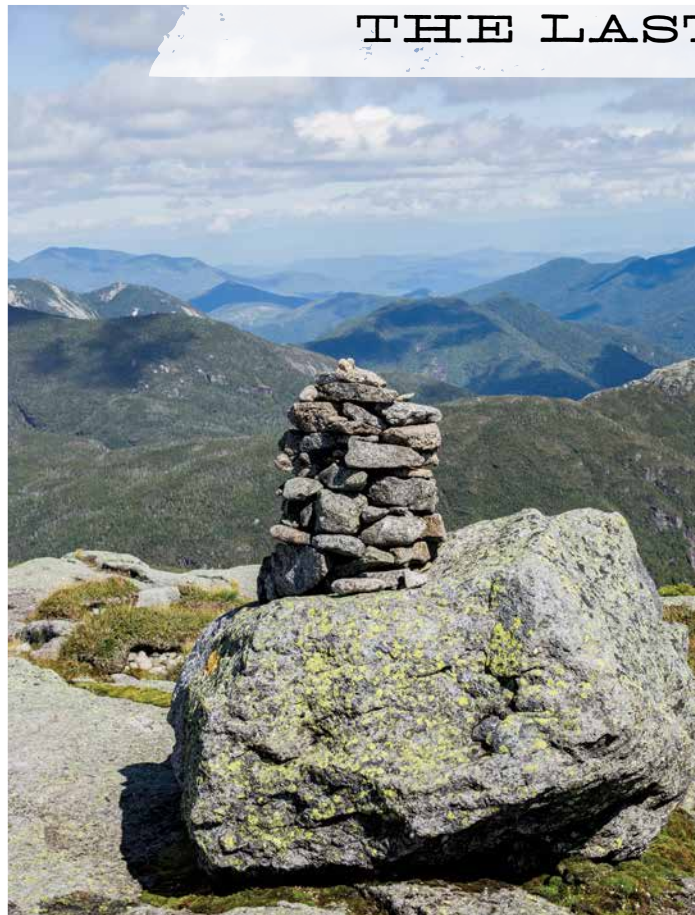


# JOHNS BROOK LODGE

THE LAST RESORT



## **THIS BACKCOUNTRY BUNKHOUSE DOUBLES AS BASE CAMP FOR COUNTLESS HIGH PEAKS HIKES**

BY LUKE CYPHERS  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIKA EDGLEY

**DOMINICK RICCIO, ON THE OTHER END** of the phone line, remembered the comment card. The critical one my hiking partner and I had submitted to the suggestion box at Johns Brook Lodge, the one that described his pot pie as bland, a little heavy, with flavorless mashed potatoes that overwhelmed the forgettable crust. This was starting to get, as the kids say, awkward. You don't want to get on the wrong side of Riccio, who last year served as the Johns Brook Lodge hut master, running the backcountry bunkhouse's day-to-day operations. Not because he's 22 years old, fit enough to carry a 120-pound pack three miles uphill, and certainly strong enough to do you physical harm. Quite the opposite. You don't want to upset Riccio because he's the most good-natured, earnest, literally rosy-cheeked host you could ask for, a guy justifiably proud of his culinary abilities, including the lodge's delicious fresh-baked bread and, of course, the homemade ice cream. Yes, ice cream.

But now you know that he knows that you thought his pot pie failed. "We never really liked the pot pie," he says cheerfully, showing no hint of defensiveness. "We took your feedback and went with it."

This is how they do things at Johns Brook Lodge (JBL), a wooden woodland retreat in the heart of the High Peaks. The staff constantly adjust: to the elements, to changing times and to their guests' advice. That's why the lodge remains relevant today, 90 years after it was built. Operated

**The Adirondack Mountain Club's 28-bed hostel, in the heart of the Adirondack wilderness, has been welcoming hikers for 90 years.**

by the Adirondack Mountain Club, JBL is a rustic bastion, part Grand Central Station and part Ritz-Carlton, if Grand Central catered only to foot traffic and

the Ritz had no flush toilets or showers and slept guests 10 to a room.

Three and a half miles from the nearest road, its location southwest of Keene Valley makes it an ideal base for people climbing multiple 46ers, with nine summits easily accessible from the front door, including Mounts Marcy and Haystack, and Saddleback and Upper and Lower Wolfjaw Mountains. It's also a perfect filling station for water and snacks for non-guests, and a handy sanctuary for those in need of emergency services. But the lodge provides a pleasant end in itself, where families or groups of friends can gather for a little nature and a lot of quiet time, playing one of the numerous board games or reading books from the small library.

A stay at the 28-bed lodge is not glamorous, nor is it supposed to be, but it's a genuine Adirondack experience, an earthy way to see wilderness without the hassle of camping, with some old-fashioned stranger-bonding thrown in.

"You get to meet people in their realest form," Riccio says. "They're not wearing makeup, they're not showering, everyone's doing the same activity, so they're in the same mindset. They don't have a smartphone distracting them, so you're talking face to face, and I've met so many amazing people. It's so cool."

These interactions, like many worthy human encounters, often take place over meals. During the summer full-service season, from late June through Labor Day, the lodge serves its guests a three-course dinner every night—everything from Riccio's prize-winning meat loaf to jambalaya—and hot breakfast every morning. They throw in a sack lunch for guests as well, all for the \$70 to \$80 bed rate. The conversation is free. Over a plate of golden-brown pancakes, Doug and Mary Jo Syck, from the Rochester area, explain how they brought their children up to Johns Brook Lodge in the 1980s and '90s. They'd go on family hikes or hang out on the deck while their kids splashed in the stream. "When they were young, it gave you the security that even when it rained, you weren't going to have a soggy tent or a soggy sleeping



Johns Brook Lodge hut masters Dominick Riccio (above) and Greg Ginnah (right) are responsible for the backcountry bunkhouse's day-to-day operations, which include culinary duties as well as packing in more than 100 pounds of fresh food and other supplies multiple times a week.

**THE LODGE IS A RUSTIC BASTION, PART GRAND CENTRAL STATION AND PART RITZ-CARLTON, IF GRAND CENTRAL CATERED ONLY TO FOOT TRAFFIC AND THE RITZ HAD NO FLUSH TOILETS.**

The lodge has always enjoyed a loyal following, but its occupancy is up in each of the past three years, thanks in part to technology. Brendan Wiltse has a Ph.D. in biology, and, while completing his doctorate, worked from 2011–2014 as the Johns Brook property director. “I’m a numbers nerd,” he says. But when he started working for the lodge, he found few ways to measure guest satisfaction, and antiquated means to reach potential new users. So he updated ADK’s web pages for the lodge, including valuable info about the bathrooms. (More on that later.) He created social media sites for fans of the lodge and helped implement a new online reservation system that allows would-be guests to book rooms any time of day.

Just as important was a shift in approach to boots on the ground. In the past, hikers would walk past the place, figuring it was a completely private facility. Since 2012, JBL has rolled out a welcome mat during the mid-morning to afternoon hours when they’re not serving meals, with signs inviting people into their mini-store for lantern batteries, hot coffee and cold lemonade. “All that traffic that was previously going by, and didn’t really know what the place was,” Wiltse says, “was now walking in the door, looking around, talking to the staff, finding out a bit.”

JBL’s improved marketing coincides with a spike in High Peaks exploration. The ADK’s Summit Stewards, who offer information to the public and make sure visitors don’t destroy delicate alpine ecosystems on popular mountaintops, had more than 28,000 contacts with hikers last summer. That’s up nearly 5,000 from the year before and 18,000 since 2004, says Wes Lampman, the operations director of ADK’s field programs. “Specifically in the eastern High Peaks,” Lampman says, “the numbers are through the roof.”

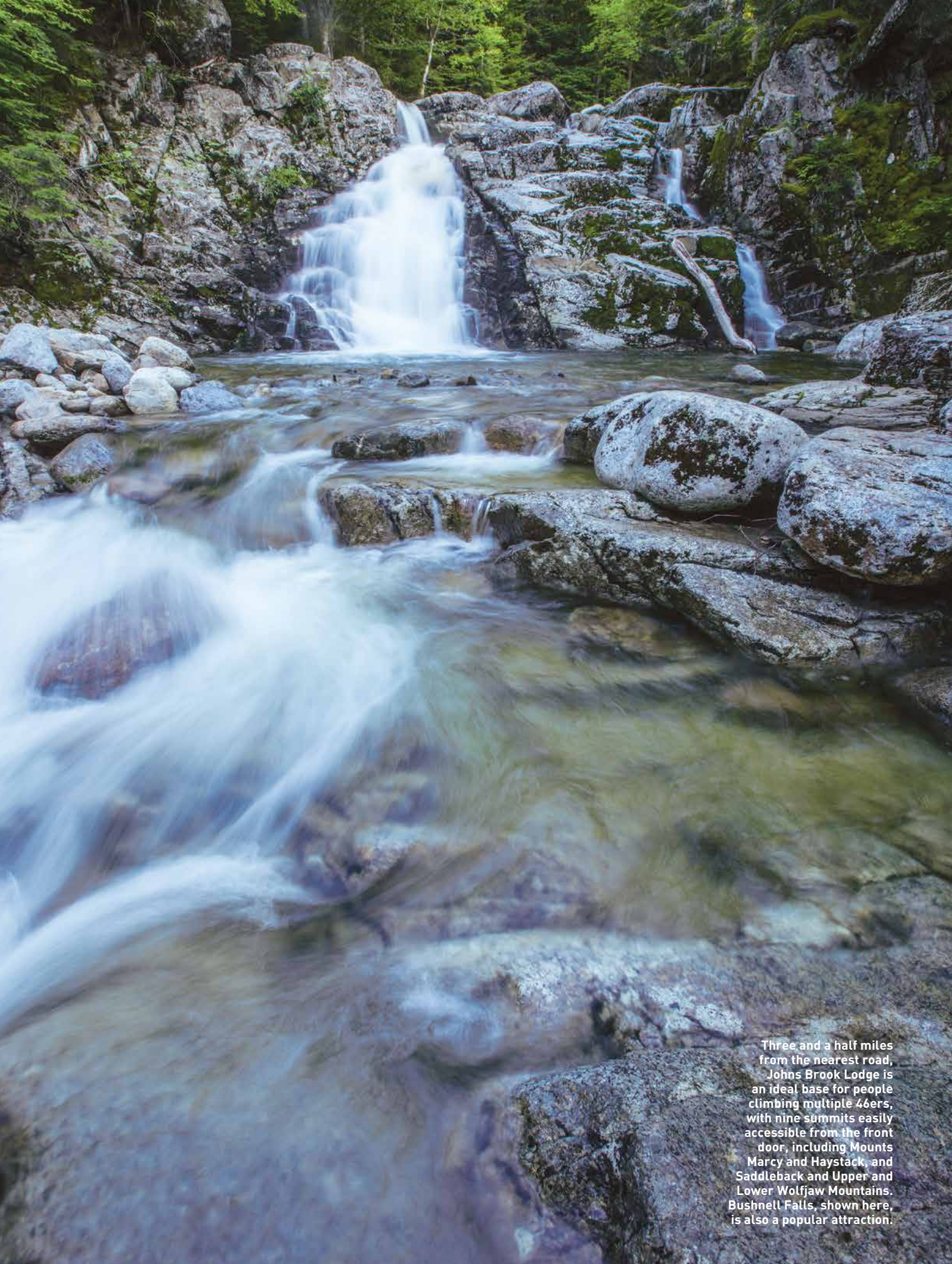
Most hikers approach JBL from the northeast, on a gently ascending 3.5-mile trail from what’s known as the Garden parking lot in Keene Valley, where spots cost \$7 a day. The walk through the woods alongside Johns Brook’s stunning white boulders and clear water is fairly quick work in good weather, but it’s humbling to realize that lodge staffers pack in fresh veggies and other foodstuffs at least five times a week, each carrying 60 to 120 pounds per trip. Just as the trail starts to steepen and feel a bit wilder, the forest opens and there’s the lodge. The grounds are well kept, with a lawn, which means, yes, someone packed a mower up here. The building itself, though, appears rather Spartan: dark brown walls topped with a green roof, like an oversized kid’s Lincoln Log project.

At the lodge entrance, a chalkboard displays the next two days’ weather forecast, and signs promise drinks and apple cake inside. All quite simple, understated and then ... the door opens into the great room—paneled from baseboard to ceiling with varnished knotty pine that looks new, and is, set against well-worn oak floors that look old, and are. Four large wooden dining tables and benches, in the same honeyed varnish as the paneling, fill the golden hall. The southern wall of the room, full of windows, looks out on the brook and the mountains. The opposite wall features the original, massive stone fireplace crowned with a shoulder-mount deer trophy.

Grimm once heard a lecture on how great museum spaces have a “wow factor,” where, “You walk in, and it’s, Wow, look at that!” he says. “For us, that’s the great room.”

bag,” Doug says. On this mid-July day, their son, Kyle, is here with his girlfriend, Ashley Lavigne. They both work for the Chazy school system in Clinton County, and the lodge is an ideal place to meet the parents. “It may look smaller than it did when you were a little kid, three feet off the ground, but basically everything is still the same—everything’s clean, nothing’s beat up,” says Kyle, whose last trip to JBL was when he was 13. “My mother and my girlfriend are already planning our trip for [next] summer, and I think my mother has designs on prying her granddaughter away from my sister and get her there at some point, too.”

Generations of families such as the Sycks, many with ties to the Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK), continue to visit the lodge, but that’s not the only clientele, says Bob Grimm, a one-time chair of the club’s Johns Brook committee who’s been coming to JBL since the late 1960s. Grimm, a 72-year-old bearded Navy vet, has twinkling eyes that peer from under the bill of a cap inscribed with the words, Your Basic Hat. Those eyes have seen all kinds stay at the lodge, from college-age hut staffers whose work there led to marriage, to a group of South Asian women who hastily swapped rooms with a family when they realized the room they had reserved was co-ed—which was a no-no in their culture. “You’ve got the marathon climber who just climbed seven peaks and is back for a late lunch, and somebody who sat on a rock out by the creek and lamented,” Grimm says. “And everything in between.”



Three and a half miles from the nearest road, Johns Brook Lodge is an ideal base for people climbing multiple 46ers, with nine summits easily accessible from the front door, including Mounts Marcy and Haystack, and Saddleback and Upper and Lower Wolfjaw Mountains. Bushnell Falls, shown here, is also a popular attraction.

## NEIGHBORHOOD STROLLS

### Mount Marcy

**Johns Brook Lodge** (JBL) offers an ideal base camp for an ascent of the Empire State's highest mountain, cutting 3.5 miles off the route from the Garden parking lot and leaving an 11-mile round trip from the lodge to the summit. The views on the bald peak, and even the happy hiking hordes you'll find there, make the trek worth it. But beware of overgrown, poorly marked sections of the Phelps trail; study your guidebooks to avoid involuntary bushwhacking.

### Bushnell Falls

**Awful weather**, small children or a flat-out lack of initiative may call for a shorter hike, and Bushnell Falls answers. Just 1.5 miles from the lodge, the only difficult going is a short steep descent to the water from the Phelps trail. The gorgeous twin falls and pristine pools below are a privilege to look upon, even more so during or just after a rainstorm.

### Big Slide, via the Brothers

**Our photographer** Erika Edgley loved this hike as a kid, she says, "because the wild blueberries are amazing!" Now, she enjoys the superlative views and moderate terrain. "You continually feel like you are making progress—up the First Brother, up the Second Brother, up the Third Brother and finally Big Slide," Edgley says. "Lots of small victories along the way rather than just one long road to the summit."

### Basin and Saddleback Mountains

**At JBL**, you'll quickly ID those who just finished this trip by their 1,000-yard stares and tales of terror. The steep ledges of Saddleback, especially harrowing in wind and rain, aren't for the acrophobic. JBL staff "strongly recommends" doing the 9.6-mile loop in a counterclockwise direction, going from



Basin to Saddleback, so that you're ascending the ledges. If you do choose to do Saddleback first, it saves the best view for last, and coming down the badly eroded Shorey Shortcut is better than going up.

### Upper Wolfjaw/Armstrong/Gothics Loop

**Bob Grimm**, one-time chair of the Adirondack Mountain Club's JBL committee, says, "My personal favorite in all four seasons is the Upper Wolfjaw/

Armstrong/Gothics loop. Do them in that order to save the best view for last and because coming down the cables is easier than going up."

### Mount Haystack

**The long slog** to the top of Haystack—with its spectacular views of Marcy and Panther Gorge—is made much shorter, and far more pleasant, with a stay at the lodge. This hike is about the same length (10.8 miles) as a round trip to Marcy from JBL, with about 300 fewer feet of elevation gain.



Off the great room are two big bunk rooms, with 10 beds each and two tiny, four-person bunk rooms designed for individual families. All have the same varnished knotty pine walls, with sturdy new beds, lending the interior an almost-but-not-quite-fancy Great Camp feel.

The facilities? Bathrooms are all the way through the big bunk rooms, while the kitchen, available for hikers to use during the “caretaker” season after Labor Day, lies between the bedrooms off the great room.

That any of this is even here is a marvel, given that there’s no automobile access. It’s a testament to the ingenuity and dedication of the volunteers, the strength of the young JBL staffers’ backs, and helicopters. Every spring, ADK executes a supply drop into and out of Johns Brook. Lumber and dry-wall and tools for construction projects, propane tanks for heating and cooking, new storage barrels for the waterless privy-vault toilets, dried and canned bulk food, the pancake batter and canned peaches and sugar for the ice cream—it’s all choppered in from a staging field in Keene Valley. Return trips haul the previous year’s empty propane tanks and full toilet barrels back to civilization.

The copter can haul just 800 pounds per cargo-net load, so each item in the 40-ton supply list is measured to the pound, sometimes months in advance. On the drop days, the 15 or so volunteers are hopping. The helicopter pilot earns “on the order of \$2,000 an hour—about 25, 30 bucks a minute,” Grimm says. “The last thing you can do is have him hanging around waiting for you. He sets it down, and he moves over and grabs the next one and takes it out. Elapsed time is like half a minute.”

That’s just the beginning of the preseason preparations. With materials in hand, ADK volunteers take two weeks every spring to tackle construction and maintenance projects at the lodge and surrounding properties, which include Camp Peggy O’Brien and Grace Camp, available year-round for group rentals. No project is routine when the building is as physically active as the hikers it hosts. “You walk in each spring and the floor’s doing something different,” says Nathan Stokes, the current head of ADK’s JBL committee, which plans and raises funds for improvements to the property. The lodge site prevents the cabin’s footings from sinking down more than a couple of feet, so the building moves every year with the shifting winter soil. “We have a saying out there: We’re not building the Taj Mahal,” Stokes says. “Nothing is square, plumb or level.”

Still, over the past several years, volunteers have replaced the roof, renovated the kitchen, entirely re-engineered the bathroom waste-disposal system, replaced all the windows with thermal-insulated models, and insulated

Over the decades this woodland sanctuary has become a gathering place for generations of families with ties to the Adirondack Mountain Club. Nowadays Johns Brook Lodge also serves passing hikers, offering lantern batteries, snacks, coffee and cold lemonade in its mini-store.



and repaneled the great room. Years ago, Stokes says, the lodge kept you dry but not much more. “It was often colder inside than outside.” After the window installation, “The wind was blowing outside and the curtains were not blowing inside,” Stokes says, “which was a novelty for us.”

While it’s a less hostile hostel, the lodge isn’t exactly luxurious. You’re out in the wilderness, after all. Guests are required to keep snack food in a mouse-proof container in the great room; the mischief of mice gamboling outside our bunk room at one a.m. testified to the wisdom of the security measures. Later in the night, some woodland creature made a ruckus just outside our window, scraping gravel and breathing heavily and sending the imagination on a walk-about. “Could be a marten,” Riccio told us. “Or a skunk.” Or a bear? I asked. “Sure,” he said, without being condescending. The next disturbance was my own, when I tried and failed to make a stealthy wee-hours trip to the privy. I bumped the doorstep, causing the door to snap shut with a thud, leading to some heavy sighs from fellow guests; it was dark, but I

could swear I saw eyes rolling.

About those privy vaults: A few years ago, when the system was new, one of the vaults wasn’t sealed properly, leaving guests inhaling a bit more nature than they bargained for. Now? They’re clean and smell fine (Riccio says they treat the toilets daily with a special antibacterial solution), though when you glance down into them, there’s a disorienting black nothingness, which is probably preferable to a somethingness. Other than navigating a bedroom belonging to 10 sleeping strangers to get to the head, it’s all good.

The greatest tumult came sometime around 5:30 a.m., when just outside our window a group of 30- and 40-something male Fratirondackers loaded their day’s essentials, including wineskins, and forgot to use their inside voices.

Still, the lodge more than served its purpose. We book-ended our night’s stay with two unforgettable hikes. The first afternoon we took the short hop up the Phelps trail to Bushnell Falls just after a brief rain, and the rocks at the bottom of the twin falls shone like platinum. (Continued on page 98)



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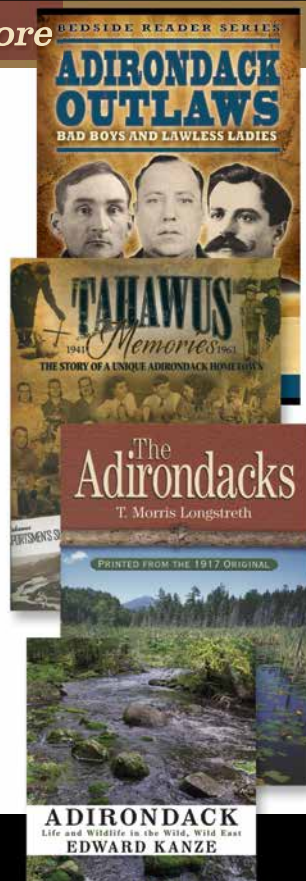
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## JOHNS BROOK LODGE

Continued from page 45

The next day we hiked the 5.5 miles to Mount Marcy, catching New York's highest summit on a clear day with verdant views of the High Peaks and the Johns Brook Valley whence we came. The way down, back to the Garden lot, was made immeasurably more pleasant by stopping at the lodge for fresh water from the spigot, a snack from the kitchen and a soak of overheated feet in the brook.

The Adirondack Park is dotted with ruins of once-sturdy structures that couldn't withstand the water and wind and cold and ever-encroaching greenery. Yet Johns Brook Lodge survives, and thrives, on squirrely soil miles from civilization. And it may expand its mission. If JBL's brain trust can figure out a way to winterize the water and sanitation system, Lampman says, demand from winter hikers and the growing backcountry ski market can fill beds through the coldest part of the year.

The lodge lives on thanks to people who refuse to let it die. Some are veterans such as Grimm, who, back in the early 1970s, was asked by the legendary Peggy O'Brien to run the JBL committee. Why? He'd visit every year, and every year he'd fill out comment cards. "I guess they thought I had some good ideas," he says. "It was me and my big mouth."

Then there's Riccio, a half-century younger than Grimm, who likewise appreciates the power of suggestion. "The pot pie was definitely the weakest dish on the menu," Riccio says. "After you made your recommendation—more meat filling, add the gravy, lose the crust—we did that and got better feedback. I want to say thank you for letting us know."

No, Johns Brook Lodge. Thank you for letting us stay. 🍷

**Visit the Adirondack Mountain Club's website, [www.adk.org](http://www.adk.org), or call (518) 523-3441 for specific hiking information, a calendar of guided outings, to learn more about Johns Brook Lodge or to make reservations.**