

A Walk in the Woods - May 2010

By David Falkenham, UNH Cooperative Extension Grafton County Forester

Slowly, very slowly, my mind starts to wake up. In my half awake state I smell cool fresh air and I hear the first birds of the morning. Now I remember; I am camping with friends on a very relaxed search for salmon and brook trout. Did I say camping?? Well technically we are sleeping outside, in the backyard of my boss's parent's house on the shoreline of Lake Francis in Pittsburg, NH. On the first morning we used the coffee maker in the kitchen, but on the second morning I insisted on camp coffee and a morning fire to start the summer season off right!

As I wake up from a fresh air induced sleep, I start to note the differences in bird songs from the oak-pine forests in North Haverhill to the spruce-fir forest above the 45th parallel. The oven-bird, cardinal, robin and vireo's that sing all morning in my backyard are now replaced by loons, white throated sparrows, blackburnian warblers and yellow bellied flycatchers. The view from my tent door is phenomenal: Lake Francis in the morning fog... it is 4:30 am.

Coffee, breakfast, fishing, then off we go to the upper Connecticut River between Lake Francis and the First Connecticut Lake. As I leave my truck my first goal is to put a lot of distance between me and the crowds that commonly gather at the bridges along the river (good roads make bad fishing). Into the woods I go, head first into a tangled mess of alder which is part of an expansive wetland along the flood plain of the river. This is not the easiest walking with fly rod in hand.

I slow down and observe the tracks in the mud: deer, bear, moose, woodcock, otter, raccoon and mink. Riparian forests, especially when mixed with tangled stands of alder, are among the richest habitat types that we have. I get down on my knees to look at tracks and imagine being a small animal and how much protection this jungle offers. However I am a 5' 10" bi-ped, not really designed to walk quickly through this stuff, so I continue to struggle through it. I stagger to a stand of spruce/fir which offers much better walking. The game trails continue in all directions, however I head for the river which I can finally see glinting in the sunlight. Sunlight: the fisherman's curse and the non-fisherman's blessing.

As I wade into the river I notice the power and cold temperature of the spring water. These rivers are dam controlled; fortunately the water is drawn off the bottom of the lakes thus keeping the water temperature in the rivers consistently cold. This cold water is great for salmon and brook trout. The water races and runs quickly, smashing into rocks with a white frothy spray and forming dark pools and eddies where the fish rest in the quiet water. The sunlight reflects off everything wet creating a glare that is difficult to see through, but beautiful to look at. What would be truly beautiful now is the site of a three pound brook trout slamming my fly, but in this radiant sunshine that won't happen today.

Near the end of his book "Walden Pond", Henry David Thoreau wrote "Life flows through us like water in a river". There are times today in this fast cold water that I think the river is trying to sweep me away and make me part of it. My liquid mind is swept away, fortunately my body stays upright. I can't say the same for my fishing/camping partner upstream from me.

Though the fish aren't biting, I am still enjoying my time in the woods today. It is reassuring to know that roughly 140,000 acres in the Pittsburg area are protected with a state-owned conservation easement and more than 8,000 acres are owned by the NH Fish and Game Dept.

It is safe to say I will be returning to fish here well into the future; this is open protected land, free for all of us to use respectfully.

I would like to thank Lesley and Ruth Covell for providing exceptional camping accommodations for this trip. Don't be surprised to look out on your lawn some morning and see my tent set up again. I'll make the coffee!