

Savoring Summits & Stillness

by Audrey Dunn, Communications Manager

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The view from Monadnock's summit. photo © Audrey Dunn

It was July, the sun was finally shining, and I had no more excuses not to hike Mount Monadnock. As a recent transplant to the area, climbing Monadnock felt like an inevitable rite of passage. A requirement more than a desire.

When I finally traversed Pumpelly to reach the rocky, cairn-covered summit... Oh! The burn in my thighs, the incredible vistas, the sense of accomplishment! As I relaxed into the crook of two granite slabs 3,166 feet above sea level, I dreamt of scrambling up Monadnock again and again. I'd take the Dublin Trail, the White Dot Trail, the Birchtoft Trail. And then — the itch came. That overwhelming urge to “bag” every formidable peak in New Hampshire. Within days of descending Monadnock, I had purchased AMC's White Mountain Guide and the Monadnock-Sunapee Greenway Trail Guide to boot. I suddenly found myself poring over descriptions, reviews, photos, and maps on AllTrails, figuring out parking logistics for trailheads in faraway places.

But I'm no fool. As someone who's been mostly sedentary for the last seven months — inert under piles of blankets as I adjusted to New Hampshire's distinctly northern climate after my relocation from the South — I knew some training might be necessary before conquering even the gentlest of the

Presidentials. It was time to start visiting the Monadnock Region's more modest peaks.

That's how, mere days later, I found myself on Stoddard's Pitcher Mountain, sweatily foraging a bonanza of blueberries before making my descent. I bypassed the parking lot in favor of continuing on the trail, crossing Route 123 to explore a short portion of the Monadnock-Sunapee Greenway. I was weaving through scrubby forest, peeking over old stone fences to overgrown pastures, and skirting around fresh bear scat when suddenly, I found myself in a midsummer hiker's oasis — the Robinson Brook Cascades. I subconsciously slowed to a halt to admire the verdant space. The brook had opened up a magical clearing in the woods where moss carpeted the ground, the canopy provided shade and protection, a welcome coolness permeated the air, and water spilled over large boulders into cool, clear pools.

Awake, Alert, Tingling. Alive.

Without a doubt, this special place was an invitation — to slow down, to shift my focus from speed and strength to appreciating nature's beauty. And to cool off. I hadn't encountered anyone on the trail all day, so I furtively glanced around, gingerly stepped from boulder to boulder into the nearest pool, and dunked myself into the freezing water. I emerged anew: awake, alert, tingling. Alive.

As I lay on a large boulder to dry, I enjoyed the feeling of being so utterly in my body, energized yet relaxed. Stillness after movement attuned me to the present moment. The boulder warmed my back, a soft breeze brushed my skin, and a Red-eyed Vireo warbled from his nearby perch. As I closed my eyes and breathed in life-giving oxygen from the surrounding trees, the boundaries of time dissolved for just a short moment. This brook had been flowing here in 1803, when its namesake Isaac Robinson became minister of the Church of Stoddard. His wife Esther likely carried clothes from their cabin to this stream to scrub and rinse and dry them on these very boulders. How long had the brook been flowing through this landscape before that? How many people and animals had enjoyed its refreshing waters? How many generations of mosses had clung to nearby stones and fallen logs? The moment eventually passed, as all are wont to do, and I turned my attention to my human needs, staving off hunger with a crisp apple as I contentedly watched a tadpole maneuvering through the pool at my feet.

Eventually, I reshouldered my pack and headed back to my car, humbled by this meditative encounter with nature. My determination to climb high peaks — becoming strong, racing to check mountains off my list, feeling accomplished — suddenly seemed so quaintly human. The desire to move through the landscape gave way to a re-awakened urge to simply exist within it. As novelist Ursula K. Le Guin once wrote, "Achievement is smaller than men think. What is large is the sky, the earth, the sea, the soul."

Savoring the Journey

Now, don't get me wrong, I still want to tackle the famous 48, but perhaps I'll savor the journey a bit, and learn to strike a balance between exertion and ease. To remember that connecting with nature comes from stillness, and also that movement can give rise to deep quietude. That perhaps studying a sun-dappled lichen or admiring the unexpected brightness of a red eft is just as enjoyable and deeply gratifying as making that final push to the top.

As I write, I'm deciding on my afternoon activity... a summit or a ramble? Today, perhaps, I'll meander through the Harris Center woods to admire glacial erratics and small cascades, but one day in the near future, you just might find me on a triumphant ascent of Mount Moosilauke.

If you're interested in exploring nearby nature, you can find information on local trails (no peak bagging required) at harriscenter.org/trails. 🐾

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