



The TRAILS *of the* ADIRONDACKS

HIKING AMERICA'S ORIGINAL WILDERNESS

CARL HEILMAN II

Foreword by
BILL McKIBBEN

Text by
NEAL BURDICK

Adirondack
ADK
Mountain Club

RIZZOLI
NEW YORK

A wide-angle landscape photograph of the Adirondack Mountains. In the foreground, a large, flat, grey rock outcrop sits on a forested slope. The middle ground shows rolling hills covered in dense forest, with some areas showing early autumn colors in shades of yellow and orange. In the background, multiple layers of mountain ranges are visible, fading into a soft, hazy blue sky. The lighting suggests a late afternoon or early morning scene.

CHAPTER ONE

GETTING *to* KNOW *the* ADIRONDACKS



Many are those who say the Adirondacks are unique. That may be an overused word, but in numerous ways the region is distinctive, and in some cases even certifiably unique. Let's consider some of those ways.

THE ADIRONDACKS ARE BIG

Not vertically, which is what most people think of when they hear the word “big” associated with mountains, but horizontally. Consider the Adirondack Park, for all intents and purposes the most useful packaging of the region. The park is defined by its famous Blue Line, so-called because somebody drew the original line in blue pencil on a map about 125 years ago. (It has been reconfigured, usually to enlarge the park, several times since.) Inside that line are 6.1 million acres, give or take. Simply put, the park is the largest of its kind—state, national, whatever—in the Lower 48. You could put Rhode Island in it and have enough room left over for Delaware and Connecticut. Toss those three aside and you could fit Maryland in. Or New Jersey, although local self-styled comedians always ask, “Why would you want to?” You could even squeeze Vermont in if you lopped a few acres off of the Green Mountain State. Yellowstone, Glacier, and Yosemite National Parks would go in nicely as a package.

Bottom line: by any measure the Adirondack Park is huge. Think of it this way: it takes nearly four hours to drive from the northern edge of the park to the southern border (partly because you can't do that very fast most of the way, especially in the region's daunting winters). That's about the amount of time it normally requires to drive from New York City to, say, Washington, DC, or Boston. Legions of curious travelers have thought to drive around the Adirondacks for a couple of hours to get to know the area, only to realize that could actually take a couple of weeks. Or longer. The insider's answer to the uninformed tourists' question, “What does it cost to get into the Adirondack Park?” is “Lots of time.”

In some sense, the park is too big. The geography, the economy, the urban orientation, the microclimate—nearly everything is different on one end than it is on the other. Adirondackers on one side display little knowledge of, or interest in, the situation on the other side. Folks in the Black River Valley on the western fringe, for example, aren't much aware of what's going on in the Champlain Valley on the east. They're too far apart: the Black River country is closer to Rochester, New York, than it is to Lake Champlain. One tries to think of the Adirondacks as a single cohesive entity, but one also lives with the gnawing possibility that it is not.

THE ADIRONDACKS ARE OLD

This is open to ongoing scrutiny by the scientific community, but most geologists consider Adirondack bedrock to be among the oldest exposed rock in the world, at somewhere beyond one billion years. It has been abused for most of that time: pushed up, worn down, pushed up again, sat on and gouged for centuries

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Late afternoon light flows across the eastern High Peaks and the St. Huberts area in this view from Giant Mountain.

OPPOSITE: A hiker enjoys the view from Cat Mountain over the cloud-filled Lake George basin.



by two-mile-thick glaciers, and eroded eternally. This bedrock—which is visible in only a few places, most notably on the higher summits—has a slightly bluish cast and is called anorthosite, a very hard granitic rock that is the southernmost extremity of the Canadian Shield. It comes from our neighbors to the north via the Frontenac Arch. Think of a cross section of a slice of the globe extending from roughly Algonquin Park in Ontario to the Adirondack Park (this, tangentially, is the route of a proposed designated wildlife corridor). The Frontenac Arch is mostly buried, but it emerges above the surface on its way to the Adirondacks in the form of the Thousand Islands and the hardscrabble, unyielding terrain that was the undoing of many optimistic pioneering farmers in parts of the St. Lawrence Valley and the northwest foothills.

Ironically, although they are old below the surface, the Adirondacks are new above. The last glaciers went back to Canada only about 10,000 years ago, the blink of an eye in geologic time. Not only did they shape the Adirondacks as they are known today—the sculpted summits, the deep narrow lakes, the sprawling wetlands of the northwest, the erratics (immense boulders) left indiscriminately here and

there—they also weighed the land down so ponderously that it is still rebounding to this day, rising at the rate of a couple of millimeters a century. This revelation causes aging hikers to comment, “I thought that mountain was higher than the last time I climbed it.” In truth, it is a sobering reminder that in the natural world, nothing, not even a feature as seemingly solid and immutable as the Adirondack Mountains, stays the same forever.

THE ADIRONDACKS ARE DIVERSE

Not so much sociologically (though the region is in fact less homogeneous than most people realize), but ecologically. Partly attributable to the region’s size, its segments are very different from one another. Many people equate “the Adirondacks” with “the mountains,” but except for a few scattered monadnocks here and there, most of the honest-to-gosh summits are sequestered in the eastern third of the park. These

BELOW: A frosty fall morning creates an enchanted landscape along the calm waters of the West Branch Sacandaga River.





mountains are not particularly tall by many standards; only one summit, Mount Marcy, exceeds a mile above mean sea level at 5,344 feet. Any self-respecting resident of Denver, Colorado—whose downtown lies at a higher altitude than every other Adirondack mountaintop—would laugh at the notion that these are called the High Peaks. They’re not even the tallest mountains in the East; the highest Great Smokies and White Mountains exceed them by a thousand feet or more. On the other hand, when you take into account the fact that the shoreline of Lake Champlain is only 95 feet above mean sea level—making it one of the lowest places not part of a coastal region east of Death Valley—you realize that from just the right spots you can see a lot of mountain in the Adirondacks. From the rare stretches on the shores of Champlain where you can peek through notches and over ridges and pick out Mount Marcy, it’s almost a vertical mile from there to the summit.

Meanwhile, the majority of the Adirondack Park is anything but mountainous. Portions of it, mostly along the fringes, even feature flat, rich farmland. But farms flourish smack in the heart of the park as well. The salads you eat in those upscale resorts and dining establishments in Lake Placid and Saranac Lake consist of ingredients grown within 20 miles of those two mountain villages.

Most of the park, though, is rolling, heavily forested, and well watered. In fact, the dominant geographic features in these vast stretches of lonely territory are lakes, ponds, and rivers—wonderful for paddling—along with bogs, mires, and marshes that harbor a remarkable variety of flora and fauna—meccas for naturalists but not of much interest to peakbaggers. This is the land of nearly impenetrable forests, of hunting and fishing, of snowmobiling for mile upon mile down abandoned railroad grades, where escaped convicts from nearby maximum-security prisons can go undetected for weeks until the blackflies wear them down. It is the Adirondacks most Adirondackers and few outsiders know.

There’s unusual diversity of ecosystems too. That’s because the Adirondacks sit astride a fuzzy, undulating boundary between the predominantly hardwood forests of midcontinent (think beech and maple) and the more coniferous boreal, or northern, forests typical of Canada. You will find groves reminiscent of the central Appalachians sharing space with taiga-like bogs at the southern extremity of their range. You will find an intermingling of tree types not often experienced in close quarters—oaks and ashes can be neighbors with spruces, hemlocks, and spidery tamaracks. Vertical boundaries intermingle as well. Drive up the Whiteface Highway and you may as well be journeying several hundred miles northbound; watch the tree types change as you ascend.

It’s said of many places, “If you don’t like the weather, wait a few minutes.” That cliché can apply to the Adirondacks too, but a more accurate testament might be, “If you don’t like the weather, go five miles in any direction.” Adirondack meteorological phenomena are as diverse as any that can be found, to the confoundment of every prognosticator within range. A blizzard can be raging on the western slopes, courtesy of their proximity to Lake Ontario (these are known in that sector—with a certain blend of respect, awe, and dread—as “lake-effect snows,” and they can generate the greatest snow depths in the East), while not two miles away the sun is shining. The vicinity surrounding Old Forge is heaven on earth to snowmobilers and adherents of other forms of motorized cold-season recreation, while Nordic skiers and snowshoers also revel in annual snowfall accumulations that can exceed 300 inches and last well into April or even May once in a while.

OPPOSITE: This stream in the Lake Placid area is along a quiet footpath to Holcomb Pond.

At the same time, the southeastern corner can get pummeled by a nor'easter good for two feet of powder, while the northwest admires skies so blue it hurts to look at them. Southern Adirondackers may bask in plus-20s temperatures while northern Adirondackers congeal in the minus-20s. Mountain peaks generate their own mini-thunderstorms on muggy summer afternoons; hikers in one spot can get drenched while others, half a mile down the trail, feel nary a drop. And, as with vegetation, there's the vertical variation as well. Too many climbers have set out for the high country on a mild spring day, dressed for the valley weather, only to be blasted back one whole season once they rose above timberline. Some of these unfortunates have lost fingers or toes. Some have lost their lives. Adirondack weather is not to be toyed with.

THE ADIRONDACKS ARE BIZARRE

Management-wise, that is. The region's size and diversity, plus an organizational oddity, render it maddening to govern. Here's the oddity: unlike most other parks, the Adirondack Park contains both public and private land. The public land, known as the Adirondack Forest Preserve, is inside the park and consists of numerous detached parcels of varying acreage that are owned by the State of New York. The preserve actually preceded the park, in 1885, in an attempt to curtail out-of-control logging. The Adirondacks were the feeder of water to the Erie Canal, spinal cord of the state's billowing commerce, and careless logging practices had silted up the rivers that fed the canal, such that not much water was getting to it. Ergo, laws to stop that. It surprises some people that recreation, arguably the key benefit of the Forest Preserve today, had nothing to do with its beginnings; that it was an effect, not a cause. Creation of the preserve was a hardheaded business decision.

The Forest Preserve in 2019 accounts for only about 43 percent of the park's aforementioned 6.1 million acres. Since approval by the voters in 1894, it has been perpetually protected—under the iconic “Forever Wild” clause of the New York State Constitution—against development, incursion for human purposes, and even lowest-level forest management (in most places one must use hand tools, not chain saws, to clear blowdown from trails, for example). Only amendment of that hallowed document by the voters of the state can permit any alteration to the Forest Preserve. Such was the case in 1927 when they voted to allow construction of the Whiteface Veterans Memorial Highway. That constitutional armor is one thing about the Adirondacks that is truly unique. “Perpetually,” though, is only as good as the good intentions of the voting public; they can unprotect the woods as easily as they protected them 125 years ago, though they have not seemed inclined to take that radical step.

The other 57 percent of the park is privately owned, even though it's in a park. The park was created in 1892 as an extra layer of protection for the forests because the loggers had not taken the preserve hint seven years earlier. The main drag in Lake George is inside the park, even though it's hardly wilderness (although there are those wits who say it gets pretty wild on summer Saturday nights). So is Lake Placid—lake and town and Olympic bobsled run and everything else. So are thousands of acres of managed woodlots, farms, homes, hunting camps, businesses, small factories, shops, art galleries, museums, schools, diners, tourist traps, and so on. Some 132,000 permanent residents live, work, and conduct their daily lives within the Adirondack Park.

OPPOSITE: Ice builds up quite high at the base of OK Slip Falls after a prolonged period of arctic cold.





On top of that, the park sprawls over a huge chunk of northern New York, reaching its tentacles into multiple layers of overlaid jurisdictions. It encompasses 102 townships (one can obtain a guidebook with a checklist, visit all 102, and get a passport stamped if he or she can locate anyone to do it), a handful of villages, parts of 12 counties (only two, Essex and Hamilton, are wholly within the park), dozens of school districts, several state Department of Environmental Conservation management zones of assorted purpose, bushels of state and local economic development and tourism-promotion agencies, citizen advocacy groups spanning the spectrum from deep ecologists to flame-throwing libertarians, and one beleaguered Adirondack Park Agency—a megazoning board that since the 1970s has had overarching (and often overwhelming) responsibility for planning and managing land use in every square inch of the massive park, on both public and private lands.

Authority over private lands has remained controversial from the agency’s beginning, at one time prompting the torching of one commissioner’s barn, the dumping of a truckload of manure in the parking lot of the agency’s headquarters at Ray Brook, and other malicious behavior. Tempers seem to have cooled since those dramatic days, but the contentiousness simmers underneath ongoing conversations and decisions like a fire in a coal mine. As a general rule, Adirondack landowners have never been keen on having government bureaucrats tell them what they can and can’t do with their land.

THE ADIRONDACKS ARE HARD TO DEFINE

In concert with all of the above, which barely scratches the surface anyway, no one is sure what the Adirondacks are, or exactly where they are. Are they just high mountains tucked into one corner of a park? Are they the sprawling swamps and wooded hills far to the west of there? Are they the organic farms and prosperous orchards of the Champlain Valley and the decaying cores of dozens of little hamlets? Are they the abandoned mines of Lyon Mountain and Tahawus and Star Lake, the empty, echoing paper mill in Newton Falls, the struggling stores and cheesy tourist attractions? Or are they merely the great views and beautiful scenery, and nothing more? Who is to say?

Ask those questions in any tavern north of the Mohawk Valley. Ask if the Adirondacks and “the North Country” are one and the same, or whether they are separate, distinct regions, or where their boundaries are, or if they intermingle here and there. You will get as many answers as there are lumbermen and truckers and farmers and real estate agents and retirees and prison guards and town supervisors at the bar. That has been the case since those regional designations came into existence, and it will be so for time immemorial. The Adirondacks will never be defined to everyone’s satisfaction.

In 1879, the surveyor Verplanck Colvin wrote, much more eloquently in this book’s epigraph, that no one really knows the Adirondacks. The same can be said today. This storied, complex, magnetic, infuriating region is too big, too spread out, too schizophrenic, to be grasped in a few days, or through a few words and pictures. The best one can do is explore with an open mind, humility, and a lot of patience. Let the exploration begin.

OPPOSITE: This long exposure of stars in a clear September sky was taken along the peaceful shore of Limekiln Lake.





PREVIOUS SPREAD: A tranquil view from the Goodnow Mountain firetower shows Algonquin Peak, Mount Colden, Mount Marcy, and several other High Peaks at sunrise.

OPPOSITE: A blue heron fishes along the shore by the entrance to the Camp Santanoni Historic Area.





OPPOSITE: A view from Mount Jo to Cascade Mountain and the mist-filled South Meadow valley below shows the sun peeking over the summit of Big Slide.

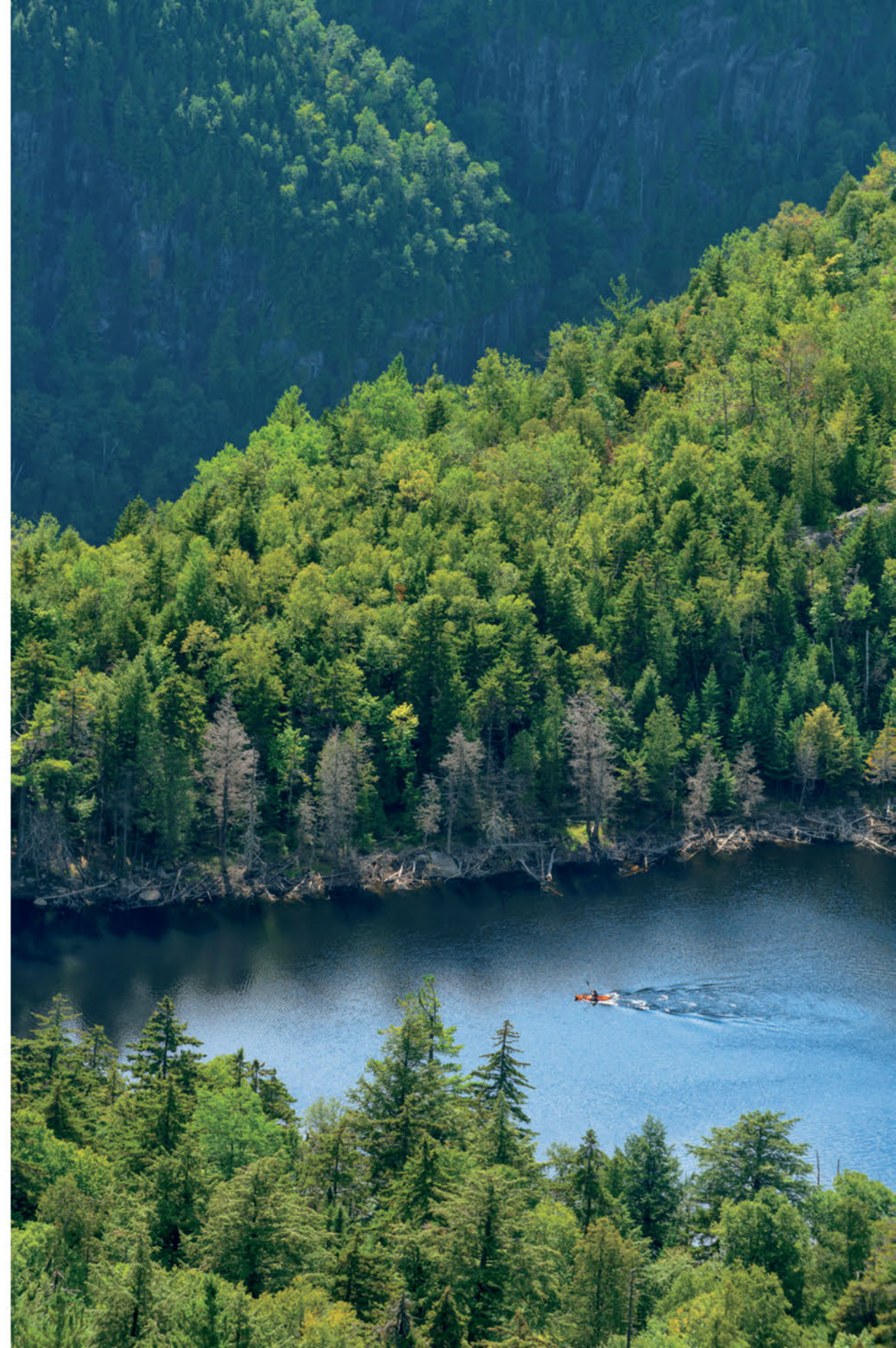
FOLLOWING SPREAD: Weathered floating trees along the Boreas Ponds shoreline are home to sundews and other bog-loving plants (left). Paddlers enjoy the Boreas Ponds, with Gothics as a backdrop (right, top). The Boreas Ponds canoe access site is near an earthen and concrete dam (right, bottom).





OPPOSITE: A group of 46ers celebrates the first official ascent of Grace Peak on June 21, 2014, just after East Dix was renamed for Grace Hudowalski, the first female 46er and a historian who corresponded with and kept track of all those climbing the 46 peaks for close to 50 years.







PREVIOUS SPREAD: The view from this unique rock feature on Giant Mountain looks toward the eastern Adirondacks, Schroon River valley, and Dix Range (left). A paddler canoes on Giant Washbowl, with a backdrop of the Round Mountain cliffs that drop down to Chapel Pond (right).

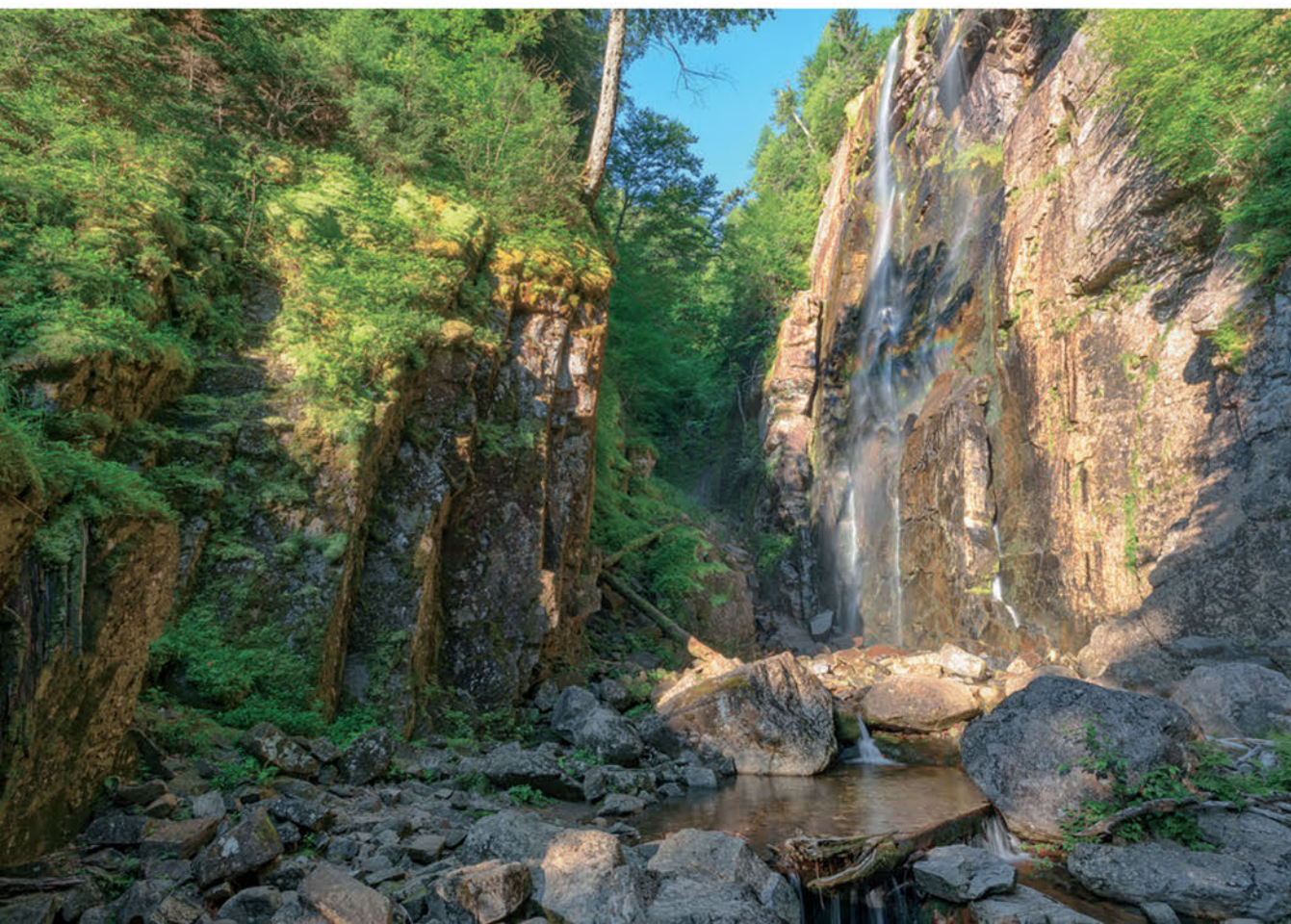
OPPOSITE: A hiker surveys the Dix Range, Nippletop, Mount Colvin, Sawteeth Mountain, the Great Range, and the East Branch Ausable River valley from the summit of Giant Mountain.

RIGHT, TOP: A paddler portages a lightweight Hornbeck canoe over a bridge above the outlet of Giant Washbowl.

RIGHT, BOTTOM: Fall color reflects in Giant Washbowl on a beautiful calm morning.

FOLLOWING SPREAD: Three views look toward Gothics and the Great Range from the summit of Cascade Mountain: in winter (left, top), under the light of a full moon (left, bottom), and in the last light of a summer afternoon (right).





LEFT, TOP: The trails in the Adirondack Mountain Reserve lead to or pass by numerous waterfalls and cascades, including this one along one of the valley trails.

LEFT, BOTTOM: Rainbow Falls is one of the tallest waterfalls in the Adirondack Park.

OPPOSITE: Harebells bloom along the Ausable River in the Adirondack Mountain Reserve against a backdrop of Mount Colvin.



