

To Bourn Pond

by Dan Styer

dedicated to Pat Thatcher

In the August of 1987, when I was hiking down the north slope of Jay Peak in Vermont, I overtook three other hikers. Normally this would be an occasion for me to fall into their group temporarily and to chat for a mile or two before we separated and continued north at our own different paces. But this was not a normal occasion. Just moments before our meeting, one of the three had tripped and sprained an ankle. When I met them the three hikers, all women, were assessing the damage and deciding what to do next. From their conversation I gathered that they had been hiking Vermont's Long Trail from south to north piece by piece for the last six years. The Long Trail stretches 265 miles from Massachusetts to Quebec, and they were within ten miles of the Canadian border. It must have broken their hearts to realize, so close to their goal, that they would have to turn back for medical attention. Yet this is precisely what they did decide to do, and it was a good decision, because it would turn out that the ankle was broken, not sprained, and it would prove hard enough for the injured hiker to walk south just one mile to the nearest evacuation point.

That point was the summit of Jay Peak, where the ski gondola was busy ferrying sightseers up and down the mountain. Naturally I wanted to help them—we hikers have to stick together in times of emergency. Besides, I've always harbored a secret desire to become a hero. In this case the only heroic thing to do was to race to the summit house ahead of the group (carrying the injured hiker's pack) in an attempt to notify the authorities of the problem. Charged with adrenalin, I made the climb in record time, but there were no authorities there to notify. I paused only long enough to explain to a tourist why I was rushing like a madman, then dashed down and met the group as it slowly made its way up the mountain. I walked back up with them in case I could be of further use. The injured woman was obviously suffering—she winced with every step. I tried talking with her, as we trudged up the mountain, to get her mind off her pain.

"You're nearly an end-to-ender now," I said. "What was your favorite spot on the Long Trail?" A stupid question, but the only one I could think of.

"Oh, I don't know," she replied. "Probably"—a pause as her hurt foot struck the ground—"Bourn Pond."

My mind raced. Could I carry her? No, not here, the trail was just too narrow.

"Bourn Pond? Where's that?"

"It's near Stratton Pond. Bourn isn't"—another pause—"as big as Stratton but it's more beautiful."

The foot path would soon merge with a broad ski trail, and there I would try to carry her. I'm not very strong, but she wasn't very big either.

"I hear that Stratton Pond is very popular."

"It is. That's one reason Bourn Pond's nicer. It's not so crowded."

It turned out that I never would have to test my back against the woman's weight. The tourist at the summit had notified a crew of ski area workers, and they met us at the ski trail with a vehicle. As the three were being driven away, one called back "Thanks, Dan. You're a prince!" It wasn't really true—anyone would have helped them as I did—but it was nice to be told so anyway.

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After I finished that 1987 trip I realized that I was only seventy miles from becoming an end-to-end runner myself. While I've always gone hiking because I enjoy hiking, and not because of some artificial self-imposed goal, this particular goal seemed so close, and so pleasant, that I decided to go after it. There was a pleasing aspect to the timing. I had already decided to take my 1988 backpacking trip in Maine, so I would finish the Long Trail in 1989, my twenty-first year of backpacking. I would come of age and become an end-to-end runner simultaneously. As I planned the trip I realized that my path would take me to Bourn Pond.

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My first sight of Bourn Pond came from the fire tower atop Stratton Mountain. That was on June 22, 1989, a day of blue skies and crystalline air. I looked out past the nearby spruce trees, past the mountain slopes, to a blue tarn set like a shining jewel among surrounding bright green mountains: Stratton Pond. Off in the distance I picked out Bourn Pond, a prosaic little puddle. Stratton Mountain is the seventh highest peak in Vermont, and my spirits that day were just as high. In the morning I had spotted a real symbol of wilderness: moose tracks. The trail up the mountain had threaded through groves of white birch underlaid with solid blankets of lush hay-scented fern. A high mountainside spring had offered delicious cold water. It seemed only appropriate that, as I walked down the other side of the mountain toward Stratton Pond, I found places where the tiny petals of mountain ash were strewn over the trail like confetti. Three wooded miles from the summit, the trail reached a grassy clearing which opened up grandly on the pond... which was small and brown and drab. The surrounding mountains were hidden by trees, and Stratton could have been any woodland pond in Ohio.

In the years since the three women had walked this section of the Long Trail, the Trail had been relocated to bypass Bourn Pond, which, however, remained accessible via a three mile side trail. It was still early in the afternoon. I was not going to miss the best spot on the Long Trail just because the Long Trail missed it. I would leave my pack at Stratton Pond, walk to Bourn Pond and back, then camp that night at Stratton.

My trail from Stratton to Bourn followed the southern shore of Stratton Pond for half a mile, then branched away to follow the pond's outlet stream, which tumbled down a series of cascades through a pine forest. Liberated from my heavy pack, I nearly pranced myself. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in his prose poem "Freedom to Breathe," describes how, for one who has been in prison, even commonplaces like breathing and walking are occasions to celebrate. A pack is no prison (in fact, it is only the pack which gives the backpacker his freedom to walk the wilderness for a hundred miles without break) but even so, walking without it always brings joy. I edged away from the outlet stream, forded a wide brook, climbed over small

hills, slogged through a bog, and, through it all, I penetrated deep into a woods of huge birch and beech trees. The sunlight plunged to the forest floor in great shafts, highlighting ferns and hobblebush. I scared up a ruffed grouse, turned to avoid a beaver impoundment, and finally came out on Bourn Pond.

And this was the jewel that Stratton Pond was not. The lake was blue, the shoreline was wild, and above it all, soaring into the sky like a poem, was Stratton Mountain. The trail edged around the pond, and I followed like a delighted and curious child. For the most part I was in the woods a few dozen yards from the pond, but every so often the trail came down to hug the shoreline, and each time I had the pleasure of a new view—each different, all the same. Eventually I turned around and started back, with a silent thanks to the woman who, two years before, had broken her ankle and thereby unwittingly sent me off to Bourn Pond.

A return trip, of course, can never be as interesting as the outbound one. I hurried along thinking about what I'd do back at Stratton Pond. The first thing I wanted was a swim. Four sweaty days of backpacking had left me filthy and reeking. I wouldn't use soap in the pond, of course: that would be environmentally unsound. But I fanaticized of simply feeling clean water about my body, of dissolving away the mud and the salt and the grime that clung to me. My reverie ended when I noticed movement ahead at the side of the trail. It looked like someone rigorously washing his hair (obviously I was still thinking about a bath), but why was his head just a foot above ground? Was he perhaps standing in a steep ravine? I approached and saw how wrong I was. It was a beaver, chewing up small plants with such gusto that his entire body shook. I crept to within six feet of the animal before stopping. Miracle of miracles, rather than running away he actually approached me as he searched for more succulent branches. I believe he didn't notice me at all until he was an arm's length away. Then he took a short sniff, started up in surprise, and bolted down the hill, running right into two trees.

So, I thought, this return trip was not to be so boring after all. What a day I had had: white birch, moose (tracks), a beaver! Only one element was wanting for a perfect day in the north woods: a loon. I plunged into the deep forest, up and down the small hills, into and out of the bog. What a majestic forest! I think of birch trees as small, but here they grew twelve, eighteen, even twenty-four inches in diameter. I stopped at one particularly large yellow birch. A massive trunk. Silvery bark peeling away in rolls. I look up. Surprise! This tree, which conveys such messages of strength and vitality, is in fact dead! But what's that bird flying from limb to limb? A pigeon? What is a pigeon doing way out in this wilderness? It turns toward me. That's no pigeon, that's a hawk! Grey back, white belly, banded tail, massive talons. Why doesn't it fly away in fright? It's just standing there screaming at me. Ah, now it's moving. But not away! It's right above me. . . it's folding its wings. . . it's diving at me!

The bird plunged to within fifteen feet of my face before twisting out of its dive and returning to the upper limbs. If it really had wanted to attack me, I couldn't possibly have moved away quickly enough. I assure you that I did not stick around to give it a second chance. The entire incident, from my first pause at the trunk to my hurried retreat, required fewer than twenty seconds.

On through the woods I went, over the brook and back up the cascades. Just as I approached Stratton Pond—I was screened from it by only a few trees and shrubs—I heard a soft croak coming from the water. A loon? I peered around the brush. No, a merganser! Her rusty head and unkempt hairdo identified her

immediately. The merganser, more observant than the beaver, flew away at once. My eyes followed her, and then stopped. There, hanging above the pond, as prominent here as it was invisible from my first pond view, was Stratton Mountain. I looked around. The shoreline was dotted with blooming pink azaleas. The water at pond's edge supported the elegant white spathes of wild calla and the delicate leaves of floating-heart. And the mountain above all gave the entire scene a majestic unity. My initial assessment of Stratton Pond had been wrong—this too was a jewel!

In the day's remaining hours I would enjoy the swim about which I had for so long been dreaming, I would discover a bog replete with pitcher plants and Labrador-tea, I would cook dinner and eat it on a comfortable shoreline rock, while swallows took pond water on the wing and fish leapt out to capture insects. That night I would sleep soundly, then awaken early enough for a pre-breakfast swim to the center of the pond where I would watch the sun rise over Stratton Mountain. Finally I would load my pack and follow the Long Trail for a quarter of the circumference of the pond, to the point where the trail, and I, would leave the pond and head north for places like Downer Glen and Killington Peak, and to my eventual end-to-end status.

At that point I turned back for one last look at Stratton Pond. Out in the water I saw movement: a pointed black head, a sinuous neck, a long black-and-white speckled body. A loon. I watched for several minutes as it dove and then reappeared on the surface. Then I turned away and walked north.