

In Conversations with Wilderness

Birch Malotky

[Epigraph,
different text:]

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

- T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets* (1943)

The Wild River Wilderness, a pale green egg on the map, is cracked with blue. The most prominent of its various waterways is the Wild River itself, which drains Black Mountain in New Hampshire, courses northeast between the Carter-Moriahs to the west and the Baldfaces and Royce mountains to the east, then finally joins the Androscoggin River in Maine. The Wilderness itself, entered from the west off Carter Notch Road, is split by the Wild River trail, which then splinters into fingers of possibility, each one depositing the traveler somewhere along Maine Highway 113 in Evans Notch. Today, I hope to be one of those travelers

The map unfolds before me: a gently inclined trail following the banks of first Bog Brook, then Wild River, before making a final push over and into "The Basin." This "notch-to-notch" traverse is more than a trail run. Rather, it is part of a larger dream to traverse each of the six wilderness areas in New Hampshire. In itself, the dream is just one symptom of a persistent craving for space and wildness, and a profound need to understand that desire. What is it that draws me and so many others to vast and relatively inhospitable landscapes? What are we seeing and what are we missing? When I try to answer, so many voices clamor for attention that I can hardly hear myself, can hardly listen to the woods.

In the Romantic tradition and many religious practices, wilderness tests the pilgrim. Through hardship or extremity, it offers the chance to glimpse the face of God or experience the sublime. Such wilderness represents the harsh desert as monastic retreat, the thundering cataract as a booming voice of the divine, and the inaccessible mountain peak as cathedral. In American frontier mythology, the West's uninhabited wilds forced settler communities to band together in democratic opposition to untamed nature. Too, they acted as stage for the strong and resourceful man—finally loosed from the trappings of civilization—to experience total personal freedom. In combination, the taming of the wilderness was the making of American character. That's one of the stories I've heard about Wilderness.

Another is declared by the Wilderness Act of 1964, which parameterized wilderness as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by [humankind]," where people themselves are visitors who do not remain. Besides lack of development, it must also "provide opportunities for solitude and...unconfined recreation," be at least 5,000 acres, and "may contain...features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value."

Of course, the Wilderness Act is its own collection of stories, a palimpsest of wilderness philosophies in white America. Its appeal to the "primeval character and influence" of land is an echo of wilderness-as-*tabula rasa*, the frontier to be claimed, iterated into the twentieth century as an escape from modernity. Bob Marshall, co-founder of the Wilderness Society, said that "the most important passion of life is the overpowering desire to escape periodically from the clutches of mechanistic civilization," in order to enjoy "solitude, complete independence, and the beauty of undefiled

panoramas.” Like the frontiersmen centuries before him, wilderness is interpreted as a space of total freedom. Unlike early trappers, traders, and farmers, however, the impetus to enter wilderness is not to start anew. Rather, it is a flight from reality. As Marshall’s co-founder Harvey Broome puts it, wilderness areas are “islands in time—with nothing to date them on the calendar of mankind.” Managed to appear unmanaged and large enough to provide solitude, such areas may allow the visitor to forget, during a brief sojourn, his place in history.

And yet, the Wilderness Act also bears the marks of a nascent American environmental movement. Just two years before the act passed, Rachel Carson’s world-shaking book *Silent Spring* was published, launching a tidal wave of public concern over human impact on the natural environment. “No book before or after has had as great an effect on arousing the American public’s awareness of environmental concerns,” says historian Robert Brown. In it, Carson reveals the pervasive effects of human habitation on nature, most vividly in the depiction of a prophetic “silent spring,” in which no birds survive in a chemically poisoned and ecologically depauperate future. “We’re challenged as [hu]mankind has never been challenged before. To prove our maturity and our mastery, not of nature, but of ourselves,” she said. A revolutionary manifesto for the time, this mandate of restraint has echoed through the years, not least in the Wilderness Act’s charge to preserve “earth and it’s community of life.” There must be somewhere, it says, that we save from—and for—ourselves.

But what about the Wild River Wilderness specifically? How will it feel to be in it? Which stories can tell me about *this* land, now, with me running through it?

Bog Brook Trail

Civilized Man says: I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is other—outside, below, underneath, subservient... I am that I am, and the rest is women & wilderness, to be used as I see fit.

- Ursula K. Le Guin, “Woman/Wilderness,” *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (1989)

The parking lot is grassy and familiar looking. In fact, I am returning to the same trailhead that a previous loop past Carter Dome had taken me to. Then, I had accidentally run the first two miles on a grassy Forest Service Road before realizing I had almost immediately missed my turn for the Bog Brook Trail.

Last time, after finding the trail and devouring my only energy bar on the way up to Carter Dome, I had bonked the whole way back down. I was stumbling over the huge rocks and roots that have been exposed by generations of erosion, light-headed and heavy-footed. Then a generous custodian and a leftover bowl of scrambled eggs at the Carter Hut saved the day. I must have looked at the buttery, chive-sprinkled calories with enough lust that the hutkeeper offered me first one bowl, then another. I descended the rest of the trail triumphantly, feeling as though I was flying. Carter hut and the hutkeeper, however, mark a boundary between Wilderness and traditional National Forest, for Wilderness must be without “permanent improvements or human habitation.”

This time, I make it onto the Bog Brook Trail without incident, enjoying a slow rise in elevation. I clatter across bog bridges and hop between stepping stones to keep my shoes dry and the trail unchurned. Crossing one of many streams, a bundle of violets blooming on a boulder mid-channel catch my eye, and I stoop eye level with their vibrant, hopeful faces.

[Pull quote, different text:] I pass through the forest, and pause in the pink hook of three flowering lady slippers. A temperate orchid, they can live up to twenty years but

will not regenerate if picked, so I am pleased to find such a healthy plant so easily within reach.

I pass through the forest, and pause in the pink hook of three flowering lady slippers. A temperate orchid, they can live up to twenty years but will not regenerate if picked, so I am pleased to find such a healthy plant so easily within reach. Like many orchid species, they form a symbiotic relationship with fungi, feeding the fungus as an adult in exchange for the nurture it receives during germination, when it is leafless and unable to synthesize its own food.

Ideas churn in my head, all the things I've inherited and shape the way I now move through this forest. The wilderness stories told by the Romantics and embodied in frontier mythology resonate, but in a distant way; they are familiar, but not personal. Do I remember the wind threatening to blow me over the thin spine of a rocky ridge? Yes. Have I lost my self/way in a desert with storm clouds lowering dark caps over sandstone buttes? Yes. And yet, there are memories and stories that are missing. Notably, the traditional wilderness narrative of white America routinely excludes or ignores large swaths of the human population, and the reality of its so-called "wilderness."

Romantics, for one, privileged leisure experiences of nature over the working relationship and intimacy of people who lived off the land. Henry David Thoreau decried how "If a man walks in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer; but if he spends his whole day as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making earth bald before her time, he is esteemed an industrious and enterprising citizen." To Thoreau "the farmer leads the meanest of lives. He knows Nature but as a robber," whereas he himself exemplifies a more enlightened relationship to nature, one of meditative learning rather than theft.

The frontier, on the other hand, was not "virgin" land waiting to be discovered by vigorous pioneers. Rather, it was the home of millions of American Indians from whom it was violently and dishonestly taken. In his book *My People, the Sioux*, Luther Standing Bear (born Óta Kté), an Oglala Lakota chief, author and historian, wrote "We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as 'wild.' Only to the white man was nature a 'wilderness' and only to him was the land infested with 'wild' animals and 'savage' people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it 'wild' for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was that for us the 'Wild West' began."

Even within colonialist narratives, frontier legend almost exclusively celebrates the archetypal hero as a white cowboy or frontiersman. In his seminal testimony *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, Frederick Jackson Turner writes that "to study...the men who grew up under these conditions...is to study the really American part of our history." He says nothing of the women who made vital contributions to the expansion of European settlement in America, and their part in history. Who am I in these histories? No one.

I circumnavigate a beaver pond on saturated soils, beaver chips on the ground like wrappers after Halloween, tall grasses with wet feet growing green in shape of the canopy opening. Soon after, I begin to climb. My breath and heartrate quicken, as if to catch and outpace my mind. After twenty minutes, my muscles' cries for oxygen are louder than my thoughts. I am in my body and no other body passes to call me out of it. A part of me is lonely. A part of me is ascending. A part of me keeps time. The stories I have are flawed, but I am still here, following this trail up into the wilderness.

Wild River Trail

*I've known rivers
Ancient, dusky rivers
My soul has grown deep like rivers*

- Langston Hughes, "A Negro Speaks of Rivers," *The Weary Blues* (1926)

A right turn and another mile take me up to noticeably higher elevation. I am cresting Perkins Notch, crossing watersheds and entering, as a wood sign faded to velvet declares, "Wild River." Two fresher signs tell me, twice, that the area is closed to motor vehicles (including bicycles) and once to keep my group size under ten. Further it warns to "expect primitive conditions in this area with few signs and rough trails that may be difficult to follow." I stand at the edge of the wilderness. Then, occupying all the space that my human body can take, I enter.

To be honest, I have low expectations about the potential wilderness character of an established trail in the ever-popular White Mountains National Forest. Even less do I think there will be a feeling of passing into a space of "primeval influence" simply because a sign declares it so. Within steps of passing the sign, however, I wade into waist-high foliage that totally obscures the trail. In his essay *The Trouble with Wilderness*, William Cronon writes that "the autonomy of nonhuman nature seems to [be] an indispensable corrective to human arrogance." Certainly, the potential for roots and rocks lurking beneath a veil of summer fecundity checks my pace. Chagrined, I make slow time to North Ketchum Pond, the headwaters of the Wild River.

[Pull quote, different text:] The trouble with wilderness, Cronon asserts, is that it is both the ideal and the impossible.

The trouble with wilderness, Cronon asserts, is that it is both the ideal and the impossible. Wilderness, so often held up as the most genuine, most perfect form of nature, is also most commonly a place where people do not belong. As the Wilderness Act states, it is a place where "man himself is a visitor who does not remain." But, Cronon warns, "If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall." The trail that I run on, the fact of my passage through this space, encroaches on the very conception of the Wild River as wilderness. The paradox could freeze a foot mid-stride.

The White Mountain National Forest (WMNF) itself recognizes the dilemma, calling the Wilderness Act's aspirations to untrammelled nature and edict to provide outstanding opportunities for both recreation and solitude "somewhat incongruous values." "These different values can lead to contradictory management objectives" it warns in the introduction to its Wilderness Management Plan, especially in "heavily used urban national forest" like the Whites.

Confronted with the idealism of the Wilderness Act and the reality of public lands in the highly impacted Northeastern United States, the WMNF quickly concedes the standard of wilderness as untouched land. Instead, NH's wilderness areas are meant to be "*representatives* of landscapes *minimally* affected by human use" (emphasis added). Moreover, the "Wilderness Character" of each area, rather than being defined solely by evidence of human impact, is also measured by its ecological integrity. Of the four types of indicators used to monitor the health of each wilderness area, half focus on biophysical conditions such as air quality, water quality, and health of wildlife and vegetation populations, while the other half indicate social and aesthetic conditions in each space. These new metrics for assessing wilderness create space to honor landscapes that were or are impacted by people, Wild River among them.

The management plan is the Wilderness Act re-iterated into the 21st century, where concessions made and new standards reflect the changing times. No longer is the primary concern the protection

of land for the sake of preserving the frontier experience. Continued population growth has forced a lowering of expectation for solitude, while a long history of land use, extending through Indigenous habitation, has undermined the demand for “untouched” land. And yet, the growing pressure of ecological threats means the urgency to preserve has in no way slackened. At the same time, the rise of ecological sciences has provided opportunities to understand the land as an ecosystem rather than a scenic backdrop, as well as tools to monitor essential features of its function. A modern woman myself, I see these management decisions adapting to conditions that I was born from: connectivity, population growth, global change.

Emerging from thick spruce forests and charging into dense, shrubby vegetation on the shores of No Ketchum Pond, I see broad blue sky for the first time. To the northeast rise a triad of peaks: Rainbow Ridge, Carter Dome, and Mt. Hight. Across the rest of the sky, cirrus clouds drag their fibrous white veils along currents of air. I stretch into the space, swell with the light. It’s hard to imagine the entire forest was once split open to the sky this way.

The newest Wilderness area in the White Mountain National Forest, Wild River’s 23,700 acres are an “outstanding example of the resiliency displayed by forests of the Northeastern United States,” says Wilderness Connect, an online atlas of wilderness areas. Certainly, the area has come a long way in the centuries leading up to its designation in 2006 by the New England Wilderness Act.

Like most of New England, the dense, tangled forest I now need a trail to navigate was once open and clear woodland, or perhaps even cornfields. An early explorer’s account from the 1520s, as documented by historian Charles Mann, reports traveling through many leagues of indigenous farms, with trees a mere line on the horizon. Nearly a hundred years later, an English settler wrote how “the trees grow here and there, like our parks, and make the country very beautiful and commodious.” You could even, it is said, gallop a horse through them with no need of a road or path because the American Indians who lived there, burned the undergrowth away twice a year.

In the two hundred years following, killing and forced removal of the American Indians put an end to prescribed fires. In their absence, the forests grew thick and tall, until the logging industry wrought another round of dramatic change on the forest. In 1896, railway lines and logging camps extended ten miles up Wild River and its tributaries. Despite dams, bridges and rails giving way again and again to the river’s seasonal flooding, logging persisted in the valley for almost ten years. In 1903, a combination of drought, abundant, dry, logging slash, and an unattended campfire culminated in a twelve-thousand acre wildfire.

The wildfire burned up most of the logging infrastructure, along with the little timber that had yet to be harvested, thus rendering the valley worthless to the Hasting Lumber Company. They sold the property to the Forest Service in 1914. The fire also opened the land up to colonization by paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*), glades of which I now descend through, white trunks peeling and peeking through drooping veils of toothy, tear-drop leaves. Native to New Hampshire, paper birch became widespread in the state after a combination of logging and wildfires cleared vast areas of mature hardwood forest, allowing this fast-growing, pioneer tree to establish in large numbers. The cost of its opportunism, however, is a relatively short life of sixty to eighty years. The trees I pass through, and birch glades across New Hampshire, are old, and increasingly susceptible to stressors like wind, drought, and insect infestation.

Do I see the birch glades and know they are the mark of a voracious logging industry that, just over one hundred years ago, deforested most of the state? Or do I love them for their place in the cycles of growth and regeneration in northern forests, for how they, in death, prepare the way for future generations of trees, giving their bodies to the soil, enriching it with hard-won nutrients finally relinquished? Do I recognize them as my namesake and my kin?

In these questions, I begin to reach for a way forward. I can and should look to the past, to what is my inheritance, both ill and sublime. But in the same way that forest and wilderness grew up from

the remains of clear cuts and wildfire, so too do better, sweeter stories have space to grow in the wholeness that other stories lack. The beauty of these birch glades is not limited to their purity, but expansive and expanding. Beauty in nature may be a diverse, well-functioning ecosystem. The wild is an awareness of, and connection to, that which is outside of ourselves.

[Pull quote, different text:] The river widens to accommodate my musings, the smooth corridor of the Wild River Trail leading me step by step down its watercourse.

The river widens to accommodate my musings, the smooth corridor of the Wild River Trail leading me step by step down its watercourse. The riverbed has deepened over time, widened and even eaten into the banks. The trail, which follows the old railroad grade, is forced into the forest several times where its former path has fallen into the water, taking a half dozen trees and their roots systems with it. These same floods and flows once took whole logging camps with them.

I am heartened by the fulfillment of that first sign's promise "Expect rough trails that may be difficult to follow." By no means is this land untouched, but the flow of ecological processes has been allowed to continue. If wildness can be taken as a fulfillment of Carson's challenge, to "prove our maturity and mastery not of nature, but of ourselves" then wilderness can be imagined as a place where human restraint echoes. Then, perhaps especially because of its history, Wild River seems worthy of its name.

Black Angel Trail

I have learned a lot from trees: sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirits

- Tatanga Mani (Walking Buffalo), Chief of the Bears paw Band of Stoney Nakoda First Nation (1871-1967)

Despite what their sonic similarity might suggest, "untrammled" does not mean "untrampled." It has nothing to do with being marked or impacted. To be untrammled is to not be deprived of freedom of action or expression. What then does it mean for land to freely express itself? Aldo Leopold, in "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac*, writes that "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." In these three fiats, in Leopold's appeals to the scientific, ethical and aesthetic, we may find a path to untrammled land.

The turn onto Black Angel Trail means committing to a couple miles of uphill. Leaving the railroad grade, the trail instantly becomes rockier, steeper, more unkempt. I am tired, and late. I find a so-called Indian Cucumber and dig up its tuber, the crunch and sweetness more reminiscent of jicama than its namesake. While unlikely to align with the tenets of Leave No Trace, I do not feel guilty, I feel nourished.

The science of conservation has been born and born again in the past hundred years alone. What started as a way to maintain game populations at sporting levels, expanded into the preservation of awe-inspiring landscapes, enveloped the concept of Endangered Species, acquired a worldly view, and now battles the pervasive nature of human-caused environmental degradation. What was once as simple as "put a fence around it" environmentalism, now grapples with globalization and climate change. And yet, at its core, conservation science is about listening to the land and its inhabitants, asking how they work and if they are healthy.

NFS scientists in the Whites, for example, use an array of metrics and standards to assess the ecological health of the Wild River Wilderness. According to the Wilderness Management Plan, if air quality, water quality, populations of threatened or endangered species, or health of indicator species, ever drops below the gold standard, management actions to address the problem are automatically triggered. Likewise with inordinate disturbance, out-of-control fire regimes, or excessive invasion by non-native species. In this way it protects the great wheel of earth processes, provides refuge for the most delicate species, and a home for those creatures that need room to roam.

Ethically, Leopold writes that “the role of *Homo sapiens* [changes] from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-member, and also respect for the community as such.” This requires a humbling, perhaps the same humbling I feel fleeing down the mountain’s side with the boom of thunder in my chest, lightning fingering its way through veils of hail. Or perhaps it is the neck arched back beyond the edge of comfort just to see the tops of the trees and the migrating flocks of warblers in them. Or maybe too it is the lichen, the sprouting trillium, the slug, that brings me to my knees just to witness its exquisite detail.

Once humbled, we have a choice. “We are the most dangerous species of life on the planet,” writes Wallace Stegner, novelist and historian, “But we are also the only species which, when it chooses to do so, will go to great effort to save what it might destroy.” Our conscience is as powerful as our technology. Developed in a way to see all the parts of the land as deserving of health and freedom, of deserving to express themselves, it will guide us to an ethos of restraint.

So too can our aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities. In *The Hour of Land*, Terry Tempest Williams speaks about the transcendent possibilities of wilderness experience, saying “Perhaps it is not so much what we learn that matters in these moments of awe and wonder, but what we feel in relationship to a world beyond ourselves, even beyond our own species.” In such moments, we hear things that we have never heard before: not the voice of God but the voice of the forest. For a moment, we are privy to an intimacy unimaginable at other times or in other places. Connection is the power that rockets through our mind’s sky like a shooting star. And so it is something we come to treasure, to seek, to fight for.

“Intimacy gives us a different way of seeing,” writes Robin Wall Kimmerer in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*. This forest that I run through is an individual. It holds a specific history of glaciation, disturbance, and renewal. Its river has cut a bed for itself, and yearly spills over into new beginnings. It holds trees that hold nests that held woodpeckers, then squirrels, and now owls. The owls are silent in the daylight, but keenly tuned to the approach of danger. How do I pass them in peace?

Leopold, Carson, and Cronon all allow that living means making a mark. It would be a specter of a life, if a life at all, that traveled all the way to the grave without touching the earth. The power in this worldview lies in the power to decide how we make our mark. Carson advises we do so “thoughtfully, with full awareness that what we do may have consequences remote in time and place.” In this way, not by erasing ourselves from the story, by fleeing time and history with escapes into wilderness, do we discover “what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like,” says Cronon.

In the Wild River Wilderness, a trail through it may be allowable, but should be narrow enough not to break the canopy, gentle enough not to send the soil downslope to muddy the rivers. Human waste should not be deposited faster than it can be consumed by the earth. The boundaries of roads should not press in on large mammals who require room to roam. Deer should have hemlock groves in which to winter, the pink lady slippers deserve fungus with which to give and receive. Many of these things may be compatible with my journey through its heart.

The miles blend together the way topographic lines pinch closer and closer as I ascend toward the Rim Junction. I can feel the heat in my face, blood pounding at the door with an armload of oxygen,

sweat and mud like a delicate carapace on my body. I don't see the wildflowers, if there are any. I check my watch. I break out onto a ridge where, like an eye, a scar, a burl, a sequin, I see The Basin. It is deep blue in a bowl of green that slopes down to its imperfect roundness. I am nearly there.

Basin Trail

You cannot stay on the summit forever; you have to come down again. So why bother in the first place? Just this... One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know.

- René Daumal, *Mount Analogue* (1952)

I take the rocks stairs down to The Basin as quickly as my legs will allow. Since that first tree-framed portrait, I have not seen it again. Instead, I sense the slant of the forest around me tilting ever closer towards horizontal. The descent is dense, lots of drop in little distance, heavy with lactic acid and latent conclusions. I am both drained and inspired; I have filled my cup again and again from the water-streaked Wilderness, a deep history of thought, and good intentions.

“The special power of the tree in the wilderness is... it can teach us to recognize the wildness we did not see in the tree we planted in our own backyard,” says Cronon, “Both trees in some ultimate sense are wild; both in a practical sense now depend on our management and care.” I have supped deeply on views, creatures and ecological relationships that exist in no way for my benefit, but that I still benefit from. I have shifted my attention into the earth, into my body, into the flowers and back again, and now remember how to do so at other times. It is time for me to carry my conversations down and out of the wilderness.

My feet splash through the shallows of a stream that feeds The Basin. The leather of my shoes, thick with mud, darkens and grows heavier. I feel heavier.

I don't feel like I'm leaving. There is no sign marking a boundary. I am simply here, kissing the ground with my feet, thinking about food, beauty and rest.

I am speaking with poet and professor Linda Hogan. “The people of the earth are reaching out. We are having a collective vision,” she says. I am having a vision, I say. I have found it time and again in wildness.

“Like many young men and women on a vision quest, we seek a way to live out the peace of the vision.” I want to live out my vision, I say. Our stories are flawed but they are many; many are beautiful; and I am still here, following this trail of wildness.

“We want to live as if there is no other place, as if we will always be here. We want to live with devotion to the world,” she says. I am listening. I am full of love. Is that how we heal this broken landscape, our broken selves?

The Basin accepts me into its waters with a cold slap. I enter the water like coming home. Δ

Birch Malotky is a freelance journalist and MFA candidate at the University of Wyoming who writes at the intersection of science, conservation, and recreation. She has been published in *Western Confluence*, *Canadian Rockies Annual*, *New Hampshire Magazine*, *Rock and Ice*, *MWV Vibe*, and *The Climbing Zine*. She thinks a lot about home and how we make it.