

Maine Swim Story

-- Dan Styer, 19 February 2008

Many years ago I decided to hike all of the Maine section of the Appalachian Trail. A real undertaking! It involved 28 days in the woods: above-timberline mountains, gorges, waterfalls, deep forests, ponds, and, on occasion, lots of mosquitoes. Three hundred miles of walking! It was not long before I was dirty and sweaty, but also it was not long before I became quiet and calm and began to blend into the woods around me.

I was a day or two from the end of my hike when I emerged from the woods onto the shore of a great pond. (In Maine, they're called "ponds" rather than "lakes", no matter how big they are.) Most of the shore was rocky, but the trail touched a tiny strip of sand, just about a dozen yards wide. I had been yearning for this moment for miles: I stripped off my cloths (Why not? I hadn't seen a person for a day or two.) and jumped into the pond. The scenery was superb, the scent of pine was exquisite, and to wash off weeks of dirt and grime was ... beyond compare. After my swim I lay out on a rock and let my body dry in the sun.

And that's when I heard voices. Not the gruff voices of the deep-woods backpackers I'd been meeting for the last weeks, but the lilting voices of girls and the sopranos of young boys. And it was strange that I couldn't pick out the words, until I realized that they were speaking French. Of course, I said to myself ... I'm very near Canada.

I was still wet but I hurried to put on my shorts ... I was still too wet for my shirt, and I remained on the rock drying in the sun. Within a few moments a ten-year-old girl appeared. She looked at the scenery, then looked at me and said hello, then retreated back into the woods. She emerged wearing a bright yellow bathing suit ... and it was clean! (None of my clothes were clean.) She splashed into the lake. Soon an eight-year-old girl appeared. She looked at the scenery, she looked at her sister, but she missed me ... I think I was just quietly blending into the background. The eight-year-old retreated back into the woods and emerged in a clean yellow bathing suit. She splashed merrily with her sister for a few minutes.

Then she turned around, saw me, put her hands to her mouth in surprise, and exclaimed "Un monsieur!"

I smiled and waved and tried to look small.

Then came a brother, who admired the scenery, retreated into the woods, and emerged in a clean yellow bathing suit, and finally the mother and father, who admired the scenery, retreated into the woods, and emerged in clean yellow bathing suits. By this time I was dry and I headed back onto the trail.