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One New England Thread: An 800-Mile Bike and Kayak Trip through the Northeast Avoids Automobiles

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One New England Thread

*An 800-mile bike and kayak trip through
the Northeast avoids automobiles*

Tom Fagin



Biking through Fire

The first beads of sweat consolidated beneath my helmet. It was 9 A.M., and heat squiggles were already rising off the pavement. My bicycle—loaded with tent, sleeping bag, stove, and clothes—felt slow and unsteady as I turned the pedals over. I glanced to my left where two mallards dabbled in soupy water at the head of the Mystic River estuary. I hoped to be paddling those waters, some weeks later, returning from the journey I was starting now.

More than 300 miles to the north, a sea kayak waited at the family cabin by the edge of a lake in western Maine. My goal over the next few days was to trace a winding line from my starting point in Old Mystic, Connecticut, get to the kayak, and then start paddling, via lakes, river, and sea, back to the duck-filled waters below my apartment. Altogether, the loop would trace 800 miles of New England roads and water. Even after months of planning, however, I still had no idea how all the pieces would fit together. I would complete this loop beneath the relentless sun of what I call Our Summer of Climate Change 2022, navigating a parched landscape of boiling pavement, wilting leaves, and shallow rivers. This was not the kind of adventure that would appeal to most people.

I traveled alone.

Well, almost alone.

The whirr of bike chain betrayed another cyclist closing on my six. I looked back to see a man who looked to be in his 80s, flush with momentum from the intersection he had just blown through, closing in. I gritted my teeth. I knew I was about to get passed. Sure enough, in a few moments, the guy pulled up alongside.

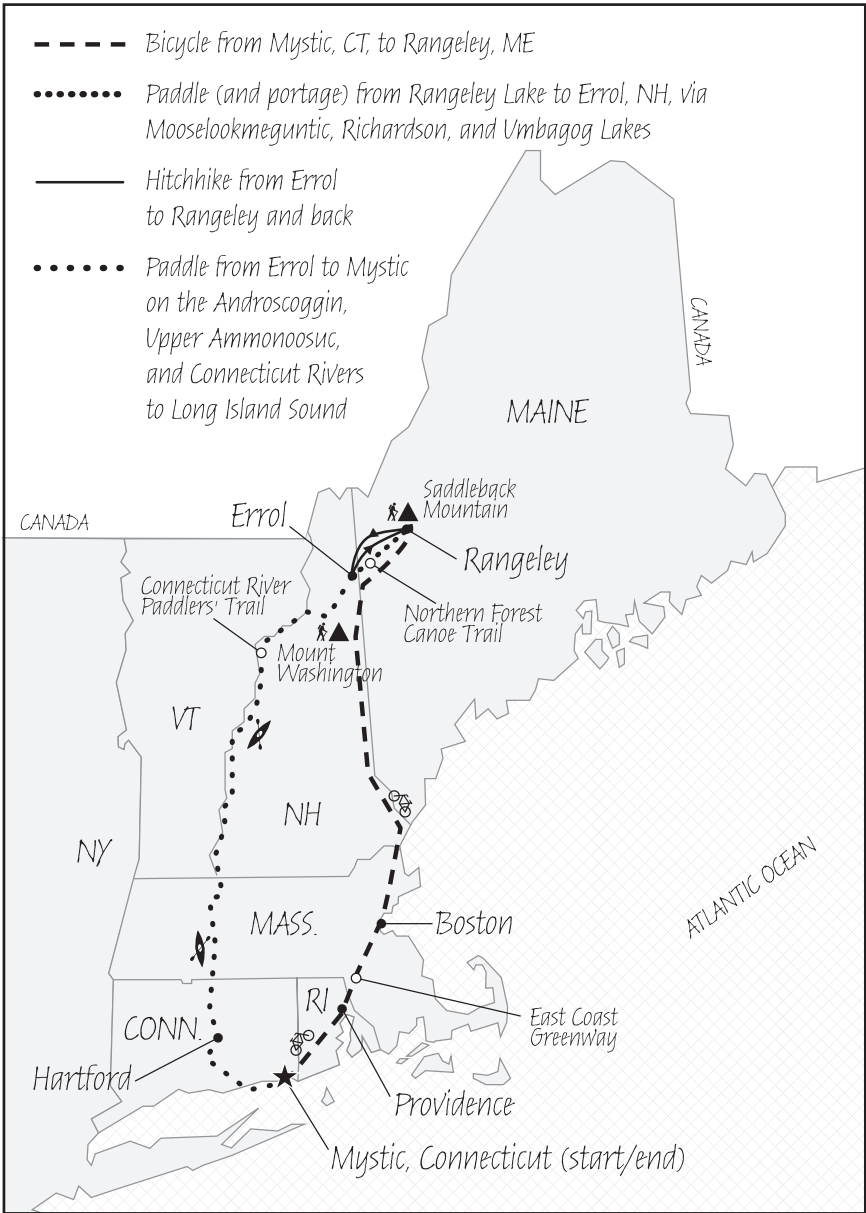
“I don’t want to ruin your day,” he started. “But I’m old, and out of shape, and overweight, and I’m beating you.”

I sighed, as the man pulled ahead, and kept my 34-year-old legs turning over.

It was remarkable how soon after I started that I found myself on back roads that were utterly unfamiliar.

A set of earbuds beamed instructions from my phone’s Google Maps app. This (sometimes) reliable narrator guided me to a paved bike path south of Providence. I was following the East Coast Greenway, a bicycle and pedestrian route that connects the Florida Keys and northern Maine. This section was flat and lovely pedaling on a former railbed. I reached the Providence

Tom Fagin launches his kayak into calm and cool Connecticut River waters, knowing conditions will soon change. TOM FAGIN



The author started in Mystic, Connecticut, and biked north to Rangeley, Maine, stopping along the way to climb Mount Washington in New Hampshire. From Rangeley, he hiked Saddleback Mountain then kayaked lakes and tributaries to reach the Connecticut River, which eventually took him back home. ABIGAIL COYLE/AMC

downtown in the middle of rush hour. Traffic was locked bumper to bumper beneath the blazing sun. I pedaled in between the parked and moving automobiles, praying that no one swung a door open without looking. The fact that I was constantly wiping sweat from my eyes did not make navigation any easier.

I made the biggest navigational decision of the trip just north of Providence, where I stopped to look at the Blackstone River and Slater Mill. In 1790 this river had powered the first hydro-powered textile mill in the United States and kickstarted the Industrial Revolution on the East Coast.

I stopped here to do reconnaissance for the kayaking segment of the trip. The Blackstone River was a key part of the original water route I'd planned between Maine and Connecticut. The plan had included both sea and river, connecting inland water routes as a way of avoiding Cape Cod. Throughout the hours of planning, it occurred to me that there were plenty of details that I simply couldn't plan for until I saw them with my own eyes.

Looking at the Blackstone now, I saw dams I hadn't planned for sealed off by walls, obstacles with no obvious path around. My earlier doubts had been confirmed. I had a fallback plan however, which would cut about 100 miles off the trip by way of a portage over to the Connecticut River.

The consequence of this first day changeup, was, of course, that I would have to alter almost the entire kayak trip. It was a relief to think that I had bought myself some more time to finish, but I also felt anxious about the dearth of information that I had about the new route. It had taken weeks for me to find, print, laminate, and organize my original trip route. Now, I would need to get a whole new set of information, somehow, while spending my days on the move, pushing my body to its limits.

One consolation, however, was that it had been a fruitful day of pedaling. I had covered 80 miles that day, from my starting point in Old Mystic. In Foxborough, Massachusetts, I paid \$50 for the right to lie down on a small dirt patch, an island in a sea of RVs.

BIKING INTO BOSTON THE NEXT DAY MEANT GOING THROUGH A WITCH'S STEW of good, bad, and flat-out dangerous riding conditions. Convenient bike lanes narrowed to menacing pinch points when double-parked vehicles forced me out into traffic. Once again, the tables were tilted in favor of the autos. The bicyclists and scooter riders who thrived were the ones who broke rules. I took my cues from a lanky rider who took turns pulling from his e-cig and dashing out into intersections the moment before the walk signal light went on.

North of the city, I found myself baking in a treeless strip of malls where I navigated the microscopic margin between a concrete curb and a deluge of vehicles pressed bumper to bumper. There was so much traffic, and so little shoulder, that I ended up going rogue and riding the sidewalk. At least I didn't see any pedestrians I could inconvenience. The treeless noisescape, roiling beneath the throttling heat, was far from the stuff of relaxing walks.

Eventually, I too decided that I needed to quit the roadside. I slept in a shaded clearing near a building's septic outfall. When I started pedaling again, the shadows were finally stretched over the left half the road, but still not close enough to cover me. Having already broken the sidewalk rule, it was easy to rationalize cycling on the wrong side of the road. I would be pushing hard for the next hours, and there was no way to do this in the full sun. The closest available campsite turned out to be in southern New Hampshire, which meant that I would have to keep pushing hard to make it before the gate closed at 8 P.M.

My ambitious new deadline ran into questionable navigation from Google, which sent me up a series of punishing hills, and then forced me to reroute when I arrived at a road that no longer existed.

Pink-clad protestors and honking vehicles were gathered in downtown Exeter. There was no time to figure out what was happening, at least not until I rolled into camp fifteen minutes before the deadline. I was exhausted to the core of my being. I set up my tent and plugged my phone into an outlet (meant for RVs) next to a picnic table. A text from a politician popped up announcing that the Supreme Court had overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

Barely 48 hours into my trip, I already felt like a responsibility dodger. Civilization was turning upside down while I was out on a self-gratifying tour. The guilt lingered, but my mind stayed occupied with squaring camp and organizing for the next day. Tomorrow would be hot, and I needed to move early.

Yet sleep did not come easy.

ALL THAT TIME THAT I HAD SPENT PLANNING THE TRIP—HAD IT BEEN WORTH it? Today had shown that world events were marching on without me, and I felt guilty for my disconnection. I felt guilty for the hours that I spent planning the trip that could have gone into résumé building or career hunting as I worked to leverage the year's substitute teaching work into the stability of a full-time English teacher job. My desire to spend a month apart from everything felt selfish. Moreover, I knew that the way I chose to do it would be difficult for most to understand.

For years, I have been a proponent of an ethic that I call the doorstep adventure. When I go on a doorstep adventure, I avoid flying, driving, or other climate-harming forms of transportation. From my doorstep to the destination and back, I rely on my own power. Such adventures tend to be far longer than simply driving to a destination, and it takes a long time to do something truly big.

This year, however, I was constrained by the fact that I needed to reach a friend's wedding by the end of July. This effectively split my summer travel time in half. To move faster, I decided to compromise the doorstep adventure ethic and allow some automotive assistance. My family was already going on a trip to our cabin in Rangeley, Maine, so I prevailed on them to make the trip with my 16-foot sea kayak on their car roof. They would drop it off at the cabin, where I would swap my bike pedals for a kayak paddle and finish the journey going south. Of course, this meant that I would have to leave a bike in Maine, but I had also persuaded them to pick this up for me on one of their later trips.

These steps may have seen absurdly (unnecessarily?) complicated, to most. After all, I had literally made a drastic change to the itinerary on day one. And yet, put together, these steps made for a personal challenge that fulfilled my need for a bold adventure, while respecting my commitment to travel modestly, and to burn less fuel in a world that was getting hotter all the time.

AS THE SUN ROSE THE NEXT DAY, I WILTED. I THEN MADE THE FATEFUL DECISION to skip a convenience store because I had decided that I needed to push for another ten minutes to “earn” my break. I had barely a quarter of a bottle of water left. But there was no other store for the next two hours. I pedaled over sunny hills, parched and near delirium. I fantasized about cold Gatorade, but every storefront offered only antiques and novelty woodcarvings. Too embarrassed to ask anyone for a faucet, I decided it was a good idea to dry myself out by spending the next hours climbing hills in the heat of the day.

I saw gray and almost toppled when I stopped alongside a highway margin to check directions. I finally pulled up at an ice cream stand and ordered vegan French vanilla.

“Do you all have a faucet I can use?” I croaked to the woman behind the counter.

“We don't allow customers to use the faucet,” she told me sweetly, “but you can buy our bottled water.”

I grudgingly paid six bucks for two bottles—about half the water I needed.

Tourist summer was going strong by the time I reached Conway, New Hampshire, where I pedaled tentatively alongside thick traffic. I stopped in Jackson, where I bought a preposterous amount of food, and then turned my handlebars eastward. The sun went down, and I flicked on a headlight on my handlebars.

As I climbed the dark road toward Mount Washington, I was already ready for a new change in the itinerary. My decision to climb New Hampshire's highest mountain had been a half-baked idea that had been thrown onto the "maybe" list before this adventure. Until 12 hours ago, I'd doubted that I would actually do it. Yet, my earlier decision to cut out the Maine coast from the journey had me hungry to do something ambitious.

Now I was cranking up the steep grade to the Pinkham Notch trailhead in the dark, tired but exhilarated.

It was mercifully cool when I pitched my tent in a cluster of beech trees, about a mile off the trailhead.

THE NEXT DAY'S CLIMB UP WASHINGTON WAS EXUBERANT FOR ME, NOT ONLY because it was a literal 6,288-foot-high point, over the bold topography of northern New Hampshire, but because of the unique way I had arrived. I had been up this mountain many times since childhood, yet this was the first time I had reached the summit as part of an unbroken chain from my home. Scrambling over the rock pile and through the krummholz pines felt more joyous to me than before, the alpine air doubly intoxicating.

Of course, I was not the only one here as part of a longer journey. I shared the white-blazed path to the summit with Appalachian Trail hikers. They were seasoned by months of sun and trails and walking with deliberate strides, honed over the miles since they started from Georgia. A far larger stream of humanity siphoned off from the Mount Washington Auto Road, including a number of French-speaking, Quebecois bikers in leather jackets. Another Mount Washington first for me was the queue of selfie-takers at the summit, at least 50 deep. I nearly skipped the line out of principal, but eventually decided I too wanted my vanity shot and fell in line. It took about twenty minutes all together.

Descending Tuckerman Ravine, I enjoyed the cold air blowing down off the snowfields, not yet melted in the shadow of the glacial bowl. The sunlit alpine world was abloom, and full of smiling, laughing people—even a single determined skier, who made the best possible use of a single 100-yard patch of crusty snow.

By the time I descended to the trailhead, the air was baking. I took a freezing swim in the snowmelt of the Ellis River and a short nap in the shade. Finally, I got back on my bike and resumed the ride toward Rangeley. I lost another thousand feet of elevation, rolling toward Gorham where the temperature there was in the 90s. I desperately wanted to rest, but sweated out another couple miles to the city of Berlin. I bitterly regretted not spending more time on Mount Washington, where it was cool. Instead, I settled for a Dunkin' Donuts where I could enjoy food and air conditioning, if not the stunning views of Tuckerman Ravine. I carefully watched the bank thermometer just outside the window. Finally, when rusty sunset light fell over the town, the thermometer finally dropped to 89 degrees. Time to move.

Beyond city limits, the roadside trees made a near unbroken wall on my left side; the Androscoggin River ran on my right. The riding was flat and fast. Tired as I was, I made ground. Heavy rain was forecast late next morning, but if I got close enough to Rangeley, I could avoid, or at least minimize, the time biking in the downpour. In the cool night air, I felt as though I could go forever.

It was not just the cool that motivated me. There was something else, something almost ineffable. Balsam! It had been years since I had breathed in this perfume of the North Woods. Now, I suffused my lungs with it and the rush of memory—a feeling of being in my home away from home. When I was a kid, this smell made me feel I had stepped outside of ordinary life into enchantment, a place where new sensations were possible. Now, I found my old exuberance sweeping through the fading line of the Androscoggin River, the darkening sky, the first stars, and the wavering profile of pines. It was a feeling of love.

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE THE PERSISTENT WHINE OF TINY WINGS TO BRING ME back to earth. Mosquitoes crawled over my tent netting, thrusting their proboscises in through the holes, straining for exposed flesh.

The next morning, anytime I exposed my hand to pack my gear, mosquitoes would cover it and I'd slap. The river was so shallow that I could hardly get my bottle below the surface. I had to use a tiny measuring cup to transfer water into it: pouring and swatting, pouring and swatting. The mosquitoes certainly weren't interested in letting me purify the water in peace, so I completed the task on the move, working for 30 seconds on one task, and then pedaling down the road, getting back to work, and then biking again when my tormentors closed on me again.

Fixated on covering ground before the rain started, I didn't look to investigate a large crash in the woods to my right. But a few moments later I decided it was worth my precious time to turn the bike around and make a quick survey. An enormous cow moose burst out of the trees and clattered across the road. As soon as her hooves were in the pliable mud, she regained her confidence and crashed back into the forests with mighty bounds.

The rain began. I pedaled the steepest climbs in a downpour. I raved at them in a violent Irish brogue.

"Ye've got fight, but yer no match for my steely quads! I'll make victim of ye yet!"

I whooped relief when I finally recognized a small intersection about ten miles south of Rangeley. I was back in known territory.

Saddleback

The dirt road approaching my family's cabin was soaked down to tire-grabbing slush. I could barely push myself up the last hill. I finally rattled down the other side and turned into the cabin driveway. I took a quick moment to check that my kayak was in place and intact, then lurched up the steps to the door. Numb fingers were barely able to get the key into the lock. I stumbled into the unheated interior, shivering wildly.

After a boiling shower, I rummaged through closets, draped myself in ancient wool sweaters and downed gallons of hot tea.

From the window, I saw Rangeley Lake, gray and wave tossed. Across the water rose the dark flanks of 4,120-foot-high Saddleback Mountain. Climbing it would be the final item on my itinerary before I turned home.

I had slept in that morning, and now, at 9 A.M., the sun punished my indolence. I quickly drained the two bottles of water I had filled at the cabin and would need to refill them at mountain streams.

I climbed my family's favorite route through a mountainside resort, intersecting the Appalachian Trail on the ridge. The landscape fell away into a tapestry of folds and ridges, blue shadows of clouds, lakes in all directions. The summit ridge was busy with AT thru-hikers. I tapped the summit sign, still standing since my first visit at age 6. As I had on Mount Washington, I discerned a new layer of meaning because I had gotten here without a car.

Several thru-hikers were heading northbound, having started in Georgia back in February. They said they had started during the winter to escape "the bubble," the glut of hikers starting in the South. I imagined a gelatinous pink

sphere, like bubble gum, rolling up the mountains. The slow movers would get stuck. For this moment, however, the presence of other people gave me pleasure. I thought on the words of author Annie Murphy Paul, who writes that the sensation of awe tends to bring people together, even spur generosity. The sweep of the mountain landscape sparked awe in my heart, and thus, I took uncommon delight in speaking to fellow travelers about the beauty of the day, and the exhilaration of adventure.

I saw the northern lakes strung out before me in a necklace. In the days ahead, I would paddle through those blue jewels and begin some of the hardest days of my journey.

On the Water

I felt unease as soon as I sat down. My familiar kayak, a 16-foot fiberglass boat, was far lower in Rangeley Lake than I had expected it to be, and it turned awkwardly. I was also slower and less stable in the water than I usually was. A set of wheels mounted in the back made the boat extra unstable. It seemed unbelievable that I would eventually be taking this clumsy (and very breakable) boat out on whitewater later in the trip.

I paddled 1.5 miles on Rangeley Lake, then portaged 1 mile to Mooselookmeguntic Lake on Carry Road.

In all the years I'd been to Rangeley, I'd never thought about where "Carry Road" got its name. It had been named for travelers hauling their boats between the two lakes. Now, it was my turn. Fortunately, my homemade kayak trailer spared me the agony of actually hauling the boat on my shoulder. Nonetheless, I soon realized that my handmade wheels were going to cause me all kinds of grief on this trip. The boat swung wildly, the wheels went out of alignment, and—even more alarming—the metal axle was eating into the plastic. Every pothole in the road sent me into mortal fear that the entire rig would break apart.

I finally made the boat launch at Mooselookmeguntic Lake. Approximately eight miles long from north to south, the lake offered sweeping views of mountain ridges. I also noticed dark clouds gathering to the north and the southwest. Already it was close to 7 P.M., and I still had four and a half miles to cover to reach my campsite. I had no desire to try to look for it in the dark.

I began the southward paddle, looking over my shoulder now and then at the burgeoning clouds to the north. Mount Washington and the Saddleback offered a beautiful view for a while, but then they disappeared behind a veil of

rain. It was coming my way. I paddled harder. Suddenly, a wind from the west washed over my right side. The surface whipped into whitecaps. Fast-moving waves broke across the deck, soaking me to the chest. I found myself bracing with the paddle and surfing when I could.

I took a couple of fast rides before I emerged into the shelter of Students Island. The skies were near dark, lit with occasional streaks of lightning. The mountain valley reverberated with thunder. Rain would come soon. I realized that my campsite was on the other side of the island, so I needed to get back out and face the waves for another quarter-mile.

I finally landed at the campsite and threw my tent up double speed, tying it between two picnic tables for stability. I unzipped the tent and rolled inside, just as the first hard drops began to lash the fabric. I peeled my wet clothes off and pulled on the green wool sweater I'd brought from the cabin. It was the best feeling in the world.

THE NEXT DAY STARTED COLD. THE RAIN WAS GONE, BUT THE FIERCE WESTERLY wind remained and continued to push against my boat as I paddled toward the portage to Richardson Lake. The heat of the day supercharged the wind tunnels and forced me to hug close to shore in shallow waters.

The real suffering, however, began with the portage between Richardson Lake and Umbagog Lake. The Swift River connects these bodies of water, but it was too shallow and turbulent to attempt in the sea kayak. Instead, I would have to portage 4.2 miles on an all-terrain road. (Once again, this route was named Carry Road, but the going here was far rougher than the earlier section between Rangeley and Mooselookmeguntic Lakes.) I decided to portage a shorter distance to an opening called Pond in the River so that I could get a break from hauling the boat. This would knock my portage distance down to about three miles.

Soon I began to realize my worst fears about the portage. The kayak cart creaked and bucked its protest as I rolled it over ruts and around rocks. Each impact made me wince. If the cart gave out, I would be stuck carrying the kayak and everything that came with it on my aching shoulder. As it was, the terrain often made it necessary to unstrap the kayak and leapfrog gear, effectively tripling my total distance. The three-mile haul could easily become a nine-mile death march if the cart gave out entirely. Sweat poured down my face, and my arm and back muscles screamed. Deerflies and mosquitoes descended from the humid air to lap my blood while I stooped to tighten and retighten the trolley's fickle wing nuts. I noticed

that the threaded rod was continuing its fearsome gouge out through the center of the trolley wheel. I wondered which would break first, the trolley or me.

When I reached Pond in the River, it was a relief to push the boat back into the water, where a swift wind banished my insect tormentors. There I saw the rusted remains of an ancient tugboat that had been in place since the 1950s. The boat marked the spot where I would have to reenter the woods.

The entire portage trail used to be part of the larger trail built between the lakes; now it followed the route of the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, the 740-mile route between Old Forge, New York, and Fort Kent, Maine. A laminated map from the Northern Forest Canoe Trail organization provided a helpful navigation tool that I continued to rely on until I reached the Connecticut River.

Once I got my boat back on wheels, I prayed that the second part of the portage to Umbagog Lake would get easier. No such luck. The insects were ready and waiting, of course. The trail was impossible to wheel for the first half-mile, although there was enough moss that I was able to slide the kayak for a time. Farther down the road lay rocks, ditches, and other obstacles that forced me to leapfrog gear. The boat swayed more and more erratically as the integrity of the cart deteriorated. Finally, about a half-mile from the put-in at Umbagog Lake, the threaded rod finally stabbed through the wheel. The cart was toast.

I would have to slide and carry the boat the rest of the way to water. It was close to evening by the time I got there. I paddled dispiritedly toward the island where I'd reserved my camp. I'd survived day two of the kayak journey.

The question was whether I could make it any farther.

From within the tent, my tired mind attempted to take stock of the new reality. Without the kayak cart, there would be no way to navigate past the many portages that awaited me on the journey back to Connecticut. I started thinking of ways that I could bail out of the trip with dignity. I thought about friends and family who had offered to pick me up if my journey went wrong. In a day or two, I could be watching the miles back to Connecticut slip away on an asphalt river. I could elicit sympathetic nods from the driver as I explained how *hard* everything had been. I could sleep beside the air conditioner and dream of the golden weeks that I had set aside for myself—weeks that had evaporated like so many other ambitions. The meat of the journey had only just begun. Yet, whatever lessons and experience lay ahead were now cast into doubt.

EVEN WITH AN EARLY START TO PADDLING THAT MORNING, THE HEAT FOUND me soon enough. I paddled out of Umbagog Lake to the head of the Androscoggin River, crossing the border from Maine into New Hampshire. A short time later, there was a dam to navigate with a 200-yard portage. I hauled boat and gear around, sliding it on the grass when I could, shooing flies.

The swift current below the dam afforded a mere ten minutes of easy paddling before I came to a set of Class III rapids and a choice. I could suffer another backbreaking portage around the turbulence or risk my safety by shooting through the waves and around the boulders in the loaded sea kayak. Fortunately, a whitewater class was launching nearby, and I watched the line these students and their experienced guides followed. I followed close behind. The remains of my shattered trolley lurched on my kayak's back deck as standing waves washed over the front. It felt as though a leprechaun were dancing a jig on my kayak. A wave crashed over my deck. I slapped the water with my paddle blade, and regained balance. The kayak went over a drop and then swung out of the current into the eddy by a boat ramp.

The town of Errol waited off the river. For a few hours, my boat sat tied up on the bank while I tried and failed to fix my rolling cart. This included consulting with a local hardware store/outfitter. Diagnosis: The cart was toast. It was time to admit that my design, while inventive, was not factory quality.

Running out of options, I walked out to the blazing roadside and put out my thumb, headed back to Rangeley. There was another cart back at the cabin. I had left it there because it seemed too bulky and would be difficult to store. Now, I appreciated that I needed that bulk so the boat could withstand the tough terrain of portages.

It took me about an hour and a half to get a ride. Eventually, an enormous pickup truck stopped for me. Behind the wheel, I found a mild-mannered guy, who turned out to be a forest ecologist conducting moose studies in the rugged Connecticut Lakes region on the Canadian border. Even though I hated breaking up my trip by riding in a vehicle, I could not have asked for a more interesting person to share that ride with. Over the next 45 minutes, I learned about how declining moose numbers in Maine were tied to climate change and, crucially, to past overpopulation driven by the abundant browse (woody plants) left by logging in the region. The ticks that had been devastating moose numbers were partly a consequence of that overpopulation, which had provided a wealth of hosts for the ticks.

The scientist dropped me back at the cabin, where I picked up the kayak cart, and (after trying unsuccessfully to hitchhike back to Errol) spent the

night. I got up early the next day to jog the dirt road to the highway, trolley in hand, and a light pack swinging on my back. It took me two rides and about three hours to get back to Errol.

When I returned to my kayak, I was pleasantly surprised at how well the heavier cart worked. I also found that it stored on my back deck more easily than I thought it would. I immediately regretted the grief I might have spared myself if I'd simply taken it from the beginning instead of taking my flawed homemade version.

The Androscoggin River was my road south. As I paddled between stands of spruce and balsam, I found myself going from placid water to sections of wave trains and boulders. The rapids would have been boring in a plastic boat, but the fact that I was in a fragile fiberglass sea kayak kept me on edge. I paddled backward to stop on eddies, dodged hidden boulders at the last minute, and, yes, I managed a few collisions, which left marks.

At times the river became so shallow that I got out from the boat onto river cobbles that were slippery with fish eggs. I thought about how the rapids were putting oxygen into the water, making it lush with life. Sure enough, I saw multiple bald eagles throughout the day, especially around rapids. They knew that wild water brought bountiful harvest.

I eventually emerged at the still water of the Pontook Reservoir, followed by a short portage around a dam back into the Androscoggin. The river here was a tilted trickle through a rock garden. And yet, luck met skill, and my kayak followed the blue thread between the rocks. I emerged at the other end, unscathed and amazed. It had been some of the best paddling I had done in my life.

I FELT LIKE THE ANDROSCOGGIN AND I WERE JUST GETTING TO KNOW EACH other, but it was time to take my leave. Before the first day of my bike trip, I had planned to simply continue following the Androscoggin River to the sea, before heading south to home in Connecticut. Back in Rhode Island, my view of the Blackstone River had convinced me to try an altered route, wherein I would depart the Androscoggin for a shortcut down through the heart of New England on the Connecticut River.

Eighteen miles below Errol, the Northern Forest Canoe Trail jags west along a 4.2-mile-overland section to the Upper Ammonoosuc River, a tributary to the Connecticut River.

The new kayak cart was indeed far superior to the old, but it was no easy task rolling half my gear in the boat and carrying the other half on my back.

I camped at a site halfway along the portage. Though I was exhausted, I felt rejuvenated too. I had solved my kayak trolley problem. Another question for the trip had been whether I would be able to paddle through the stony Androscoggin River, and now that I had gotten past it, I felt new confidence that I would succeed.

Two miles later, I reached the Cedar Pond campground, where I camped and woke up early to roll the boat the rest of the way to the next river. My heart sank when I looked at the Upper Ammonoosuc, which barely qualified as a creek. For the first miles, I spent much of the time walking in the river pulling my boat behind.

At one point, I had to walk the boat down Class I rapids, which turned out to be quite difficult on slick cobbles shifting unpredictably underfoot. I could barely see through the diffracted water and struggled not to let the loaded kayak pull me down the river.

A shrubby island near the mouth of the Connecticut was my campsite for the evening. Leaning over my stove, my back relived the agony of every paddle stroke and portage. I barely thought to look around when I heard the soft snort from behind me. A deer, no doubt.

I turned my head, and a black bear looked back at me. My dinner guest was six feet tall on its hind legs, staring directly at me from the shrubs on the other side of the ankle-deep river. I took a moment to appreciate this rare opportunity to see a magnificent animal, and then, to spare it and myself in as kind a way as possible, shouted something impolite. The bear turned around and crashed back into the woods.

I moved my bear canister farther from the tent and collapsed back inside, too exhausted to do much else.

Connecticut River Beginnings

I arrived at the Connecticut River in the golden light of Independence Day morning. The river, shallow and muddy, barely seemed larger than the tributary I was leaving. Nonetheless, it was my route back home to Connecticut. It was not an unbroken route. Ahead lay dams to portage, shallows to stumble through, and rapids to smash up in. I appreciated that there was a current at my back, but this hardly guaranteed easy paddling.

Because I had quickly changed the itinerary to the Connecticut River, I was in dire need of navigation resources. By the first night on the journey down the Connecticut, I downloaded the FarOut app on my phone for a

small fee. The app consolidated all the information posted by the Connecticut River Paddlers' Trail into an accessible format. It included a couple of useful map layers such as food sources. The app used my phone's GPS to home in on riverside campsites that were often scarcely marked and hard to distinguish from the landscape.

I felt guilty for delegating navigation to my phone, but I was hardly at risk of wasting hours looking at the screen. My phone battery wouldn't last long, and the small solar charger unit that I'd brought would only go so far.

As the sun climbed, the river corridor between the New Hampshire and Vermont sides became a wind tunnel, forcing me to stay in the shallows close to shore to avoid the full fury of the wind. I saw no other boats on the water, but throughout the next hours, I enjoyed the company of three bald eagles, two osprey, and countless geese, cormorants, and kingfishers. The goose families were divided between the adults and the not-quite-grown-up goslings, which were almost the same size and color as their parents but not yet able to fly. When my boat approached, the goslings ran at top speeds along the shore. As soon as they found underbrush they stopped, motionless, while I pretended not to see them and paddled past.

By midday, I napped on a shady spot onshore. A midday break was as valuable to me kayaking as it had been biking, perhaps even more so when considering the winds. It quickly became an established pattern for my trip. I would wake up early, sometimes as early as 4 A.M., and getting on the water shortly after 6. I liked paddling the bulk of my miles in the early morning when I could still float in the eastern bank's tree shadows. By midday, I would sit out the sun and the strongest winds onshore. I would also leave a solar charger in the sunlight so that I could recharge my cell phone and camera later. The wind and sun would still be going strong when I started paddling later in the afternoon, but it was satisfying to see them diminish as I paddled on. I looked forward to when the shadows from the west bank finally stretched out far enough for me to enter them. I often felt lazy taking my long breaks in the middle of the day, but I kept the heat on, often surpassing 30 miles in a day. I was now only weeks away from my friend's wedding and I wanted to make sure that I finished the trip first.

I was grateful for this pattern when I got to the 9.8-mile-long Moore Reservoir that evening and crossed its unsheltered expanses on calm water.

The Moore Reservoir led to the 178-foot Moore Dam, which powers the largest hydroelectric plant in New England. The river was held back, partially by a mound of grassy earth, mown sheer. As I rolled my kayak along the

grass, I startled a fox. Now that I was heading south down the river, I had left the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, but I had joined the Connecticut River Paddlers' Trail. The organization works in concert with Great River Hydro, the current owner of dams up and down the Connecticut River, along with the Appalachian Mountain Club and other groups that maintain shelters and campgrounds along the trail.

The trail features portage paths, which I found to be wide and generous, although there were inevitably rugged sections where I had to carry equipment. The most difficult parts of any portage tended to be near the river, where past floods had exposed the biggest boulders, or engineers had put bulky riprap in place for water control. Because the river was low in its bed, I had even more obstructions to get around before I could launch the boat.

That night I stayed at the Moore Primitive Site maintained by the hydroelectric company. Here I easily built a fire using the resinous red pine branches that were littered everywhere. Fireflies danced through the tree boughs, while fireworks exploded on the Vermont side of the river.

Wildlife continued to be a diversion along the trip, including the bald eagles that scouted the water. Invariably, the flying eagles found themselves pestered by smaller crows and sparrows. I watched one eagle fly upside-down through a bridge truss to avoid its aggressor.

One day a mother duck tried to divert my attention from her ducklings by flapping at the water as if injured. I tried to paddle farther away from the ducklings, but the bird continued to veer in front of me, flapping as if in a great struggle to take off. Suddenly an eagle appeared in front of me and took extreme interest in the wounded bird. Fixated on me, the duck took no notice of this peril until the last second when the eagle began to dive, talons extended. Half a second before obliteration, the mother duck gave up the farce of injury, and took to the sky. The eagle chased after the duck and dove again. This was far off and backlit, so it was hard to tell what happened. The eagle fluttered into a large pine downriver. I paddled down with a heavy heart, worried that I might have been responsible for the duck's untimely end. Yet, when I passed the tree, I saw the fearsome talons of the eagle were empty. I breathed out.

I continued my pattern of getting on the river early, then swimming and resting during the brutal midday heat. On days with favorable winds, I managed to clock 38 to 40 miles.

Before I entered Massachusetts, the Connecticut River offered me its wildest stretch of water yet: the Hartland Rapids. This section often is labeled



Tom Fagin sets out to run Hartland Rapids between Vermont and New Hampshire. Moments before, he portaged his heaviest gear around the fast water. TOM FAGIN

Class III, but the low water conditions probably downgraded it to Class II. Weighing the risks of ripping my kayak open on the jagged rocks made me waffle about whether to run the section or portage. I ultimately compromised, hauling my heaviest gear around so that I could go back to the kayak and shoot the rapid.

The rapids ran into a narrow sluice after which I had my choice of three different slots that dropped between jagged fins of bedrock. I started toward the left slot, but changed my mind at the last second, and spun around upriver to reach the middle drop. I had to turn viciously, and the stern of the boat bopped a rock. An instant later, I plunged back into the river for a refreshing splashdown.

The Broken River

Shortly before Massachusetts, I came to the first dam I'd encountered on the river that had a fish ladder. The fact that none of the dams above this one had ladders effectively guaranteed that fish above and below would be cut off from one another. The Connecticut River used to be the most prolific run of Atlantic salmon in North America, writes Mark Kurlansky in his 2020 book, *Salmon* (Patagonia); 50,000 fish were estimated to have traveled upriver annually before the American Revolution. By the beginning of the nineteenth

century, the fish were all but eradicated because of dams in the Connecticut River and its tributaries. “Connecticut River salmon [are] not even remembered now,” Kurlansky concludes. Although dam removals and other restorations have improved habitats on the river and its tributaries, climate change has made it more difficult for salmon to survive in the oceans. The fish must swim against colder and stronger currents from the melting arctic ice to reach feeding grounds near Newfoundland and Greenland, reports Delaney Dryfoos in *Inside Climate News* (insideclimatenews.org). Biologists today have concluded that there is no hope for their return to the Connecticut River in meaningful numbers. According to Dryfoos, a grand total of four salmon were spotted on fish ladder cameras in the Connecticut River in 2021.

In Turners Falls, Massachusetts, I encountered one of the boldest interruptions to the river yet. I took out before a dam and followed a bike trail along a diversion canal that nineteenth-century engineers had designed alongside a row of mills. The red brick buildings stood above the original, lower, river channel. This placement allowed them to direct the water through their turbines at will.

Turners Falls is intimately connected to New England history, starting with the name itself. The location of the falls had originally been a camp for a group of Nipmuc people. No doubt the crashing water had created a prime fishing spot. Here, in 1676, Captain William Turner, a local militia leader, directed a massacre of 100 to 200 civilians in the Nipmuc Tribe during King Philip’s War, reports *Greenfield Recorder* reporter Max Marcus.

In 1798, early developers dammed the falls, singlehandedly cutting the Connecticut River salmon runs in half, “the beginning of the end” for Atlantic salmon coming up the river, according to Scott Coen, writing for *MassLive.com* in 2012. Heavy industry began to develop in 1868 when businesses built cotton, cutlery, and paper mills around the newly built canal. Walking along the canal front, I thought about how the role of the river had changed with time, first as an engine of life, then a source of mill power, and finally, as electricity.

A local I’d talked to in camp the previous night had suggested a shortcut that eliminated at least two miles from the 2.8-mile portage designated on the official route. I rolled the boat down a rugged path and put in at a diminished river, starved of the water that went through the artificial canal. I was back to navigating shallows, much like the Upper Ammonoosuc. The Class I rapids also drew multiple eagles. Farther downstream the main part of the diverted river came thundering out of a massive penstock. Here, I could feel the water thunder through the boat and had to be careful, lest an eddy current feed me into the agitation up ahead.

I thought ruefully that the most powerful, most thunderous sections of river that I had witnessed on my trip had always been from dam outflows. Even the Hartland Rapids were in a league below these artificial behemoths. Inevitably, the mightiest water on the river occurred along the same narrows and steep gradients that were ideal for dam construction. Here, as in other sections of the river, the wildest and most beautiful New England rapids were drowned beneath reservoirs.

Even with the changes dams brought to the river, I felt drawn by the sheer might of the water gushing from these outflows. Perhaps, like the eagles that I saw in such places, I instinctively sensed that these roiling waters were (or had been) places of abundance. I could not help but feel cowed by the sheer amount of power tied up in the machinery. I felt the same amazement one other time that day, when a mile-long train of oil cars rumbled over a trestle. It was a kind of awe, but divorced from any accompanying sense of beauty.

The river went from shallow and cobbly to deep and wide. Solitary eagles gave way to miles of cigarette boats, party boats, and Jet Skis. Past the bounty of flowing water, I could now witness petro-powered activity: whooping people flying full throttle over each other's wakes, the Latin soundtrack from one party blasting into the country soundtrack of the next. Revelers waded through shallow water holding up their drinks. My boat vibrated to the beat of sound systems and roaring engines. Unsurprisingly, sleep was a fraught commodity when I got a free camp at a marina above Springfield. The parties went long into the night. Reeking pizza boxes and mountains of empties spilled out from dumpsters nearby.

I spent much of the next day straining against winds and pushing off sandbars. I stopped and watched screaming passengers at Six Flags New England taste some G-forces on the Ride of Steel. By the time I reached the Connecticut state border at Enfield, the river became shallow again; the speedboats disappeared. Eagles flew here. When I got to camp, at the mile-long Kings Island, there was no one else to share it with. Although



Navigating toward the French King Bridge between Erving and Gill, Massachusetts. TOM FAGIN

Connecticut is quite urban compared with Maine or New Hampshire, I found the wild beauty of the spot to be comparable with any other place that I had visited on the trip.

Human Reinforcements

Passing beneath Highway 291, I spotted a familiar red Honda Civic waiting by a boat ramp. Approaching closer, I recognized the long, white double kayak by on shore. My dad, Steve, and our friend, Phil Plouffe, were just finishing offloading supplies from the car to the kayak.

I shook hands and accepted congratulations.

“It sure is windy,” my dad remarked.

“It’s always windy,” I told him.

My father was no stranger to the Connecticut River. When he was a college student in the 1960s, he and a group of friends had canoed down from near the Canadian border. More recently, in 2019, my father and I paddled from Hartford to Mystic, Connecticut, over two chilly days in March, fierce winds and spring flood conditions at our backs. The river had sped us along then, but today it would try its hardest to slow us down. The wind was blowing from the opposite direction, and the river current was far lower.

This could not have been clearer to us by the time we reached Hartford. Early shafts of morning sun set the mirrored buildings ablaze. My eyes drifted over to Riverside Park on the east side of the river.

“Is that the parking lot where we launched last time?” I asked.

The lot, now ten feet high and dry above the river’s surface, had been half-flooded during that previous trip, when we had paddled over parking spaces and around benches. Now, the river was so low that we needed to stay vigilant for sandbars, even out in the center. The wind was blowing just as hard as it had been during the last trip, only now it was against us.

The winds continued to defy our progress south of Hartford. Finally, in Rocky Hill we stopped by the ferry, which offered the oldest continuously operated service of its kind in the United States. Nearby, there was a fast-food shack. My dad, Phil, and I noshed on black beans, burgers, and fries. I encouraged my new companions to do what I had been doing: wait out the worst of the day’s heat and wind by doing nothing. We stretched out and slept in the shade beneath the trees and let the breeze cool us.

When we finally started paddling again, the south wind was still going strong, but at least there was relief in the shaded west side of the river.

Massive thunderheads chased us off the water before we reached Middletown. The sparse campsites I knew about in the area were booked up, and running out of options, we decided to pitch an informal camp on a large, abandoned floodplain. We put rainflies over our tents in anticipation of a soaking that never came. It was easily the hottest night I'd slept through on the trip.

Neither Phil nor my dad was keen to try my 4 A.M. wake-up strategy, but I managed to convince them to rise at 5. Phil shared his top-shelf camp coffee with me, and I decided not to push my agenda too hard. We were on the water by 6:30, which was good for a couple of hours of shaded paddling before the sun-punishment came into full force.

The river widened as we approached the sea. The riverbanks were sparsely developed, although many farms were growing crops in the rich floodplain soil. Wildlife spotting helped pass the miles, including the first egret I'd seen on the trip; many more would follow. My dad and Phil enjoyed the abundant osprey and bald eagles. My father had paddled the Connecticut River shortly before the ban on DDT and the Clean Water Act took force. He had seen none of these raptors throughout that entire trip. Raw sewage had also been a frequent sight in the river back then.

I was glad not to see raw sewage as I dipped my water bottles into the river. Although the ocean tide had made it this far north, the surface water remained fresh. I noticed farms were still running irrigation hoses from the river.

For the first time on the trip, the flood current from Long Island Sound was powerful enough to overwhelm the downstream flow, and we found ourselves hopping between eddies to save work. Finally, we pulled ashore for a break. No sense enduring the midday heat and the opposing current at the same time.

Back on the river, we passed such familiar sights as Gillette Castle and Selden Island. I made out the span of the Baldwin Bridge where Interstate 95 crosses. It was a mere three miles from there to Long Island Sound.

We had one final river camp on a scrubby island near the bridge. The journey was almost over, and I had plenty of time to get to the wedding. I had long fantasized about the view at the river's end, but the sight only brought me weary satisfaction. Home meant job applications, worries about finding a new apartment, and all the responsibilities that had backlogged before the trip began.

Now and then, during the trip, I felt that I had unwound mental knots and gotten back in touch with my adventurous side. Who knew when I



Tom Fagin enters the last short stretch, floating up the Mystic River in Connecticut.

TOM FAGIN

would next get the chance to do so? It was hard to imagine getting another long period to myself again, and the knowledge made me sad.

THE TIDE WAS FLOODING AGAINST US WHEN WE WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING. We started late to avoid fighting the worst of the tide. We followed the low tidal flats at the Connecticut River. The water changed from brown to blue as we crossed into Long Island Sound. Thirty miles of water now lay between our boats and my apartment in Mystic.

We could have made it in one day, but my father had to give a talk (about kayaking in Connecticut of all things) at 3 P.M. that day. Instead of one push, we made a stop in New London, about halfway home, and stayed at my grandmother's house. To get there, we had to take on a four-mile open water crossing (no shade, no freshwater) that left us parched and tired.

In New London, we paddled a short way up the Thames River, then wheeled the boats the rest of the way to my grandmother's house. I decided to walk the two miles to see my dad's talk at the nearby Waterford Library. I wasn't ready to get back in the car.

The Last Day

On our last day, we wheeled the kayaks down to the beach and launched late so that we would have more favorable tides. We had to make a quick crossing of the Thames River and paddled into Fishers Island Sound. An hour later, we started up the Mystic River. I called my partner, Farrah, to meet me at the river's end. The Mystic River narrowed and shallowed. I threw my paddle onto the ledge. Friends gathered on the shoreline. Three weeks after I'd left, I saw my apartment again, the same stretch of pavement that I had followed north.

The events of the last weeks, united by the self-powered adventure, had spooled out behind me in a singular experience. Although I'd had my doubts at the beginning, I now valued the time I had set aside for the long journey. Without those weeks, I could not have appreciated the connections of the waterways or the places I'd visited.

I realized that the hike up Mount Washington, ordeal with the broken kayak cart, paddle through the rapids on the Androscoggin, and portages around the dams of the Connecticut River meant more because they were linked. Preexisting lines had guided me, whether these were roads, the Appalachian Trail, the Northern Forest Canoe Trail, the Connecticut River Paddlers' Trail, or even the shape of the river itself.

Although these lines were old, the way that I'd traced them together had been new. I find that the richest adventures exist as unbroken threads, where hardship and exaltation follow a single narrative flow. Now, standing back at home, I worried that the tie to the adventure was cut, as surely as a dam blocked the flow in a river. Yet, I was tied also to the people here, simultaneously responsible to them and cared for by them. The thread that trailed behind remained connected. To truly make the journey meaningful, I had to wind it back to myself, to weave those memories into the journey that lay ahead.

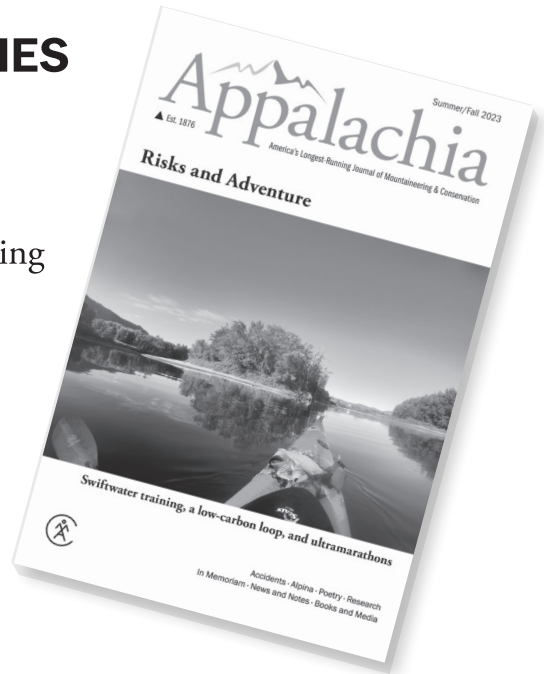
TOM FAGIN is an English teacher who lives in Ledyard, Connecticut.

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