

## Research Note

# A “MOSSY AND MOOSEY PLACE”: THOREAU’S MAINE WILDERNESS

BY MEGAN VHAY

*Megan Vhay graduated from the University of Maine, Orono, in 2016 with a BS in Wildlife Ecology. Her adventures working as a field technician include mapping invasive plant species in eastern Washington, searching for goshawks in southeastern Idaho, and trapping wild turkeys in northwest Oklahoma. Megan is interested in human dimensions of wildlife management and believes that good communication between natural resource professionals and the public is the strongest foundation for the future of wild places. Megan plans to pursue her master’s degree in a wildlife-related field in the near future, with the goal of becoming a wildlife biologist at the state or federal level. She hopes to continue writing in whichever occupation she finds herself. In the meantime, Megan continues to seek wildlife field technician work, write, and go for walks in the woods with her Bernese Mountain Dog.*

HENRY DAVID THOREAU is best known as the author of the classic work *Walden*, which details the author’s endeavors to live simply and commune with nature in the Massachusetts woods. Perhaps nearly as famous are the transcendentalist’s ventures into the remote wilderness regions of nineteenth-century Maine, recounted in a volume aptly titled *The Maine Woods*. Thoreau’s narrative and personal reflections reveal the conflicted perceptions of someone living in an age when public consciousness had already embraced the economic potential of Maine’s resources, but had only just begun to see what the limits of those resources might be: a nation just leaving its youthful boundlessness behind and slowly awakening to its own destructive appetites. A similar moral and philosophical revolution emerged in the wilderness movement of the 1900s long after Thoreau’s death, which brought new relevance to the transcendentalist’s



Portrait of Henry David Thoreau by Geo F. Partlow, 1861. *The Evolution of the Conservation Movement, 1850–1920*. Library of Congress. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Henry\\_David\\_Thoreau\\_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Henry_David_Thoreau_2.jpg), accessed 11 December 2017.

work. Like Thoreau, the nation had begun to recognize the value of spaces where the landscape appeared as it might have before the growth of industry, where one could find rest and adventure among the forests and rivers. Wilderness advocates realized such places would be lost without formal action. For its early-twentieth-century audience *The Maine Woods* called for such a preservation of wilderness, in acknowledgement not only of the need for nature's restorative powers, but also of the necessity of protecting it for generations to come.<sup>1</sup>

But what *is* wilderness? If we vow to protect it, we must presume to understand it. The term is widely used but not strictly defined. In his seminal 1983 work, William Cronon debunked long-held perceptions of pre-contact New England as endless, empty, pristine expanses and noted indigenous tribes' practice of clearing land with fire, sometimes to great extents. The quintessential Maine "wilderness" was later drastically altered during the nineteenth-century lumber boom and endured further widespread harvest at the hands of pulp and paper. Federal preservation efforts in the twentieth century demonstrated the degree of discord inherent in the "wilderness debate." The 1964 Wilderness Act defined the term as land "untrammelled by man . . . retaining its primeval character or influence, without . . . human habitation," effectively negating the concept of eastern "wilderness." The more inclusive 1975 Eastern Wilderness Act brought additional protections by conceding that cultural use should not disqualify lands with potential for restoration to "secondary wilderness." Considering this discord among legislators and government agencies, perhaps an all-encompassing definition is unnecessary. But in the interests of retrospection, and to provide some context for the developments in Maine conservation, it is worth exploring what Thoreau—and, by association, his readers—called "wilderness."<sup>2</sup>

*The Maine Woods* is a fair-sized work, meticulously detailed, and constructed in journal-like fashion. Thoreau's musings and observations provide a running narrative of his forays into the North. As such, there is no particular organization aside from the book's division into parts corresponding with each of Thoreau's trips. This research note attempts to synthesize from his three Maine excursions—"Ktaadn," "Chesuncook," and "The Allegash and the East Branch"—what might be considered the essence of Thoreau's wilderness and the heart of the modern wilderness movement.

Thoreau hinted at his interpretation of "wilderness" as early as the opening chapter of *The Maine Woods*, suggesting that such a realm was synonymous with the wild frontier. As Thoreau related his travel plans, he wrote that his journey would begin "one hundred miles by the river above

Bangor, thirty miles from the Houlton military road, and five miles beyond the last log hut." By juxtaposing wild lands with civilization, he emphasized the remoteness and "other-ness" of the North Woods; it existed in the context of what it was not. The wilderness frontier was so far removed from cities, roads, and posh mansions that human presence was suggested only by the most basic travel routes and solitary woodland hermitages. Approaching the mountains, Thoreau further emphasized the remoteness and isolation of the landscape:

There was the smoke of no log-hut nor camp of any kind to greet us, still less was any lover of nature or musing traveler watching our batteau [*sic*] from the distant hills; not even the Indian hunter was there. . . . No face welcomed us but the . . . evergreen trees, waving above one another in their ancient home. At first the red clouds hung over the western shore as gorgeously as over a city, and the lake lay open to the light with even a civilized aspect, as if expecting trade and commerce, and towns and villas.

But, of course, there were none to be found. Even where the land looked familiar, there was always a strange absence of human activity. The signs that did exist, such as an old clearing that the group happened upon "in the midst of the otherwise uninterrupted forest, only reminded [them] how uninhabited the country was," according to Thoreau. His surroundings further impressed upon him that the wilderness was a place where humans were still few and far between, past the fringe of civilization.<sup>3</sup>

Thoreau's accounts also emphasized that the wilderness was not just a physical place, but a lifestyle, one that was primitive and rugged by necessity. He found himself exposed to the elements and perpetually at the mercy of nature's meteorological whims. Thoreau wrote of being caught in rain showers and camping in thunderstorms, and of hikes during which time "the best shod for the most part travel[ed] with wet feet." In rudimentary camps, he noted, "each of us had a blanket, in which he lay on the fir twigs . . . but nothing over his head. . . . It was very . . . independent, this lying in the open air, and the fire kept our uncovered extremities warm enough." Thoreau and his traveling partner were limited by what they could carry, as he observed early in the Katahdin trip: "We each had a knapsack or bag filled with such clothing and other articles as were indispensable, and my companion carried his gun." They confronted the power of nature with a slim material margin for survival.<sup>4</sup>

Though far less comfortable than civilization, a life in the wilderness was simpler and more adventurous for Thoreau. It was a shared experience



Joseph Attean, a Penobscot chief and Maine guide who accompanied and influenced Thoreau during his North Woods travels. *Fanny Hardy Eckstorm Papers*. Courtesy of Special Collections, Raymond H. Fogler Library, DigitalCommons @UMaine, [http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/spec\\_photos/3326/](http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/spec_photos/3326/), accessed 11 December 2017.

with the settlers and tribes of old, a throwback to an age where wits and tests of strength defined backwoods heroism. Thoreau and his companion relied heavily on the assistance of experienced Maine backwoodsmen, including their American Indian guides and watermen. The bateau drivers' deftness out on the rapids impressed Thoreau, who remarked that "only a practiced eye could distinguish a safe course. . . . The utmost familiarity with dead streams . . . would not prepare a man for this particular navigation; and the most skillful boatman anywhere else would here be obliged to take out his boat . . . where the practiced batteau [*sic*] man poles up with comparative ease and safety." Wilderness was a place that belonged to the few who had the raw skill and courage to survive and adapt to the dangers of the river and forest. All others, Thoreau included, were just visitors.<sup>5</sup>

Judging from the attention Thoreau devoted to the animals and birds around him, forest creatures were as integral to wilderness as were forbidding forests and raging rivers. He made a concerted effort to record wildlife encounters and kept numerous botanical notes as well. As someone presumably more familiar with the deer and small mammals of Concord's disturbed—and limited—woodlands, Thoreau was particularly taken by the sheer size of the moose as well as the haunting call of the loon. The bird's voice, Thoreau recalled, was "a very wild sound, quite in keeping with the place and the circumstances of the traveler, and very unlike the voice of a bird." When camping in a wilderness such as this, Thoreau continued, "you are prepared to hear sounds from some of its inhabitants, which will give voice to its wildness. Some idea of bears, wolves, or panthers runs in your head naturally, and . . . you conclude that it is a pack of wolves . . . cantering after a moose." Like the Maine answer to Jack London's call of the wild, the loon symbolized a beautiful but strange and unnerving world filled with an equally great and mysterious host of creatures. The wilderness animals were not half-tame, city-park creatures; nor were they listless zoological specimens. They did not exist for the benefit of the traveler and his whims. Thoreau hoped to encounter them, if only for fleeting moments on his journey. The Maine wildlife were watchful and secretive, outside the view or even the scientific understanding of humans—akin to forest spirits great and small whose presence was felt all around, yet never fully seen. Thoreau knew this feeling after his guide brought down a moose, and in the calm following the chase he "recalled how far on every hand that wilderness stretched . . . and wondered if any bear or moose was watching the light of [his] fire, for nature looked sternly upon [him] on account of the murder of the moose." In the wilderness, it was humans who were the timid beings treading carefully through a domain of greater beasts.<sup>6</sup>

Flora, as well as fauna, occupied Thoreau. He was an astute botanist and marveled at how the profusion of species, rare in eastern Massachusetts, had, in Maine, "a particularly wild and primitive look." It is not difficult to imagine a disheveled and muddy Thoreau stooped over each tiny, flowering specimen, lost in his own world and scribbling excitedly as his perplexed travelling partners passed him by.<sup>7</sup>

Newcomers—like Thoreau—learned that the wilderness is a strange and otherworldly place. Maine's nineteenth-century evergreen forests bore little resemblance to the attractive and relatively open hardwood stands common throughout southern New England. Regarding the vast vistas of the Maine woods, Thoreau noted dryly "you are never reminded that the wilderness which you are treading is, after all, some villager's familiar



wood-lot." Scarred as they may have been from the lumber boom, the forests were by no means manicured for travelers' comfort. In a particularly revealing notation, Thoreau noted with exasperation, "It is all mossey and *moosey*. In some of the dense fir and spruce woods there is hardly room for the smoke to go up. The trees are a *standing* night. . . . Then at night the general stillness is more impressive than any sound." The forest depths were unwelcoming and eerily hostile. Even the trees themselves seemed to close in on their camp, as if the very embodiment of a landscape where Thoreau struggled to fit in and where he was surrounded by silent, unmoving woodland sentinels.<sup>8</sup>

The emotion reflected in Thoreau's imagery spoke to the restorative power of wilderness: its ability to spiritually lift mind and body. Upon first glimpsing Katahdin, the awestruck Thoreau likened the great mountain to a supernatural New England Olympus: "a dark isthmus . . . connecting the heavens with the earth." His journey became an epic quest; he was "Prometheus bound . . . travelling of the old heroic kind over the unaltered face of nature." Wilderness fed his writer's imagination and brought him closer to the storied gods and heroes of old.<sup>9</sup>

Like many others who had begun to see nature as a remedy for mid-nineteenth-century illness, Thoreau saw the Maine woods as a tonic for physical wellbeing. This is not surprising, given his struggle with the chronic tuberculosis that would take his life at forty-four. Nourishment taken in the wild became infused with a supernatural quality; a "clear and thin" logging-camp beer was "strong and stringent as the cedar sap, as if [Thoreau's party] sucked at the very teats of Nature's pine-clad bosom in these parts—the sap of all Millinocket botany comingled . . . a lumberer's drink, which would acclimate and naturalize a man at once." What may well have been an unremarkable libation if consumed in a Concord tavern became nature's essence: a simple and nurturing magic. Thoreau delighted in simply living and breathing the outdoors. He marveled that "the ever-green woods had a decidedly sweet and bracing fragrance; the air was a sort of diet-drink, and [his party] walked on buoyantly in Indian file, stretching [their] legs." The wilderness that Thoreau found was youthful and life giving, like a woodland herb growing specially to ease the afflictions of the world weary.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, despite his wonder and ecstasy, on several occasions the joys of wilderness seem to have worn thin. The same trees that had earlier "exhilarated" him, the "wild fir and spruce tops, and those of other primitive evergreens . . . like the sight and odor of cake to a schoolboy" later became "spear-heads, black against the sky" that "gave a peculiar, dark, and somber look to the forest." The thrill of immersion in nature was tempered by the

timeless response of the footsore and hungry to the inescapability of the hulking, dark, never-ending woods. At times, the melodic prose of the advocate for asceticism became discordant notes echoing the dreary, rainy days at camp and sodden worn-out shoes, and the buzzing of incessant biting insects whose infernal whining dragged unmercifully on into the wee hours. The increasingly rough terrain between portages began to tell on Thoreau's enthusiasm as well, as expressed in his relief upon reaching an open lake: "It is an agreeable change . . . after you have been shut up in the woods!" We might give Thoreau credit for his honest admission that nature is not always as idyllic as we imagine and that there is, perhaps, a fundamental awkwardness to being human in the outdoors.<sup>11</sup>

Still, general discomfort was, on at least one occasion, replaced by genuine fear, when the long-suffering travel companion became separated from Thoreau and their Native guide. As darkness fell, the two men were forced to abandon their search until first light. What followed may constitute Thoreau's most visceral depiction of wilderness:

I remembered that my companion was near-sighted, and I feared that he had . . . fallen from the precipice. . . . I shouted and searched above and below this precipice in the twilight till I could not see, expecting nothing less than to find his body beneath it. . . . I anticipated and believed only the worst. I thought what I should do the next day, if I did not find him, what I could do in such a wilderness, how his relatives would feel, if I should return without him. . . . It would be a desperate undertaking to find him; and where were they who could help you? What would it be to raise the country, where there were only two or three camps, twenty or thirty miles apart, and no road, and perhaps nobody at home?

What was the backcountry's splendor and peace fell away in these moments, and suddenly Thoreau became just another frightened stranger in the woods. The wilderness in all its Eden-like beauty was, in truth, deadly serious, indifferent to the fates of risk takers and innocent wanderers alike. Though the party recovered the lost man unharmed, it was a sobering experience for Thoreau. The wilderness momentarily became a place of anxiety and helplessness, a jarring reminder of humans' feeble mortality.<sup>12</sup>

The Maine woods have changed since Thoreau and his party traversed through them. The white pines so coveted by shipbuilders, subsequently reduced to a scattering of unmarketable snags in Thoreau's time, are once again a common sight. Moose hunting is determined by lottery, and enthusiastic hunters may wait years for the opportunity to stalk Maine's most iconic animal. Many of the botanical names Thoreau so diligently recorded



have been updated over decades of revisions to plant taxonomy. More poignantly, the wolves that serenaded Thoreau on moonlit nights and the woodland caribou that once roamed the forests have since been extirpated from even the most remote Maine locations. But regardless of these changes, the experience itself endures. All of Thoreau's joys and deepest unshakable fears, all of his discomforts and thrills, are repeated and shared by countless modern pilgrims. Moose and porcupine, bears and barred owls—even the smallest red squirrels—never fail to enthrall. Even in an age in which the world feels smaller and more accessible, when technology has allowed us to explore the secrets of the earth, and in which we are routinely bombarded with, and desensitized to, real and fictionalized beauty, drama, and violence, we are still amazed and intimidated by our wild lands. It is our return to innocence, our return to humility.

The modern urban landscape would astound Thoreau. He would, undoubtedly, remind us just as adamantly that we need wild spaces. For us, as it was for Thoreau, the wilderness offers a rare escape into the unknown, a chance to live as ruggedly as a lumberman or a river guide in a mythic kingdom of trees and beasts. It provides us a rare glory and peace, but also a reminder of what it is to be mortal and vulnerable regardless of one's preconceived notions of self. The enduring nature of these possibilities only strengthens the image of wilderness as Thoreau saw it: wonderful, mysterious, frightening, and humbling—a “mossy and moosey” place indeed.

## NOTES

1. The editors of *Maine History* would like to thank Carol Patterson–Martineau for her early editorial assistance in preparing this manuscript for publication; For more on the evolution of thought on wilderness, see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).
2. William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Wilderness Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-577, accessed 4 May 2016, <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/wilderness/upload/1964-Wilderness-Act.pdf> (first quotation); Eastern Wilderness Act of 1975, Pub. L. No. 93-622, accessed 13 November 2017, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-88/pdf/STATUTE-88-Pg2096.pdf> (second quotation).
3. Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, ed. Joseph Moldenhauer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 3 (first quotation), 36 (second quotation), 33 (third quotation).
4. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, 20–21 (first quotation), 104 (second quotation), 5 (third quotation).

5. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, 32 (quotation).
6. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, 224 (first and second quotation), 120–121 (third quotation).
7. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, 93 (quotation).
8. David R. Foster and John F. O’Keefe, *New England Forests Through Time: Insights from the Harvard Forest Dioramas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 8. Disturbed woodlands surrounding mid-nineteenth-century southern New England towns usually consisted of early successional species such as birch, as well as deciduous hardwoods like red maple; Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, 152 (first quotation), 275 (second quotation).
9. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, 33 (first quotation), 235 (second quotation).
10. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, 28 (first and second quotation), 16 (third quotation).
11. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, 86 (first and second quotation), 109 (third and fourth quotation), 97 (fifth quotation).
12. Thoreau, *Maine Woods*, 259 (quotation).