand Lake once more, in the Grand Laker steered by guide and folk singer Randy Spencer, I scanned the shoreline for signs of change, and failed to find any. Doubtless there were new cottages, especially on the lake's south end, but I hadn't noticed the cottages in the 1970's, and I didn't notice them now. Nothing looked new, obtrusive or out of place. Most of the 14,000-acre lake still appeared untouched by humanity. It was silent save for the yodeling of loons and the lapping of waves. It was still embraced by a healthy mixed northern forest that stretched to the horizon or rose to meet purple ridgetops—not wilderness in the technical sense perhaps, but a damn fine facsimile. Collected by West Grand are the waters of 32 lakes, ponds and streams, all as wild or wilder. As nearly as I could discern, there hadn't been any

change, but change was bearing down from all compass points.

Throughout the North Woods—that 26-million-acre swath of green from Machias, Maine, to Syracuse, New York—timber companies, beset by changing world markets and hounded by ravenous stockholders, are hawking their holdings. These days they tend to manage their forestland not on time scales dictated by natural regeneration but by the average corporate life expectancy of their CEO's (less than 10 years). So, from the industry perspective, growing cellulose on shore-front property has become fiscally imprudent. It's more profitable to slick off the timber and sell the land. The primary threat to fish, wildlife and the local economy is liquidation cutting, subdivision and loss of public access. "It's happening all around us," declared Downeast Lakes Land Trust director Steve Keith as we strolled along the remote beach at the narrows below Pocumcus Lake, where American Indians had speared sea-run salmon. "Even in Washington County you can go 50 miles from these lakes and find everything we're trying to avoid."

In 1999 the locals got a major scare when Georgia Pacific sold 446,000 acres—nearly all its property in Maine—to timber investors who consigned it to the care of Wagner Forest Management, Ltd. The initial concern of the guides was not suburban sprawl; woods and waters were so immense that they couldn't imagine such a thing. They worried instead about loss of access. Would the new owners festoon the forest with posted signs, cutting sportsmen off from favorite streams, ponds, grouse coverts, trap lines and deer stands? It wasn't long, however, before they realized that their livelihoods depended not just on access but on wildness.

It's true that these lakes provide some of the best smallmouth fishing in the world, that the landlocked fishing is unexcelled south of Canada, and that lake trout are so prolific the state discourages their release, fretting that they'll get ahead of the forage base. But anglers don't come here from all over the world just for

the fish. They come here for the North Woods experience—to be poled on still waters in Grand Laker canoes, to listen to the loons and warblers and the summer wind through birch, maple, spruce and balsam, to breathe sweet air undefiled by gasoline fumes. There are far more deer per acre in my central Massachusetts woods than in Downeast Maine, but there is not one hunting lodge.



The Grand Lake system is home to trophy-sized bronzebacks like this.

So in 2001, the guides allied themselves with sportsmen, lodge owners and local environmentalists to form the Downeast Lakes Land Trust. Their mission: purchase and permanently protect the entire 27,000-acre Farm Cove Peninsula. Skeptics, including professional biologists, foresters and land conservators, smiled condescendingly. Only rich folk from, say, East Hampton, New York, attempt to do this sort of thing; and even when they succeed they're lucky to save 100 acres. When approached by the land trust the Wagner company suggested that it find an experienced outfit to work with. So the land trust turned to the New England Forestry Foundation. By anyone's

standards the land trust had been thinking big with its dream of saving the entire Farm Cove Peninsula. But NEFF had just wrapped up the largest conservation easement America has ever seen. In two years it had raised \$32 million, mostly from private sources, and, for \$37.10 per acre, protected 762,000 acres of forestland in northern and western Maine owned by the Pingree family.

NEFF suggested that the Downeast Lakes Land Trust collaborate with it in an undertaking called the Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership. Farm Cove Peninsula would be purchased outright, then conservation easements would be obtained on additional forestland, bringing the total area protected to



Grand Lake Stream Sunset

342,000 acres. The project would include 78,000 surface acres on 60 lakes, 54,000 acres of wildlife-rich wetlands, 445 miles of lake shoreline, 1,500 miles of river and stream shoreline. Last March the partnership (with its other member, the Woodie Wheaton Land Trust) completed the St. Croix phase, raising \$3.2 million and purchasing a 500-foot wildlife corridor/buffer along 13 miles of Spednic Lake (another world-famous smallmouth fishery) and 36 miles along the St. Croix River (the international boundary with Canada). Purchase of the Farm Cove Peninsula will cost \$12.5 million, the easement on the remaining land \$13 million. The partnership has committed to close on the deal by Dec. 31, 2004. It's a tough time to be raising money, and help is needed. Still, at this writing, everything's on schedule.

Moreover, the timing has been perfect. As the partnership was signing options to purchase the land and easements, New Brunswick had just bought and protected 390,000 acres from Georgia Pacific's Canadian holdings, 72,000 acres of which, mostly on Spednic's north shore, has been designated as wilderness reserve. Throw in state federal reserve lands, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot lands, and other

protected parcels, and you get a nearly contiguous block of one million acres of fish and wildlife habitat saved from development.

Aspects of the Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership offer important lessons. First, nothing like this has ever been

attempted anywhere. Other protection

projects—even NEFF's monumental Pingree coup—have targeted unpeopled woods. No other project has been community based, community spawned and designed to preserve the local economy and traditional lifestyles. People live and work in these woods. The Baileyville mill, now owned by Domtar, is the biggest employer in the region. Without it the economy, along with the forest products industry, would collapse and Wagner would be forced to sell outright to developers. The partnership guarantees continued logging under responsible, though not oppressive, guidelines. Guaranteed also is public access and all traditional uses including hunting, fishing, trapping, snowmobiling and even ATV riding. The project is a model and a mold-breaker, the only practical way to avoid the Californication of Maine. As NEFF's director and Maine resident, Amos Eno, comments, "We should strive to lead, consistent with our motto

‘Dirigo,’ [I lead] and not follow California’s example. . . . A half century ago California was self-sufficient in wood. Today the state imports 80 percent of what it uses. . . . Maine is a state on its knees financially, and Washington County in downeast Maine is on the economic floor.” The Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership offers salvation of the environment and the economy which, here and everywhere, are one and the same.

Washington County is the epicenter of the Wise-Use movement in Maine, but there’s been little noise. In all my research I was able to turn up only one published harangue—a June 19, 2003 op-ed in The Portland Press Herald by Wise-Use guru Jon Reisman of Cooper. “I expect more than half a million acres between Routes 1 and 6 will be ‘protected’ in one manner or another, creating the Down East National Salmon Wilderness Reserve, or DENSWR,” lamented Reisman. “. . . Wilderness is winning over jobs, and for most of Washington County it means less opportunity. Unless you’re in the business of protecting salmon habitat or publishing beautiful multi-colored Green propaganda.”



Chester the loon

The partnership’s project manager, Frank Reed, met with Reisman to try to reason with him. “He couldn’t call this a bad idea,” recalls Reed, “because then he’d be saying the landowners shouldn’t do what they want with their land. I kept saying: ‘Jonathan, are you saying you want to tell the landowner what to do with his land?’ ‘Oh, no, no, no,’ he’d say. ‘Then what are you

trying to tell me here?’ He finally said, ‘Well, landowners ought to be able to do what they want, but uh, uh, uh. . . .’”

If you follow FR&R’s Conservation column, you may recall my report about the nasty and embarrassing tiff over the Champion lands acquisition in Vermont in which a tiny group of opportunists whipped up paranoia and property-rights fervor among economically disadvantaged residents by claiming (falsely) that the deal had been put together in secret by government bureaucrats and the Green mafia from out of state. But because the Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership involves neither government nor environmental groups and because it was hatched and is being steered by locals, especially guides and sportsmen, wise-users have no one to co-opt. The big peg for the wise-users in Vermont had been the ecological reserve in which the prescribed management was no management. “Come and watch healthy trees grow old, fall over and die,” puffed James Ehlers in (Vermont) *Outdoors Magazine*. But last January the board of the Downeast Lakes Land Trust unanimously voted to establish a 3,500-acre ecological reserve in the upper Machias River watershed—habitat of Maine’s endangered anadromous Atlantic salmon—that will abut a 3,800-acre ecological reserve established by the state and a 3,700-acre parcel to be managed by the land trust on 100- to 150-year cutting rotations.

“Ecological reserves are important,” says Bill Cherry, who worked 29 years as an industrial forester for St. Regis, Champion and International Paper and is now coordinator of the Machias and East Machias River Watershed Council. “They provide valuable controls, baseline data. If we’re doing something wrong elsewhere in the forest, ecological reserves can tell us what it is.”

And ecologist Janet McMahon, a consultant for the project, told me this: “These woods are all pretty young. The oldest stands are along the water, and they’re only about 90-year-old hemlocks, about a third of their natural age. What’s missing is older, closed-canopy stands.

Most of the beech has been cut; that has hurt bears. The oaks have been cut off the ridges, and that has hurt both deer and bear. We know old growth is good for deer yards, and in most cases reserves in Maine are surrounded by land with lots of browse. Reserves provide big trees and snags for species like marten, woodpeckers, wood ducks, hooded mergansers and owls. That's the part of the North Woods that's missing." In Downeast Maine at least, sportsmen are starting to understand this.

I did not argue with the land trust's Steve Keith and NEFF's Tim Storrow when they proclaimed that if you just walked around in these woods (or "puckerbrush," as Downeasters call it) you wouldn't see much of anything, that the only way to get a feeling for this country is by water, and that since I was going to be on the water anyway, I might as well tote a fly rod. First stop was Tomah Stream, a bit of an anomaly in the area known for its smallmouths, landlocks and lake trout, because in spring it provides spectacular wild brook trout fishing. One of the reasons is that Tomah sustains the highest diversity of caddis species ever found in the United States. It also sustains the state-threatened Tomah Mayfly, one of the very few predatory mayflies.

But in high summer Tomah is low and warm, and I'd have to content myself with smallmouths. For half a day we paddled and pulled canoes through the heart of the project area via as wild and lovely a stream as I have ever encountered. Raptors (barred owls and red-shouldered hawks I think, but couldn't get positive ID's) flushed ahead of us and sailed toward Grand Lake Flowage, only to flush again. A ruffed grouse and her brood buzzed out of the alders. Ebony jewelwing damselflies in fantastic numbers fluttered over dry sandbars and perched in iridescent, green-black clusters on brush, sedges and the drooping seedheads of grass. We drifted over fallfish nests—piles of gravel three feet across and a foot high. Smallmouths, some a foot and a half long, ghosted out of the shallows.

Jeff McEvoy, my stern man and new owner of the storied Weatherby's Lodge at Grand Lake

Stream, regaled me with local lore, while his Springer bitch, Madison (named for the river), pranced along the bank. McEvoy, formerly with the Natural Resources Council of Maine and, before that, a US Fish and Wildlife Service refuge manger, has been a source of biological enlightenment and political savvy for all committed to the protection of woods, waters and traditional livelihoods. We caught smallmouths—clean, ruby-eyed fish with caudal fins you could shave with—and fat, grunting fallfish on Clousers and beadhead Woolly Buggers. I enjoyed the plucky fallfish nearly as much as the bass. "Cousin trout," Thoreau called them.



The next morning we were scheduled to fish smallmouths on Big Lake at 8 o'clock. This banker's schedule, I explained to Tim Storrow and Duck Unlimited's Ray Whittemore (on hand to check out the project's enormous potential to waterfowl), left us with almost three hours to fish Grand Lake Stream, which flows three miles from West Grand to Big Lake. We got on the river at 5 am, wading out into the fast flow and bouncing little dry flies over the riffles. Fat brook trout hovered under the overhung bank, but this really isn't brook trout habitat. It is simply the best and most consistent dryfly water for landlocks in the US. June had seen spectacular hatches and spectacular catches, with persistent anglers hooking as many as 40 fish a day. West Grand (annually stocked with 10,000 salmon) is

one of just four lakes in Maine where landlocks are native. About five percent of the fish you'll catch in the stream and lake are wild; you can tell because they aren't fin clipped.

I had the first landlock—a sleek 17-inch that snatched a fast-moving Elkhair Caddis and, though she never showed herself, fought like a fish twice her size. Soon I was into another that came unbuttoned as I slid it into an eddy. Whittemore landed a decent smallmouth. But Storrow had the fish of the morning—a stream-bred, golden-hued salmon of at least 18 inches that ascended three times to absurd altitudes. It's enormous pectoral and ventral fins reminded me why, in fast water, Atlantics have the advantage over all other fish, native and alien.

A misty rain was blowing across the valley when the guides pulled up in their trucks, Grand Lakers in tow. "You look like you want to go fishing," declared Chris Wheaton as I bit off my 6X tippet and tied on a yellow balsawood popper. I told him he'd figured me right, so off we drove to the landing at Big Lake in Princeton. Big Lake is shallower than West Grand, with more structure along the shore. There isn't finer smallmouth water on the planet. It's not a big deal to catch 50 bass a day. And the slot limit, which spares bass between 12 and 16 inches, has created a trophy fishery.

Big Lake, too, was just as wild as I remembered it, and its south and southwestern shores are in



Although the Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership has scored some impressive victories, it needs help to preserve woods, water and wilderness in the Grand Lakes area.

the project area. As I eased my first bass toward Chris's outstretched net something big and black and checkered with white spots shot under the canoe, missing the mesh by inches. It was the

"obnoxious loon." He surfaced four feet away, watching the bass. Pin feathers protruding from the back of his neck gave him the manic air of Woody Woodpecker. To my delight and Wheaton's pique, he followed us for two miles,

eyeballing my rod and surging to the boat each time it

bent. An immature eagle sculled over spruce spires. Kingfishers dipped and rattled. There is nothing like fly-fishing out of a cedar-and-ash canoe for North Woods smallmouths, especially when you're being poled within an easy cast of sunken boulders. That's the way bass fishing used to be. Chris Wheaton, one of two people who still build Grand Lakers, has strong opinions about what has befallen bass fishing. If he's guiding you and you want to liven up the conversation (not that you're likely to encounter the need), just ask him what he thinks of all the fancy bass boats they have on the TV shows. Or better still, ask him if he is planning to get one. And as you're fishing keep looking around you. That's the way it can be in Maine and everywhere in the North Woods.

Editor's note: If you would like to help make this project happen, call the New England Forestry Foundation at 978-952-6856, extension 101. NEFF's website: www.newenglandforestry.org.