A Ranger Problem

Doing more with less—again

BY LUKE CYPHERS

As the first half of 2020 has shown, New York State Forest Rangers are blessed, and burdened, with a wide-ranging portfolio. In February and early March, rangers managed an influx of winter hikers on popular High Peaks trails, including one March weekend where cars on the Adirondack Loj Road were parked bumper to bumper. "I've never seen our trailheads so busy in winter," says Scott van Laer, a ranger based in the High Peaks who also serves as a union representative.

During the same time period, rangers performed difficult backcountry searches, calling in a State Police helicopter to aid in a successful effort to find a missing woman near Mount Marcy, and performing an overnight operation to rescue a pair of hikers, one who died of hypothermia, in the Dix Range.

Meanwhile, numerous rangers assigned to the Adirondacks were busy aiding New York's coronavirus response downstate, with several becoming infected themselves. "They're dealing with COVID-19," says Michael Barrett, executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club, "because they're familiar with the state's incident command system, and many municipalities are not."

Yet in the midst of this frenzied activity, taking place during what's supposed to be their slow season, rank-and-file rangers received a familiar message from the state: Help is not on the way.

The novel coronavirus saw to that.

At the beginning of the year, van Laer says the Police Benevolent Association of New York State, which represents the forest rangers, had been asking the legislature for 40 additional ranger positions. The union has argued for years that the jump in recreational use on public lands, especially the recent influx of 10 to 12 million visitors per year to the Adirondacks, has spread the ranger force dangerously thin.

Coming into 2020, it looked like they might finally net an increase in staff, says Assemblyman Dan Stec, a Republican from Queensbury whose father was a forest ranger, and who has long been a legislative advocate for the force. "There were a lot of people on the same page," Stec says. "A very diverse spectrum of groups and individuals were encouraging more staffing for the rangers, including myself. I think it had a fighting chance this year. I don't know about 40, but an increased number for sure"—as many as 10 in the High Peaks, where Stec and others say they're needed most.

Over more than a century the duties of forest rangers, originally woodsmen hired to fight fires in the Forest Preserve, have evolved. Today they're responsible for more than ever.

Photographs of Cold River fire in 1953 and Kane Mountain fire tower in 1967 courtesy of www.nysforestrangers.com. Ranger and Smokey the Bear photograph by Nancie Battaglia

The pandemic and the resultant budget crisis, however, killed any chance to expand the ranks. "I had no problem pounding the table three months ago and saying, 'I want more staff,'" Stec says. "But when the state can't keep up with the amount of people applying for unemployment, and we've been told there will be a $10- to $15-billion shortfall, it's hard for me or anybody to pound the table and say, 'We need more staff today.'"

It's wait till next year, again.

"There aren't enough rangers today, and there weren't enough rangers yesterday," says David Gibson, managing partner of the conservation group Adirondack Wild. "There have been ups and downs, but essentially it's remained static for 50 years."

Indeed, the ranger force was understaffed more than three decades ago under Governor Cuomo, and the union says it's understaffed now under Governor Cuomo.

Louis Curth knows this well. The retired career ranger authored a comprehensive history of the force in 1987. Curth's book tells how a scrappy bunch of woodsmen hired to fight fires in the state Forest Preserve in 1885 evolved over a century into a group of tough, determined, jacks-of-all-trades who not only battled blazes but tended trails, protected pines from larcenous loggers and saved stranded hunters and hikers. They organized local community members in conservation and rescue efforts, and even went to schools dressed as Smokey the Bear to educate children on preventing forest fires.

But even as Curth was working on the

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state-sponsored book in 1985, Governor Mario Cuomo's administration proposed cutting 50 ranger positions, which would have left the state with well under 100. "They had already whittled down the ranger force by attrition, and you can just imagine that this was the end of the line," Curth says today. "I'm sure somebody in Albany had some kind of devious idea that they were going to get rid of their rangers because they were too independent."

A public outcry scrapped the plan and saved the positions. Turned out people really liked forest rangers.

They still do. Late last year, Albany officials briefly floated the idea of merging the 134-person ranger force, which includes 108 field rangers, with the state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) police as an "efficiency" measure.

The union has argued for years that the jump in recreational use on public lands, especially the recent influx of 10 to 12 million visitors per year to the Adirondacks, has spread the ranger force dangerously thin.

The idea died when environmental groups got wind of it and lobbied the legislature. "We said, 'Look, you shouldn't merge them,'" Barrett says. "The rangers have a unique culture that benefits everyone. I didn't see any resistance or counter-argument to that."

That unique culture makes for "a wide-ranging skill set," van Laer says, one that keeps state forest rangers perpetually busy. The record-setting numbers of recreational users have led to five straight years with more than 300 search-and-rescue missions, with at least 100 a year in the High Peaks. Climate disasters such as Hurricane Irene in 2011 and Sandy in 2012, and the manhunt in the wake of the 2015 Dannemo-

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ra prison break, called on the force's aforementioned incident command expertise. Wearing their law-enforcement hats, rangers help to police timber theft, poaching, trail damage, parking problems, campsite disputes and people who feed bears. They also engage the public in less confrontational situations, schooling both backcountry and frontcountry users on how to enjoy the wilderness without spoiling it.

They do all this while adhering to their original mission: They put out fires, literally. And not just in New York. Forest rangers participate in a federal program that ships fire-control experts to national hot spots, and they've fought the devastating western-state wildfires of the last several years.

"We get federal funding for it, and it saves state taxpayers money," van Laer says. "We love that program. It's not just about fires. It's every natural disaster. We're used not just in the Adirondacks, but anywhere in the U.S."

All of this work comes at a cost. With more visitors lured to the Adirondacks by the state's successful tourism promotion campaigns and social media, and more public lands to patrol thanks to the state's aggressive wilderness acquisition program, the force gets spread thinner and thinner.

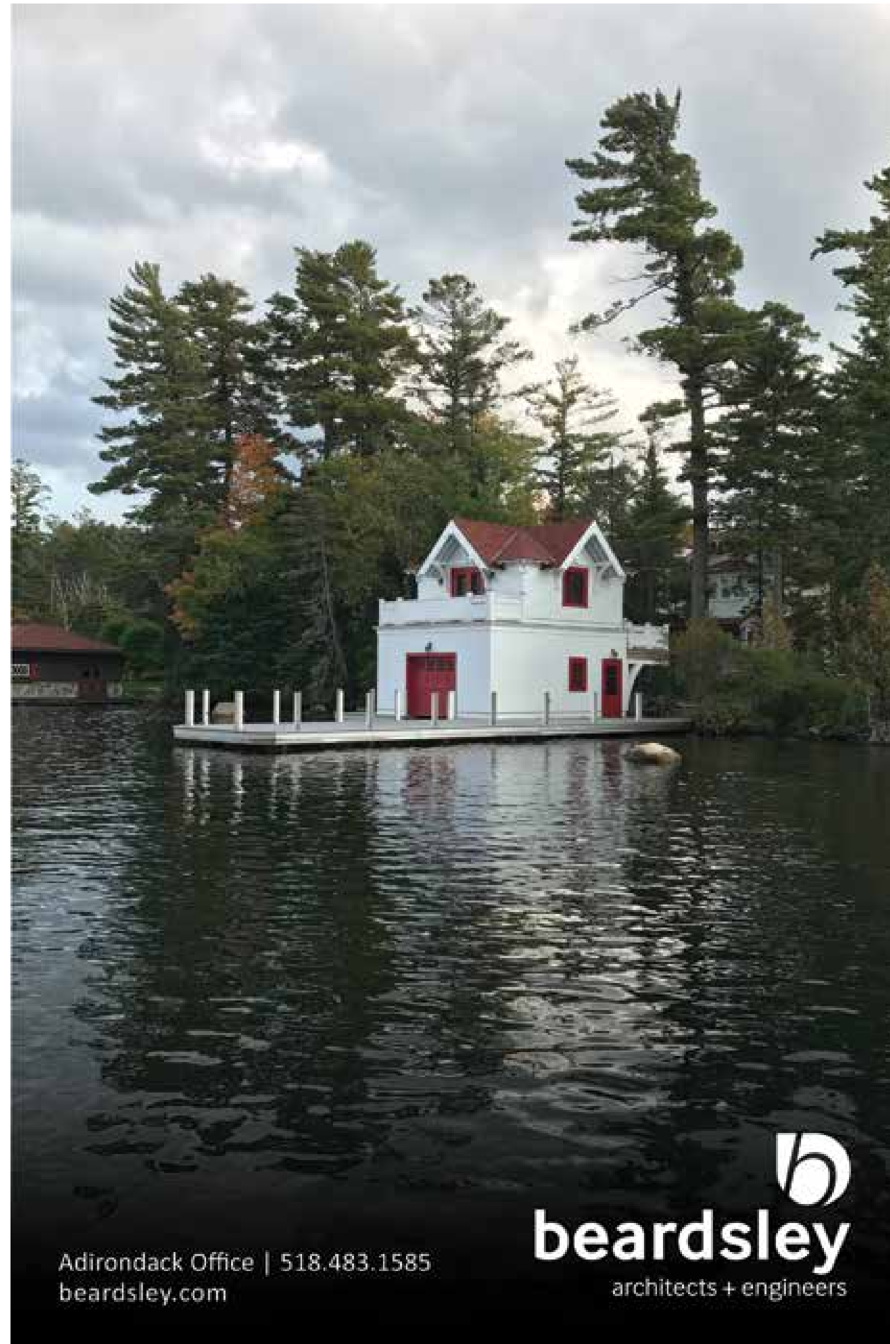
"These are extremely dedicated people," van Laer says of his fellow rangers. "That rescue call is what we live for. But we're people. We do burn out. We're hanging by a thread now."

For van Laer, the solution has always been a simple equation: More area to cover plus more users should equal more rangers. New York's budgetary math keeps coming up with a different answer, and the ranger numbers over time have stayed flat.

"When I talk to the legislature," van Laer says, "they're like, 'Yes, we want more rangers.' But when it's time to go to the governor, every year the budget comes out, we don't get it."

Van Laer believes the problem lies less with Cuomo than with the DEC. "I think they're just unwilling to give in to a union request," he says.

The DEC tells a different story, saying



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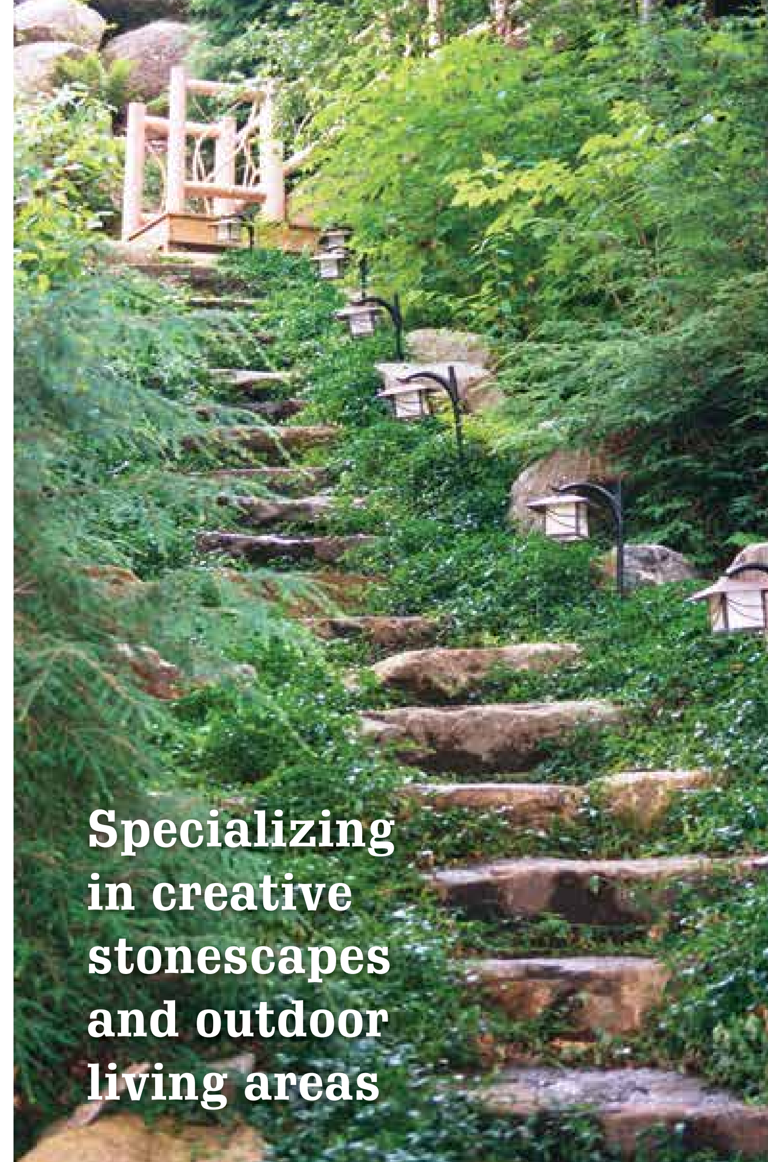

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it's committed to ensuring forest ranger staffing remains at high levels, and that "at no time have ranger staffing levels put the hiking community or the natural resources at risk."

It's true that after several years of skipped training academies following the recession of 2008, the DEC graduated 56 fresh-faced rangers from the state's training academy in the past six years, including 14 in December.

"I give the department and the director credit for that," van Laer says. But he adds that the new blood was just enough to replace a wave of retirements and didn't beef up overall numbers.

The DEC also believes new technologies, such as drones, are helping rangers work more efficiently than before. Van Laer disagrees, calling drones "overhyped. We haven't had a single find from a drone in the last three years."

Technology can't replace boots on the ground, he says. "You need people."

With more staffing, Barrett believes rangers can be more proactive, spending time in backcountry outposts where they can survey and anticipate problems, and getting out into the community to educate hikers before they get into trouble. As things stand, in the summer busy season, the understaffed force is often tied to their vehicles so they can access major trailheads for the inevitable rescue calls.

More staffing could also lead to a more diverse ranger force that looks more like the state it serves, according to Curth. "You look around, and the ranger force is lily white," he says. "That's got to change."

Debates over new hires must now wait for another time, one where coronavirus doesn't rule our lives. "I'm frustrated," Stec says, "but what can you do? You've got to play the hand that's dealt to you. And right now, we've got a generational challenge in front of us."

The assemblyman hopes the issue is back on the table in 2021.

So does van Laer, though he won't count on anything. "I get it," he says. "Every year is a bad budget year."

And this year, he concedes, it's actually true.

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Real Estate Rush

In these times, an Adirondack property is more appealing than ever

BY LUKE CYPHERS

In June, New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand put her Albany-area home on the market, and her press office confirmed she was looking to relocate in the Lake Placid–Saranac Lake area. Gillibrand is a professional politician, so it's her job to know which way the wind blows. And this summer, it's blowing north, with gale force.

For months now, real-estate agents across the Adirondack Park have been deluged with home buyers from cities in central and western New York, from the New York City area, and from points farther south. The summer sales surge is expected to more than offset the spring's forced business shutdown due to the pandemic, and turn what had been a hot 2019 housing market into a 2020 inferno. Everyone agrees that COVID-19 was the accelerant.

What's selling?

Photograph from iStock

"Everything," says Dawn Timm, owner of Timm Associates Sotheby's International Realty, whose region includes Blue Mountain Lake, Long Lake and Old Forge. "From multi-million-dollar houses to $10,000 lots, and everything in between. I think people want a place to escape to."

The surge is rippling across the park, says Michael Coughlin, the association executive for the Clinton County Board of Realtors. "Realtors are so busy they don't really have time to understand who their clients are."

July sales figures for Clinton, Essex, Franklin, Hamilton and Warren counties showed pending sales spiked to 292 units, up 83.6 percent over July 2019, with prices on closed sales increasing 25 percent from the year before.

Nobody is sure yet how many of the new buyers are purchasing second homes or primary residences, or if any of the second-home purchasers are open to settling in the park permanently.

What the salespeople do know is there's a land rush, and clients are ready to buy. Right now.

Last year, Coughlin says, properties were selling fairly quickly—drawing offers 30 to 45 days after listing. "Now, if you put it up Friday, by Monday you'll have multiple offers."

Buyers frequently pay in cash. What's remarkable is the market is devoid of one reliable source of purchasers: Canadians, who've been barred from crossing the border since March.

Jodi Gunther, president of the Northern Adirondack Board of Realtors, says the bidding frenzy extends into the park's priciest houses, which in normal times "tended to sit for a couple of years."

No longer. Even before her employer, Berkshire Hathaway/Adirondack Premier Properties, reopened from the government-mandated shutdown in May, she says, "Our office sold four or five properties in excess of two million dollars, just on the basis of FaceTime videos and the virtual tours that our websites were posting."

Camp Woodmere on Upper St. Regis Lake drew 14 bidders to an early August auction—including, according to the Albany *Times-Union*, two billionaires and "a famous and current actor"—and sold for $5.21 million to a private businessman who was not identified.

The pandemic and the hardships it imposed on urban areas, especially the New York City region, are spurring the spending spree. "We always see an influx of people who realize the quality of life up here is excellent, that the scenery and the open space is very desirable," says Luisa Craige-Sherman, the association executive for the Southern Adirondack Realtors. "But I think the pandemic has really driven that home even more."

Indeed, coronavirus has scared people with money and flexible jobs into

Last year, properties were selling fairly quickly–drawing offers 30 to 45 days after listing. "Now, if you put it up Friday, by Monday you'll have multiple offers."

seeking safer spaces to work and live. With low infection rates and minimal deaths from COVID-19 thus far, the Adirondacks fits the bill.

For many already living here, however, the hot housing market is creating fears of its own. Prices are rising fast, and younger renters who might have been able find homes for under $180,000 a couple of years ago no longer can. "So you're seeing people who can't move into that first home," Coughlin says. "There's no inventory."

Brian Wells, Indian Lake's town supervisor, agrees. He says post-COVID sales have combined with previous conversions of many properties to Airbnb rentals to squeeze out locals. "I feel bad for the young kids who come out of school and don't want to move away but can't afford to stay," he says.

This has ripple effects, too. "Our fire department is struggling with numbers for young recruits," Wells says, "because we don't have the pool to draw from."

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The influx of new neighbors is also generating worries for already angst-ridden school district administrators, who are well aware of the market activity but unsure of its impacts on the education system.

As of early August, the Keene Central School District was expecting 163 students when school starts in the fall, a modest increase from the 159 enrollees last year. But those numbers fluctuate in an ordinary year, and this is no ordinary year. Superintendent Daniel Mayberry says he's heard from a number of families who have moved into the school district to live with relatives in the wake of the pandemic. "A lot of them have to do with unknowns regarding jobs, some overseas, some in other states," he says.

Indian Lake Central Schools reported at least four additional students in late August, bringing enrollment to 114, but was bracing for more. "Those numbers are going to go up," said District Clerk Dianna Wilder. The schools have been hearing from second-home owners and new buyers waiting for their sales to close, and expect "a lot of last-minute" enrollment.

Diane Fox, the Saranac Lake district's superintendent, says she's seen no increase in registrations yet. But a wild card is the number of people already using second homes as primary residences during the pandemic. "Our seasonal homes have been occupied much earlier this year," she says. Some of them have children who may continue to do distance learning through their downstate districts for now, but that could change later in the school year.

Most Adirondack districts have plenty of room for new students. Lake Placid superintendent Roger Catania says his district peaked around 15 years ago at about 950 kindergarten-through-12th-grade students. In 2019, that number had shrunk to 600, including pre-K. "In a normal year," he says, "we could easily grow by 50 percent."

But again, these are not normal times. Ask Long Lake school superintendent Noelle Short. Last fall, the cafeteria had

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a "surge capacity" of up to 50 additional students. "Now it's 10," Short says, because of social-distancing requirements.

That's just one example of how her tiny district and its 65 students could be affected by even a small enrollment bump. One new family with three children, for example, could require redesigning an entire bus route, because of the time pressures associated with cleaning the vehicles between runs.

The bright side, if there is one, is that educators across the region are now accustomed to making changes on the fly. "We've learned a lot since March," Short says.

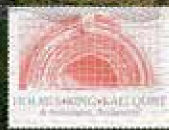
So far, none of the district officials *Adirondack Life* interviewed predicts an immediate, massive spike in students, for which they're thankful. "It's not a good year for a surge," Catania says.

On the other hand, they all welcome the prospect of growth in the wake of a catastrophe. It's happened before. "The region kind of saw it after 9-11," Mayberry says. "We had families who weighed their options and their risks for where they live and what they do, and decided to settle here."

The hope is the newcomers will start to see the region as more than just a verdant panic room. In contrast to places like New York City and Westchester County, Catania says, his schools offer small class sizes and low-stress extracurricular opportunities in music and sports.

Catania and Stephanie Colby, a real-estate agent in Lake Placid, were part of an informal group that met last year to discuss ways to market those advantages. "We talked about why more people don't choose to live and work here," Colby says. "The answer has always been because it's so remote, and there aren't the same job opportunities. Now the world has changed, and working remotely is totally acceptable."

Not every community is as well-positioned as the Tri-Lakes region. In Indian Lake, Wells says limited broadband and cell service, and the prospect of driving an hour or more to a major grocery store or hospital, remain deterrents to



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Kate Fish, the executive director of the nonprofit Adirondack North Country Association, worries about the potential "Aspenization" of real estate across the region, where the wealthy part-timers are disconnected from the rest of the hollowed-out community. She's been predicting an exodus of urban dwellers to the Adirondacks for years, though she thought climate change, and not a pandemic, would be the catalyst. "For a lot of reasons, there's a reckoning for urban environments," she says.

The key now, Fish says, is to encourage the recent buyers to engage with their new surroundings beyond merely enjoying the fresh air—serving on school boards, lending their talents to

The key now is to encourage the recent buyers to engage with their new surroundings—serving on school boards, lending their talents to the community and shopping locally rather than ordering everything from Amazon.

community groups and shopping locally rather than ordering everything from Amazon.

On the latter front, she's seen signs of hope. Local farmers' markets have thrived since the COVID crisis, as have many merchants, even with the cancellation of keystone events such as the Ironman triathlon. "In Lake Placid, Main Street is having its best summer in years," she says.

While Lake Placid is unique, every part of the park is getting a longer look as a long-term home. And it happened without a single advertisement to get people to move to the park. "Indirectly, our serenity and the outdoors and all the things that make it great to live here have been promoted," Gunther says. "COVID did a great marketing plan for the Adirondacks."

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Rachel Finn

Reading the river with a world-class angler

BY LUKE CYPHERS

Finn, a fly-fishing guide at Wilmington's Hungry Trout Fly Shop and "sport ambassador" for Patagonia, fishes a tributary of the Ausable River.

Rachel Finn photograph by Jamie West McGiver

When Rachel Finn talks, you can't help but listen. Partly because of the surroundings. She's a fly-fishing guide at Wilmington's Hungry Trout Fly Shop, which means her stage is often the middle of a quietly babbling brook, her auditorium a cathedral of towering pines, hemlocks and maples. "I love it when the sun is out," Finn says, "because it filters through the leaves and it's beautiful."

Apparently, the fish don't mind. "I don't think talking scares them," she says. Maybe the hardy trout of the Ausable River watershed just like her material.

It's hard not to. Finn is funny as hell, with an intellectual yet earthy vocabulary. She tells an interviewer to tie wading-boot laces "tight, but not concubine tight." When she lights up a cigar—the smoke helps keep bugs at bay—she offers: "I hope it doesn't offend you. But if it does, tough shit. Stand upwind."

Finn can talk about seemingly anything, and does so in a variety of theatrical voices, fitting because she's a passionate Broadway fan. "I'm the Elaine Stritch of fly-fishing," she says. She's also an athlete who grew up playing street hockey and soccer against boys in suburban Boston, and who later became a ski instructor at Whiteface. She's a world-class angler, with sponsorships from Scott Fly Rods, Nautilus Fly Reels and Patagonia, for which she serves as a company "sport ambassador." And she's an artist with an MFA from Yale, a past life in a Brooklyn loft, and the mental scars to prove it. "I tried the New York art scene," she says. "Nasty people."

For two decades she's been working out of her studio next to her Wilmington home, not only painting but creating collages and other tactile visual works, frequently inspired by the natural world, often with materials used for fly-fishing. "I'll use the patterning of stone fly wings as a jumping-off point," she says. "The patterns on their wings are as beautiful as the traceries at Chartres."

Finn is less eager to discuss her origin story. "I'm tired of the same old," and here she puts on a husky, dumb-guy voice, "'How did you learn to fly-fish? Where are you from?'"

Today, on a warm summer morning, en route to a tributary of the Ausable River in the eastern High Peaks, Finn wants to talk about climate change: how it's affecting not just the planet, but the way she makes her living, and the thing she's addicted to. "If there were a Betty Ford Clinic for fly-fishing, I've said before I'd be the Elizabeth Taylor, but now I think I'm the Liza Minnelli."

She's never seen anything like the weather patterns of recent years. "Outrageous temperature spikes," she says. "And winter's the same way. Everything is extreme now. There's no middle."

When she first moved to the Adirondacks 28 years ago, nobody needed an air conditioner. "A hot day," and here she breaks into a loud North Country accent, "'Whoa, that was a *hawwwt* one'—was like 85. It never used to hit 90. And I saw in the news yesterday we've had 14 days of 90 degrees so far. That's crazy."

More disturbing were the river readings this summer. "We had lethal temperatures," she says, voice rising.

Trout are cold-water creatures, requiring temps in the low 60s or below to thrive. Finn won't fish for trout in water warmer than 70 degrees, because the stress of getting caught will kill them.

In June and July, the Ausable and its tributaries ran low, and the sun baked the exposed stones in the stream beds. "We had water temps above 80 degrees in the Ausable," she says. "The only reason we didn't have a massive fish kill was because we had some fast water left"—which meant there were enough places for the brook and brown trout to get enough oxygen to survive.

On this day, Finn is fishing a high-elevation stream that shall remain nameless. She's a guide, after all, and doesn't want to reveal trade secrets. Also, she's on private land. "Trespassing is part of fishing," she says, grinning. "I mean, I have permission. I got it 20 years ago. I'm sure they'll remember."

She dips a thermometer in the stream and finds a nice 63-degree temperature. Earlier in the summer, this usually reliable spot produced almost no fish, and she's worried. So she's doing some reconnaissance.

Fishing and art require observation, she says. "And I'm a good observer." She explains the rudiments of fishing "pocket water," finding the confluences of currents where fish can find food and cover from predators. "They don't want to work that hard," Finn says. "They're

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lazy."

Finn is not. She enjoys wading upstream, against the current, finding a spot, and moving on, preferring the middle of the brook to the shore. She likes the feel of the water. It's a workout, but a calming one, with frequent stops to take it all in. "The best part of all of this is looking around," she says. "If you're not doing that, why are you out here?"

The conversation isn't all jokes and happy talk. Finn has faced plenty of hardship in recent years. In the past decade, she's had a knee replaced, then had to have it re-replaced because of a faulty part. "The pain was unrelenting," she says. She survived a rare form of cancer and a grueling chemotherapy regimen that required frequent trips to Boston. And last October, her partner of 37 years, Jeff Kirschman, died at the age of 65 after a five-month battle with cancer. He was the man who helped her fall in love with the outdoors, the man who taught her to fly-fish, the man she settled down with in the Adirondacks.

In January, she traveled to Argentina by herself. "It was a good place to go and deal with my grief," she says. "People don't know how to deal with it. I got tired of people running the other way because they didn't know what to say. And I don't blame them. We don't deal with grief well as a culture."

The trip helped. The fishing was good, the people better.

Finn likes big fish. But on the small tributaries of the Ausable, the wild brook trout that average four inches in length are more fun to catch than a stocked lunker on the main river. The pleasure comes in reading the water.

"See where all that water comes together?" she says, pointing to a small dark pool. "In a textbook, a fish should be there." She casts, and immediately, a little brookie hits it. Some fish she hooks, some she doesn't. No matter.

She keeps wading, finding new pockets, casting, and getting hit after hit. Before gently releasing one fish, she fawns over the gorgeous geometry and coloring that make brook trout so beautiful out of the water and so invisible to predators in it. "Perfection," she says.

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Finn moves upstream to the final stop, a deep pool at the base of a snow-white waterfall tumbling 30 feet down a mossy, rounded rock face. She changes tactics, replacing the grasshopper dry fly with a wooly bugger nymph that floats beneath the surface. Within minutes, she's getting hits from much bigger fish, but not hooking them. "I'm not fishing very well today," she sighs.

No sooner does she say that than—BAM!—a fish strikes, bending her pole. Finn reels it in carefully, as it flaps and fights, and she can't contain her excitement. "Monster!" she says, bringing in a brookie that's easily a foot long.

"Fishing is about faith," she says. "Ya gotta believe!"

Finn calls it a day.

Back at her studio, she displays the wares of her other career, including her rendering of a fish that wound up on a Patagonia hat. She shows the fly boxes she decorates with duck feathers and epoxy, or with chenille that's used to tie flies—"They're like small paintings to me," she says. She's made several for Patagonia founder Yvon Chouinard.

She opens the door to the house and out come a pack of gleeful English and Llewellin setters, the ones Jeff used to hunt birds with. "That's Riff, short for riffle, which is part of a river, and this is Nikki, and this is Mister," she says. "They've got a lot of energy."

So does Finn, though she insists she doesn't. She points to the garden that she says needs tending, to the fence she says needs fixing. "My husband was amazing," she says. "He was always doing projects, and I was always trying to get out of it so I could go fishing. So now I have to do everything, but I'm still, like," and here her voice gets low, "probably out fishing."

She laughs her big laugh, with no shame. Why would there be? Fishing is about faith.

Life doesn't always go as planned. The fish aren't always where they should be. The weather and our bodies betray us. Rachel Finn knows these things too well, but she has an answer for them.

She walks upstream. That's where the hope is.