TIME OF THE TICK

Co-existing with the Adirondacks' most dangerous predator

BY ANNIE STOLTIE

JAY MEADOW PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR. TICK PHOTOGRAPH FROM ISTOCK

In the nymph stage a blacklegged or deer tick (*Ixodes scapularis*) is the size of a poppy seed. Nymphs—the most potent carriers of Lyme disease—are active from May through mid-July. Adults are most active in fall.

LATE LAST FALL I was sick in bed, so feverish my skin hurt. It wasn't influenza, my doctor had assured me, but another respiratory virus that, with time, would run its course. I have two young kids; for several days my husband assumed all childcare responsibilities, which included some kind of daily adventure. During my sickest, I heard my phone ping. I reached for it on the bedside table and studied the photograph my husband had texted me: my kids in smiles and with walking sticks and driftwood trophies they must have found along the Ausable River. I recognized the swampy meadow and the mountain silhouette—they were downriver from the Jay covered bridge, likely following herd paths marched flat by local deer.

I felt a wave of worry.

Ticks.

And then I recognized my sadness that a time had come when seeing the beauty of my children or the magnificence of an Adirondack backdrop was overshadowed by the consequences of a bite from a speck-sized parasite.

BLACKLEGGED TICKS are arachnids that feed on warm-blooded animals. These blind, multi-legged creatures rely on smell, hitching a ride—not jumping or flying—on prey. They're bloodsuckers. Unlike mosquitoes that grab a quick meal, ticks take their time, chomping and then burrowing with powerful jaws, sometimes feeding for days until they engorge to the size of a large corn kernel. Ticks thrive with moisture. They can live through a hot-water cycle in the washing machine. They can handle winter, especially temperatures in the 40s, though insulating snow and duff can protect them from subzero snaps. Ticks are survivors. And, according to Paul Smith's College natural sciences professor Curt Stager, they're the most dangerous creature—"other than humans"—in the Adirondack Park.

That's because of the pathogens they carry and spread. Ticks are notorious vectors of Lyme disease, an ancient bacterial infection. Blood samples from Ötzi, the 5,300-year-old "iceman" discovered in a glacier in the Alps, indicate he was infected with the bacteria that causes Lyme.

Lyme grows in the small-mammal population, and ticks move it from one animal to another. These creatures don't get sick from Lyme, but the bacteria knows how to evade the immune systems of humans and dogs. Lyme can affect all the organs in the body—most terrifying, it can cause arthritis, neurological damage and other chronic issues that experts struggle to understand. The infection is particularly insidious because it mimics other afflictions, leading to dangerous misdiagnoses and, consequently, treatment delays. And with each new tick bite you can become infected again and again.

About 14 years ago, when I brought my dog to a veterinarian in Jay, she recommended a Lyme vaccine. Some local dogs were getting sick, she said, testing positive for Lyme. Soon after that I pried a pair of ticks from my husband's backside, so he visited a Lake Placid doctor. He was refused antibiotics; the doctor insisted the Adirondacks was Lyme-free. After my husband's next tick encounter—this one resulting in that cartoonish telltale bull's-eye—he sent photos of his rash to a doctor friend in Boston. She called in an intensive regimen of doxycycline.

Lyme was, obviously, in Jay.

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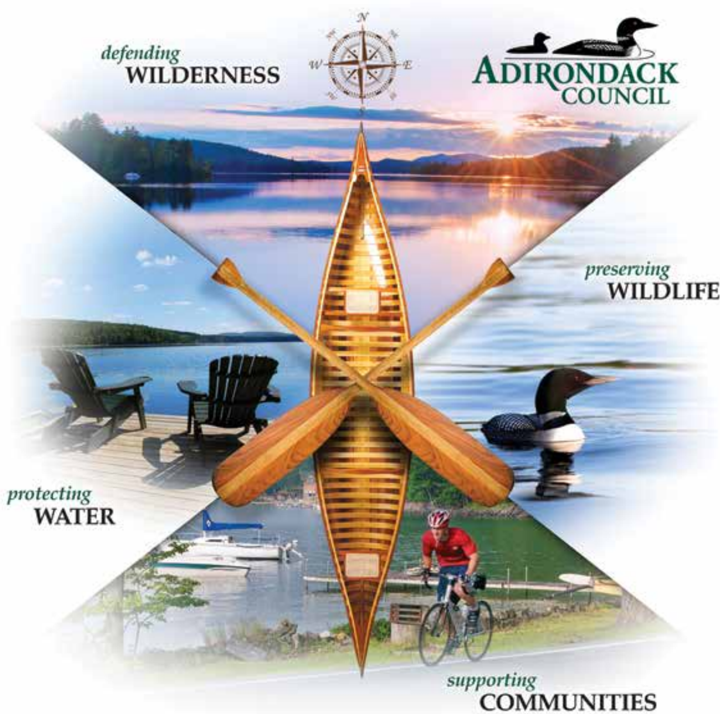

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But for years conflicting reports about ticks and Lyme in the Adirondacks continued. Now, research by Lee Ann Sporn—a Paul Smith's College biology professor with training in toxicology and infectious disease—confirms that ticks and Lyme have been recorded across our northern counties. Through her New York State Senate-funded fieldwork, in collaboration with the state Department of Health, Sporn and a team of Paul Smith's students tested ticks in Clinton, Essex, Franklin and St. Lawrence Counties. Tupper Lake, Saranac Lake, Lake Placid, Wilmington, Elizabethtown—Lyme was everywhere. Also present in 20 percent of the ticks tested was Babesiosis, a malaria-like parasite that can cause headaches, fever and muscle pain. "Often ticks are affected by both," says Sporn, which means they can infect you with "both at the same time."

Because, she says, "ticks and Lyme are on the move," Sporn is studying "emergence, driven by climate change and changes in land use." She speculates that we've witnessed the first wave of Lyme—"burning hot at the edges"—in places like the Champlain Valley. But human cases in all our northern counties are on the rise, particularly in Essex County, where it's "circulating like a hurricane." Last year "was supposed to be the tick apocalypse," says Sporn, "but it really wasn't." This year, after "all that crazy warm weather [last fall], ticks are going to be going crazy."

She says, "We've seen a huge transition. I never would have guessed" ticks and Lyme would be "so widespread in higher elevation sites." It's an ecological and epidemiological shift in a blink that "changes the way we interact with the landscape."

Protecting ourselves from ticks—full-body checks, light-colored clothing, tucking in pants—is critical. The threat isn't going away any time soon.

We live in the Adirondacks for the fresh-air freedom. But these days when my kids ask to play outside and explore their surroundings, I can't help but hesitate.

ETERNAL LOVE

When peaks become final resting places

BY ANNIE STOLTIE

THE BEST YEARS OF MY LIFE HAVE, so far, passed in a crease of the Ausable River Valley. The love of my life, our children, our friends, our trials and triumphs—it's all happened here. Recently, after the kids were tucked in and the dog walked, my husband and I sat on our front porch, the river roaring after days of rain, the creeping night swallowing the Jay Range in the distance.

I'd just seen a series of photographs circulating on social media that zoomed into patches of Mount Marcy's summit. In them, angular ivory pebbles appear among lichens, sand and other peak-top debris. These are human bone fragments, deposited after people's cremains were scattered from the top of the mountain. The images prompted a conversation on the porch that night about where, someday, we'd like our physical remains to go after we die. It wasn't the first time we'd discussed the topic.

In the deep of life, the reality of final rites can seem as distant as Cassiopeia, twinkling above. But the Adirondacks, with its Kodachrome forests and its lakes, peaks and ponds, has a way of inspiring such plans. Mountain summits, in particular, are popular places for symbolic goodbyes.

That's because people "want to be one with the mountains," says Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK) education director Julia Goren. "Or they like the idea of being eternally part of a peaceful place that had significance for them."

At 5,344 feet, Mount Marcy's summit is the highest terra firma in New York State. Getting there takes some doing. And, once on top, if you're met with clear skies, peaks sprawling on and on, you just might consider this the closest place to heaven.

VIEW FROM HOPKINS MOUNTAIN PHOTOGRAPH BY LISA J. GODFREY

Although he's summited Marcy 777 times, retired forest ranger Peter Fish says Baxter Mountain is where he would someday like to end up. "It's such a dinky little thing, but it's my favorite peak of them all," says the 82-year-old. "I like the vegetation—the blueberries, the mountain sandwort, all the varieties of wildflowers. I like the red pine. I like the view of Johns Brook."

Like Fish, most Adirondackers have a beloved spot. As a veteran Adirondack summit steward—and now director of the program—Julia Goren says she's seen human cremains on just about every peak she's climbed. While ADK "doesn't have an official stance" on the practice, she says, "just please make sure you are standing downwind of everybody else" when releasing ash. And, "a little bit of ash and a few bone fragments are benign," but the entire contents of an urn—as Goren once discovered on Wright Peak—is "visually obtrusive" and can "make a big impact" ecologically.

The Department of Environmental Conservation prohibits the scattering or burying of human ashes on public lands, considering it littering. And regulations for scattering ashes in national parks like Acadia and Yellowstone depend on the park, and often require a special-use permit. Regardless, what many members of online hikers' forums express, whether they're devoted to the Adirondacks, the Whites or the Rockies, is disdain for burial in a box on an already cramped planet. Becoming part of the landscape seems more eco-friendly—a thank-you to nature.

"My feeling," says Goren, is that "what happens to your remains after you're gone is really about the people who are left behind. Maybe it gives them a feeling they can be close to that person, have a tangible connection, when they visit that place. I can totally understand it."

From my porch, Jay Mountain buffers us from the rest of the world, its ridge a place where my family and I have hiked and looked across the land we call home. Then there's the Ausable River, a constant, in sight and sound, through our days and nights.

For now—forever. It's a lot to think about.

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ILLUSTRATION BY MARK WILSON

TAKING OFF

When dreams are too big for the Blue Line

BY ANNIE STOLTIE

LAST SPRING, DURING the Meghan Markle and Prince Harry wedding extravaganza, some media outlets looking to translate the pomp and circumstance relied on the expertise of commentator Thomas J. Mace-Archer-Mills, Esq., chairman and founder of the royal-enthusiast British Monarchist Society. In bow tie, tweed cap or top hat—and with a meticulous British accent—Mace-Archer-Mills stressed the importance of British traditions and heritage. Which is why it was such a surprise when, after the festivities, he was outed for his former identity as Tommy Muscatello, an American from Bolton Landing, in the Adirondacks.

When asked about this, he told *The Wall Street Journal* that he "loved England as a boy." Mace-Archer-Mills's Bolton Central high-school music teacher was quoted as remembering him as a kid who had "plowed into Georgian-era history" and duplicated a British accent when he was cast as Mr. Sowerberry in the school's production of the musical *Oliver!*

Growing up surrounded by the natural world has its advantages, but staying in the Adirondacks doesn't necessarily help realize dreams.

Johnny Podres would never have hit the major leagues—pitching the Brooklyn Dodgers to their only World Series championship, in 1955—if he'd not said goodbye to Witherbee, where his dad toiled in the iron mines. Computer programmer Raymond Tomlinson couldn't have invented email and its "@" sign, in 1971, from his Vail Mills hometown in the southern Adirondack foothills. It was in a California lab, far from his childhood home in Indian Lake, where in 2015 physicist Joshua Smith helped detect waves of gravitational energy from two black holes merging—proving Albert Einstein's theory and introducing a new type of astronomy.

But for some Adirondack natives, like Mace-Archer-Mills, breaking through the Blue Line isn't enough. Lizzy Grant, from Lake Placid, reinvented herself as Lana Del Rey, a sultry West Coast crooner with repeated Billboard hits and recent Grammy and Golden Globe nominations. And more than a century earlier, there was Julia Elizabeth Oliver, born in Johnsburg, the daughter of a lumberjack. Oliver traded a hardscrabble Adirondack life, emerging in the early 1900s as a model in *Vanity Fair*, *Cosmopolitan* and other magazines, and with a new name—Jeanne Robert Foster.

Foster pursued modeling, acting and journalism. With esteemed editor Albert Shaw, she worked on the *Photographic History of the Civil War* that featured images by Mathew Brady (another Johnsburg-born talent). She was literary editor of the *American Review of Reviews*, served as a World War I correspondent, published several acclaimed books of narrative verse, and hung out with Pablo Picasso, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Constantin Brancusi, John Quinn and John Butler Yeats.

Foster's fame soared when she moved away from the Adirondacks, though she returned again and again to visit her beloved Crane Mountain. Throughout her life, and most poignantly in *Adirondack Portraits*, a collection of her poems published posthumously, her childhood landscapes, both the social and physical, informed her greatest work. In "The Wilderness Is Strong," she wrote: "Here in the wilderness folks will tell you / To be careful about the place you live / For there's something in the mountains / And the hills that is stronger than people / And you will grow like the place where you live / The hands of the mountains reach out / With bindings that hold the heart forever."

School plays, Little League, science fairs, open-mic nights, star gazing—they're all launchpads for our kids' futures. Still, the Adirondacks is tangled in their DNA, its beauty and grit a fundamental part of them. You can't help but hope that wherever they go, whatever they do, whoever they become, someday they'll come back. ▲

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