

Happily Dazzled

It was good to sleep on the ground again. Good to hear a moose crashing through the underbrush behind the tent at 5 a.m., when we surprised each other in the dim light. It was good to find a place with elbow room to spare. And it was particularly pleasing to discover a bevy of native brook trout residing at the base of noisy, cascading falls in a magical glen where I half expected to spot a fairy napping under a toadstool.

Perhaps best of all, it was good to return to a wilderness campsite and discover how little had changed in 30 years, which is the last time we camped in Baxter State Park, the 210,000-acre wilderness in northern Maine. There is still no Wi-Fi, no cellphone service, no running water, no flush toilets and no electricity at Baxter. Generators are not allowed. No ice, soda or food is sold. There are plenty of mosquitoes and deer flies.

It's the preconnected, slow-paced, analog world reconstituted. Former Maine Gov. Percival P. Baxter, who was instrumental in creating the park, made it his life's "magnificent obsession," and 50 years after his death, scores of outdoor folks are glad for his focused passion.

What Baxter does offer is becoming increasingly difficult to locate in today's world. "It reminded me of the way things used to be," said my wife, Patty. "Back when I was younger and there weren't as many people everywhere."

Patty can be forgiven. She grew up hiking the Sierra Nevada in California, whose population has increased by about 40 percent since she was a kid.

At Baxter, you can rent a canoe for \$1 an hour. No waiver to sign; just put the buck through a slot in the ranger's door. And the water in Howe Brook, one of the coldest streams in the park, will take your breath away.

The haunting wail and maniacal laughter of a pair of nesting loons echoed across the lake at twilight and dawn. They sing of wild places and are a reminder that the world is still full of things beyond our grasp. "Music is, to me, proof of the existence of God," said the writer Kurt Vonnegut. "It is so extraordinarily full of magic."

The voices of the loons are but one reflection of the ethereal mysteries that wilderness conjures.

Time slows and you slow. You lose track of the day of the week, the hour of the day. You tell time by your stomach and by watching the sun slip across the sky. At night, you sit around a campfire and sip a couple of fingers of rum or Scotch as the grandkids discover the many ways a marshmallow will burst into flames.

There is the full-body fatigue that comes from hiking and scrambling

and climbing on a hot day, swatting deer flies, smashing mosquitoes, sweaty and hungry. You crawl into your sleeping bag and drift off listening to the night sounds and the wind in the trees.

The dog days of July are not the best time to fly-fish for trout in Maine. A stocky ranger at the park entrance who had a few years on him considered my question about where to fish for a moment and recollected a stream with a series of falls that we could reach from a trailhead a couple of miles outside of camp. The water should be cold enough, he said, and it used to hold fish. That's all I needed. We were there the next morning.

Fishing for these diminutive wild critters carries me back more than 50 years to a red farmhouse in the Connecticut countryside, where we would visit relatives for Thanksgiving. Uncle John was a gentle, soft-spoken man who hunted pheasant and caught trout in the spring-fed stream that ran behind his house.

I learned to drift a worm in a pool below a small waterfall, where tiny native brook trout darted out and snatched the wiggler as quickly as an illusionist pulls a coin from behind a child's ear. It was pure magic then and now.

I thought of the Thanksgiving stream this summer as I drifted a nymph through a pool at the base of that series of falls in the Maine woods — and *voilà*, like magic, a brook trout shot from the shadows of a boulder to take the fly.

Native brookies are barometers of cold, clean waters and wild places, reason enough to celebrate their existence without affixing a price tag.

"The most solid piece of scientific truth I know is that we are profoundly ignorant about nature," wrote Lewis Thomas, the physician, poet and essayist. In another work, Thomas, who won three national book awards, observed: "Statistically, the probability of any one of us being here is so small that the mere fact of our existence should keep us all in a state of contented dazzlement."

The best advice is often not to overthink everything. "Just shut up and cast," a friend used to say.

With nature, wilderness, the sea, a tiny trout or a blue marlin, being dazzled is enough.