

A RAINY DAY'S SLOG TO HELP OTHER HIKERS

Two Canadians volunteer in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom

Glen and Janet Allingham

It was not a promising day for a hike. On a sunnier day we had responded to a call for volunteers from the Northwoods Stewardship Center in what Vermonters call the Northeast Kingdom. The idea was to convert a dilapidated fire warden's cabin on Bald Mountain into a shelter for hikers. We were to be the pack mules for building materials.

The area is sparsely populated. The *North-east Kingdom Mountain Trail Guide* (2010) calls it an "emblem of wildness, symbolizing the rugged nature of the least populated corner of the least populated state." Its proximity to Canada (just over four hours from Ottawa) and an abundance of trail guides and books lures many hikers, campers, skiers and outdoor adventurers.

At 1,010 metres, Bald Mountain is one of the higher peaks in Willoughby State Forest, an expanse of lakes, ponds and mountains. From its summit, hikers are rewarded with a panoramic view of mountains and more than a dozen lakes and ponds. To the east are New Hampshire's White Mountains; to the west the Green Mountains. Looking north you can just see the southern tip of Lake Memphremagog that extends from Newport, Vermont to Magog, Quebec.

We were to join the crew at the base of Bald Mountain at 8:30 a.m. en route from the

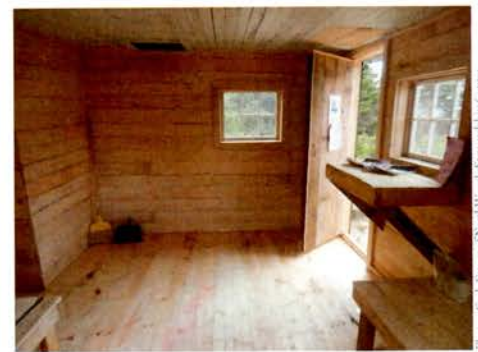
Canadian border at Highwater, Quebec. During a steady drizzle we arrived to have the American customs officer look skeptical when we said we were "going hiking." The arrival of heavier rains and swollen streams made us wonder if the hike might be cancelled. If still on, it would be a wet day on the trail. The warm, dry car would be hard to leave.

We reached the meeting place right on time. Minutes later, a truck pulled up and out jumped four young adults. Yes, we were the expected Canadians, yes, the event was on, so out came the ponchos. The enthusiasm of our U.S. companions was infectious, and we felt energized.

A kilometre and a half hike would take us to the supplies. Then another three kilometres up the mountain. The trail started in an open field, and when we entered the woods the footing quickly went from damp to wet to muddy. At first we were cautious, hoping to protect

our boots, but gave up through a succession of deep mud puddles and water-filled ruts.

We reached the pile of building supplies. Our loads would consist of pine wedges to jack up the building. As the ascent grew steeper across slippery granite rock faces, the pine boards helped maintain our balance. In the trickier places we clung to wet and balsam boughs along the trail edge.



(clockwise) An outside view of the area, an inside view of the newly built hikers' shelter; the crew.



Photos: Craig Stevens of North Woods Stewardship Center

At the summit, we gathered in the derelict cabin to compare notes. A professional carpenter had left his tools there, and would hike up in the afternoon. The weather blocked any enjoyable summit views. After a meal of granola bars, it was time for the descent – often tougher than climbing up. We were grabbing for balsam branches again.

As we trudged back through the mud, we thought of dry socks and the car heater pushed us on. But the sense of accomplishment was profound. While we had no great views from the summit, we had been part of a project that will greet other hikers for years to come. We drove home damp and muddy, but happy. ■

The Allinghams live in Kemptonville, and have hiked the Northeast Kingdom for almost 40 years. Check out the North Woods Stewardship Center at: www.northwoodscenter.org

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