



Spectacular TERRAIN

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THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL DOES NOT CROSS A SINGLE paved road for more than 30 miles as it climbs over six 4,000-foot mountains, down steep ravines, and across unbridged mountain rivers in western Maine between the towns of Rangeley and Stratton. From the traverse of the Saddleback Range, the broad vistas of the western Maine mountains inspire a thirst for adventure in hardy hikers, but the mountainsides also provide habitat for many of Maine's most iconic forest species. The area has seen a long history of timber management. Narrow gauge railroads carted off hundreds of trees from remote high elevation camps around the turn of the last century. Today, although the timber industry continues to utilize the forest, the remote camps have faded into the regenerating forest. In 2002, when the majority of the region remained in large private holdings, the Maine Appalachian Trail Land Trust (MATLT), the land conservation-focused partner of Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), and the Maine Appalachian Trail Club

determined that this section of the A.T. and its environs should be a focus for its land conservation efforts and began to call the area the Maine High Peaks Region. The name stuck and is now used by multiple groups in the area to characterize the region.

In 2006, after the success of the ATC and our partners to conserve Mount Abraham, a mountain adjacent to the A.T. with the second largest alpine area in the state, the MATLT commissioned an ecological study of the High Peaks by Peter S. McKinley, Ph.D. The study provided guidance about future conservation goals in the area, where large tracts were changing hands and the future of the vast forests, remote mountains, and important wildlife habitat — all critical to the A.T. experience — was uncertain.

The Orbeton Stream Easement area protects 6,000 acres on the south flank of Saddleback Mountain (shown here), one of the premier alpine ridge hikes in Maine. Photo by Claire Polfus

One of the study's focus areas was a 6,000-acre parcel of land in Madrid Township, just to the south and east of the Saddleback Mountain ridgeline. A ski resort sits on the northwestern slopes of Saddleback Mountain but the south side of the ridge is remote, forested and accessible only on foot or by a network of logging roads and snowmobile trails. This parcel, just downslope from the A.T. corridor, abuts 1,300 acres owned by MATLT and a smaller parcel owned by the ATC. McKinley named this the Orbeton Stream parcel.

The land is owned by Linkletter Timberlands, LLC, a family business located in Athens, Maine and the majority is actively managed for timber production. Like many timber companies in the state, however, the Linkletter family keeps their property open to outdoor recreation in areas where active logging is not occurring. The entire southern portion of the property is crossed by Maine's Interconnected Trail System for snowmobiles and the Moose Loop for all-terrain vehicles. A number of foot trails, including the Fly Rod Crosby Trail (the brainchild of MATLT board member Lloyd Griscom, which was named for Maine's first registered guide), also now traverse the property. In the east, the parcel is bisected by Orbeton Stream, which was the site of the successful reintroduction of spawning Atlantic Salmon in 2012.

"Plain old vanilla forest" is how McKinley recalls one conservation official referring to the Orbeton Stream parcel. What McKinley saw was nothing of the sort. He saw a landscape that can anticipate climate change, with a diversity of ecological communities along an elevation gradient that range from eastern hardwood forests through the subalpine spruce fir areas and up to the alpine tundra on the area around the Appalachian Trail. In other words, the ecological communities in the Orbeton parcel are already coping with a range of climatic conditions. As the climate changes, it is more likely that areas such as the Orbeton, which already host a diverse range of species and topography, will be able to adapt more quickly than areas without topographic or species diversity. The forests of the Orbeton parcel not only provide habitat for Canada lynx, pine marten, moose, black bear, and countless species of songbirds and birds of prey — they provide an area through which species can migrate in response to the host of climatological changes in our future.

One local landowner McKinley contacted felt the same way. Lloyd Griscom's family owned a number of properties in Madrid Township, including a few camps within the Orbeton Stream Linkletter parcel. He also lived in on the edge of the Orbeton property, and from his house Griscom would lead McKinley to see some of the undocumented features of the area, like the Orbeton Gorge and the trails leading to the ridges jutting from the Saddleback massif. He also introduced McKinley to Robert

Linkletter. Rather than finding a businessman whose concerns were limited to harvesting, McKinley, himself a former forest products company scientist, was pleased to find an outdoorsman who was intrigued by what McKinley was saying about the forests of Orbeton. He was happy to take McKinley out on the logging roads in his truck to show him the land. He was open to the idea that this land should be conserved.

What McKinley had in mind, based on his field work and data mining, was a different kind of large landscape conservation, one which had its genesis in the stance of Drs. Born and Davis at the Maine Mountain Conference in 1972: the mountain is as much the valley as it is the summit and ridges. It was a conscious effort

to look beyond novel features like unharvestable alpine areas or views from summits. The Orbeton Stream project was the poster child for climate change adaptation, working forest, and multi-use access for recreation.

After the publication of *An Ecological Study of the High Peaks Region of Maine's Western Mountains*, McKinley and Griscom both joined the MATLT Board. The two met with Linkletter and began to talk about a conservation easement over the property that would allow for the contin-

ued harvesting of forest products according to best practices. Future development would be strictly prohibited.

MATLT's efforts significantly raised the visibility of Maine's High Peaks, and in 2012 the land trust joined with the Trust for Public Land and Rangeley Lakes Heritage Trust to obtain funding from the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program for the Orbeton Parcel. With further assistance from the High Peaks Alliance, an organization dedicated to ensuring and enhancing public recreational access and opportunities in the Maine's High Peaks, and a variety of other partners in the region, the Orbeton Parcel was finally placed under a working forest conservation easement at the end of 2014.

Today, due to these efforts, over ten miles of spectacular terrain on the Appalachian Trail is buffered by what was once referred to as "plain vanilla forest" but is now recognized as of great economical, ecological and recreational importance. MATLT's Saddleback property and the Orbeton easement combined with the state lands on Mount Abraham, the Crockers, and the Bigelow Preserve add thousands of conserved acres to the A.T. realm, thus ensuring that the wildness, remoteness, and solitude that is at the very heart of the Appalachian Trail experience, will remain forever a part of Maine's High Peaks. ♡

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