

Adaptive Snowsports | Winter Fishing | Counting Birds

NEW YORK STATE

Conservationist

FEBRUARY 2011

Year of Forests

Cracking the Code

Journals of an
Adirondack Hermit

Conservationist for Kids!

New issue inside



NEW YORK STATE
Conservationist 

Volume 65, Number 4 | February 2011
Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor of New York State

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Winter Sports for All

Adaptive sports programs provide opportunities for people of all abilities.

By Elaine Bloom

Scott Hadley loves sports. Or more accurately, he loves coaching—Little League baseball, youth basketball, soccer. But it's when he takes off his prosthesis and straps on a ski to teach the sport to someone with a disability that he really comes alive.

"I never skied before the accident and didn't think much about it afterward. But then I saw Ted Kennedy Jr. (who lost a leg to cancer) skiing on TV, and I thought to myself: if he can do it, so can I," says Scott, who lost his leg in a car accident 31 years ago. Now, Scott, an instructor at Belleayre Mountain ski center, inspires others the same way.

"Adaptive" sports enable people with disabilities to participate in sports using special equipment or instruction. Advances in technology and techniques allow people with almost any physical or cognitive challenge to play in the snow.

In adaptive sports, an individual's abilities and disabilities determine which equipment they use. People with disabilities that allow them to balance and support their body weight may be candidates for stand-up skiing or snowboarding. Often a stand-up skier will use crutches with mini-skis attached (called outriggers) to help with stability, strength and turns.



STRIDE Adaptive Sports

The feeling of freedom you get going down the mountain opens people's eyes to what they can do.

Scott skis as a “three-tracker”—one ski on his leg and two outriggers. Four-trackers use two skis and two outriggers.

Skiers who cannot stand can sit-ski on a seat fastened to a frame with one or two skis (called a mono- or bi-ski). Skiers with visual impairments or those with autism or learning disabilities can ski too, often in tandem with instructors or guided with a bamboo pole. Techniques and tools for adaptive snowboarders include tethering (where an instructor holds reins attached to the student's snowboard to help with turns and speed control), outriggers like those used by skiers, or a rider bar (a horseshoe-shaped device mounted to the top of a snowboard and used for steering).

“Every student is different,” says Anne-Marie Johansson, another instructor trained in adaptive techniques. The best adaptive instructors are endlessly innovative in devising the safest, yet least restrictive techniques. Some adjustments involve adding belts and buckles. Other times, it's seeing things through the adaptive skier's eyes. On that basis, Anne-Marie developed a technique to help kids with autism ski without being touched.

“You figure these things out because you need to,” says Anne-Marie. “The equipment is one end of it; the other end is when you offer no physical restraint, but provide a model and point of focus for the skier.”

For example, one young man wasn't sure about taking off his prosthesis to ski, but when he saw instructor Scott Hadley gliding fluidly across the snow on a single ski, he was willing



STRIDE Adaptive Sports

“Three-trackers” ski by using a ski on one leg and two outriggers—crutches with mini-skis attached.

to try it. That approach, by the way, also works with “two-leggers,” as Scott calls people who ski in the traditional way. “Even if they're reluctant to try something, when they see me doing it, they don't dare tell me they can't,” he grins.



Various tools and techniques are used to help teach snowsports, like skiing, to those with visual impairments, autism or learning disabilities. Here, a student is learning to ski by holding a pole held by two instructors.

“The feeling of freedom you get going down the mountain opens people’s eyes to what they can do,” Scott says. Experts agree and say that snowsports build self-confidence and help people bounce back in the face of challenge and change.

Bettyrae Lorenz, coordinator of Belleayre’s adaptive program, explains that freedom and independence mean different things to different skiers. For many, it means mastering the equipment, navigating the lift independently or skiing with friends instead of instructors. And nearly all adaptive skiers improve in strength, balance and flexibility. For some, just going down the mountain in a sit-ski steered by an instructor and accompanied by two assistants allows them to experience the joy of being outdoors and the sense of transcending limits.

One of Anne-Marie’s favorite experiences was with a high school senior who came last winter in a wheelchair. “She told me she just wanted to feel the wind on her face and ski down the mountain with her friends. After a lesson on a bi-ski, that’s what she did.”

The beauty of it is, when they’re on the ice... you don’t know who’s disabled and who isn’t.

And then there’s Luke Wilson of Voorheesville, NY. He likes to ski, but he loves to play sled hockey, a fast-paced, bone-jarring game where players sit close to the ice in lean aluminum sleds mounted atop skate blades. The game was invented for and by athletes with disabilities, but its popularity among people without disabilities is skyrocketing, with many teams



Kim Wilson

Every participant in an adaptive snowsport is different, and uses a variety of tools and techniques. Here a student is using what is called a bi-ski.



Kim Wilson

Organizations like STRIDE Adaptive Sports sponsor sled hockey teams made up of people with and without disabilities, enabling those with disabilities to play a competitive sport on an equal level with their peers.

including both types of members. Rules are like traditional ice hockey, but players propel the sleds and control the puck with two picks—shortened hockey sticks with metal teeth at the end. Sixteen-year-old Luke, who has cerebral palsy, plays center for the Capital District Sled Warriors, based at Albany Academy. The co-ed team, sponsored by STRIDE Adaptive Sports, has 12 players, both with and without disabilities. Luke’s family credits the team, which includes Luke’s twin brother Ben, with giving Luke the opportunity to play a highly competitive sport on an equal basis with his peers.

“We live in a time where technology allows anyone with a disability to participate in any sport,” says Mary Ellen Whitney, founder and director of STRIDE, a non-profit focusing on sports for people with special needs. “People without limbs are climbing mountains and scuba diving and skiing.”

Or as Kim Wilson, Luke’s mother and a Sled Warriors coach, sees it: “The beauty of it is, when they’re on the ice, you’ll see all these wheelchairs lined up next to the rink, but looking at the team on the ice, you don’t know who’s disabled and who isn’t.”

Elaine Bloom is a contributing editor to *Conservationist*.

Where to Play in the Snow



A number of ski centers in New York State have facilities, equipment and specially trained instructors to accommodate skiers with a wide range of disabilities. Some also have facilities and instruction for adaptive versions of snowboarding, Nordic skiing and snowshoeing. Here are a few of them:

Belleayre Mountain (Highmount)

www.belleayre.com/winter/adaptive.htm

Belleayre's new Adaptive Snowsports Center has highly trained instructors and state-of-the-art equipment for three-track, four-track, and sit-skiers. They offer one-on-one lessons for beginner, intermediate and advanced skiers on varied terrain. All ages are welcome. Lessons are 2½ hours, by reservation only. Don't miss Adaptive Awareness Day, February 27, 2011, when the Helen Hayes Hospital staff visit to educate the public about their Adaptive Sports Program. For information, call 845-254-5600 ext. 2473 or 2474.

Windham Mountain (Windham)

www.windhammountain.com/lessons-programs/adaptive-sports-foundation

The largest adaptive sports program on the East Coast for children and adults with disabilities. Skiing and snowboarding lessons are available seven days a week from December to March. Lessons are full- or half-day; season-long program options are also available. Advance reservations are required. In addition, Windham's Adaptive Sports Foundation offers a season-long race competition program for advanced adaptive skiers. For more information, contact the Adaptive Sports Foundation directly at 518-734-5070 or asf-windham@mhccable.com

Greek Peak (Cortland) www.gpadaptive.org

Adaptive sports program offers equipment, snowboards and mono-skis, one-on-one instruction from more than 70 trained volunteers, staff of 30 certified ski and snowboard instructors and Special Olympics instructors, and a fully accessible Adaptive Snowsports Building. For information, call 607-835-6111 ext. 2.

USA Hockey www.usahockey.com

Click on "disabled" under the players tab. USA Hockey has four programs for people with disabilities including sled hockey. Check their website for teams in New York and across the country.

Double H Ranch (Lake Luzerne)

www.doublehbranch.org/winter.html

Private, non-profit organization that offers children aged 6-16 dealing with chronic and life-threatening illnesses the opportunity to participate in various winter sports in the Adirondack Mountains. **Families must apply in advance.** For information, or to support the program, check out the website, or call 518-696-5676.

Whiteface Mountain (Wilmington)

www.whiteface.com/mountain/lessons_adapt.php

The Adaptive Snowsports Program is for adults and children with disabilities who want to learn how to ski and snowboard. Lessons are provided for everyone from first-timers to advanced skiers and snowboarders. Lift ticket, lesson (usually two hours, depending on the student) and rental of adaptive equipment are included. For information, call 518-946-2223.

Lounsbury Adaptive Ski Program, Holiday Valley Resort (Ellicottville) www.lounsburyadaptive.org/index.html

Lessons are available for people of all abilities, both physical and cognitive. Each student is instructed individually with full emphasis on his or her ability. For information, call 716-699-3504.

STRIDE Adaptive Sports www.stride.org

STRIDE is a volunteer, non-profit organization that offers free programs in 16 different sports to children and individuals with special needs. STRIDE has more than 350 skilled volunteer sport instructors and serves families at 25 locations in the Northeastern U.S. Its Wounded Warrior Project provides sports opportunities to recently injured members of the military. For more information, call 518-598-1279.

See also: www.adaptivesportsfoundation.org



Cuckoo, No; Yellow-bellied, Yes —birders ring in New Lang Syne

By Craig Thompson

Looking back on their New Year's celebration, people usually think of merriment, champagne, resolutions kept (or otherwise), and...birdwatching?

Few people in their right mind would willingly rise at the crack of dawn on the January 1st holiday and brave the wintry elements to look for birds. Unless, that is, they're some of the hard-core aviphiles who for thirty years now have participated in the annual New Year's Day Bird Count at DEC's Five Rivers Environmental Education Center in Delmar, just south of Albany. Amazingly, this informal foray—billed as “Albany's First Morning”—typically attracts more than fifty early risers, who have collectively (and

unwittingly) amassed a considerable body of hard scientific data, reflecting many interesting and important large-scale ornithological trends.

Hearty Party

As the eager participants gather in the comfort of the Visitor Center's bird-

watching lounge at 9 a.m., a careful count is made of visitors to the center's

birdfeeders. Upwards of 30 bird species can be tallied at the feeders, making one wonder exactly why it is necessary to go outdoors at all!

But there are many winter bird species which do not visit feeders—owls, for example—so field parties are mustered and assigned divergent routes throughout the 450-acre site. After about an hour afield, birding parties reassemble at the Visitor Center to defrost over hot coffee and to compile the morning's data, which

There is something irresistibly beguiling about what might be around the next bend in the trail...

kicks off the center's new annual list of species either seen or heard at the center.

Though the site is one of the finest places in the Capital Region to watch birds, the number of New Year's Day species recorded is highly weather dependent and particularly influenced by wind speed and the availability of open water. Counts have ranged from a low of 21 species to a high of 38, but the average is 33 species, just less than half of the composite total of 70 different bird species seen at the center on New Year's Day over a 30-year period.

Of those 70 species, 12 have been recorded on each of the 30 annual January 1st counts, and 21 tallied in 25 years or more. These “usual suspects”

Susan Shafer



Participants in the New Year's Day bird count often see more than 30 different species of birds.



Get Involved and Have Fun by keeping track of birds you see at home

No matter where you live, you can take note of the birds you see in your own yard, or contribute to a larger effort at a local park or nature center. Birders of all ages and skill levels can help biologists better understand the health of bird populations and identify emerging trends simply by sharing their casual bird sightings with researchers. The success of these "citizen science" projects depends on the participation of interested individuals willing to contribute their observations. We encourage you to get involved and help scientists learn more about the changing bird landscape as you learn more about birds.

Great Backyard Bird Count

A joint citizen science initiative of Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and National Audubon Society, the Great Backyard Bird Count is an annual event conducted during the third weekend in February. Observers simply count the highest number of each species they see at any one time in their backyard, schoolyard, or local park during an outing (or an "inning") of at least 15 minutes, and enter their tally on the Great Backyard Bird Count website. The count helps track the distribution and abundance of birds throughout North America in late winter, a time when few other large-scale bird counts are conducted. Visit www.birdsource.org/gbbc to learn how to participate. For further reading, see "Great Backyard Bird Count" in the December 2001 issue of *Conservationist*.

Christmas Bird Count

Each year, affiliate chapters of the National Audubon Society conduct local Christmas Bird Counts on a chosen date between December 14 and January 2. Last year, 60,000 volunteers across the U.S., Canada and 19 countries in the Western Hemisphere participated in their local all-day count. The voluminous ornithological data amassed in more than 100 years of this census have enabled biologists to monitor the early-winter status of bird populations. To participate in a count near you, log onto the Christmas Bird Count home page at www.audubon.org/bird/cbc. For further reading, see "Still Counting After All These Years" in the December 2007 *Conservationist*.

Project FeederWatch

Project FeederWatch is a seasonal research and education project of the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology and Bird Studies Canada. The 2010-11 reporting season began November 13, but you can enroll at any time by visiting www.feederwatch.org. Participants keep track of their backyard birds through the winter, reporting the numbers and different species of birds at their feeders each week on the FeederWatch website. This helps scientists track changes in winter bird populations from year to year. For further reading, see "Project FeederWatch" in the December 2006 *Conservationist*.

NY eBird

NY eBird, a joint project of the New York State Ornithological Association and Audubon New York, is a simple and free way for birders to electronically keep track of their bird observations in the state year-round, while simultaneously contributing important information to a growing database of bird records that can be accessed by researchers. To learn more about NY eBird, visit www.ebird.org/NY.

NestWatch

NestWatch is a nest-monitoring online database of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Volunteers collect and submit nest records—including information on nest site location, habitat, species, number of eggs, young and fledglings—for all North American breeding birds. Funded by the National Science Foundation and developed in collaboration with the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, the project aims to track reproductive success of breeding birds. To learn more, visit <http://watch.birds.cornell.edu/nest/home/index>.

are generally the common backyard bird-feeder species most upstate New Yorkers can enjoy and expect in winter, such as black-capped chickadees, blue jays and white-breasted nuthatches. However, 27 species have been seen on less than five New Year's Days, and are the kind of sightings that make birdwatching—even into the teeth of a howling winter wind—something of a sport, with long stretches of anticipation, uncertainty, and personal reflection on one's sanity, followed by a few fleeting seconds of sheer excitement. Long-eared owl! Eastern phoebe! Common redpoll! There is something irresistibly beguiling about what might be around the next bend in the trail, and reaping the benefits of a combination of savvy strategy, dogged effort and just plain luck.

Downies Are Up

In the last 30 years, winter ranges of many bird species have changed, some dramatically, and the composite January



Susan Shafer

...“usual suspects” are generally the common backyard birdfeeder species...such as black-capped chickadees, blue jays and white-breasted nuthatches.

1st record reflects these well. For example, New Year's Day data clearly demonstrates surprising range expansions in

tufted titmice and northern cardinals, two reliable January 1st species which were unheard of upstate 50 years ago.

tufted titmouse

Bill Banaszewski



American robin



Part of the reason for this is that the popularity of bird feeding increased rapidly in the 1970s.

American robins and northern mockingbirds have also expanded their winter range in the last 50 years and are common New Year's Day birds throughout upstate New York. Unlike titmice and cardinals, however, this increase is not thought to be linked to increased bird feeding, but rather to the succession of abandoned farmland into dense berry-producing brushland.

Because the Carolina wren's winter range is conditioned by the average

The number of New Year's Day species recorded is highly weather dependent and particularly influenced by wind speed and the availability of open water.

minimum January temperature and the mean length of the frost-free period, the expansion of its winter range is often cited as an indicator of climate change. Interestingly, there had been no January 1st records of the wren prior to the 1990s, but it has been recorded in eight New Year's Day counts since.

New Year's Day data also reflect the remarkably sudden upstate expansion of the red-bellied woodpecker's range, first

logged at Five Rivers Center in 1989 and seen every New Year's Day since 1998. Winter temperature has been suggested as the limiting factor for this species.

Audubon Christmas Bird Count data show a precipitous decline in the evening grosbeak as a winter visitor in New York since the mid to late 1980s. Evening grosbeaks were recorded four times at Five Rivers on New Year's Day in the early 1980s, but not since 1987.

Yellow-bellied sapsuckers were recorded on the January 1st count for the first time in 2008 and 2009, reflecting record numbers tallied during

local Christmas Bird Counts in those years. There has been a 25-year increase in sapsucker numbers throughout the northeast, and the bird appears to be lingering later into the winter season at its northern margin.

Eastern bluebirds, not recorded on January 1st before 1990, have been tallied in 18 of the 21 years since, perhaps due at least in part to an aggressive initiative to place bluebird nest boxes on the property.

By itself, a single day's bird checklist is nothing more than a snapshot of a single locale at a given point in time. And simply keeping a keen eye open in your own backyard every day enhances your knowledge, appreciation and understanding of birds, providing threshold experiences that often engender environmental stewardship and advocacy. But when those informal data are combined with similar "citizen science" data over the long term, and/or to broader contexts, the collective result of even casual bird watching can help identify or reflect widespread environmental influences such as climate change, habitat destruction or disease.

And here we all thought we were just going out to watch birds.

Lifelong birding enthusiast **Craig Thompson** is director of DEC's Five Rivers Environmental Education Center in Delmar.

For further reading on seasonal distribution of birds and how scientists study them, see "Flight Patterns" in the December 2008 Conservationist, and "Feathered Friends of Winter" in the February 2010 issue.

DEC photo



Year of Forests

By Gloria Van Dyne



When many people think of the Empire State, images of New York City—Times Square, Broadway, Wall Street, skyscrapers—come to mind. But most people would be surprised to learn that New York State is actually one of the most heavily forested states in the country. In fact, more than 60% of the state is covered in forest; that's an acre of forest for every resident.

Forests and trees are essential to the health of our planet. They protect water and air quality, shelter us from the sun and wind, sequester carbon, provide wildlife habitat, and generate employment for thousands of people in the forest products, outdoor recreation and tourism industries. To celebrate our forests, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly declared

2011 the International Year of Forests. The goal is to raise awareness of sustainable management, conservation and sustainable development of all forest types.

According to the UN, forests cover 31% of land area worldwide, are home to 300 million people, and house 80% of our terrestrial biodiversity. In addition, the livelihoods of more than 1.6 billion people depend on forests, and trade in forest products was estimated at \$327 billion in 2004.

While the UN proclamation underscores the international concern for the future of forests worldwide, here in New York we have a wonderful legacy of forests, and a proud history of forest conservation worthy of celebration. For more than a century, the Department of Environmental Conservation

(DEC) has worked with many partners to conserve and protect our forests, from the wilderness of the Adirondacks and Catskills, to the beautiful tree-lined streets that grace many of our communities.

Imagine what New York State would be like with little or no forests. Your local reservoir, campground, town, street, yard, work place, Adirondack and Catskill Parks, and Central Park in New York City would no longer be places where you'd like to live, work or spend your leisure time. And no trees would make us extremely vulnerable to the affects of global climate change. At a time of great environmental and economic challenge, planting trees, practicing sustainable forestry, and conserving our forest lands are among the most cost-effective strategies we can take to keep New York green, while building our communities and contributing to the state's economic recovery.

To celebrate the International Year of Forests, *Conservationist* will run a series of short articles throughout 2011 highlighting different aspects of New York's forests and advising you of things you can do to protect them. With care and wise investments in their future, our trees and forests can remain an important part of New York's future—a future in which we continue to reap the benefits from our rich legacy of forests.

Gloria Van Duyne works for DEC's Division of Lands and Forests.

New York's Forests at a Glance

New York State's forests have undergone dramatic changes through the years. Originally almost completely covered in forest, the state was heavily cleared for settlement and agriculture. Forest land had shrunk to less than 25% of the state by the mid 1800s. However, widespread abandonment of farms in the late 1800s enabled much of the land to revert back to forest. Today, New York has more forest land area than it has had in the past 150 years.

NYS Forest Facts

- **Forest area:** 18.95 million acres (63% of land area)
- **Privately-owned forest land area:** 14.4 million acres (76% of forest land area is privately owned by approximately 687,000 landowners)
- **Number of tree species:** more than 100 commercial and non-commercial
- **Most common forest type:** maple/beech/birch (53% of forest land area)
- **Economic contribution of forest products-related manufacturing and services:** \$14 billion (U.S. Census)
- **Forest-related tourism:** \$1.9 billion

Urban Forest Facts

- **New York's urban and/or community land area:** 3.42 million acres
- **Urban and community tree coverage:** 1.32 million acres (40.4% of urban and community land area)
- **Estimated number of urban or community trees:** 253.6 million



On Patrol

Real stories from Conservation Officers and Forest Rangers in the field

Contributed by ECO Lt. Tom Caifa and Forest Ranger Lt. John Solan

Carl Heilman II

Illegal Ivory—New York County

As part of a large investigation into the booming business of ivory smuggling in New York City, Lt. John Fitzpatrick, ECO Timothy Machnica and ECO Gregory Maneeley recently assisted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) with the seizure of a large quantity of elephant ivory from a posh residence on Central Park West in Manhattan. Officers seized 132 pieces of ivory, ranging from small statues to large tusks, valued at more than \$40,000. ECOs in the city have been working with the USFWS since December 2008 to identify and apprehend individuals involved in this illegal ivory trade.

"Quick" Getaway—Ulster County

During an evening patrol in December, ECO Myles Schillinger responded to a complaint of shots fired near several residences in the Town of Plattekill. The complainant, a DEC Sportsman Education Instructor, saw a man shoot a deer in the field next to his home and went to confront the shooter. The panicked man hurriedly loaded the deer in his pickup truck, hoping for a quick getaway. Unfortunately, he had locked his keys in the truck. Desperate to get away, the shooter broke a window with the butt of his rifle, but he wasn't quick enough—the DEC Instructor had plenty of time to get a good look at the man and jot down his license plate. ECO Schillinger arrested the man at his residence a short time later and ticketed him for discharging a firearm within 500 feet of a residence, as well as taking a deer after legal hunting hours.

The New 6C—St. Lawrence County

After receiving a complaint about someone illegally taking deer in the Town of Canton, ECOs Bret Canary and Scott Atwood visited the subject and asked to see inside a large outdoor, walk-in freezer located on the property. In the freezer were three deer, one of which had a tag for wildlife management unit (WMU) 8C in the ear. Closer inspection revealed the tag had been altered to make it look like a tag for WMU 6C. While ECO Atwood examined the deer, ECO Canary found a full meat-processing station in the garage, with deer tags from the previous five years displayed on the wall. For each prior hunting season, tags for WMU 8C were used, even though the property was in WMU 6C. The property owner admitted to using the wrong tags, stating that 8C tags were "much easier to get" and simply altered to look like 6C tags. Several tickets were issued for the current violations, as well as for previous violations that could still be prosecuted.

Timber Thief Deported—Suffolk County

Recently, a sportsman issued a complaint concerning the theft of trees at the Peconic River Headwaters Fresh Pond State Land Unit. The complainant stated an individual in a Chevy Silverado pickup truck removed evergreen trees from the property. The property was put under surveillance and approximately a week later, Ranger Bryan Gallagher observed a man with two trees loaded onto his truck and four additional shrubs beside the vehicle. When questioned, the subject admitted he took four trees, said he was sorry, and that Ranger Gallagher would never see him again. Ranger Gallagher called Rangers Michael Thompson and Kevin Slade for assistance in the collection of evidence. The suspect was arrested and taken into custody at Riverhead Police Department to await his arraignment. It turns out the subject also had an outstanding warrant with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for his deportation. He was detained after his arraignment until ICE picked him up for federal processing.

Ask the ECO

Q: I use a store-bought, pop-up style shanty for ice fishing rather than the traditional homemade style you normally see. Since I take it home with me after each outing, do I have to mark it with my name and address for it to be legal?

A: NYS Navigation Law states that "any person who places any structure upon the ice shall have placed thereon, with paint or in some other permanent manner, the owner's full name and address in letters at least three inches high in a contrasting color to the surrounding structure." When written, this law was really geared toward identifying shanties that are left out on the ice for days or weeks at a time. Pop-up style shanties are becoming more popular with ice fishermen and are rarely left out on the ice, so your question is a good one. However, since the definition of "structure" does apply to a pop-up shanty, you should mark your pop-up as indicated in the above law.



New York Born and Raised

Like all New Yorkers, seedlings from the state tree nursery in Saratoga Springs are grown to be tough, hardened by the demanding climate conditions of the region. With more than 75 percent of the 50 species coming from local New York seed sources, seedlings grown at the state nursery are well adapted to our state's conditions.

Local seed is best for growing healthy trees. A white oak from the southern U.S., for example, is genetically different from a white oak from the north, and so may struggle to survive in northern climes. Staff from the Saratoga Nursery have been collecting local seed for more than a century, and maintain more than 200 acres of seed orchards and seed production areas throughout the state.



James Clayton

highbush cranberry seeds



Susan L. Shafer

variety of tree seedlings

So consider buying hardy, New York-grown seedlings propagated from local seed sources—it's an investment that will pay off in healthier, stronger trees and shrubs for our future.

To order seedlings, please visit:

www.dec.ny.gov/animals/7127.html or call (518) 587-1120.

SECRET SCRATCHINGS

The cryptic written language of
Noah John Rondeau—the hermit of Cold River.

By Jenna Kerwin

“Quack’s Pants.” “Bickford is bloody bugger.”

When I first read these phrases, I couldn’t possibly imagine them being any more than a silly collection of words. I assumed they were meaningless, or maybe not my business to understand.

It seems that is precisely what the author of these phrases intended.

These and many other notes were written in a strange code in journals belonging to the mayor of “Cold River City (Population One).” This “mayor” is better known as Noah John Rondeau, the hermit who lived at Cold River in the Adirondacks for more than 30 years.

Noah was born in July of 1883 near Au Sable Forks. As he grew up, he quickly realized schooling and the working man’s life were not for him. Instead, he became a guide to hunting and fishing parties for a hotel near where he lived in Coreys. In 1928, Noah decided the solitude of the Adirondacks was what he sought, and settled at an abandoned river driver’s camp deep in the mountains overlooking Cold River. Over the years, he built Cold River City, a small camp with two tiny cabin-style abodes and several wigwam-style wood structures. He wrote poems, collected

firewood, worked on his camp, entertained visitors—those covered with fur, feathers or skin—and was on the whole, content and busy in his solitary neck of the woods. He also busily kept a journal in which he wrote daily observations of animal movements, weather, and excursions. It was a way to keep track of date and time, especially during the winter months when visitors were sparse.

Not your typical hermit, Noah was actually quite sociable and his camp was a favorite stop for many hikers, hunters

THESE AND MANY OTHER NOTES WERE WRITTEN IN A STRANGE CODE...BELONGING TO...THE HERMIT WHO LIVED AT COLD RIVER IN THE ADIRONDACKS...

and anglers. For instance, Noah had been friends with Richard “Red” Smith’s family before moving from Lake Placid to Coreys in 1913. Red was in his teens when he reconnected with Noah, and the two quickly developed a deep friendship. Noah became Richard’s mentor and, more than that, lifelong friend.

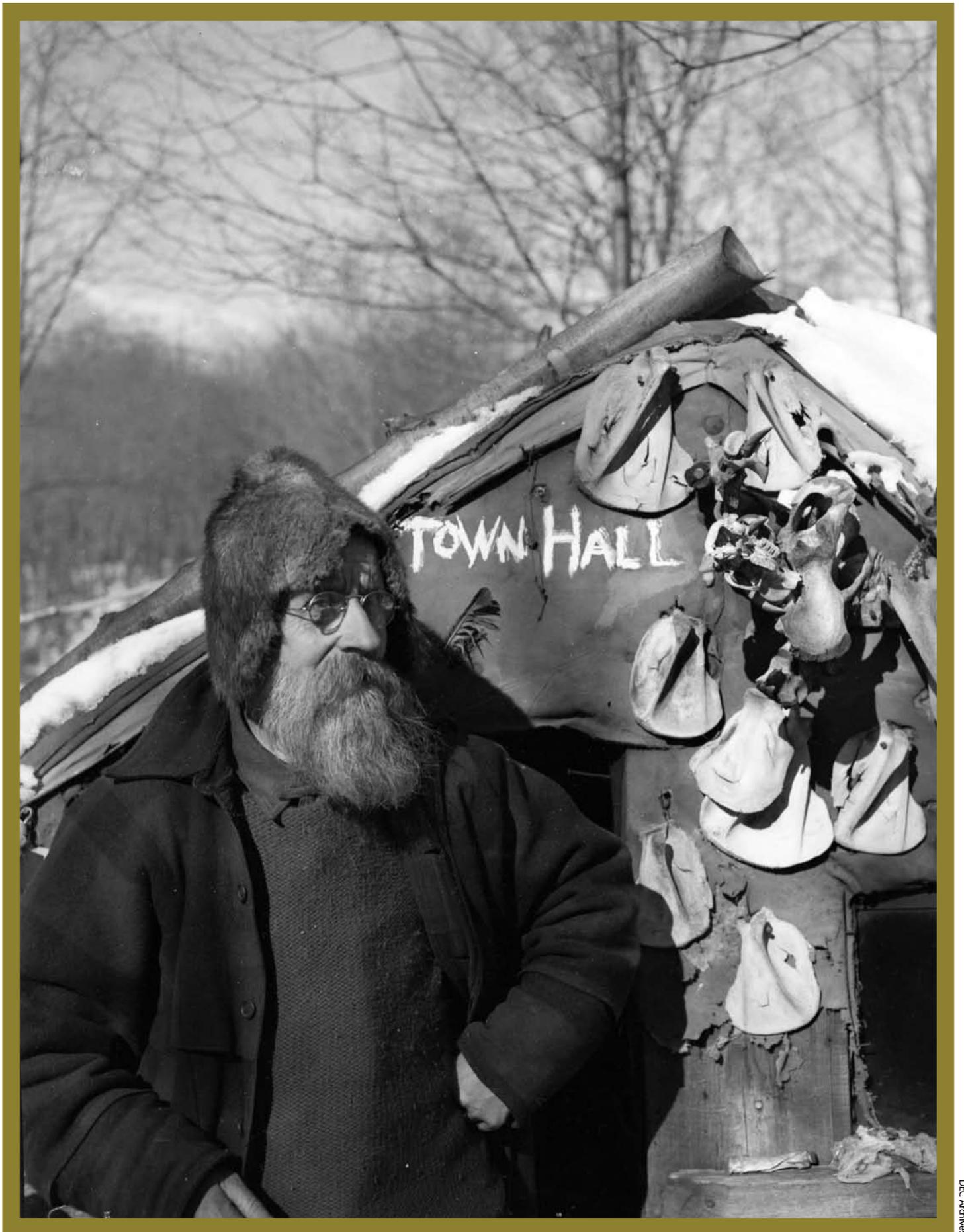
Noah always held strong opinions about government, and was never on good terms with New York’s then-Conservation (or “Consternation,” as Noah called it) Department. He had run-ins with the Department concerning his

illegal hunting, and with the exception of a few environmental officers he befriended over the years, he cared little for the organization.

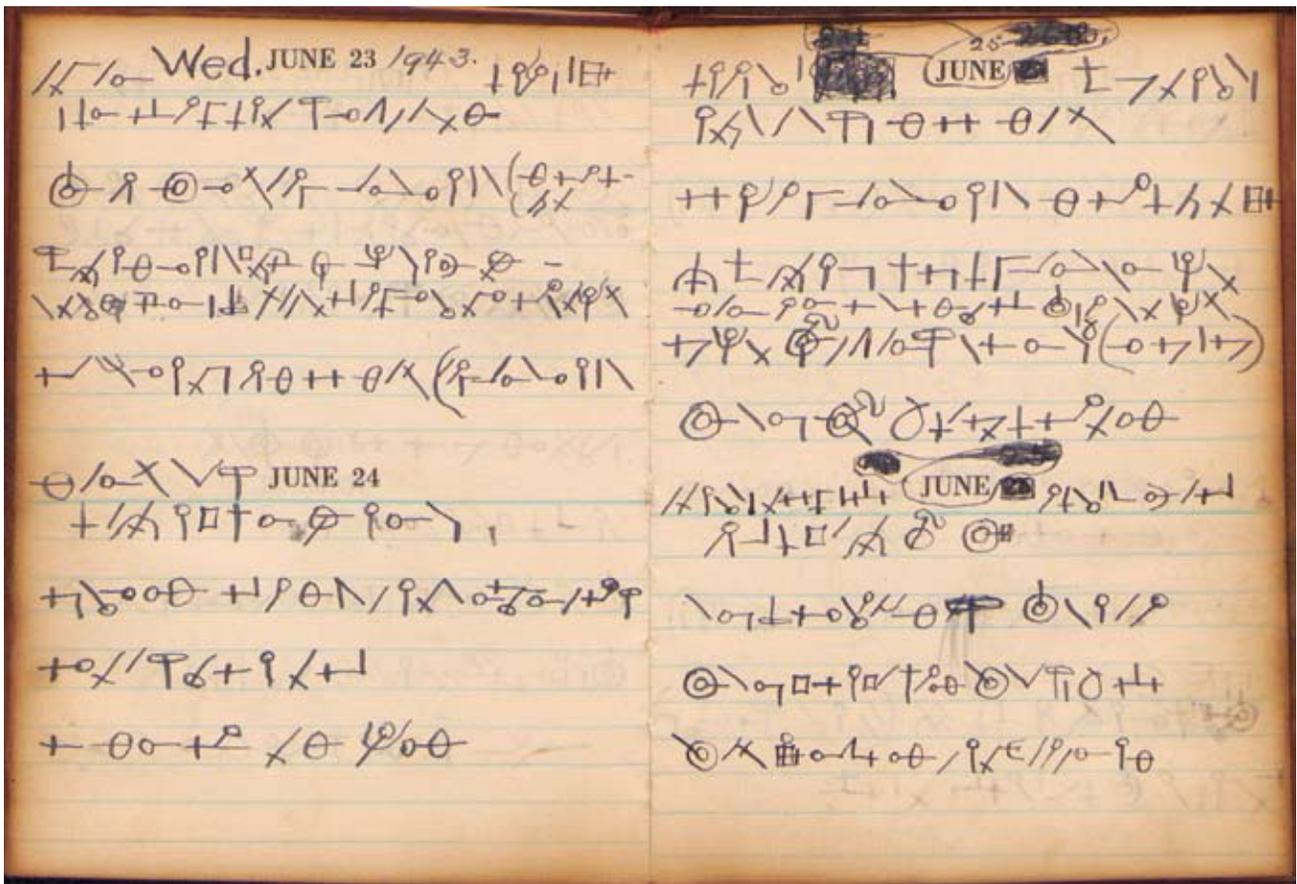
Noah often worried his journals would end up in the hands of the Conservation Department. So to ensure the contents of his journals couldn’t be used against him, he developed a code. The code also ensured his privacy from other prying eyes, an important thing to Noah who felt that some visitors asked too many questions about his journals.

Although Noah had already been using an unsophisticated code when he was in Coreys, he developed and perfected an impressive new code during his stay at Cold River. Adolph D. “Ditt” Dittmar, a close friend of Noah’s, remarked the code resembled the “scratchings of an inebriated hen.” His observation was a good comparison; Noah’s code looks like a barnyard bird stepped in paint and walked across the page!

Following his move from Cold River in 1950, Noah continued his long-held practice of code-writing. When he died



Not your typical hermit, Rondeau was always happy to entertain visitors at his home at Cold River. Here he poses for a photo near Cold River Town Hall, a wood structure he used as his living quarters.



Adirondack Museum/New York State Archives

Noah often wrote in his journals using a highly sophisticated code he developed to keep "Official Busy-bodies" from snooping around his business.

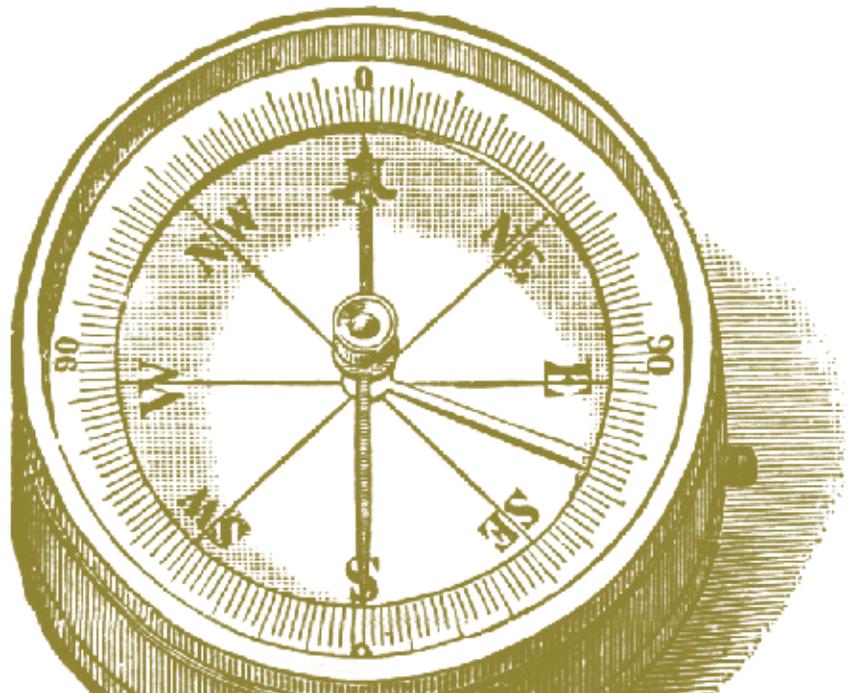
in 1967, so did the secret to his journals. Locked in their coded language, the journals seemed to fade away from public memory, destined to be forgotten. And that might have happened if it wasn't for David Greene.

David had been interested in Noah and his journals since he was a small child. David's mother Evelyn (daughter of Adirondack legend, Paul Schaefer) and her family had visited Noah's hermitage when she was younger, and she shared her hand-written experiences with her son. This further intrigued him and prompted him to try to decipher Noah's code. To help, his mother got a few photocopied pages of Noah's journal from the Adirondack Museum, and so David began decoding Noah's system. But it wasn't until the early 1990s that his work paid off.

After years of trying to crack the code, David finally discovered that a compass rose was the key to Noah's mysterious characters. All the letters of the alphabet—plus the numbers 0 to 9—fit on

the compass rose. Squiggly lines, crosses, lines, etc. formed the characters. The breakthrough came about when David discovered that the symbols for "north," "south," "east" and "west" also stood for the letters n, s, e and w. Another find was that Noah added extra lines or "arms" to the symbols of his alphabet to indicate repetition. For example, two arms added to any symbol meant to read that character twice.

What made Noah's code even more difficult to decipher was that he added elements to throw off would-be cryptanalysts. Writing "J" instead of "K," including words and phrases in his own personal rendition of the French language, writing upside-down, not using spaces, and inserting random stick figures and symbols were all clever ploys Noah used to keep "Official Busy-bodies" out of his personal business.



In his book, *Noah John Rondeau's Adirondack Wilderness Days*, William J. "Jay" O'Hern describes some other tricks Noah used:

"...perhaps the meanest two tricks of all were these. When Noah used a stick figure with its arms up in the air it meant the next line of code was upside down. This would be easy to spot in codes using a normal alphabet, but if you inverted a symbol in Rondeau's cipher, it became another valid symbol. To make it even harder, he sometimes combined words in an 'every-other-letter' technique, so that the jumbled string of characters 'CTOOLWDRNRHIAVLELR' actually says 'Cold River Town Hall!'"

With such convoluted code, it was an amazing feat that David solved Noah's cryptics. Despite the astounding accomplishment, though, the deciphered words and phrases (like "Quack's Pants") didn't make any sense. Enter Jay O'Hern. At about the same time David was deciphering Noah's code, Jay was working on a new book about the hermit of Cold River, and establishing a relationship with a now

much-older Richard Smith. Noah's friend had shared some of Noah's old letters, scrapbooks, poems, diaries, and other trinkets and paraphernalia with Jay. However, they were both stumped when it came to Noah's coded diaries. That's when Jay heard of David, and got in touch with him.

Soon, the three once-strangers began a journey to uncover an old hermit's language. Richard was particularly important because he helped to put context to the cryptic phrases. As Jay said, "To put it simply, Richard brought Noah's journals to life."

With Richard's memories, the group was able to put meaning to David's interpretation of the hermit's mysterious writing. The phrase "Quack's pants," for instance, was relatively simple in meaning. According to Richard, "Quack" was Noah's nickname for him based on the location of Richard's Adirondack camp close to Duck Hole and the Preston Ponds. "Pants" referred to a pair of pants Noah helped Richard make out of deerskin. Richard (no doubt amused by the memory) remarked how

During his life at Cold River, Rondeau became quite a celebrity among the public, often making guest appearances at a variety of sportsmen shows across New York. Here he has been helicoptered to Saranac field for a stop en route to New York City to be a "live display" at the 1947 National Sportsmen's Show.



DCC Archives

THE HERMIT of Cold River Flow
By CLAYT SEAGERS

...Yet let's get waiting to be a hermit who was able to be one with a minimum of outside interference, and in a peak-studded wilderness six hours by land's-foot-trail from the nearest hamlet. The most that seems to be that (1) Noah John is one in 14 million and (2) that despite a population density of 250 folks per square mile, we still have large quantities of country for people to lose themselves in when pressed. (For various reasons) but a walk in quiet very wide and very wild.

Let me do three up a bank of Indian stamp white. Noah John cooks what very well may turn out to be his whole day's "tiffin"—a few flapjacks logged down with his own brand of syrup.

This cooking function is performed (in summer) over a stone of less perched upon fire. He dips the sticks in bear grease, soft them up like a rope, lays off about up to the hand and then takes a healthy swig of syrup out of a bottle of lard-bone around the scene. Note, says Noah, to the regular trade.

And let us gaze (withal, with awe) upon the unique living quarters of Noah John. What appear to be wooden tepees on the above photo are, indeed, wooden tepees—but of a variety more practiced than anything ever described in the Manual of Camping and Tents by George Barr. Noah John lives in his own woodpile. Come spring, he has burned his little tent; his one

...up walls, his tent poles and his powder room behind him. Furthermore he has made it easy to do.

The system is this. When winter has run itself out down the mountain river, Noah John starts building up his tipi-village. He cuts long poles of efficient burning diameter. Every three feet he notches them nearly through. Then he stacks 'em up like a wagon, having an interior section large enough to stretch out in. Thus, when winter has piled the drifts high and one hermit's activity has been reduced to a minimum, the chore of keeping a fire as a cook. Noah John smokes, smokes out the door, re-enters a pile, gives it a belch with the ear hand, and the notched poles fall apart. He always in track how to fasten to figure out the proper deal for the smoking angle; but what the few years amount to is a pattern of life such as that.

Noah John is 63 years old. He now finds it had never to do his man sleeping under a double canopy of slanted poles. So he has a hardy mate from a few months off a long distance lumber camp. Over the wadded door to the realm of contentment the old hermit has nailed a sign "TOWN HALL." Inside there's

NEW YORK STATE CONSERVATIONIST

A snapshot of Clayt Seagers's 1946 *Conservationist* article "The Hermit of Cold River Flow."

tight they were, and that he waddled around in them "like a duck that had slivers in its web feet."

Another curious phrase was "Jonah in verse is percolating." This alluded to a poem called "Jonah and the whale" that

Noah was writing. “Bickford is bloody bugger” was an amusing, but altogether confusing phrase that actually hinted at the hunting ability of one of Richard’s friends. His level of hunting was what Noah considered “bloody bugger.”

Probably some of the strangest phrases found in Noah’s journals involved the nature and wildlife around him. “Blue Jay trapped on little guts at Caboose door” might seem a little ridiculous and even gro-

NOT YOUR TYPICAL HERMIT, NOAH WAS ACTUALLY QUITE SOCIABLE AND HIS CAMP WAS A FAVORITE STOP FOR MANY HIKERS, HUNTERS AND ANGLERS.

tesque, but it actually referred to something as simple as a future meal. “Caboose Door” is a reference to one of the several structures in his hermitage; guts were often used as bait to attract birds for Noah’s famous “everlasting stew.”

Though his health was deteriorating, reminiscing about Noah with Jay and David seemed to lift Richard’s spirits, if only for a little while. In a letter to Jay, he echoed the same words Noah

said to him, years before: “Old father time keeps picking my pocket, and I can’t make him stop!” He died a short time later in 1993, but for a time he felt renewed and uplifted.

Those are the feelings you get when you read one of Noah’s journals. His entries aren’t long or detailed by any means, but they are a glimpse into a devoted and peaceful life in nature, apart from modern day distractions. Noah’s words

about his surroundings, his travels, his daily activities—all paint a picture of a life in which men and women are able to not only survive, but truly live in a world which inspires them. It’s with his words that many people have—and continue to have—a love for nature and the outdoors.

In reference to Noah and other legends like Clarence Petty and Paul Schaefer, Jay once told me I had missed meeting

some truly great people. Though, thanks to his sleuthing, the dedication and commitment of David Greene, and the memories of Richard Smith, I am able to at least catch a glimpse into Noah’s world. If it wasn’t for these three strangers, none of us would be able to share in the world and life of the Mayor of Cold River City (Population One).

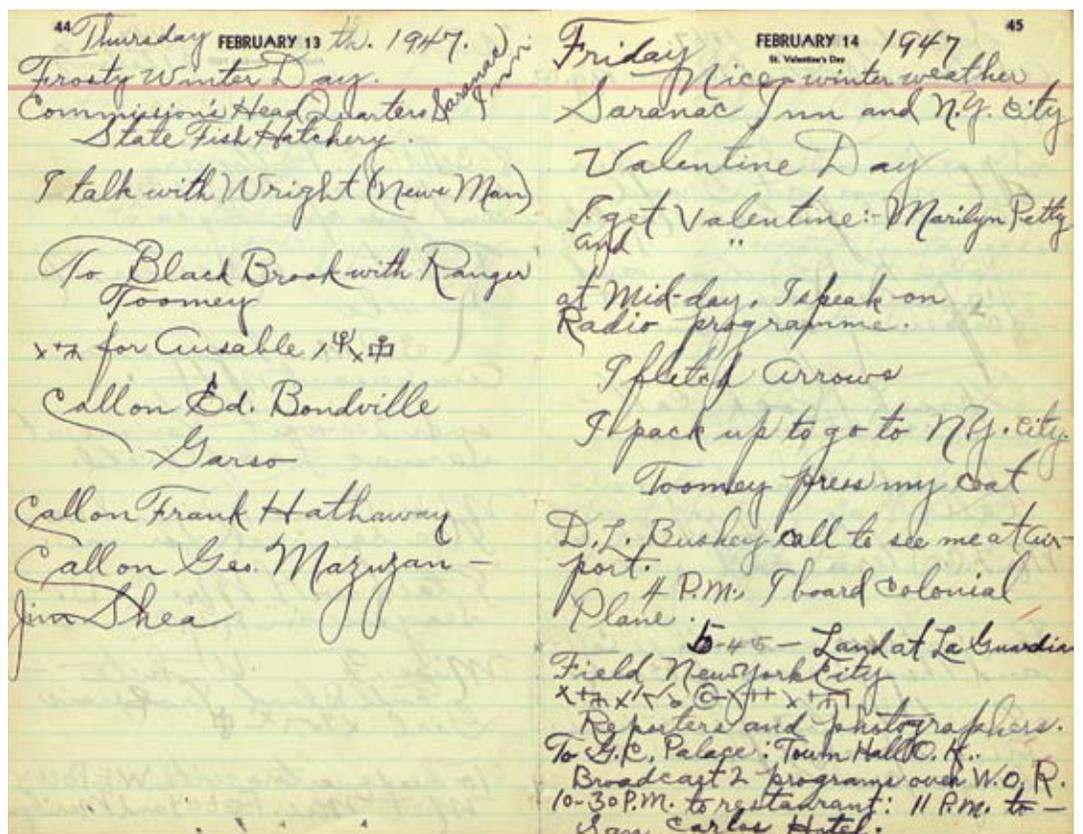
Jenna Kerwin is the staff writer for *Conservationist*.

The author would like to thank William J. O’Hern for his help, guidance and wisdom on the above article.

Right: An aerial view of Noah John Rondeau’s camp by Cold River shows the various wig-wam-style and cabin-like structures that made up his home in the Adirondacks.

Inset: A popular figure of the times, Noah was often interviewed by visitors to his camp. He made sure not to give too much away, though, and was sure to let passersby know when they were asking too many questions!

Many of Rondeau’s journals are written in both regular handwriting and code. In this way, he was able to keep his secrets from wandering eyes.





ἠπῆγε Ἀβὲ Τηγε Ἰῶω?

Most of Noah John Rondeau's journals have not been lost to the passage of time. The Lake Placid/North Elba Historical Society holds diaries, photographs, poems and letters by the Adirondack hermit. Visit its website at <http://lakeplacidhistory.com> for hours and directions. You can view some of this memorabilia digitally via the New York State Archives at www.archives.nysed.gov; just type "Noah John Rondeau" in the search box. In addition, the Adirondack Museum has a Noah John Rondeau collection. Its website is www.adkmuseum.org; click on the "Discover & Learn" tab on the main page and then "library & research" to explore.

Ἐφ Ἐβλή ἡορε

There are a variety of works on Noah John Rondeau and his journals. Some published works that might be of interest include William J. O'Hern's *Life With Noah: Stories and Adventures of Richard Smith with Noah John Rondeau and Adirondack Wilds*, and the 1946 *Conservationist* article by Clayt Seagers entitled "The Hermit of Cold River Flow" (see page 19). Maitland de Sormo's *Noah John Rondeau: Adirondack Hermit* also contains interesting and engaging information, though some do not consider it an accurate representation of Noah's character.



ICE PRINCESS

Combining ice fishing with the joy of marriage.

By Mike Raykovicz

Mary Lou and I almost didn't make it to our first anniversary. Shortly after we were married, we each made a serious mistake that almost ruined our newlywed bliss. I committed the first blunder by foolishly asking her if she'd like to go ice fishing with me, and as far as I'm concerned, she made the more grievous error by saying yes.

Normally I went ice fishing with one of my friends (or "playmates" as my wife calls them), but I was faced with having to go alone on the upcoming holiday weekend. I racked my brain thinking of whom I could ask, when it occurred to me to ask my bride. One night after dinner, I decided to risk it. "How would you like to go ice fishing with me tomorrow?"

Mary Lou looked at me as if I had announced I was having an affair.

"Ice fishing? Have you lost your mind? I think standing in the cold every weekend has made your brain mushy," she said.

"Why not? You love fish, and besides, the weather will be warm tomorrow."

"Twenty five degrees is not warm," she fired back. From the response, I sensed she was weakening. She had actually responded to my question with words, rather than hysterical laughter.

"Okay, I'll go, but only if you promise to take me home if I get cold."

"Deal," I said quickly.

As I was sipping a cup of coffee, my wife waddled into the kitchen looking like the Pillsbury Dough Boy.

The alarm went off at 5:45 a.m. I was on my feet in an instant. I touched Mary Lou's shoulder and she immediately disappeared beneath several layers of cotton percale as quickly as a night crawler retreating from the beam of a flashlight.

"Wake up, hon."

"What time is it?"

"Quarter to six."

"It's the middle of the night for crying out loud," said a muffled voice.

Knowing I'd probably meet with this sort of resistance, I had cleverly set the clocks ahead an hour so that my wife

would be ready in time to get to the lake before daylight. She didn't know it was only 4:45, and I wasn't about to tell her.

As I was sipping a cup of coffee, my wife waddled into the kitchen looking like the Pillsbury Dough Boy.

“Uh, don’t you think you might be a little overdressed?” I asked.

“If I’m going out in this weather, I’m going to be dressed for it,” came the sleepy reply.

Actually, Admiral Byrd probably took less clothing to the South Pole, but I wasn’t about to argue.

“Would you mind helping me with my boots?”

“Why?” I asked.

“I can’t even bend over,” she replied.

Small wonder. The way she was dressed, I wondered how she could breathe. Mary Lou finally sat down with a cup of coffee, but I knew it was time to go.

“You finish your coffee and I’ll warm up the truck,” I offered.

I don’t know how long I waited with the heater on; I guess it was the first few drops of perspiration that alerted me that more than a reasonable amount of time had passed. I was about to

check on her when she appeared at the door and announced, “I have to go to the bathroom.”

“There’s a Porta-John at the lake you can use. Let’s go, it’s getting late.”

“You must be a few fries short of a Happy Meal. I’m not taking off a glove, much less anything else to use a portable outhouse in the dead of winter or at any

“Tea! You want tea? For your information, I brought a thermos of coffee, not a lunch wagon!”

other time for that matter. Gee, it sure is dark this time of the morning.”

My clock trick had yet to be discovered.

Thirty minutes later we were at the lake. Because of the balmy temperature, I knew the holes from the previous day’s fishing wouldn’t be frozen too solidly. Handing Mary Lou my prized ice spud, I instructed her to start chipping open a few holes while I got the remaining equipment out of the truck. The spud was

a beauty. I bought it many years earlier with money I earned running a trap line. It not only had a great heft but it could take and hold an edge like a fine knife. It was a prized piece of equipment.

Suddenly, an awful thought occurred to me. Too late! I turned just in time to see my spud disappear through the ice. I had forgotten to tell Mary Lou to put the

rope loop around her wrist so the spud didn’t slip through her hand when the hole opened. I couldn’t speak. My prized ice spud was now serving as bottom structure for the lake’s fish.

I walked the short distance to where my spud disappeared and stared down the hole. My spirits soared when I saw it stuck in the mud only three feet below the bottom of the ice. To make the situation even better, the braided



To my wife, a frozen lake at sunrise was anything but inviting.

Michael J. Cavanaugh



Susan Shafer

Ice fishing tools of the trade.

polyethylene rope floated above the handle. It became apparent I might be able to recover it.

Remembering I had a length of tow chain with a hook in the back of my truck, I walked over to get it while Mary Lou took my place peering down the hole. Perhaps she thought it would float to the surface. Returning with the chain I said, “Don’t worry Hon, you have a cup of coffee and I’ll have it back in a jiffy.” I deserved an Academy Award for my phony cheerfulness.

“Mike?”

“What?”

“I think I’d rather have tea.”

“Tea! You want tea? For your information, I brought a thermos of coffee, not a lunch wagon!”

“Gosh, you’re grumpy. Why are you getting so upset over an old iron stud?”

“Spud!”

“What?”

“Spud! It’s called a spud!”

“I thought you called it a stud.”

“Trigger’s a stud. This is a spud.”

“This Trigger friend of yours—he sounds like trouble.”

“Look, just have a cup of coffee while I try to get my spud.”

I got on my belly, stuck my head in the hole and lowered the chain. After a few attempts I was able to catch the floating loop and pull the spud back to the surface of the lake where it belonged. Finally, I could begin fishing.

I set the last tip-up and checked each hole as I walked back to join Mary Lou for a cup of coffee. All was in good order and every one of my minnows was wiggling faster than a Hula dancer. I knew it was just a matter of time before the first flag went off.

“Mike?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m cold.”

“Cold? Whaddaya mean? We just got here!”

“We’ve been here an hour and a half, and I’m telling you I’m cold!”

“Nonsense. You can’t be that cold. Besides, a little discomfort builds character.”

“Bull,” came the icy retort. “You promised to take me home whenever I got cold, and I’m cold.”

She had me. Ordinarily, “cold” to Mary Lou was anything less than 80 degrees. Reluctantly, I picked up my gear as Mary Lou waited in the truck.

Later that evening, my wife said, “Actually Honey, I enjoyed going with you this morning.”

“You did?”

“Yes, but would you mind terribly if I never went again? I don’t like the cold.”

Working on Academy Award number two, I tried to look disappointed. “Oh, all right, I guess,” I said, suppressing a grin.

Mike and Mary Lou **Raykovicz** have been married 44 years, and went ice fishing together once.

Peeping Tom

I was sitting at my computer when I heard gobbling. I turned around to see a turkey looking in my window, so I took a couple of photos. The birds like to come down to eat under the bird-feeder and under my old Christmas tree where I throw seed for the ground feeders.

Michael R. Weishan
Cattaraugus



What great photos. We have heard of turkeys gathering quite closely to feeders and in close proximity to houses, but to see one right outside one's window is truly remarkable!
—Conservationist staff



Due Credit

I have always enjoyed the *Conservationist*. I have just one complaint. My late husband LeRoy Irving was a dedicated employee of the Conservation Department. He administered the Conservation Boys (and then, Girls and Boys) Camps, but in all the magazine articles about these camps, I have yet to see his name mentioned. He also did some writing for the *Conservationist* and at one time did the map work for it. I think he should be given some credit, but then again, I am very proud of his record.

E. Jane Irving
Rensselaer County

Thank you for shedding light on your late husband's fine career in conservation in New York. I took a look at our files and your husband did indeed make a number of contributions to the magazine in the 1950s and 1960s, and compiled the student's page during that time. One article Mr. Irving wrote about the Ranger School at Wanakena particularly caught my attention. In it, he discusses student life at the school, including arriving by train, enduring 40-degree-below zero weather in the winter, quiet time at 7:30 p.m., and studying plane geometry. Mr. Irving also spent some of his tenure with DEC's conservation camps. It seems he was a consummate nature educator!

Considering the fact that he ran the conservation camps for a number of years, now is a good time to remind folks that registration opened recently for summer 2011 DEC environmental education camps (see Brieflys on page 28).

It's always a pleasure hearing about men like Mr. Irving, and it makes me wonder what changes have occurred since their time. Though many here today never had the opportunity to have met or worked with LeRoy or his colleagues, their names and contributions are not forgotten.

—Dave Nelson, Editor

Early Bluebird

I was surprised to see this bluebird perched on my roof this afternoon. I wouldn't have expected to see one of these backyard favorites until March at the earliest, but I hope it decides to stay. Is it common for them to make an appearance at this time of year, in the midst of a tough winter?

Tim Mack
Saratoga County

Surprisingly enough, bluebirds do overwinter in the Capital Region; we often see small groups of them (up to perhaps 10 birds) in the winter at the DEC Five Rivers Environmental Education Center in Delmar. Bluebirds, which are in the thrush family, and American robins (also thrushes) can be found in our region throughout the year.

—Scott Stoner, DEC Research Scientist



✉ LETTERS

Albino Birds?

(*Conservationist* often receives letters from readers with photos of all-white or partially white animals. Here are two interesting ones we've received. Answers to both are found below the second photo.)

Can you help me identify this bird? It is a regular at my feeder. Could it be an albino chickadee?

Tom Lewis
New York County



My husband and I were on our way to Savona when we saw this white red-tailed hawk. We pulled over and when the hawk landed I got these photos. I have never seen a hawk like this; it was awesome to see such a pretty bird.

Brenda M.B. Todd
Steuben County



How interesting it must have been to see these two birds! I agree, Mr. Lewis: it appears you have seen a chickadee. For guidance on these instances of color variation, I turned to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Both birds are leucistic, sometimes referred to as partially albino. Like albinism, leucism is a genetic mutation.

New York State Conservationist, February 2011

Albinism is the total absence of melanin (a pigment found in skin, hair, feathers, etc.); leucism is when the melanin is not properly deposited in the feathers. Birds like these can be tricky to identify and sometimes do not do well, in part because of their inability to blend in with their surroundings. Based on the photos, it appears both birds are doing fine.

—Scott Stoner, DEC Research Scientist

Special Delivery

Yesterday, I discovered a rufous morph of an eastern screech-owl sitting quietly in the open bottom compartment of my neighbor's mailbox. In view of the bitterly cold temperature and amount of snow, it seemed that the owl was patiently waiting to be picked up by the mailman to be delivered to a warmer climate!

Brad Bowden
Alfred, Allegany County

With the blustery cold winters we're used to here in New York, we don't blame it!

—*Conservationist* staff



Write to us

Conservationist Letters
NYSDEC, 625 Broadway
Albany, NY 12233-4502
or e-mail us at: magazine@gw.dec.state.ny.us

Monitor Raptors this Winter

You can help monitor New York's birds of prey this winter. Some populations of winter raptors like northern har-



Jeff Nadler

riers and short-eared owls have declined as the amount of suitable habitat in New York has slowly decreased. DEC has been capturing, banding and radio-tagging raptors for several years from December through March, and volunteers are needed to help with this winter's survey. If you'd like to participate, contact a coordinator in a DEC region closest to you. Visit www.dec.ny.gov/about/70255.html for more information.

Helping Hellbenders

DEC and the Buffalo Zoo are teaming up to help New York's declining population of eastern hellbender salamanders. In the past year, 600 hellbender larvae



courtesy of the Missouri Department of Conservation

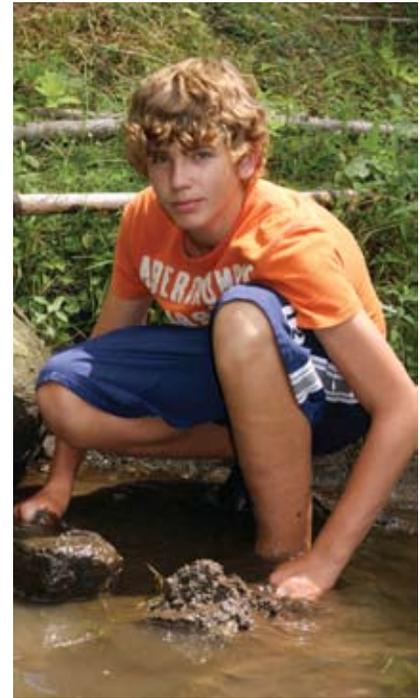
were hatched in the Buffalo Zoo from eggs DEC collected in the Allegheny River watershed. Some of the larvae were then transferred to be raised by staff at the Bronx and Binghamton Zoos. The NYS Department of Transportation also assisted by completing habitat restoration for juvenile hellbenders in the Allegheny River. In 2013, surviving members of the original 600 will be tagged and released into these sites, in hopes of restoring the population. For more information on the eastern hellbender, visit www.dec.ny.gov/animals/7160.html.

Operation Dark Night

More than 130 people were charged with a total of 250 offenses resulting from a major DEC enforcement effort dubbed "Operation Dark Night." Spanning from Montauk to Buffalo, the operation cracked down on deer poaching and focused on the illegal taking of deer by use of artificial lights. The process is oftentimes called "deer jacking" and occurs when a light is shown on a deer, "freezing" them and leaving the animal vulnerable. During a seven-week period, Environmental Conservation Officers patrolled rural locations in every part of the state except New York City, and held stakeouts during all hours of the night. The successful initiative sends the strong message that DEC will not tolerate poaching. Read more about Operation Dark Night online: www.dec.ny.gov/press/70879.html.

Conservationist is on Facebook

Visit us today to see photos from readers, learn about New York's wildlife, read updates about the current issue, and much more! To find us, click on the Facebook button on *Conservationist's* webpage at www.TheConservationist.org.



Susan L. Shaffer

Summer Camp Registration

There's still time to register a child aged 12-17 for a DEC Environmental Education Camp this summer. Simply download an application form from DEC's website at www.dec.ny.gov/education/61769.html. To learn more about the camps, packing tips and other information on DEC camps, check out www.dec.ny.gov/education/29.html.



Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

Elusive Quarry

For a wildlife biologist, things don't always go *exactly* according to plan.

by Barbara Allen Loucks

The mid-afternoon sun shone brightly over the snow-covered fields and golden brown clumps of grass. My heavy felt-lined boots crunched through the snow as I made my way to the small tan camouflaged blind. Glenn Hewitt, my colleague and more experienced trapping partner, busily set up the traps: a few small wire cages containing a couple of mice, covered with monofilament loops to snare an owl's leg; a small piece of noosed wire that fit over the top of a perch pole placed a short distance from the blind; and the largest trap, a circular bownet several feet wide, folded in half and baited in the center.

As biologists, our goal was to put a radio backpack on an endangered short-eared owl to learn more about its habitat needs. Much of the undeveloped land in this upstate New York town is for sale, and we need basic information on these birds to know how best to protect them.

...they appeared to float above the fields, rising and descending, somehow erratically and smoothly at the same time.

Once the traps were carefully arranged, we retreated into the blind to sit quietly and wait for the first birds to arrive. It didn't take long before some slender, graceful harriers appeared. Swiftly gliding and turning, sometimes diving at prey, they occasionally landed on a fencepost at the far side of the field or in a tree. Sometimes they interacted with another harrier and we could hear their odd cries. At times they drifted nearby; close enough to see their somewhat owl-shaped faces.

Then, as the sun began to sink further in the sky and the air temperature began to drop—making me appreciate my many layers of clothing and the small propane heater in the blind—short-eared owls began to emerge from their roosts. Their flight was different from that of the harriers: almost moth-like, they appeared to float above the fields, rising and descending, somehow erratically and smoothly at the same time. Unlike many owls, short-eareds often hunt their prey in daylight, especially just before dusk. I felt lucky to be spying on them, their buff and cream colors so perfectly complementing the white and gold fields.

As Glenn and I watched, we grew anxious. Daylight was expiring, and so was our window of opportunity. A few owls



Gordon Ellmers

swooped low over the bownet. One even landed on a large downed tree next to it, but none landed on the traps. Then, suddenly, an owl appeared almost overhead. It drifted down and around, back and forth over the bownet in front of the

blind. I suddenly realized that I was holding my breath. Glenn firmly gripped the end of the long trigger line to the bownet, which was just 35 yards away. The owl abruptly dropped and landed. I could barely see it in the area of the bownet; no, in the middle of the bownet! Glenn knew this was our chance and quickly yanked on the line. Nothing. He pulled again, and still the trap did not spring. Unsettled, the owl opened its wings and lifted off. We left the blind and ran to the bownet. To our dismay, we saw that the netting had caught on something and the trap had not sprung. Instead of an owl in hand, we had an empty trap.

At first, we were disappointed. That season we had caught only one owl. They were proving to be more elusive than anticipated.

As we took down the traps in the dark and packed up the truck, however, we agreed that while our mission may not have been successful, the day certainly was. How lucky we were to work in the field and get a glimpse into the twilight world of these beautiful birds.

And as for capturing our quarry, there's always tomorrow.

Barbara Allen Loucks is DEC's endangered raptor specialist.



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