

# Looking for the remote

■ *A Florida couple claims to have found the spot in the Adirondacks farthest from roads and settlements—a stone’s throw from the Northville-Placid Trail.*

By Josh Wilson

**B**OB MARSHALL, a pioneer of the wilderness-preservation movement of the early twentieth century, worried that the American wilderness was “melting away like the last snowbank on some south-facing mountainside during a hot afternoon in June.” Nearly a century later, Ryan and Rebecca Means share Marshall’s anxiety about the intrusion of roads and development into wild lands.

The husband-and-wife team is behind Project Remote, a unique effort to visit and document the most remote spot in each of the fifty states and try to come up with objective criteria for gauging the remoteness of wilderness. They hope their research will call attention to the diminishing wildness of America’s natural landscapes.

The Meanses, who are conservation biologists from north Florida, define a state’s remote spot as the farthest point, as the crow flies, from settlements and from all roads that are open to motor vehicles. In the nineteen states documented thus far, they have established that a person can get no farther than five miles on average from a road.

In early June, I joined the couple, their three-year-old daughter, Skyla, and Ryan’s twenty-year-old nephew, Cameron, on a trek into the High Peaks Wilderness to visit what they had determined was New York State’s most remote spot. (Later they would visit remote spots in the six New England states.)

Using Geographic Information Systems data and mapping software, Rebecca identified the location along the Cold River, a little less than six miles from the nearest road. Since the trail-less Seward Range stood between our starting point on Coreys Road and our destination, we would have to hike twice that distance.



Photos by Josh Wilson

Rebecca and Ryan Means lead an expedition to what they believe is the remotest spot in the Adirondacks.

As we started down the trail, dark rainclouds loomed overhead. Skyla appeared endlessly inquisitive and restless after the car trip from Florida. She bounced down the trail, stopping every so often to examine plants and catch the occasional toad. When her parents identified flora and fauna by their scientific names, Skyla seemed to absorb this technical information like a sponge.

We did not get a sense of remoteness in this part of the woods. The foot trail more or less follows the boundary between state Forest Preserve and the Ampersand Club, with posted signs and evidence of logging often visible. It soon crosses the Calkins Brook Truck Trail, built in the 1930s by the old Conservation Department, which saw such roads in the Preserve as necessary to control forest fires. Bob Marshall railed against this policy in a 1935 essay, arguing that truck trails “wreck the sense of wilderness completely.” Over seventy-five years later, though motor vehicles have long been banned and vegetation has

reclaimed the corridor, the trail’s origin as a road is still obvious.

Soon after we arrived at the Ward Brook lean-to, four and a half miles from the trailhead, it started to rain heavily. Skyla did not seem to mind the turn in the weather. Now riding in a child carrier on Rebecca’s back, she laughed and caught raindrops on her tongue. Obviously, this was not her first taste of inclement weather: she has accompanied her parents on every remote-spot expedition.

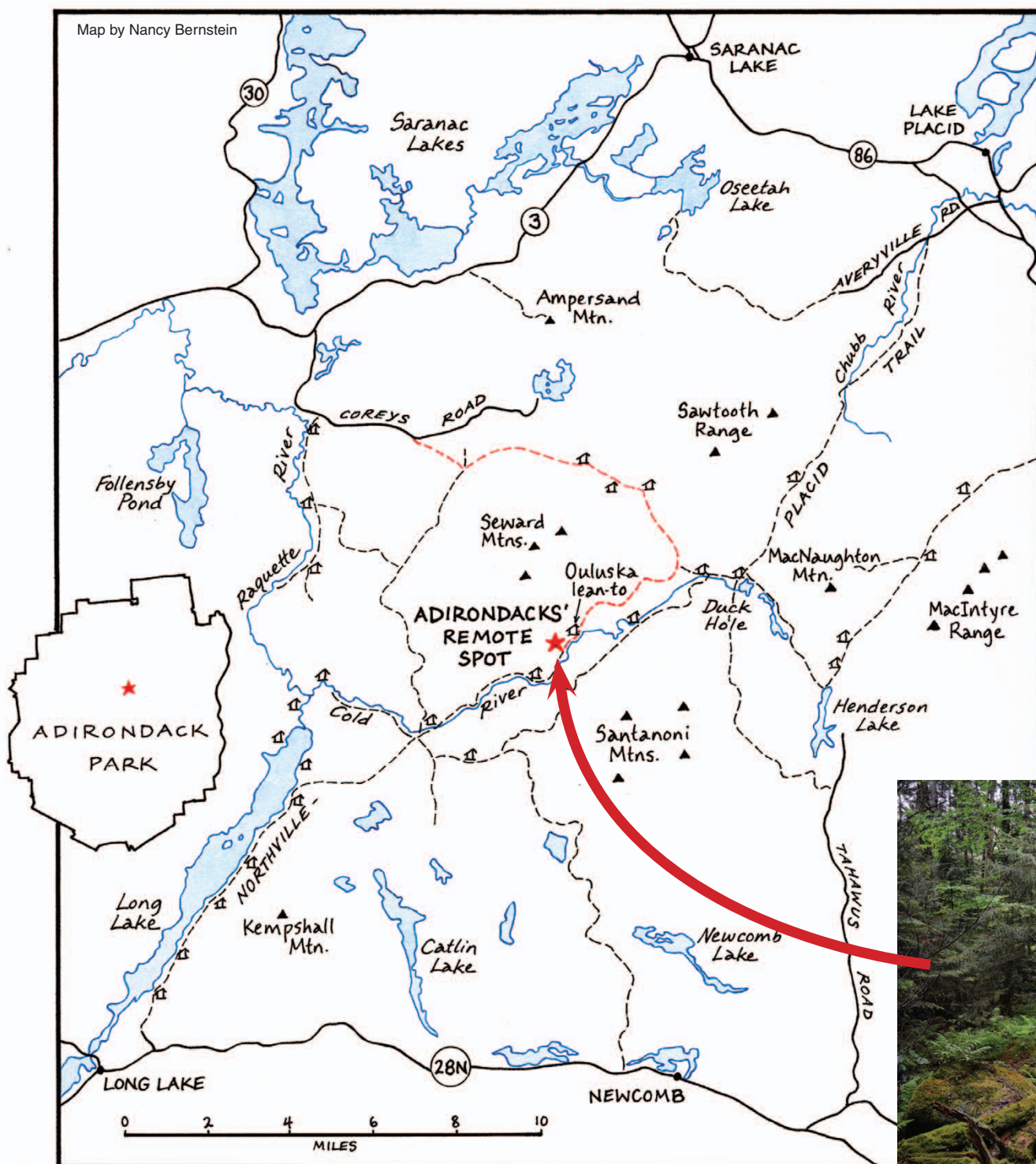
By early afternoon, we reached the Northville-Placid Trail, which is a true foot path rather than an overgrown woods road. Cameron and I stopped at Mountain Pond to take photos and waited for the others to catch up. It was still raining, and now that we had been on the trail for six hours, Skyla began to lose patience.

“Skyla is melting like an Alaskan glacier,” Ryan remarked in an attempt to cheer her up. She only ..►



A wetland along the Ward Brook Truck Trail affords a view of nearby peaks.

Map by Nancy Bernstein



## New York's Remote Spot

**Location:** High Peaks Wilderness  
**Distance from nearest road:** 5.3 miles  
**Distance from nearest trail:** less than 0.05 miles  
**Cell-phone coverage:** No  
**One-way hiking time:** 1 day  
**One-way hiking distance:** 14 miles

would prevent forest fires. The operations necessitated the construction of additional roads into the Forest Preserve.

The next morning we hiked a half-mile or so farther south on the Northville-Placid Trail and soon found ourselves within close range of the spot. We bushwhacked a short distance into the forest, zigzagging until our GPS unit determined we had reached the precise location.

Ryan could not contain his excitement. "I imagine this is the same feeling mountain climbers get when they approach the summit of a big peak," he said.

The surroundings were not particularly scenic. We were in a wet area among moss-covered boulders, ferns, grasses, spruce trees, and the occasional maple. The Cold River was within earshot. Perhaps the spot's most salient characteristic was quiet. There was no road noise. Nor did we have to worry about cell phones breaking the silence: there was no reception here.

Nevertheless, it didn't feel very remote to me, given its proximity to a busy hiking trail. Indeed, the Northville-Placid Trail was visible from where we stood.

Ryan and Rebecca acknowledge that remoteness is somewhat subjective and cannot be determined solely by quantitative measurements such as distance from roads. Nevertheless, they aim to measure remoteness objectively so far as that is possible. At each location, they complete a fifteen-minute Remote Spot Assessment, which includes taking a panoramic photo, recording sounds, and noting plant and wildlife species and signs of human activity. The primary goal of Project Remote is to establish baseline data so that future researchers can repeat the study and quantify changes in the landscape.

Coincidentally, the Adirondack Park Agency is conducting its own analysis of remoteness. The agency recently mapped areas that are more than three miles from roads and snowmobile trails and more than two miles from water-

ways that permit motorboats. The preliminary analysis revealed that only about 3 percent of the Park meets the criteria.

The remote spot identified by Ryan and Rebecca falls within one of the remote areas mapped by the APA. Yet, based on the agency's criteria, there are other places in the Park that are more remote.

However it's defined, remoteness is a rare and valuable resource. Indeed, some people never escape the human-built environment of roads, buildings, artificial light, the noise of civilization. Fortunately for the Adirondacks, remoteness is not always lost forever. Many places in the Park that seem wild to most observers were once cleared, logged, or crossed by roads.

The Cold River country certainly saw its share of human activity. Starting in the late 1800s, it was logged extensively. Several roads were constructed in the area. After the Big Blowdown, salvage loggers again opened up the region.

The landscape has largely recovered. The banks of the Cold and the forested slopes of the Searwards are arguably wilder today than they were when first added to the Forest Preserve. We cannot predict what the future will hold for this and other remote places. Thanks to the work of Ryan and Rebecca Means, at least we will better understand what we have to lose. ■



Skylar takes note of her mom's work.

cried harder. "Still receding, I guess," he added as we trudged through the worsening mud.

The rain finally stopped when we got to the site of Noah Rondeau's hermitage (marked by a plaque), but then the mosquitoes came out in force. We were now close to our destination, making me wonder if the old hermit had a sixth sense about this place's remoteness. A little beyond the hermitage we passed an aluminum canoe, twisted and partially wrapped around a cedar tree next to the Cold River. Other signs of the chaos wrought by Tropical Storm Irene, such as eroded banks and piles of cobble, were everywhere along the river.

Eight hours into the hike, we arrived at the Ouluska Brook lean-to—wet, cold, and tired, but in good spirits. We scrambled to change clothes, make camp, and cook dinner before it rained again. No-see-ums and black flies joined the swarm of mosquitoes to create a maddening trifecta of biting insects. We all wore bug nets to dinner.

Afterward, we settled into our sleeping bags, and Rebecca whispered a bedtime story to Skylar, once again describing the day's wildlife encounters with scientific terminology. It started raining again, but the forecasted thunderstorms held off.

In 1950 a powerful nor'easter, later known as the Big Blowdown, caused extensive damage in the Cold River region. Spruce trees were toppled en masse. In the storm's aftermath, state officials authorized loggers to remove the valuable spruce timber, believing that it

