A GREAT BIG ADVENTURE

A DAD AND HIS DAUGHTER UNLOCK THE SECLUDED BEAUTY OF THE ESSEX CHAIN LAKES

BY PETER KOCH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHNATHAN ESPER*
*UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

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"MY BAG IS SO HEAVY!"

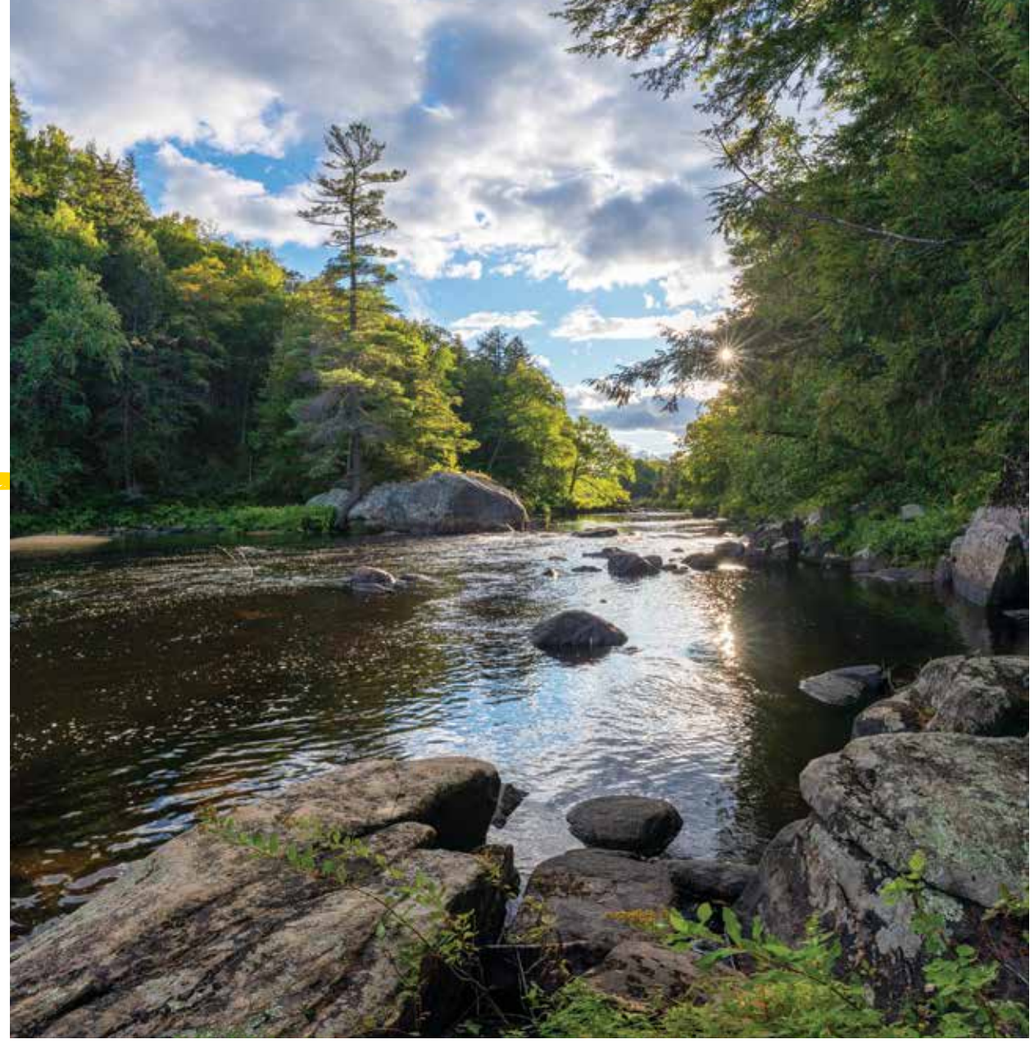
moaned my daughter, Oaklee, sagging straps off her shoulders and making a sad puppy face in my direction. Part of me wanted to empathize with her. We'd been walking the rolling gravel road for 20 minutes, after all, with no clear idea of how far it was to water. And she was doing at least a five-year-old's fair share, hauling her own little backpack loaded with necessities: a nature journal and pen, a deck of UNO cards, bird-watching binoculars, her water bottle, a bag of trail mix, and her stuffed bear, Bear-y. But the other part of me was keenly aware of the canoe hoisted over my head—I had to tip it out of the way to see her puppy impression—and two gear-laden packs (one in front, one in back) digging into my own shoulders. "You're doing great," I croaked, flashing an encouraging smile-wince, "now let's keep moving."

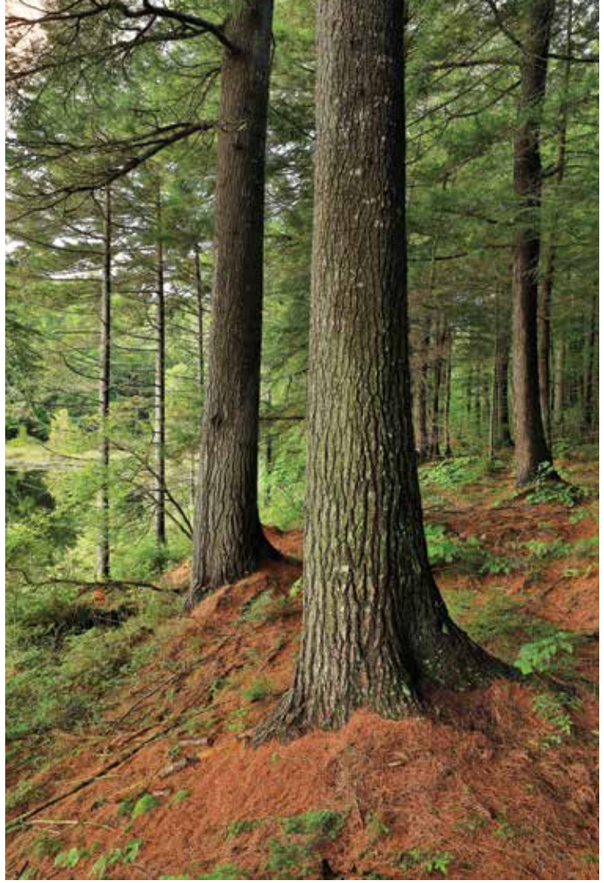
After well over a mile, the surface of Third Lake at last shone like quicksilver through the trees. Whooping with joy, we all but ran down the overgrown track to the put-in. Water lapped gently against the shore, and a single loon bobbed peacefully on the waves. The crucible behind us, we'd at last arrived at the Essex Chain Lakes.

TUCKED INTO THE RELATIVELY LOW, ROLLING TOPOGRAPHY between Newcomb and Indian Lake, the eight interconnected Chain Lakes and their surrounding ponds lie at the heart of nearly 20,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn timberland. Purchased by New York State in 2013 and opened to the public for recreational use, today these lands are almost entirely undeveloped. Most of what remains of the former logging operations—gravel roads and a handful of outbuildings—is being reclaimed by the woods, leaving behind a quiet wilderness that conservationists have called a "paddling paradise."

That—and the quiet afforded by the 1.3-mile canoe carry—is what drew us here during a spell of warm, sunny weather early last October. For years, almost since the day my wife told me she was pregnant, I'd pictured father-daughter backcountry trips like this one. I wanted to give Oaklee the gift of exploring wilderness, but not just to soak in the scenic beauty of shimmering lakes set against ancient mountains or to encounter wildlife on its own terms. I also wanted her to feel the quiet self-assurance that comes with accessing remote places on your own power, and then relying on yourself to meet basic needs. I wanted us both to be challenged, in other words, but not so much as to discourage future trips. The Chain Lakes appeared to fit the bill perfectly—intimate enough to paddle their entire length in a day, but remote enough to make even a small adventure feel outsized.

IT WAS AFTER FIVE P.M. BY THE TIME WE LAUNCHED OUR canoe onto Third Lake, so we focused on reaching our campsite as quickly as possible. On the recommendation of a local guide, we bypassed the sites on the largest lake in favor of a more isolated location. "Fires aren't allowed on lakeside campsites," said





The author and his five-year-old daughter, Oaklee, far right, spent 48 hours in the Essex Chain Lakes without encountering anyone but loons and other wildlife. PAGES 36–37: **The Blackwell Stillwater extends several miles along the Hudson River.**

Photograph of the author's daughter by Peter Koch

IF YOU GO

To access the Essex Chain Lakes, follow the signs south from Route 28N in Newcomb. Take Goodnow Flow Road 4.3 miles, turn right onto Woody's Road (paved at first, then seasonal use gravel) and left on the gravel Cornell/ Deer Pond Road, which you follow 4.4 miles to the parking lot and kiosk at Deer Pond trailhead. From there, it's a 1.3-mile portage to Third Lake, which can be reduced by carrying 0.25 mile to Deer Pond, and paddling across it to a second, 0.5-mile carry.

Contact Dave and Ruth Olbert at Cloud-Splitter Outfitters (cloudpsplitteroutfitters.com, 518-582-2583), in Newcomb, for up-to-date intel on water levels and paddling conditions. Their mom-and-pop outpost is also conveniently located for last-minute trip provisions, from fishing gear and camp fuel to basic groceries.

OTHER APPROVED ADVENTURES

Cyclists starting from Deer Pond Road can reach several lakes and ponds, as well as the Cedar River, via 20 miles of gravel woods roads. Bring a wide-tired gravel bike at the minimum, though a suspension-equipped mountain bike is recommended to make the journey comfortable.

Peter Hornbeck, of Hornbeck Boats, recommends paddling the Blackwell Stillwater, a flatwater section of the Hudson that extends for several miles in either direction from the put-in at Polaris Bridge, and also grants access to the Goodnow River. Mike Carr, the conservationist perhaps most responsible for securing the Essex Chain Lakes, recommends continuing south on the (Class I–II) Hudson to the lone campsite at its junction with the Cedar River, which he says "feels like a spiritual place."

Carr also recommends a floatplane trip to isolated Pine Lake, which can be arranged via Helms Aero Service (518-624-3931) or Payne's Air Service (paynesairservice.com, 315-357-3971).

For more information, visit www.dec.ny.gov/lands/91888.html.

The eight lakes of the Essex Chain—including Fifth Lake, above—lie at the heart of 20,000 acres of former Finch, Pruyn forestland purchased by the state in 2013 and now open to the public.

Dave Olbert, of Cloud-Splitter Outfitters, in Newcomb, "except for two really nice ones on First Lake that are supposed to be reserved for floatplane use." After a moment's pause, he added, "If I went back, I'd camp at one of those spots. Nobody's really using them, and I don't think you'll have any issues with DEC [Department of Environmental Conservation]." Opting to take my chances, we set off across the water, making good time to the short, wooded path that would carry us around a two-foot-high beaver dam from the still, tannin-stained water of Second Lake to an inlet on First.

Pushing off into the riffles below the dam, we paddled swiftly out of the inlet and took in our first glimpse of home for the next two days. From shore to shore, First Lake was a mirror that reflected pink-purple wisps of cloud, shady evergreens and a fireworks display of autumn red, orange and yellow hardwoods.

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Here and there, a bone-white birch punctuated the shoreline and, above it all, the crown of a 700-foot-tall hill glowed orange in the setting sun. This scene, and these colors, were enough to make Thomas Kinkade jealous, but, with precious little daylight remaining, we couldn't dally.

Hugging the north shore, we quickly came upon a tent campsite—one of 13 set directly on the lakes—laid out under a stand of hemlocks, with an expansive view of the lake and the sun-bathed hill. While Oaklee wandered the small clearing, exploring our base camp, I scrambled to set up in the fading light. Pulling tent and poles from their stuff sack—an oddly small bundle, it seemed—I unfurled them to discover I'd packed the wrong tent. Not the roomy two-person shelter I'd so often shared with my wife, but a mesh-covered backpacking model that would cramp even a chipmunk family. Even worse, I had the larger

tent's rain fly. So much for self-assurance, I thought, recalling the subfreezing overnight forecast.

Retreat flashed briefly through my mind, until I remembered there were two paddles and two portages between us and the car. Anyway, I wasn't about to give up on our adventure so easily. With food, sleeping bags, warm clothes and, well, most of a shelter, we'd be just fine, so long as this weather held. Stretching the ill-fitting fly over our tiny tent with a sigh, I resolved to focus on our other basics before night closed in and temps bottomed out.

Those included locating the "throne room," an open-air privy set down a short trail through the trees; filtering lukewarm water from the lake using a handheld backpacking pump; cooking up a simple meal of tuna fish in ramen noodles; and, finally, gathering sticks for a campfire. All the while, Oaklee stayed glued to my hip, observing and helping where she could, but mostly just sheltering in the reassuring safety of my presence. When she was skeptical of the throne, I sold her on its great amenities: "Look, Your Majesty," I said, gesturing grandly at everything that wasn't there. "Built-in ventilation, lovely views,

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Aside from the lakes themselves, the Essex Chain Complex includes portions of the Cedar River, top, and the Hudson River.

Photograph of the author's daughter by Peter Koch

and you never have to worry about getting stuck in here." When she said the water tasted off, I got down on all fours with a LifeStraw water filter to slurp directly from the lake. When we gathered deadwood, she insisted on carrying sticks together to the fire ring.

It was getting late—way beyond Oaklee's bedtime—so we built just enough of a fire to roast s'mores and take the edge from the cold. Then we crawled into our tent, snuggled into our sleeping bags, and I read to her from a surprisingly macabre kid's classic by Roald Dahl. Within a minute or two of switching off my headlamp, she was asleep.

THE NEXT MORNING, WE AWOKE ABRUPTLY TO THE GRATING calls of blue jays in the trees overhead. Ornithologists call these vocalizations "jeers," and that seems apt. Perhaps they were jeering us for sleeping in so late. Outside, fog had mostly lifted off the lake's surface, but was still hanging low over the trees and blocking out the morning sun. Topping ourselves off with oatmeal and instant coffee, we prepped for the day's expedition. Oaklee filtered water into our bottles, while I loaded daypacks and studied a map.

Our plan was simple: Explore the length of First Lake into its outlet (the so-called "Chain Drain"), then paddle the entire Essex Chain sequentially to at least Seventh Lake—Eighth Lake requires a portage, and I wasn't sure we'd have time for it—and back, following a different shoreline in either direction. Along the way, we'd indulge our fancy and investigate whatever might grab our attention. This was exploration, after all. "Ready to set sail, Captain?" I called out to Oaklee, who was already wearing her swimmies over a base layer. "Aye, aye, Sailor," she replied gamely. "All aboard!"

THERE'S MORE TO THE ESSEX CHAIN COMPLEX THAN THE lakes themselves. Four miles of the shallow, riffle-choked Cedar River flow up from the hamlet of Indian Lake and through the southern part of the unit, delighting white-water paddlers when snowmelt and/or heavy rains conspire to raise water levels. Knobby-tired cyclists and equestrians can explore deep into the complex—all the way to the wild northern banks of the Cedar—via the 20-mile network of grav- *Continued on page 64*

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el logging roads, though a few stretches suffer from disrepair and are being gradually reclaimed by the woods. And nearly a dozen miles of the Hudson River, from Newcomb to the Indian River confluence, run along its eastern edge and were only opened to paddlers when the state acquired the land.

This last part was recommended to us by legendary Adirondack boatbuilder Pete Hornbeck, when we stopped by his Olmstedville shop to borrow a boat. "I love the Hudson River, where it's called the Blackwell Stillwater," he said. "I've spent a lot of time paddling, fishing and painting in that area." Unfortunately, water levels were too low this late in the season to paddle the Hudson. Anyway, putting together an overnight trip on the Hudson requires more paddling prowess than the Essex Chain itself, not to mention the more complex logistics of a shuttle. Hornbeck granted that the lakes made a fine, beginner-friendly consolation prize. "The Essex Chain is a bit of an enigma—so peaceful and beautiful, but so lightly used. You'll have a great time!" His son-in-law, Josh Trombley, set us up with a nimble 14-foot Nomad that weighed just 25 pounds, the perfect pond-hopping boat for such a waterscape.

Halfway to the outlet, we stopped to have a look around the second floatplane site. An uprooted tree had fallen into the lake, damaging the fire ring. Behind it, a canoe carry trail rose steeply into the woods where it would eventually connect to yet another body of water, Grassy Pond. We wandered the trail for a bit, looking for animals and calling out whenever we spotted a trail marker (no doubt scaring away any animals). In the interest of science, and to show her mother when we got home, Oaklee drew some tree fungus in her journal. Back in the boat, she reminded me that she was not only the expedition naturalist, but also the captain. And she looked the part, binoculars scanning the shoreline, finger pointing wherever her fancy dictated.

At the end of the lake we encountered our first beaver dam. It was easy enough to bridge the lightweight canoe over it without removing Oaklee, and slowly we continued down the meandering wa-

terway, the banks closing in from either side. Around the next bend, we encountered another dam, and it appeared a pattern was developing. After consulting with the captain, I turned us around, but not before we heard the telltale slap of a beaver tail on the water.

Retracing our route from the previous day under cloudless, bluebird skies, we crossed First and, in a blink, Second Lakes. On 216-acre Third Lake, the views opened up and we could make out Dun Brook Mountain and, in the distance beyond it, Blue Mountain. We followed a loon toward Fourth Lake, then studied some cliffs along the north shore before being attracted to a tiny, cedar-covered island. "Let's find out if there's treasure buried on it!" Oaklee said, calling for a landing. No treasure was in evidence, but its sun-baked rocks served as a fine spot for a snack. We named it "The Island of Fallen Trees" after a massive complex of uprooted cedars on its western side. Such are the rights of explorers. Fourth Lake was small and intimate, and we watched a belted kingfisher working its waters from overhanging trees. An oversized metal culvert connects Fourth and Fifth Lakes beneath a raised causeway, but it's narrow enough that you can't paddle inside it. Instead, you pull yourself along a rope that's hung along its entire length. Needless to say, Oaklee loved this and insisted on several repeat passages before I lured her up onto the causeway with the promise of lunch and a game of UNO.

Back at Base Camp, Oaklee was a changed person from the night before. She wanted to do everything—filter the water, light the camp stove and gather deadwood for a campfire—and no longer cared if I was right by her side.

That's how the rest of the "expedition" went—the two of us lily-dipping and drifting, enjoying a quiet paddle with stunning views and no real agenda other than to have a look around. The low-profile boat enhanced our physical connection to the water, bringing us close enough to easily touch its surface, and also to each other. Oaklee sat between my legs, and I had to reach around her to propel us with a double-bladed paddle. It made for an intimate, sometimes awkward journey, when one of us would lose focus and I'd knock her with the paddle. It was one of the trade-offs, I wryly suggested, for not having to do any work all day. A strong west wind had picked up by the time we reached Sixth Lake, and we decided to head back to camp to enjoy the evening.

Back at base camp, Oaklee was a changed person from the night before. She wanted to do everything—filter the water, light the camp stove and gather deadwood for a campfire—and no longer cared if I was right by her side. While I was hauling wood, she ran off to the "throne room," and didn't bother to tell me until she came back. After finishing her mac 'n' cheese, she hopped up from the table with the LifeStraw and slurped water directly from the lakeshore. Oaklee had arrived, strong and self-possessed, and was beginning to feel more like a partner on this trip than a passenger. Afterwards, we cooked s'mores over a massive, crackling fire, and watched the moon rise over First Lake while a screech owl cooed nearby.

The next morning, we packed up and paddled out. Scanning the shore of Third Lake for the carry trail, we at last located it by the overjoyed whoops of another party of paddlers who'd finally reached water's edge after the long haul in. A group of five friends who'd met at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, they were sweaty but clearly exhilarated to be out in the woods together. We chatted for a bit, and they said they come to the Essex Chain every year for its beauty and solitude. The first people we'd encountered in 48 hours, we knew exactly what they meant. ▲