

'The Natural History Tour is going to take you away ... '

By LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, August 9, 2002

Late this spring, a museum so new that it doesn't yet have a home — the Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks, soon to be built in Tupper Lake — came out with an eight-page, color, glossy flier.

We immediately dubbed it "The Natural History Tour."

The brochure gave North Country visitors descriptions of 38 spots scattered across the Adirondack Park where they could experience the area's special geological and ecological history for themselves.

I decided to drop in on a couple of the tour stops myself last Thursday. The places I chose were two very different sites: the Silver Lake Bog Preserve, near Au Sable Forks, and Poke-O-Moonshine, south of Keeseville.

Silver Lake Bog

My trip to Silver Lake started out as all such treks should start: I got lost.

I set out last Thursday morning to go from Lake Placid through Saranac Lake to another wetland site in Franklin County, but the directions in the Natural History Tour brochure were so general that I couldn't find it. I had to continue on to my next site: Silver Lake Bog.

The cutoff from Route 3 in Franklin County to Union Falls, the nearest community to Silver Lake, is a no-lane blacktop road through a desolate forest. The road was once the main turnpike from Port Kent to Hopkinton, but that was back in the 1830s, and the road doesn't look like it's seen much action since then.

As soon as I crossed the Clinton County line, however, the desolate forest gave way immediately to a bright, open backwoods resort community, Union Falls, named for the small, picturesque, antique hydroelectric dam at the outlet of Union Falls Pond into the Saranac River.

The turnoff to the Silver Lake Camp Preserve, my destination, was a half dozen miles down the road. Signs told me how far it would be, and they pointed the way off county Route 4 at the Hawkeye Road to the trailhead, 0.2 miles down the dusty dirt road on the right. Parking is available at the trailhead for up to five cars.

No signs, however, mark the way to the preserve from Au Sable Forks, in the opposite direction, which is actually the way most visitors come to the Silver Lake Bog. From Au Sable, county Route 1 leads to the Douglas Beach House on the left, headquarters to a prominent commercial campground at the head of Silver Lake. Just beyond, a two-story white frame house stands watch over a fork in the road; the left branch leads in 1.1 miles to the Hawkeye Road, where visitors should turn left to the trailhead.

The Silver Lake Camp Preserve belongs to the Adirondack Nature Conservancy, which maintains the exquisite half-mile boardwalk trail through the Silver Lake Bog which ends where the Bluff Trail begins, a rocky, sometimes wet three-quarter-mile path climbing 200 feet in elevation to a rise overlooking Silver Lake.

I was there to check out the boardwalk through the bog, nearly unique in the Adirondacks on two counts: It's one of only a very, very few backwoods trails that are wheelchair-accessible, and

it's also one of the rare walks through a wetland preserve in an area best known for its rocky High Peaks.

The Silver Lake Bog trail does not attract a high volume of visitors. If you go, you're likely to have a very quiet, very solitary experience of the environment there. Fewer than 400 people logged in at the trailhead register last month, an average of 14 visitors a day, more than two-thirds of whom came from New York state.

Not another soul was there when I logged in last Thursday, just before noon, picking up the last copy of the interpretive brochure that walks visitors through the 15 stops along the bog boardwalk.

My immediate and overwhelming impression upon entering the bog was of just how green a place can actually be — it has to be one of the most brilliantly green spots I have ever visited anywhere, and that's no exaggeration. The floor of the bog is covered with deep, thick, spongy sphagnum moss. The sturdy, attractive boardwalk angling through it punctuates that green with a slender brown line meandering off into the distance.

At one of the stops — a bench placed on the end of an arm extended out from the main boardwalk trail — I could look into the shallows of a small, still pond with a bottom black as night, so dark I half expected to see stars shining from the thick mud, the reflections of trees darkly rising around its perimeter.

Everywhere along the boardwalk I could hear the calls of birds, crying back and forth through the bog. Some of the birdcalls were amazingly articulate; others were annoyingly monotonous, just endless “scree, scree, scree”ching, like a squeaky hinge on a door blowing back and forth eternally in the wind.

Besides the many birds, the bog is home to several mammals and amphibians, but the animal-life form that was most evident last Thursday was the Adirondack mosquito — it was, after all, a bog, the perfect breeding ground for the little bloodsucking beasts.

Overall, my visit to the Silver Lake Bog boardwalk was a wonderfully serene hour, and a great way to start a road trip leading on to a much more active stop: the trail up Poke-O-Moonshine to one of the last remaining fire towers in the Adirondack Mountains.

Poke-O-Moonshine

You'll find the trailhead to Poke-O-Moonshine, elevation 2,180 feet above sea level, at a state campground on Route 9 a ways south of Keeseville — 3.0 miles south of Exit 33 off the Northway, to be precise. There is a \$3 day-use parking fee at the campground; the only way to avoid the fee is to park a quarter-mile or so away along the highway.

The name of Poke-O-Moonshine is said to derive from two Algonquin Indian words, “pohqui” (broken) and “moosie” (smooth), referring to the smooth, bare rock of the mountain's summit and the broken rocks of the impressive 1,000-foot-high cliff on the east side, famous among rock climbers.

It wasn't to climb the sheer rock face of Poke-O-Moonshine that I went to the mountain last Thursday afternoon, however. I went for the relatively short, 1.2-mile hike up a guided nature trail to one of the old towers used for almost 90 years to spot Adirondack forest fires.

Once there were nearly 70 such towers scattered throughout the Adirondack and Catskill mountains. Today, just five remain in the Catskills, and 23 more still stand in the Adirondacks, some of them living on borrowed time.

The majestic fire tower rising atop Poke-O-Moonshine, however, is safe, thanks to the Friends of Poke-O-Moonshine, a coalition of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, the Adirondack Mountain Club, Chesterfield township and Adirondack Architectural Heritage.

The Friends have also produced an interpretive brochure describing 11 stops along the trail up Poke-O-Moonshine, each highlighting a different aspect of the mountain's terrain, its plant and animal life, and the weather affecting them all. Though these brochures are supposed to be available at the trailhead registry box, I had to track down a ranger in the campground to get my copy — the box was empty.

As I paid my parking fee, the suddenly overcast sky started spitting a few scattered drops of rain. The ranger who was taking my cash looked up and said, "Anh — it'll pass in a minute. There wasn't any rain forecast for today."

I drove my truck down to the southern end of the campground, where the trailhead stood, taking along what I thought was a light, waterproof shell, just in case, as I started up the trail.

I was soon to discover, however, that "waterproof" is a relative term.

A marker at the trailhead tells you that the path to the summit is 1.2 miles long. It does not tell you, however, that those 1.2 miles are mostly straight up, with nearly no switchbacks whatsoever. The trail climbs nearly a quarter mile in elevation before it delivers you to the bare rock of the summit.

The trail marker also neglects to tell you that, if it starts to rain, the rocky path is going to turn into a rushing mountain stream — and that's exactly what it did. By the time I'd reached the third interpretive stop on the nature trail, the few raindrops that had been falling at the start of my climb had intensified into a full-blown mountain thunderstorm.

I took shelter in a small cave that had been left when a big chunk of rock had fallen away from the sheer cliff face a few feet off the path. As the rain intensified, I was joined in my cave by several guests. The first of them was big, black, very friendly, very wet dog, one of two canine companions to the volunteer who had been working on the restoration of the fire tower at the mountain's top.

The second group of visitors was a young family, the Taylors, visiting the North Country from Cleveland. Though the rain was relatively warm, their three young children were shivering cold (youngsters lose body heat more quickly than adults), and they had not brought any protective gear with them.

As the rain lightened up, we could see the mountains across the way emerge from the haze. The Taylors decided that was their chance to flee Poke-O-Moonshine for the shelter of their car. I took it as my cue to resume the climb up the mountain.

For the next half mile, my climb consisted of a series of hops from rock to rock up the mountain stream created by the summer storm.

Finally I reached a saddle near the mountain's top, where the stone chimney and foundation of the fire watcher's old 1932 cabin still stood, rising like an archaeological ghost from the mist.

The remaining 0.4 miles of the trail to the summit were relatively level and much easier to negotiate.

A few hundred yards up the path, off to the left, was the first spot where I could get a view of the High Peaks to the west and southwest, Whiteface rising spectrally about 14 miles away, the slides of Giant visible to the south.

But nowhere was there a fire tower to be seen — not until I was almost upon it. Then, suddenly, just a minute or two before I turned the final corner in the trail, I saw the tower cabin apparently suspended in mid-air above the forest.

I hurried along and, bam, there it was, the tower itself, rising from the sheer rock of the Poke-O-Moonshine summit — and there, too, laid out before me, was the whole Adirondack world, Lake

Champlain to the east, Butternut Pond and Augur Lake to the north toward Keeseville, and all the mountains one could imagine marching off into the western distance through the clouds.

Climbing the sturdy, solid iron fire tower, the view was even more stupendous, completely unobstructed by anything. I was soaked to the bone, but supremely satisfied. The climb was very, very well worth the trouble — the steep path, the lightning, the torrential rain, the huddling cave, the stream skipping, all of it.

More stops on the Natural History Tour

The Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks highlighted 38 sites throughout the Adirondack Park in its eight-page publication on “Roadside Ecology: Easily Accessible Natural History Attractions in the Adirondacks.” Besides the two sites visited by our reporter, here are a few more stops in Essex County and just over the border in southern Clinton County.

Wilmington

✿ The *Wilmington Notch* is a narrow V cut by the Au Sable River through the mountains between Lake Placid on Keeseville. A former horse-and-wagon trail through the Notch has become state Route 86, the main road leading from Montreal to the Olympic Village. A section of broken rock on the Notch’s northeastern face, perched high over the sometimes turbulent river waters, has been the home of peregrine falcons.

✿ *Whiteface Veterans Memorial Highway* was built in the early 1930s to honor those who died in World War I. This extraordinary mountain road winds up Whiteface Mountain to a parking lot near the peak, where visitors can take either an elevator or a staircase cut in stone to the summit. Among the Adirondack’s 46 High Peaks, Whiteface best illustrates the power of ice to sculpt rock by forming ridges and amphitheaters known as “cirques.” Landslides from years passed exposed the rock surface of the mountain — hence its name. As visitors approach the summit, they will notice the stunted forest that is characteristic of a timberline. This forest, called “krummholz,” retreats before the alpine summit is reached. To get there from Lake Placid, take a left on Route 431 from Route 86 in Wilmington hamlet. The Memorial Highway starts a few miles up the mountain at a toll house.

Au Sable Forks/Keeseville

✿ The *Clintonville Pine Barrens* is another Nature Conservancy preserve. The pitch pine-heath barrens is one of the best examples of a fire-dependent natural community. Many of the plant species here actually need fire in order to reproduce or survive competition from non-fire-adapted species. To get there from Au Sable Forks, take Golf Course Road to Dry Bridge Road. Turn right. Go 0.3 miles to Buck Hill Road (there’s no sign, so watch your odometer). Turn left. The trailhead is 0.5 miles on your left.

✿ The *Au Sable Marsh Wildlife Management Area* consists of 580 acres on Lake Champlain off Route 9 at the southern end of Clinton County just north of Port Kent. The fertile delta at the Au Sable River’s mouth is ideal for a rich variety of plant and animal life, and the marsh is considered a top-notch “birding” site. To get there, follow the signs from Route 9 to the Au Sable Point Campsite. At 0.3 miles there is a handicap-access boardwalk and viewing area.

Westport

✿ *Coon Mountain*, another site owned by the Nature Conservancy, is famous for its mysterious, craggy interior with rocky outcrops and hemlock forests. A nature-trail guide available at the trailhead tells the story of this unique area as you climb to the rocky summit for great views. To get

there from Westport, take Lake Shore Road north 3 miles. Take the first left, onto Halds Road. The trailhead is 0.75 miles, and the trail itself is 2 miles round trip.

✿ Nearby is the *Webb-Royce Swamp*, a 305-acre state preserve that local birders call “the magic triangle,” referring to the three roadways that encircle it: Cross, Clark and Lake Shore roads. Visitors can walk an easy half-mile hike to the cattails at the edge of the marsh. Some birds that may be seen are egrets, black-crowned night herons, blue-winged teals and Virginia rails. There were once at least 20 great blue heron nests in the Webb-Royce, but since a 1994 DEC decision allowing trapping, the loss of beavers (and their dams) has led to a shrinking of the swamp. To get there from Westport, take Lake Shore Road 5.1 miles to Cross Road.

Keene

✿ The upper and lower *Cascade Lakes* are twins that lie in a fault zone carved out by glaciers. The lakes are named for a waterfall that plummets down a cleft from the mountain towering above them. Mineral deposits of blue calcite and red garnet can be found among the debris at the base of the rocky slope on the far side of the lakes. To get there, take Route 73 between Lake Placid and Keene. The lakes are halfway between the two communities on the south side of this east-west road.

FOR A COPY of the “*Roadside Ecology*” brochure, call the Natural History Museum of the Adirondacks at 359-2533, or visit the NHMA Web site at adknature.org.