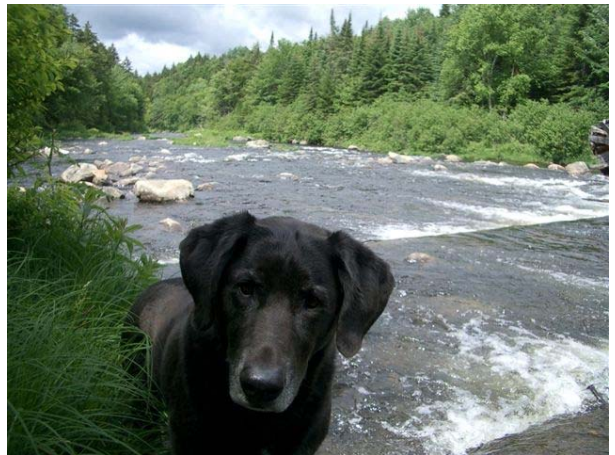


A Walk in the Woods - September 2009

By Dave Falkenham, UNHCE, Grafton County Forester

It has been some time since I last wrote; this last stretch of unpleasant summer weather has not exactly inspired me to walk in the woods. The forests of summer, although lush and green, are often hot, steamy and swarming with insects. The last few walks I was on were short, especially since the old panting dog gave me a look that said that she had had enough walking for one day. Sometimes it is best to wait for cooler weather, and now it is here.



As I write, Hurricane Danny is soaking North Haverhill and my mind drifts like wood smoke to the forest I will be in shortly. Soon I will be camping in Northwest Maine on the north shore of Lake Aziscohos near where the Magalloway River flows into the lake.

My trip, as in years past, will revolve around the big river and the wild spawning brook trout and salmon that move from the lake into the river in the spring and fall. The shore of this beautiful lake makes a great setting for fishing camp, a place to stare at the campfire and sip the best camp coffee ever, the laughter of loons rising like ghosts from the fog.

I set out, fly rod in hand, where the river flows into the lake at a bridge built for log trucks years before. I wander up a snowmobile trail, which is riddled with moose, bear and some deer tracks, to a snowmobile bridge that must span at least one hundred feet across the river. I have walked this trail many times with my wife and four legged companions Hunter and Jewel. At this point I head into the woods. As I continue up river the riparian forest is bottomland northern hardwoods, a beautiful stand of mixed timber with maple, birch, spruce and some hemlock. This area has seen some beaver activity and it is also great habitat for otter and possibly black backed woodpeckers in the adjacent spruce/fir stand. I am between two lakes which are separated by two miles of river and seeing eagles and ospreys overhead is not uncommon. The terrain is still flat; however another mile upstream the terrain changes dramatically. Steep rock ledges form on both sides of the big river squeezing the water into a series of plunge pools and water falls. The ledges, formed by the last receding glacier, are steep and unforgiving, even the moose and deer are forced to go inland to flatter ground. Stunted spruce and mountain ash brilliant with red berries cling to the cliffs and everything is wet from the spray and lack of sunlight reaching the valley floor. The smell in the air is what I dream of: mist, turbulent water, moss on rocks, spruce and balsam fir all come together to form a smell that is too good to describe. This is where I want to fish; the water is fast, the pools are deep and salmon and brook trout dash from behind rocks with focused enthusiasm to grab a fly. This is where life begins for me, and in my mind this is where life began millions of years ago. Steep cliffs, rushing water and spawning brook trout colored the brilliant orange of autumn.

As I fish my way upstream the terrain flattens and the river widens until I reach the remains of an old dam that was built for the purpose of driving logs down the river long before log trucks needed bridges. Now I just need to find my way out of here. It's a long way back to camp where the fire and coffee will dry me out and stories of the day's adventures will be told. How I yearn to feel the sting of the hot mug in my hands and inhale the smell of coffee that reminds me of the million smells of the woods.

This was written in memory of Hunter my longtime four legged walking companion. Your time came before I was ready my friend, but you will always be by my side whenever I walk in the woods.