

 **LETTERS** Compiled by Alex Hyatt

**Canine or Cougar?**



I believe my son saw a mountain lion in northern Rensselaer County on January 17. I realize that many believe this species no longer inhabits this region. As my son opened the back door of our house he noticed our horses were very agitated. An animal—what he thinks was a cougar—came running out of the barn

and into the woods behind the barn. I was able to take photos of the tracks.

Mark Anatriello, Rensselaer County

*The tracks in your photos are almost certainly canine. Cat toes generally leave rounded prints (see image below); some toe prints in your pics are very pointed. The symmetry and width of the toes in relation to the pad are all indicative of canine origin as well. The behavior of the animal in question is also*



*a clue. To the best of my knowledge, wild cougars generally don't enter structures. Domestic dogs do. Mistaken identity is very common. We get dozens of sighting reports every year, but no proof of wild cougars in New York has been brought forward since about 1894 (see Conservationist*

*February 2008). Contrast that to areas with even small cougar populations, where sign is relatively easy to find and carcasses turn up frequently.*

—Scott Van Arsdale, DEC wildlife technician

**We Ask Questions Too!**

While producing David Bonter's article (February 2008) about the apparent decline of evening grosbeak populations in New York State, our editing team wondered if scientists felt climate change could be responsible for the phenomena, or changes in other winter birds' ranges. We asked the author, and here is his response.



Jeff Nadler

Alex Hyatt, assistant editor

*A series of relatively mild winters has almost certainly contributed to the northward range expansion of northern cardinals and several other 'southern' species that were historically not seen in New York. I'm less comfortable suggesting that climate change has something to do with changes in evening grosbeak numbers over the past 15 years as the mechanisms contributing to the range contraction are unclear. However, I think it is valuable to note the influence of climate change on bird populations. The evidence gathered in recent years is overwhelming. We will certainly see changes in the avian community in New York as a result of global warming.*  
—David Bonter, Ph.D., Cornell Lab of Ornithology

**The Shark of Bugs**



This picture is from a trout stream in Jay. Have you ever seen such a thing? I have been playing in the brook all my life and have never seen anything like it.

My question is, are these water beetles predators or do you think the brook trout was killed some other way and the beetle just got a free lunch?

Glen Hagar, Essex County

*The fish eater is a giant water bug, probably Lethocerus americanus. Giant water bugs are very common aquatic bugs found in ponds, pools, and ditches. They have a "snorkel" on the tip of their backside they use to breathe through while underwater or while cruising the surface looking for food. They are fierce predators and shark-like in the speed and ferocity of their attacks. These big insects are often predators of frogs and small fish, as your picture portrays. They are good fliers, moving easily from pond to pond in search of food. They are attracted to lights at night and often scare people when their noisy, clanky/clunky flight smacks them into light fixtures and walls. They can give a very nasty bite if you pick them up. Their common names reflect people's experiences with these unfriendly aspects of their behavior; as in "fish killer," "toe biters," and "electric light bugs."*

—Jerry Carlson, DEC research scientist

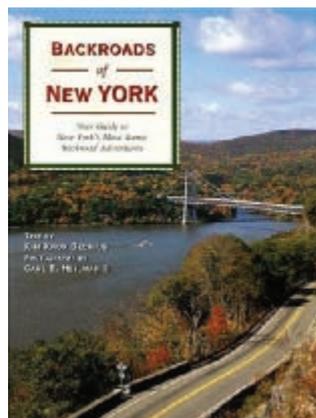
## Backroads of New York: Your Guide to New York's Most Scenic Backroad Adventures

Text by Kim Knox Beckius  
Photography by Carl E. Heilman II  
159 pages; softcover \$21.95  
Voyageur Press  
Phone: (800) 826-6600

One of the family rituals of my childhood was the Sunday drive—a peregrination with no real destination in mind. Dad would aim the station wagon toward a thinly-populated area of western Massachusetts and we'd wander along country roads, not worried about making wrong turns. My parents enjoyed taking the measure of houses and properties; I imagined the trout that might lie in inviting streams along the roads, my siblings admired the farm animals we passed, and all of us kids would clamor for stops at ice-cream stands or roadside attractions with come-ons like "See Baby Rattlers!" ...plastic baby rattles on a bed of hay.

Today, mindful of energy conservation and beguiled by the cornucopia of organized, well-advertised weekend events, my family has let the Sunday drive tradition fall by the wayside. But I do have lists of places to see, and an occasional weekend for a short getaway. *Backroads of New York* is the perfect book to inspire such itineraries.

The book is organized in six regional sections: City Outskirts (Long Island to the Hudson Highlands), The Catskills and the Hudson Valley, Around Albany, The Adirondacks, The Seaway and Finger Lakes Regions, and The Western Door (Niagara, Chautauqua, and more). Within each region, author Kim Knox Beckius offers travelogues covering the highlights of specific drives. As her introduction points out, while each of the trips can be completed in a single day, more time is needed if you stop at even a few of the notable sights or hike a handful of the enticing trails she mentions.



Carl Heilman's wonderful and numerous color photographs are the highlight of *Backroads of New York* and even more effective than the text in spurring the reader to slip the key in the ignition, start 'er up, and head on out. His work evokes the wonder of the sights to be found along the way. In addition, historic black-and-white photos accompany some of the site descriptions.

While this is a great volume for inspiring and outlining travel plans, it is not the reference to reach for when you come upon a confusing intersection during a trip. The travel routes are sketchily described and mapped; heed the introduction's advice to invest in a New York State road atlas before setting out. Likewise, this is not a guidebook; it lacks details such as site phone numbers, hours of operation, and entry fees.

Such specifics are outside the province of this book, being secondary to its main intention. *Backroads of New York* aims to make you forget the household chores, retail therapy, and televised football games and—in the spirit of those old Sunday afternoon drives—to push you out the door into an adventure on New York's country byways. It will likely succeed.

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