

BAXTER PARK DIARY

A Week at South Branch Ponds

by Steve Smith

It's been six years since I paid my first visit to Maine's magnificent Baxter State Park on a peakbagging sojourn with hiking buddy Mike Dickerman. This trip will be more focused on exploring a new area rather than ticking summits off the list, and will bring me to the more remote, less-visited northern section of the park.

I've been daydreaming about this visit for months after seeing a striking photo of Lower South Branch Pond, a clear, deep glacial lake clasped between the steep slopes of rock-strewn mountains. I've scheduled my visit for early July, when the days are luxuriously long - this far north you can stay out til nearly 9:00 pm - and the peak summer season has not yet begun.

July 10 – Little Peaked Mountain and Barrell Ridge

After spending the night in Millinocket, poring over guidebooks and maps, I make the long drive in from I-95 past Patten, spotting a bear crossing the road a few miles before the park boundary. The usual bone-jarring drive over potholed park roads gets me to South Branch Campground around noon. I settle in at leanto #4, not on the water but close enough, and actually more private as it's tucked back into the woods.

It's a sunny day, and the setting at the ponds is suitably picturesque. The campground is set amidst a light, airy birch forest. Through the trees I can

see the sparkle of the 90-acre Lower South Branch Pond, and the bold ridges of The Traveler – the sprawling, barren mountain that dominates this end of the park – rising from the east shore, with South Branch Mountain guarding on the west. I think I'm gonna like this place.

Early in the afternoon I walk back up the campground road a short way and set off on the Ledges Trail, then branch off onto the Middle Fowler Trail. (One of the beauties of this campground is that many of the trails can be accessed without getting into your car.) The footway on this trail is hardly worn at all, but the route is well-blazed. It climbs through thin hardwoods, then changes to ledge and scrub as it gains a little notch between Little and Big Peaked Mountains.

Here I leave the trail and bushwhack left up through small, stout red pines – this is burned country, scorched in the great fire of 1903 that swept over the Traveler and its outlying ridges. I scramble up broken outcrops of volcanic rock to the open top of Little Peaked Mountain, a spine of shattered ledges perhaps 200 feet long.

Under a sky of sun and puffy clouds, I survey the 360-degree view over the northern sector of the park. The mass of North Traveler – darkly wooded from this angle - is dominant close by to the south, over the rocky knob of Big Peaked. Also prominent is South Branch Mountain with part of the pond at its base. In the distance I can spot the high peaks of Barren, Fort and North Brother beyond North Pogey. Only a shoulder of Katahdin can be seen.

To the west and north are vast, rolling forestlands leading out to wild, mysterious mountain ranges on the horizon. To the northeast are intriguing

lower peaks spotted with open rock – Trout Brook Mountain, Billfish Mountain, Barrell Ridge, and the shapely cone of Bald Mountain – collectively known as the Deadwater Mountains. I can see that there's enough terrain here to keep explorers content for days on end.

I drop back down to the trail and continue up to a spur leading to Barrell Ridge, where the extraordinary view gazes down at the snakelike Middle Fowler Pond spread beneath the triple peaks of Billfish Mountain. The long, ledgy spine of Bald Mountain is another arresting sight. After finding views from other angles along Barrell Ridge, I retreat to the campground. In just one afternoon I have been thoroughly captivated by this ledgy playground in the northern part of the park.

July 11 - Peak of the Ridges

I'm awakened before 5:00 am by an enthusiastic chorus of robins and the cry of a loon shuddering across the pond. It soon turns into a spectacular July day – sun, puffy clouds, northwest breeze. At mid-morning I set off southward along the Pogy Notch Trail, shadowing the east shore of the mile-long pond. Just past the Lower Pond a deer snorts at me, then bounds off into the woods. Farther on, a short path breaks off to the shore of Upper South Branch Pond. The watery vista here is exquisite – birch-lined shores, cliffs plunging into the pond, and the jagged ridge of Katahdin rising in the back, over the treetops.

A short distance beyond, the main trail struggles up over one of the waterside cliffs; at the top, amidst red pines, a flat perch overlooks the pond and the ledgy side of South Branch Mountain. I spot another deer on the far shore.

Ten yards farther, I turn onto the Center Ridge Trail leading up to the Peak of the Ridges. This trail immediately assaults a steep, ledgy, very rough slope, and before long there is a succession of gorgeous bird's eye vistas of both South Branch Ponds. Katahdin and its satellites sprawl to the south. Up ahead, the Peak of the Ridges beckons, its slopes a jumble of ledge and talus mixed with some diehard scrub.

The climb to the top of this spur of The Traveler is an exhausting scramble up boulder fields and jagged ledges. Like the paths on Katahdin, it is more a route than a trail. As I ascend, the vast open slopes of The Traveler stretch out on both sides. I meet a man and two boys, the first hikers I've seen this week. His words are daunting: "You've got a long way to go."

And he is right. I attain the real Peak of the Ridges only after a long, grueling slog, with relentlessly rough, Northern Presidential-style footing, grunting over several false rocky peaks. Even following the trail is a challenge, though with a little searching I can usually find the next cairn or blaze-painted boulder. It takes nearly three admittedly leisurely hours to cover the 2.1 mile climb from the shore of Upper South Branch Pond. Stephen Clark's invaluable Baxter guidebook is right on with its assessment: "...the effort needed to traverse this trail is considerable." This trail has unexpectedly whipped my butt.

Once at the top, after I stop sucking wind, all I can muster is an "Oh, my!" Here I can gaze into the wild heart of Baxter, a vast forested bowl ringed by South Traveler, the Turner Mountains, Katahdin, the Brothers range and the Pogy Mountains. The expansive plateau in the center reminds me of the eastern Pemi Wilderness in the White Mountains. Down on the flats Pogy

Pond, Weed Pond and other watery breaks shimmer in the hazy sun.

For contrast, there is the imposing nearby view of the main Traveler summit, rising beyond endless rocky slopes. The peak was supposedly named by voyageurs paddling down the East Branch of the Penobscot, for as they moved the massive mountain to the west appeared to travel with them. The trailless traverse to that lonely outpost looks formidable, and I am in no shape to attempt it today.

Two-and-a-half hours isn't quite enough time to soak it all in, but the swarming black flies make it easier to leave. Between the obscure footway and terribly rough footing – even more noticeable on the descent – it takes two hours to get back down to the pond. I stir up another deer on the way back along the shore, and that evening I watch a nighthawk flitting and feeding low over the water.

July 12 – The Northeast Ponds

This sunny cumulus day is devoted to a lowland ramble among the cluster of gem-like ponds tucked in below the small ledgy peaks north of The Traveler. Meandering trails lead me through lovely spruce forests and along the shores of five ponds in the space of 8 ½ miles.

From the edge of Lower Fowler Pond, under the shade of cedar trees, the shimmering water opens wide to a view of Billfish Mountain, Bald Mountain, Barrell Ridge – all with ledges highlighted in the sun – and the dark crest of North Traveler. I pass more of these idyllic spots along the shore, then follow the trail along an esker (a low hogback ridge deposited under a glacier) and down to Long Pond.

I pass little High Pond, make my way out to the Long Pond Pines

Campsite and toss myself down on a soft mat of pine needles. The breeze sighs through the pines, the black flies have taken a holiday, waves lap the shore, the sun sparkles on the water, fleets of puffy clouds sail over Barrell Ridge, a raven cries up by Billfish Mountain, a great blue heron flaps by, and *there is nobody around*. “Summertime, and the livin’ is easy.” This shady spot holds me for two hours of dozing and dreaming.

I continue on to visit Billfish Pond – beautiful, but a little difficult to get at - and Round Pond, a steep little kettlehole ringed by shrubs, where I flush a hooded merganser. On the way back I return to the Long Pond pines for a few minutes, and watch a big bull moose with an impressive rack feeding shoulder-deep in High Pond. There’s a loon there, too. Back at the exquisite Lower Fowler Pond a camping family is out in a canoe. They’re one of only two parties I’ve seen all day.

July 13 – At the South Branch Ponds

After three solid days of hiking, today I’m taking it easy, just rambling along the shores of the South Branch Ponds. First I pay a visit to a string of lovely pools, grottos and cascades on the lower section of the Howe Brook Trail – so many wonders in this park! Then I return to the Pogy Notch Trail, bushwhack across to the stream between the Lower and Upper Ponds, wade up it in sandals, and work my way along the steep slope on the west side of Upper Pond.

I find a fine ledge perch on the lower side of South Branch Mountain and lounge here for three hours, gazing across the water to the rockbound ridges of The Traveler. Threatened thunderstorms never materialize, though a sudden squall dunks me as I make my way to a lower cliff. Then

it's back to the upper perch for another hour or so before heading back the two miles back to the leanto, where my friend Bill Flynn has arrived for a quick visit from New Hampshire.

July 14 – North Traveler

My lucky, sunstruck week continues. For our climb of North Traveler Bill and I have a sunny, dry Canadian high day with wispy clouds and see-forever horizons. This trail starts right outside the campground and its generally good footing provides a much more pleasant climb than the gnarly route to Peak of the Ridges. The first views pop out just a half mile up (the steepest part of the climb), and the trail enchants along its entire 2 ½ mile length with numerous open ledges, alpine meadows, a remarkable grove of gnarled birches, and ever-shifting vistas over the ponds and peaks. After a leisurely, delightful climb, we arrive at the flat, open summit about noon, passing only three other hikers on this perfect summer day. Sweeping views open on all sides from this high, wild, remote place.

After 2 ½ hours at the top, Bill, worried about sunburn, heads back down to the campground. I stick it out for another 2 hours, setting what might be a personal summit-hanging record. (Mike Dickerman and I once spent 4 hours atop Camel's Hump in Vermont.) This makes up for the sticky, hazy days Mike and I endured on our peakbagging visit to Baxter six years earlier.

Limitless horizons stretch out to the north, beyond the ledgy Deadwater Mountains and Grand Lake, and to the east, past the windings of the Penobscot's East Branch. Southward are sharp-edged Katahdin and the array of lower but still impressive peaks around it. Southwestward is a

little-known region of smaller mountains around South Branch Mountain, and off to the northwest are the huge Chamberlain Lake and the vast country of the Allagash Wilderness Waterway. When I finally leave the summit at quarter to five, it's to the accompaniment of a sad, sweet whistle from a white-throated sparrow.

July 15 – South Branch Mountain and Mahar Pond

A vacation week isn't complete without at least one bushwhack epic, and today is the day. I rise at 4:15 with the singing robins, much to the amazement of my drowsy friend. After a cold breakfast, I bid Bill farewell and strike off for the South Branch Mountain Trail on the west side of the campground. My objective is Mahar Pond, a small, remote water body tucked into a hollow a mile or so south of the south end of South Branch Mountain. It is named for one of the early rangers of Baxter. An old guidebook had said it was in "a beautiful coniferous setting." I had caught a tantalizing glimpse of it from Peak of the Ridges the other day, and being somewhat of a backcountry pond buff, it's an irresistible lure.

A steady, moderate two-mile climb, with several good viewpoints east to The Traveler en route, lifts me to the wooded north peak of South Branch Mountain. Another half-mile down and up through fern-filled birch woods gets me to the south peak, a mix of ledge, shrubs and meadow, at 7:30 am.

A bit farther down the narrow, gently descending ridgecrest are outcrops with wide views looking south. Here I pick a suitable perch and for two hours survey the panorama: the shadowed ridges of The Traveler, beaver meadows winding across the lowlands of Pogy Notch, North and South Turner, Katahdin, North Pogy, Fort and the Brothers, slide-scarred

Doubletop, Center Mountain, the remote Black Brook Mountains close at hand, and little Burnt Mountain with its firetower reflecting the morning sun.

A sharp-shinned hawk circles overhead, and I spot a dark speck – a moose – in one of the Pogy Notch meadows. I study my proposed route to Mahar Pond, which will cross some scrubby ledges along the way. I make a note to stay left of what looks like a blowdown area on a low ridge above the hidden pond.

It seems strange to leave an open summit at 10 am, with nearly eleven hours of daylight left. But I suspect I may have some hard miles to go. Heading south, the trail descends a steep, open talus slope, then winds down through shrubby meadows with several more fine views.

At 10:15 I leave the trail where it makes a swing to the left, towards Upper South Branch Pond. I immediately encounter a very rough and steep talus slope and it takes twenty minutes of careful traversing and descending to get to the ledges at the bottom. I get the feeling of plunging for real into the Baxter backcountry. I descend through woods to a col and make a difficult scramble up through a jumble of mossy boulders on the far side. I emerge onto more ledges, breathing hard, and look back up at South Branch Mountain to see how little distance I've covered in an hour.

From here I work my way up through more ledges and open woods to a beautiful spruce grove, where a rare Tennessee warbler is singing. And then I hit the blowdown. I try to skirt it on the left to no avail. Tall dead snags loom in all directions, with dense scrub beneath. For the next hour and a quarter I clamber and curse my way over, under and along fallen tree trunks and through scrub. It is ridiculously slow going, and dangerous to

boot. I battle my way up and over a low ridge, only to find more of the same on the far side. I later learn that the devastation in these woods has been caused by a spruce budworm infestation.

I stubbornly keep to my SSW course and eventually make it down to an open bog shown on my USGS quad. I work up and over a low ridge next to the bog, through more downed trees, only to find another swell beyond. The blowdown is endless, the terrain featureless, I'm tired and thirsty, and I despair of ever finding the pond. Whose idea was this, anyway?

I head more to the south, figuring I'll hit the pond's outlet brook at some point. The woods improve, and I pick up a well-trodden moose path that leads into open conifers. My spirits soar as I know this will lead to the pond – and it does, emerging at the outlet. It's taken me three hours to cover just a mile or so from the trail.

And the pond is a high-country beauty, tightly rimmed with spiry spruce and fir, a fringe of bog shrubs, and an inner ring of flat, brown-stained rocks. It has the feel and look of Shoal Pond in the Pemi Wilderness. I hop the boulders around the edge to some slanting grey ledges on the southwest shore. This is the spot – a perch above the water with the rock-strewn Peak of the Ridges seen through a notch in the treeline. White-throated sparrows whistle from the woods around the pond. Other songsters soon join in: a yellowthroat, a magnolia warbler, a junco and a tinkling, trilling winter wren. Two and a half hours pass by quickly in the sun on this enchanting shore.

I reluctantly take my leave of the pond at 3:45 pm. I'm getting low on water and it's a long way back to my comfy leanto. I decide to try an

unknown route east to the Pogy Notch Trail – it has to be better than the way I came. I follow the outlet brook down through some rough, tangled terrain – there's no easy route to this pond! After a while I head northeast, briefly in reasonable woods, then through yet another belt of blowdown. After picking my way through this I get down to a draw of open hardwoods – hallelujah!

When the blowdowns finally peter out up to the left I make a tiring climb up a steep slope through small birch and spruce. I cross a ledge with a view of the Turners, crest a wooded hump, then descend through open hardwoods to open ledges on a lower knob poised above the west side of Pogy Notch. I arrive here at 5:25 pm, and survey the scene under skies that have turned grey. Much of The Traveler is in view to the east; most impressive are the cliffs and talus on the face of Pinnacle Ridge. Also notable is the view south down the broad Pogy Notch to the great rock-covered mass of North Turner. A barred owl hoots down below. A moose is browsing in a beaver meadow on the valley floor. I've happened upon another great spot in Baxter.

After a 45-minute stay I navigate a relatively easy route down through the hardwoods to the Pogy Notch Trail. This part of the bushwhack takes just a half hour. The trail leads north through nice birches, then becomes rough and rocky as it traverses the slope above Upper South Branch Pond. I startle a cow moose who wades into the pond and starts swimming. I struggle up the cliff where the Center Ridge Trail takes off, and pause on the ledge to watch the moose emerge on the far shore and stroll into the woods. The last mile and a half on the trail is familiar territory. I set a fast pace, looking forward to guzzling a cold Diet Pepsi and then, perhaps, a

brew.

I get back to the campground at 8:05 pm. The rangers have already taken in the day's hiker sign-out sheet and put up a new one for tomorrow. Later, after dark, two rangers come over to my lean-to to check up on me: "Are you Smith?" I tell them about the day's adventures and one of them says that someone had left a pair of glasses up at Mahar Pond seven or eight years earlier.

It's been a full day.

July 16 – Fowler Ponds

I hang around the leanto on a cloudy morning, recuperating from the dawn-to-dusk trek to Mahar Pond. A little after noon I drive to the Fowler Ponds trailhead and return to Lower Fowler Pond with its ring of ledgy mountains. The only sounds at the shore are the breeze, the singing robins and red-eyed vireos, and a spruce tree creaking back in the woods. A loon is diving out on the pond. The clouds are breaking to puffy cumulus, and the sun puts a sparkling sheen on the water. Assuredly this is one of the most beautiful places on earth.

After a while I push on towards Middle Fowler Pond through an open forest of birch and spruce, where a bay-breasted warbler sings. The ledgy outlet hints at the beauty ahead. The trail emerges at Middle Fowler's northeast corner, and it's another stunner – a long water view between birch-lined shores, with Billfish Mountain, Bald Mountain, North Traveler and cliff-faced Barrell Ridge presiding above. Ledges slope down into the water, providing a perfect picnic spot and elevated viewing perch. This pond has its loon, too.

After an hour here, I poke along the trail through the birch woods on the west shore, finding some views up to the cliffs on the side of Billfish Mountain. Three beaver swim by in front. A raven soars overhead and gives a wild cry. Amazingly, for three hours I have this whole wonderful, mile-long pond to myself, on a beautiful Saturday afternoon in July.

On the way back I watch two deer foraging along the shore of Lower Fowler Pond.

July 17 – Trout Brook Mountain

My farewell hike is a morning climb up little Trout Brook Mountain, the northernmost of the Deadwater Range. For a mile and a half climb this 1700-footer provides a whopper of a view, best enjoyed from an open clifftop on a slightly lower knob two minutes south of the high point. Spread before me is a semicircle of shimmering ponds and sunwashed rocky peaks. I can spot Littlefield, Billfish, Long, High and Lower Fowler Ponds. Surrounding summits include Horse, Billfish, Bald, Traveler, North Traveler, Barrell Ridge, Big and Little Peaked and South Branch. It's a great way to cap off the week, as four of the hikes I've done can be seen from this one spot. A chorus of white-throats sings out during my entire two-hour stay. The occasional cry of a loon wafts up from the ponds below. Only the specter of a seven-hour drive pulls me away from yet another magical Baxter setting. Sadly, it's time to go home.

In subsequent summers, I return to South Branch Ponds, alone and with friends, and visit some of the places I scouted during my first sojourn there – the desert-like crags of Big Peaked Mountain; peaceful Pogy Pond, where we snooze in the leanto on a 90-degree scorcher; Weed Pond,

immortalized by Chief Justice William Douglas in his *My Wilderness: East to Katahdin*, where I am startled to encounter four fly-fishermen, a mile from the nearest trail; ledges on an eastern shoulder of North Pogy, with a sweeping view across the park interior; and the nubby peak of Black Brook Mountain in the lonely country west of South Branch Mountain. And still there are many more spots to see.