

The Last (*Real*) Trout Stream

For the outdoor enthusiast, the farther you travel into the wilderness, the closer you get to home.

By Jay Atkinson, Photos by Joe Klementovich

Writer Jay Atkinson casting for one more brook trout on the Dead Diamond River in the last light of the day

Seventy-five miles north of Mount Washington, Route 16 is a bumpy, twisting, rural road, hemmed in by fir trees and interrupted only by an occasional farmhouse shrouded in mist. Here the peaks of the White Mountain National Forest have been replaced by a vast green wilderness of deserted roads, rolling hills and remote ponds and rivers.

A half mile beyond a defunct general store, we passed a sign that read “Welcome to Maine” and pulled a U-turn. I was riding in photographer Joe Klementovich’s truck, rubbernecking left and right, looking for the entrance to Dead Diamond Road. We hadn’t seen another vehicle for 20 minutes, except for Chris Pierce and his 8-year-old son, Will, who were following us.

Coveted biking and fishing spots are often difficult to pinpoint, but this was ridiculous. Joe lives in North Conway and had been here before, but even he was flummoxed. Without GPS to locate the turnoff, Joe yanked the truck onto the shoulder of the road, yelling, “Going old school, Will,” out the window as he rummaged around for a map.

Despite the gloomy skies and impending

rain, we were itching to get started, to kit up, to climb on our mountain bikes and ride into what’s been called the last real trout stream in the state.

When I was a kid, my friends Rick Angus and Dave Frasca and I would rise early during April vacation, pack our lunches, fishing rods and tackle, and ride our bicycles down the steep hills of our neighborhood. Gliding to the tiny railroad depot in our hometown Methuen, Massachusetts, we’d pedal along the cinder apron bordering the tracks, rolling northward into Salem, New Hampshire. Back then we rode 4 or 5 miles parallel to the Spicket River, a deep, black, slow-moving stream that empties into the much larger Merrimack River. After an hour, we’d cross an old fieldstone bridge and steer into a grove of trees, where the Spicket ran fast and shallow over a rocky stretch and where we hoped to land the season’s first trout.

For a certain kind of traveler, every sojourn is a return to the adventures of youth. All these years later, the grownup equivalent of such a pedal-and-cast tour is mountain biking into remote stretches of the Diamond, Dead Diamond and Swift Diamond rivers. I’d been dreaming of this trip since Joe, an avid fly fisherman and cyclist, had mentioned it months

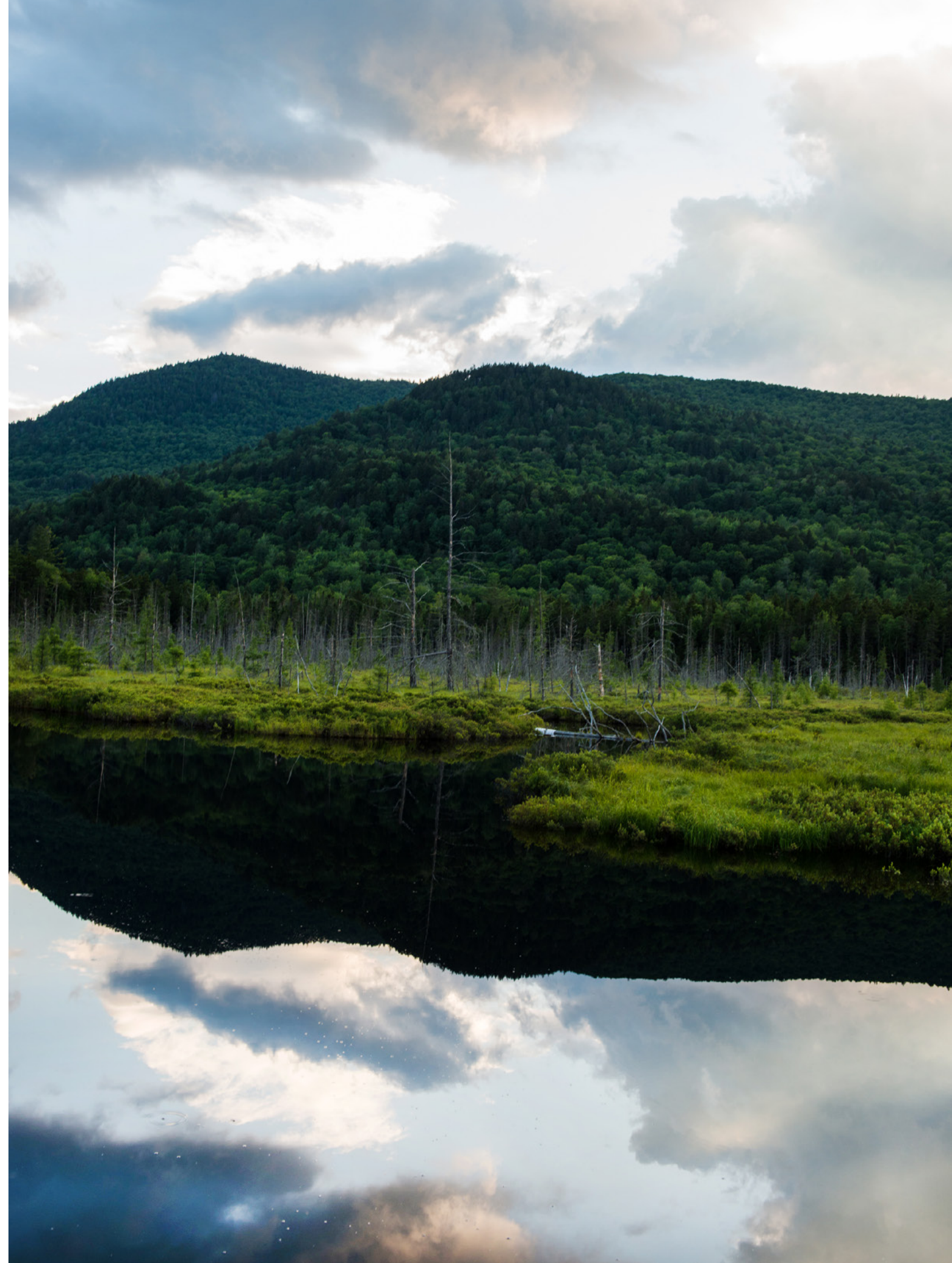
earlier. We’ve known each other for a while and have worked on stories together, but I took it as a compliment that Joe was sharing one of his favorite spots with us.

We were heading into a 27,000-acre parcel of land known as the Second College Grant. In 1789, the state ceded the town of Clarksville to Dartmouth College. But the college sold off the bulk of the so-called First College Grant, and in 1807, Dartmouth received the second grant by an act of the state Legislature. Today, the rugged wilderness area provides top-notch recreation for visitors, including hiking, fly fishing, canoeing and mountain biking, along with cross-country skiing and snowshoeing in the winter. In addition to native trout, the region is home to beavers, black bears, deer, minks, moose, muskrats and otters.

The sky darkening with clouds, we eased along Dead Diamond Road, a rutted dirt lane that led to a grassy parking lot and metal gate. (According to Dartmouth’s website,

Below: At about 10 minutes away, Errol is the closest town to the Second College Grant trailhead on Dead Diamond Road.

Right: As the Dead Diamond River gets farther along, it begins to slow and meander, connecting with oxbows and bogs along the way.





camping, cabin rentals and vehicular access to the old logging roads within the grant is restricted to “Dartmouth-affiliated visitors and their guests,” although “foot travelers are welcome at any time.”

Even with the pattering rain, we discovered that the parking lot was a staging area for the local insect population. As soon as we exited the vehicles, a horde of mosquitoes surged from beneath the trees, buzzing frantically at our ears. So when the sky cracked open and the rain arrived in force, we laughed as we shouldered our hydration packs, mounted the bikes and rode off, happy to be under water rather than under siege.

Darting around the gate, we rose from our saddles and pedaled wildly down the road. Blond-haired and blue-eyed, Will was a 50-pound missile of energy, flying ahead in his rain jacket and bike helmet, hell-bent for leather. He reminded me of my old childhood hockey pal, Rick Angus, barreling toward the Spicket River on his Stingray bike.

After the first mile, the road curved past the Gate Camp cabin, which appeared empty, then crossed the 200-foot Perley W. Churchill Bridge over the Diamond River. The rain had tailed off and patches of blue showed to the west. Atop the bridge, we paused for our first look at the river.

It was like the trout streams of Valhalla — 60 feet wide, studded with rocks and boulders, the gray-green depths embossed with a pewter finish as it twisted down through a country as densely wooded, fresh and glistening as anything I’d ever seen. As teenagers, we’d pitch a tent in Dave Frasca’s backyard on the eve of our fishing excursions, staying up half the night, talking excitedly about just such a place.

After the bridge, the road climbed, growing steeper and rougher in places, sometimes offering glimpses of the river below, and on other occasions flanked by an unbroken wall of trees on either side. Torn between exploring the territory and stopping to fish, we biked for an hour, arriving at an intersection with another dirt road and the first clearing we’d encountered since the Gate Camp. There was a patch of mown grass, another tidy cabin, and a sign indicating that a left-hand turn would

Top left: Chris Pierce’s son Will, Jay Atkinson and “Piercy” pedaling into a light summer shower just after leaving the trailhead

Middle left: Piercy getting some tent-setting-up advice from his son at Mollidgewock State Park just south of Errol along the Androscoggin River

Bottom left: A sweet spot for lunch just off the grassy fire road, Jay jots down a few notes while Piercy digs out lunch.



put us on Swift Diamond Road, paralleling the river of the same name, which flowed into the Dead Diamond River from the west. Piercy and I agreed to scout ahead while Joe stopped to give Will a fly fishing lesson.

The road ascended a series of long, rocky hills connected by brief plateaus, too infrequent to catch our breath. Piercy is a jack-of-all-sporting-trades, and together we’ve undertaken many outdoor campaigns, stretching from the White Mountains to Montana and northern California, and all through the rugby-playing towns of North America. Once we get outside, I know what to expect from Piercy.

Every time we reached a flat spot, I’d pray it was the top, but the road curved into the trees and another hill loomed ahead.

“These damned — *wheeze* — hills are — huff — more difficult — *puff* — than they look,” I said, my legs churning.

Riding ahead, Piercy threw a remark over his shoulder. “No, they’re as hard as they seem.”

I labored along in Piercy’s wake, and after a short interval, I said, “Now that you mention it, it’s amazing how there’s an exact correlation between how difficult they appear and how difficult they actually are.”

Piercy suggested I perform an action that was virtually impossible, and we laughed, and continued grinding uphill.

When we gained a long, flat stretch where the road grew thick with meadow grass, I spotted a single track off to the left. There was a wooden sign nailed to a tree that called it “Sam’s Lookout,” and I holstered over to Piercy.

The trail contained a few gnarled roots and rocks, winding upward to a copse of trees. In a clearing atop the bluff, there was a weathered picnic table overlooking a magnificent stretch of the Swift Diamond, located 100 feet below. The breeze had driven away the mosquitoes, and the emerging sun turned the river into a shining silver band trimmed with fir trees.

Piercy and I dismounted, doffed our helmets, and drank from our hydration packs. The shady ledge was named for Sievert Mathias Jorgenson Brungot, known as Sam, a celebrated local woodsman, fire warden and storyteller. Quickly we agreed to ride back for the others, returning here for lunch.

“Lovin’ those hills,” I said, as we cruised back to the road.

Will is an agile sprite with a quick wit, ea-

A rare white moose on display at L.L. Cote in Errol along with many other specimens from the local woods and rivers

For the next hour, I hopped from pool to pool, with only the burbling water for company.

ger and able to keep up with the adults. Back at Sam’s Lookout, we feasted on wraps and energy bars and fruit, gazing down at the river. Will began devouring a peanut butter and peach jam wrap, his eyes bright as he listened to our chatter.

“How long do you think we could survive out here?” Joe asked. Tall, loose-limbed and laconic, Joe hardly seems to eat or drink anything, even on daylong excursions like this.

“All of us?” Piercy asked.

“Yeah.”

“We could survive a week,” Piercy said. “I mean, we could survive longer, but ...”

Joe smiled. “After a few days, we’d get chip-py?” he asked.

We were looking westward, up the silvery course of the river, with spruce trees following closely along the banks and the dark blue hills silhouetted against a lighter sky. We hadn’t seen anyone on the trail for three hours, and our picnic spot seemed as remote as the moon.

“This must be what heaven looks like,” Piercy said.

Joe went off through the trees with his camera, and Piercy was busy tinkering with the bikes. When I looked up from writing in my notebook, Will’s face was daubed with peanut butter and jam, and he was grinning broadly. He looked like a remedial Picasso.

Holding up his gooey hands, Will called out, “What should I do?”

Piercy glanced over. “Wipe your hands on that tree, and rinse with a handful of pine needles,” he said.

Will did the best he could, and returned to the table. He’d polished off his peanut butter wrap, an apple and a bag of Sour Patch Kids. “How about a nap?” he asked me, raising his eyebrows comically.

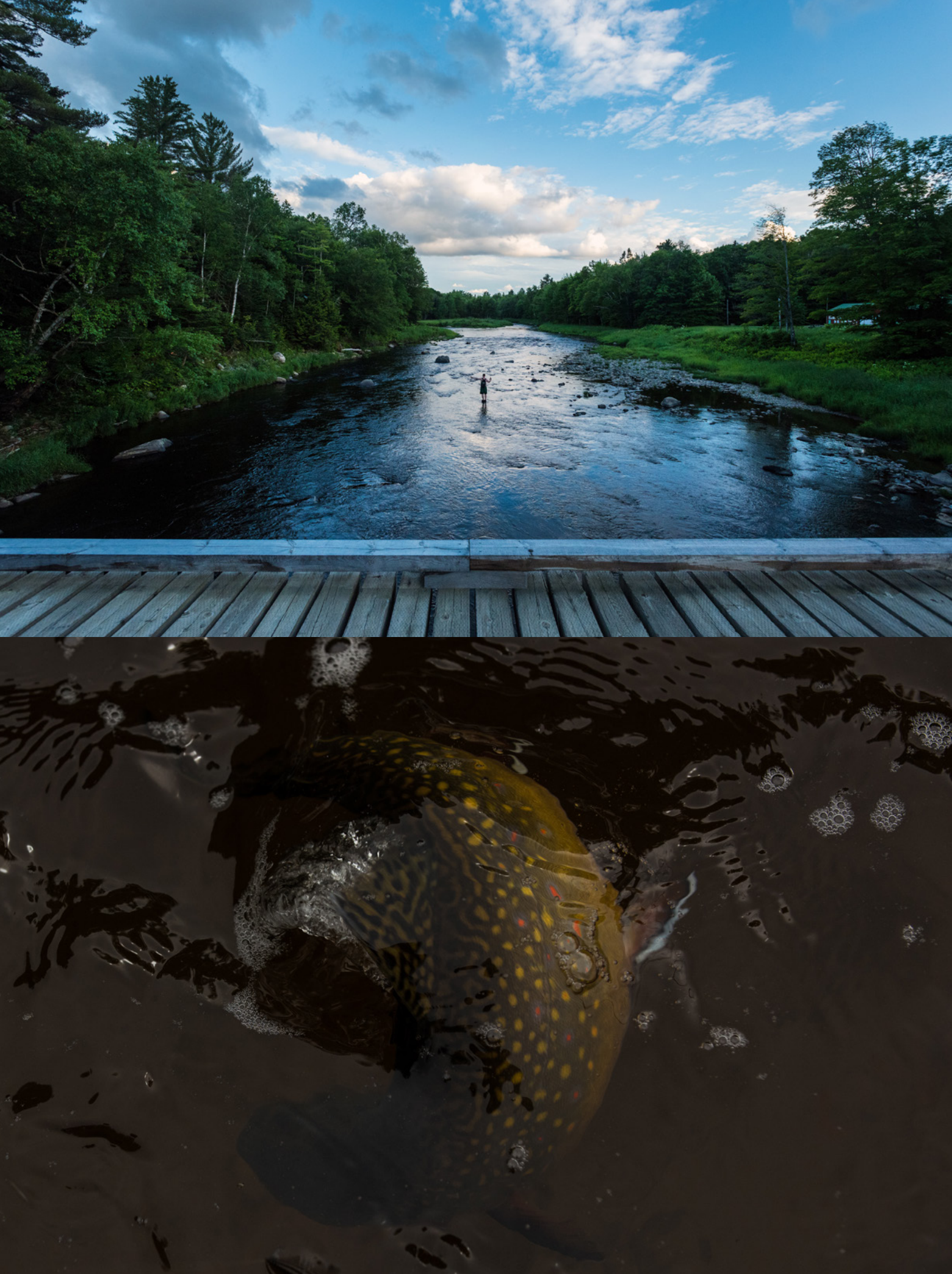
But it was time to go fishing. Will led the way down the single track; I followed him out, and Piercy and Joe gathered their stuff and came after. Back on the grassy road, I paused for a moment to look around. The afternoon had grown sunny and still, with only the drone of insects over the meadow. Random notes of birdsong wafted out from the trees — a pee-wee, the scream of a blue jay and a woodpecker banging out a staccato rhythm.

Fresh bear and moose scat was piled alongside the road like mile markers. Riding ahead, Will was barely visible in the tall grass, just his helmet bobbing along.

“Hey, bear bait,” I yelled. “Wait up.”

I reached Will as the others arrived, and then Joe and I forged ahead. On a long downhill, I was going at a good clip, the gravel pinging against the frame of the bike as I hopped over bits of ledge. From somewhere





above us, Piercey called out that Will had taken a header from his bike.

Joe and I waited on a flat, sandy spot, wondering if it was serious. After a long minute, I said, “He’s a tough nut.”

Then Will appeared with Piercey alongside, gliding down the slope. Will showed me a small puncture wound on the fleshy part of his right hand. Piercey knows I always carry a wilderness first aid kit in my pack, and I tossed it over to him.

“I’m not licensed to perform surgery, but I have stitched people up,” said Piercey, who’s a physical therapist.

Piercey cleaned the abrasion with water from his hydration pack. He patted the wound dry with a sterile pad, spread a layer of antibacterial gel on it, then tore a second pad in half and bound it to Will’s hand with medical tape.

“You know what this means,” I said to Will, mussing his hair. “Ice cream for dinner.”

Back at the intersection of dirt roads, I was surprised to find a pair of white-haired ladies sitting on the porch of the Management Center cabin. Piercey rolled over the lawn and began chatting with the women, who were Dartmouth employees and whose husbands were off looking for the nearest grocery store.

One of the women asked Piercey if he was “affiliated with Dartmouth.”

“No,” Piercey said. “We’re regular people.”

After 10 miles of biking out and back, we found a stretch of river that narrowed, accelerated over some rocks, and broke into deep shaded pools rippled with foam. The river went by in a musical chorus, offering several attractive spots to wet a line.

I hadn’t done any fly fishing since I was a teenager, but Joe spends plenty of time fishing in New Hampshire, Maine and Canada. He gave me a brief refresher course, and then, choosing a dry fly and moving a short distance upriver, Joe hauled in a 14-inch brook trout with a marvelous pattern of colored speckles along its flank.

“Show off,” I said.

I was standing beside a long, black pool that eons ago halved the giant boulder that hid me from the trout lurking nearby. I practiced my casting with a dry fly, and then switched to a little green and brown streamer that resembled a tiny brook trout. I threw an overhead cast

Top left: A lone fisherman out in the middle of the Dead Diamond River chasing small and big native brook trout with just a fly rod and a pair of shorts

Bottom left: A lively, strong and colorful native brook trout that was caught and released back into the cool waters of the Dead Diamond River

about 35 feet, letting the fly drift across the strong point of the current. When the streamer reached the end of its arc, I paid out a little more line. Holding the rod tip high, I hooked the index finger of my right hand over the heavy floating line just above the reel.

The fly sank a little farther, descending into the pool. Using my left hand to jerk the line into 6-inch coils, I made the streamer zigzag upstream, just a few inches below the water.

On my next cast, I saw the bright flash of a trout as it struck the fly. A jerk on the rod set my hook, and I pulled in the little brookie, freed the hook from its mouth, and grinned over at Joe. Holding the pan-sized trout with its head upstream to help catch its breath, I released the fish.

Although of modest size, it was the first trout I’d caught in more than 20 years, and the first ever on a fly rod.

Now I had the bug, figuratively and literally. As the afternoon waned, an invasion force of mosquitoes, horseflies, deer flies and gnats oc-



cupied the river. More than one useful cast was ruined by a palsy of self-inflicted head slaps, like I was one of the Three Stooges. You could make a fortune with the insect repellent franchise for the Great North Woods.

For the next hour, I hopped from pool to pool, with only the burbling water for company. As I got into my rhythm, I noticed a good-sized trout holding itself in the current 20 feet away.

My first cast missed — too far. By the time I retrieved the fly and prepared to cast again, the fish was gone. But I followed Joe’s advice and threw the fly into the trail of bubbles running into the pool. As soon as I began to jig it upstream, there was a splash and the big trout hit the fly. He darted across the pool, fighting the hook, and then leaped out, a beautifully speckled fish of considerable heft.

But when I took up the slack, the trout was gone. I knew there were plenty more where that came from, and half an hour later, when we gathered on the road to bike out, I was eager to return the next morning.

Since “regular people” aren’t allowed to camp

on the Second College Grant, we took a site at Mollidgewock State Park, a rustic 44-site campground on the Androscoggin River. Piercey and I popped up the tent, strung the rain fly and joined Will for a swim in the river.

As longtime rugby teammates, Piercey and I sometimes squabble like legionnaires in the barracks. Not long after supper, Will fell asleep in the tent. While retrieving something from my car, I dozed off in the front seat, waking up to complete darkness. Unzipping the tent, I crawled inside, trying not to disturb Will.

But for several moments, I rustled around with my sleeping bag, unable to get my legs all the way in.

In a fierce whisper, Piercey said, “Shut the hell up,” and I could barely keep from laughing.

The morning broke clear and sunny, and cooler temperatures had diminished the insects. Back on the Diamond River near the Churchill Bridge, I was fishing from the shore on one side, and Piercey and Will were directly opposite, while Joe roamed around with his camera.

Piercey likes to think of himself as part mountain goat. Large rocks and boulders were arranged in a haphazard pile from the road to the water’s edge. Clutching a fly rod and wearing sport sandals, Piercey went hopscotching down the jumble of rocks. En route, he dislodged a boulder the size of a refrigerator, darting to one side as it clunked down the scree. It landed at the river’s edge with a thud that rattled the bridge, and sent out a resounding boom that echoed over the valley.

I called over to Joe. “I make one tiny noise in the tent and Piercey gets all indignant, but he drops a huge boulder that spooks every trout within 4 miles, and nobody’s supposed to mention it,” I said.

That afternoon, we ended our trip at the L.L. Cote Sports Center in nearby Errol, a backwoods superstore peddling everything from groceries and beer to hand-tied flies and live grasshoppers. Huge taxidermic heads stared morosely from the walls, the disgruntled bears, beavers, deer and moose of yesteryear. After checking with Piercey, I made good on my promise to buy Will an ice cream as big as his head.

Sitting at a picnic table outside, the third-grader made a valiant effort but finished less than half, with a Rorschach of strawberry ice cream smeared across his face.

As Will headed inside to wash up, Piercey gazed after him, saying, “This is the kind of trip he’ll remember when he’s older.”

“Fifteen years from now, he’ll come up here with his buddies and this trip will be part of the story,” I said. **NH**