

THE NONPROFIT VOICE FOR THE PARK **SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2017**

Adirondack EXPLORER

**Bears getting
into mischief**
PAGE 4

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September / October 2017

The lower Bog River is perfect for fall paddling. PAGE 16

PHOTO BY CARL HEILMAN II

FEATURES

Bikers on a roll / 8

Fifteen years in the making DEC's plan for the Saranac Lakes Wild Forest calls for thirty-five miles of mountain-bike trails.

The girls of summer / 12

Alumnae and other volunteers restore a beloved Girl Scouts camp on Eagle Island on Upper Saranac Lake.

Quiet times on the Bog / 16

Our editor and his daughter enjoy a leisurely paddle on an overlooked stretch of river near Tupper Lake.

Coot Hill's a breeze / 20

David Thomas-Train takes a short hike to an airy perch above Lake Champlain and reflects on its curious history.

Kids on the trail / 22

Leigh Hornbeck leads her two young boys up Sawyer Mountain, a small peak outside Indian Lake.

Are rangers overworked? / 24

Critics say DEC's rescue force needs more recruits to keep up with the increase in hikers and state lands.

Business buzz / 26

Some people fear that a new helicopter-tour company will disturb wildlife and the wilderness experience.

Fear for Article 14 / 28

Green groups say a constitutional convention would jeopardize the revered forever-wild clause, but not everyone agrees.

Reconstructing history / 30

Mark Wilcox restores homes the old-fashioned way, right down to the square nails and plaster mixed with horsehair.

You name it, he'll hike it / 32

Erik Schlimmer sets out to visit every peak, pond, stream, swamp and any other landmark worthy of a name.

Man for all seasons / 36

Carl Heilman II's new photography book captures the beauty of the Adirondack Park in all six seasons.

The tick list / 60

Researchers worry that deer ticks may bring other diseases besides Lyme to the Adirondack Park.

DEPARTMENTS

Briefs 4-5

Brief Bio 6

Views of the Park 35

Editorial 38

Letters 39

Viewpoints 41, 43

It's Debatable 45

Birdwatch 47

On the Wild Side 49

Trailblazer 50

Naturalist's Lens 59

Book Reviews 62, 64, 66, 69

Book Explorer 69

Outdoor Skills 70

COVER: Black bear
Photo: Larry Master



PHOTOS BY LISA GODFREY

Girls of summer

Former campers Rose Foody and Heidi Meramo take a donated sailboat for a spin around Eagle Island.

■ Volunteers with fond memories of Eagle Island rescue the summer camp from oblivion.

By Olivia Dwyer

Kathy Gilroy stands over an improvised work station in the family cabin on Eagle Island. Soft bath towels drape a wooden table to cushion a brown wooden frame holding nine panes of glass. The table's edge holds a tub of glazing compound, paint scrapers, glass cleaner in a spray bottle, terry-cloth rags, a measuring tape, and a handheld heater that looks like a small hairdryer.

She carefully sculpts glazing compound to join the straight edge of a single pane to the wooden grid. The eleven buildings on Eagle Island sat unoccupied from 2008 to 2015, and the neglect took a toll. "There was no putty or points holding the panes in place," says Gilroy. "They were there out of habit."

If all goes to plan, Gilroy's work will restore another Eagle Island tradition. For seventy years, the Maplewood-South Orange New Jersey Girl Scout Council ran a summer camp on the thirty-acre island, a rocky dome that rises from Upper

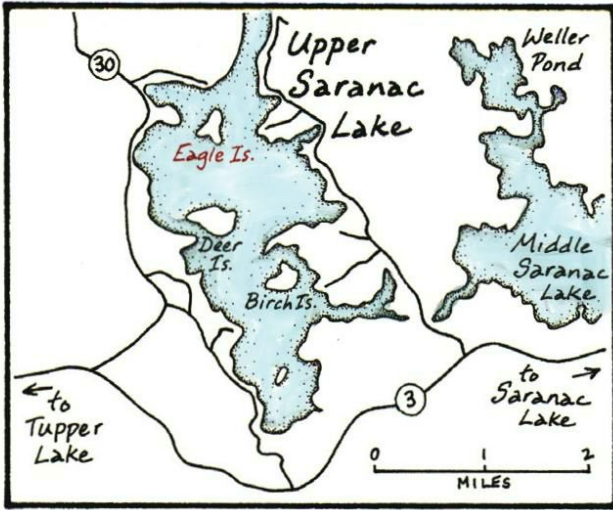


The architecture and décor reflect the tradition of Adirondack Great Camps.

Saranac Lake between Gilpin Bay and Gull Point.

But in 2000, attendance started to decline, and in 2010, the Girl Scouts put Eagle Island up for sale. Former campers organized Eagle Island—originally called Friends of Eagle Island—a nonprofit with more than a thousand

members. Bolstered by an anonymous donation, the group purchased the camp in 2015 for \$2.45 million. Now, with the help of Gilroy and more than a hundred other volunteers (almost all women), Eagle Island will reopen as a girls' summer camp in 2019.



Hannah Grill cuts replacement railings for the guesthouse.

Summer-camp tradition

The American summer-camp tradition dates back to the 1870s. The boom of railroad, oil, and steel industries sparked urban growth. Concerned that city life wouldn't teach boys self-reliance, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) started Camp Dudley, the country's first summer camp, in 1885. The first girls' camp—Camp Farwell—followed four years later and still operates in Newbury, Vermont. In 1908, Camp Dudley found a permanent home in Westport, above Lake Champlain, where campers swim, hike, canoe, and rock climb.

More camps followed, but there still were only a hundred nationwide by 1900. Then G. Stanley

Hall, a leading psychologist, gave the business a bump: his 1904 book *Adolescence* argued that child development followed the same trajectory as civilized society. Given access to a "wild undomesticated stage" in nature, boys would build fires and shelters and grow into modern gentleman. It worked for the Neanderthals, right? American summer camps numbered more than a thousand by 1918.

While summer camps brought children into the wilderness, wealthy urban elites created their own retreats. Elaborate Great Camps appeared on remote lakes in the Adirondack Mountains. Enter Levi Morton, a former vice president and New York governor. After a failed

presidential campaign, he retired and enlisted architect William L Coulter to design and build a refuge on Eagle Island. Construction finished in 1903, and the collection of shingle-sided lodges, cabins, and dining hall linked by covered walkways, spacious porches, and paths softened by pine needles continues to occupy the island's southern end. A sprawling boathouse perches on the shore, with a service dock nearby.

Morton was nearly eighty years old when Eagle Island was completed, and he sold it seven years later to a New Jersey industrialist named Henry Graves. He and his wife Florence brought their

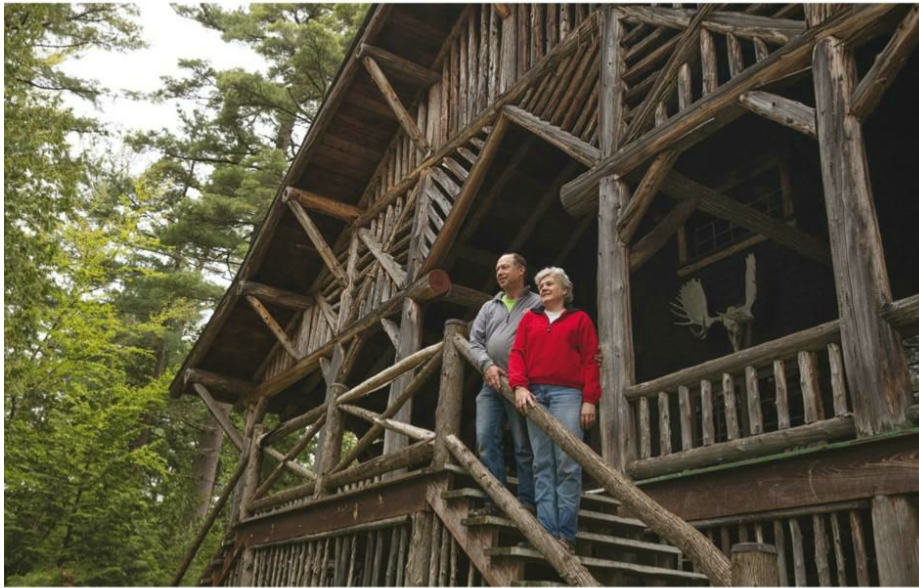
Eagle Island, continued on **Page 15**



Paula Michelsen McGovern is Eagle Island's executive director.



Rose Foody and Heidi Meramo enjoy the view of Upper Saranac Lake from their favorite perch.



PHOTOS BY LISA GODFREY

Eagle Island treasurer Carole Mackenzie and assistant treasurer Steve Reich stand outside the rustic summer camp's main building.

Eagle Island, continued from Page 13

four children to Eagle Island for Adirondack summers, racing other camp owners in annual regattas. "They loved the island like they would a family member," says Henry "Buz" Graves Jr., a great-grandson of the first Henry Graves who lives in Saranac Lake. But after two sons died in automobile accidents, and the upkeep became too expensive, the elder Graves donated Eagle Island to the Girl Scouts in 1937.

The Girls Scouts expanded the dining hall. They also added extra support under the main lodge, where they held folk dances in a great room crowded with the Graves family's hunting trophies. Over the decades, platform tents and smaller cabins were added to house more campers, leaving the original buildings mostly unaltered. From June to August, school buses loaded with 140 Girl Scouts between the ages of seven and sixteen left New Jersey every week for the six-hour drive north. After the buses made the slow turn off Route 30 onto Gilpin Bay Road, only a ten-minute boat ride separated them from camp.

Chris Hildebrand attended Eagle Island in the 1950s and 1960s and still remembers vivid details from the summer routine. The big event for younger campers was a daunting canoe overnight—really, a short paddle to the island's far side. Teenage campers were called the Mariners and bunked in the boathouse. Island life took on a nautical theme: the girls divided into starboard and port crews, taking turns swabbing the decks, cleaning the heads, and sailing. Each day's events were recorded in the log. When Hildebrand paged through old ledgers, she noticed a pattern: "For the first two or three days, the ship log is



Taj belongs to Eagle Island's caretaker.

full of complaints. After that—nothing. As we lived here, we figured it out."

Over the decades, parents continued to dispatch kids to camp for a single week, or even the full ten- or eleven-week vacation. Their thinking? Summer camp introduced their children to communities beyond established family and school circles. For working parents, it was an effective child-care solution at a time when their kids were not in school. And the sleepaway experience supplied real adventure: Hildebrand remembers a lightning strike that hit the power cable between Eagle Island and the lakeshore,

leaving the camp off the grid for weeks.

As campers grew up and had their own children, they often sent them to Eagle Island. Paula Michelsen McGovern stayed at Eagle Island in 1982, and her daughter followed in her footsteps. "She was in sixth grade when they closed," says McGovern, "and she wrote letters asking them to reopen. Now, McGovern is Eagle Island's executive director and sole employee.

Eagle Island wasn't the only summer camp shut down in the early 2000s. Demand shifted to marketable skills that would prepare children for the hyper-competitive college admissions process. As summer camps adjusted to keep pace, prices spiked. Today, camp fees in the United States range from \$630 to more than \$2,000 a week. And when the recession hit, camp attendance dipped. Nonprofit camps run on precariously thin margins were the most susceptible. Still, more than 14 million adults and children attended summer camp last year, and there are 8,400 overnight camps in the country today.

More work ahead

Eagle Island relies on volunteers like Gilroy to bring their professional skills to the vast renovation. Gilroy teaches industrial tech at a middle school in New Jersey. A set designer built stairs that lead to a staff cottage, while a Ph.D. student developed a nature walk and field guide. Last year, a core group of women stayed for six weeks in the summer to clean, stabilize buildings, and start repairs. Scores more of their fellow Girl Scouts alumnae descended for a Memorial Day 2017 work party and planned to return for an eightieth anniversary celebration in August.

More work lies ahead: Eagle Island was recently awarded a \$500,000 grant from New York State, and there is a \$2.5 million capital campaign to fund repairs and camp operations. In July, the camp held an Open Island Day so that former campers and their families could return to visit, share memories, and ultimately become more involved in the camp's reopening. Ginny Hildebrand (Chris's sister) strums her guitar and leads two dozen campers and their families through the camp songbook. Everyone joins in on popular tunes like "This Land is Your Land."

But camp classics pair with choreographed hand gestures known only to Eagle Island alums. That leaves Gilroy out. She was a New Jersey Girl Scout growing up, but her mother couldn't afford camp. She was determined to send her daughter—but the camp closed the year her troop signed up. Now, when Gilroy repairs window panes and plumbing fixtures, she works with future campers in mind. In July, she stands on a deck above the water's edge with Huckleberry, her toy fox terrier. Yesterday's rain smudged paint on the stairs that she hopes will one day lead campers to a beach full of canoes and sailboats. That's one more job to do, but Gilroy just smiles. "Right now, we call these the steps to nowhere," she says. "But soon, they'll go somewhere." ■