

HOME SWEET HOME

on the Rensselaer Plateau

—a discovery hike in my own backyard



By Fred DeMay

Photos courtesy RPA unless noted

It was an absolutely beautiful day. The sky was clear; the air cool and crisp. Fall foliage was spectacular, providing a background palette of colors that has to be experienced in the northeast to be believed. The fifteen people wandering around the Dyken Pond Environmental Education Center parking lot were introducing themselves and anxiously awaiting the vans provided by Rensselaer County to take them to the starting point for the first north to south, two-day traverse hike of the Rensselaer Plateau, a 105,000-acre area of contiguous northern forest. We knew the place was unique, but didn't realize just how much it stood out as a region.

Like many others, I always associated long hikes and climbs with a trip to the Adirondacks or Catskills. I had always thought about the Plateau as an area with lots of interesting places to visit, but not as a large wilderness area. Yet the Rensselaer Plateau, about ten miles wide by thirty miles long, is home to the fifth largest forest in the state.

Part of the Plateau's rugged character lies in its unique geology. Pushed into its current location more than 400 million years ago, the Rensselaer Plateau eroded to form the present day escarpment that steeply rises to heights of 1,000 to 2,000 feet above the surrounding landscape. An extremely hard and erosion-resistant bedrock, called greywacke, is responsible for both the longevity and rugged topography of the Plateau. For us hikers, it meant two days of challenging terrain that gave few hints of being an ordinary "flat-top" plateau.



The idea for the hike began several months earlier with the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance (RPA), a grassroots organization established to promote the long-term health and vitality of the Plateau (see Note, page 32). During one of the first meetings I attended, Jim Bonesteel, President of RPA, announced that he and several other members were scouting routes for a traverse hike of the Plateau from Pittstown to Stephentown. The goal: to knit together all those interesting places to go, and to help people see the region as a whole.

Because there was no established trail across the entire region, Jim needed to map the route and obtain permission from the private landowners whose land we hoped to cross. The concept struck me as brilliant, because even though I have lived on the Plateau for decades and spent many a happy hour cycling, trail-running, cross-country skiing, fishing and exploring the area, the idea of hiking across the whole thing never occurred to me.

We began our trek near Pittstown State Forest, making a two-mile march up the 800-foot plateau escarpment to Grafton Lakes State Park. Nick Conrad, President of the Rensselaer Land Trust, led the first section, taking us up an old logging trail that turned into a streambed I remembered from a mountain biking trip several years earlier. Our path followed along the western fringe of Grafton Lakes State Park, past Shaver Pond, south over Route 2, to the shores of Dunham Reservoir where we stopped for lunch.

While eating, we spoke with a couple of kayakers who were out for a leisurely meander around the lake, and I made a mental note to get my kayak up here soon. Hearing a loon's haunting call echo off the surrounding hills, talk turned to

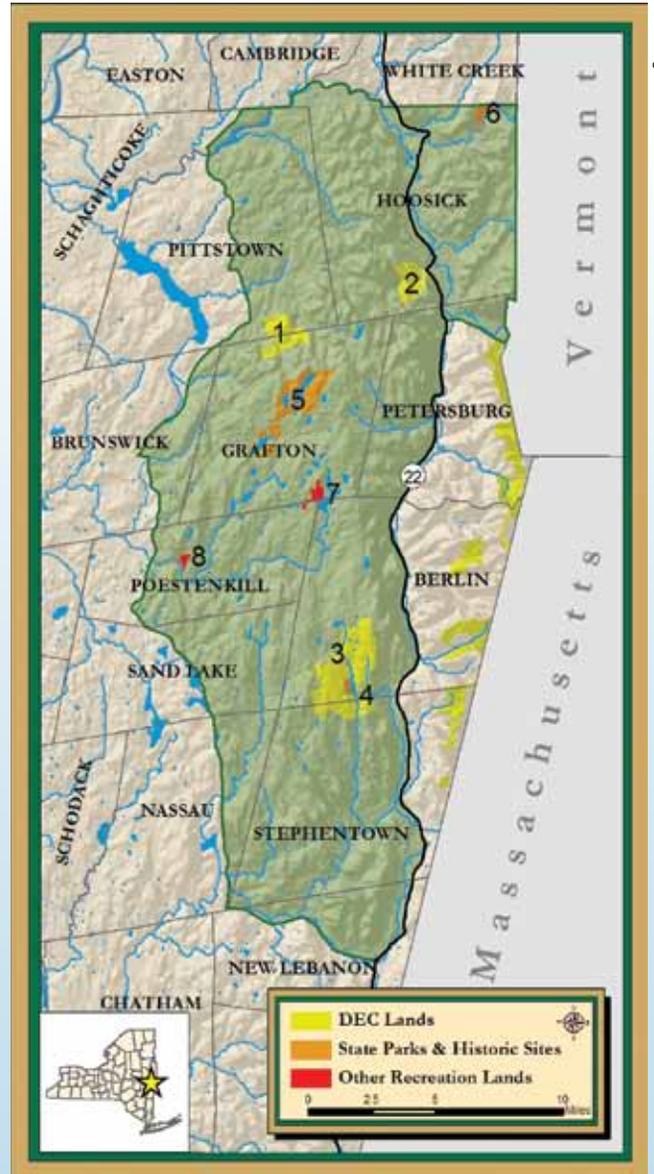
the birdlife found here. I learned that the Plateau is one of Audubon's Important Bird Areas because it supports a diversity of forest breeders, including many at-risk species such as Cooper's hawk, northern goshawk, red-shouldered hawk, wood thrush and Canada warbler.

Sitting by the reservoir, I discussed with one fellow hiker (a forester by profession) how the Plateau is essential to the forest industry, creating jobs and income while maintaining traditional land-use practices. He pointed out that with more than 80 percent of the Plateau privately owned, the sustainable forestry practiced today by many owners supports the forest industry, protects the environment, and helps make sure the woods on the Plateau stay as a forest. It's the stewardship of private forest owners and state forests, he observed, that defines this unique plateau as a working and protected landscape serving many needs and values.

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After lunch, Rachel Riemann, a USFS forest economist, and Lisa Hoyt, Director of Dyken Pond Environmental Education Center, took over navigation duties and led us southeast through undulating northern hardwood forests and dense hemlock groves to the enchanted wetlands and elevated plank trails of the Dyken Pond Center, where we camped for the night. I checked my trusty GPS and saw we'd gone 11 miles. Sweet dreams campers!



Josh Houghton

- 1. Pittstown State Forest
- 2. Tibbits State Forest
- 3. Capital District Wildlife Management Area
- 4. Cherry Plain State Park
- 5. Grafton Lakes State Park
- 6. Bennington Battlefield State Historic Site
- 7. Dyken Pond Environmental Education Center (owned by Rensselaer County)
- 8. Barberville Falls (owned by The Nature Conservancy)

In the morning, the aroma of wood smoke and fresh coffee drifted through the air as we stretched tight muscles, yawned and packed up for day two. Trail-master duties fell to Jim Bonesteel who had mapped the route and contacted landowners for permission. We were all appreciative and recognized that the hike would not be possible without landowners' support. Jim was a little anxious and wanted to hit the trail early since he had estimated the distance to be considerably more than what we covered the day before. Some hikers from day one had to leave, while several new folks joined us; overall we had 13 hikers and one dog.

The first few hours took us south out of Dyken Pond through rolling backcountry terrain that skirted wetlands, and then along beech and maple groves on the eastern edge of the popular Pineridge Cross Country Ski Area. Here we followed Old Cropsey Road and emerged onto Plank Road, which we followed east for a bit before turning south on an old logging road that ran through the former Cowee Forest Products' lands. For more than a century, this tract has been managed for lumber and forest products, and our visit let us see firsthand what a good example of traditional sustainable land use looked like.

We encountered challenging rock formations, numerous short, but steep rises and drops, occasional wetlands and constantly changing forest types.

It was in this area that we reached our highest elevation (a little more than 1,900 feet), saw abundant signs of recent moose activity, and crossed the remnants of the colonial era Albany-Boston road, now mostly reclaimed by the forest. The terrain certainly made me appreciate the challenges of travel 200 years ago!



James Clayton



A Forest Legacy

In 2010, the U.S. Forest Service designated the Rensselaer Plateau as a Forest Legacy Area, recognizing its many unique characteristics, including being the fifth largest contiguous forest in the state. The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) began in 1990 and is a federal grant program that helps protect participating forest lands from conversion to non-forest uses. Most of the country's forested lands are privately owned, and landowners are continually facing growing financial pressure to convert their lands, such as for residential and commercial development. Participation in FLP offers landowners an alternative that helps keep their forested land intact, and is entirely voluntary.

The main method of protecting land under the FLP is through the purchase of conservation easements whereby forest landowners sell a portion of their property rights, but retain ownership of the land. This allows landowners to continue their current land practices, such as forestry, but at the same time ensures that important public values such as wildlife habitat, natural areas, forest resources, and outdoor recreation opportunities are protected.

For more information about FLP, check out www.dec.ny.gov/lands/63117.html.

The recently restored Dickinson Fire Tower, now maintained by Grafton Lakes State Park, offers 360-degree views into Vermont, Massachusetts, the Catskills and the Adirondacks.



Our route took us from the Cowee tract into the Capital District Wildlife Management Area and Cherry Plain State Park, where there are miles of rugged trails for all-season activities, trout streams, waterfalls and a lake with camping facilities. We encountered challenging rock formations, numerous short, but steep rises and drops, occasional wetlands and constantly changing forest types. After 13 miles, we took a long break for lunch.

With only a few hours of daylight left, we decided to shorten the planned route, and set off past a wetland that fed the Black River (a headwater to Kinderhook Creek). Beyond Buckwheat Hill we stopped briefly to check out an incredible old stone foundation, then crossed some power line access trails and continued on to the southern portion of the Plateau around the shoulder of Turner Mountain. The final push took us down a steep decent on the southern wall before reaching the vans at Garfield Road, just as sunlight faltered. Twenty-two miles for the day!

All totaled, the trip was 33 miles long and had an elevation change (up and down) of about 3,000 feet; my body felt every step. As an Adirondack 46er, I'm used to epic hikes, and I can honestly say this ranks right up there.

I feel like this is a new find for me: a landscape and resource in my backyard that is not only beautiful and challenging to hike and explore, but also steeped in traditions of stewardship and history. What a treasure, and one I'm looking forward to exploring again.

A longtime resident of the Plateau, **Fred DeMay** is retired from the NYS Education Department.



Note: The Rensselaer Plateau Alliance is a not-for-profit, grassroots organization with a diverse membership comprised of local individuals and groups. The organization was created in 2006 to better recognize the unique resource of the Plateau and work cooperatively with landowners and local governments for the conservation of its natural resources and traditional uses. With the help of a grant from the Hudson River Estuary Program, RPA is working with these stakeholders to develop a Regional Conservation Plan. To learn more, check out RPA's website at www.rensselaerplateau.org.



Sporting Tradition

The unique character of the Rensselaer Plateau enables a richness of plant and wildlife species to live here. The area's habitats resemble that of the Adirondacks, with large unfragmented blocks of forest providing habitat for bear, bobcat, fisher and moose, while numerous ponds, streams and wetlands are home to a variety of aquatic species.

Generations of hunters and anglers have enjoyed the fantastic hunting and fishing found on the Plateau. Healthy populations of deer, bear, turkey, grouse and other game species provide hunters with plenty of opportunity. In addition, the numerous waterbodies keep anglers busy as they pursue a variety of species, including bass, pickerel, sunfish and trout.

Several hunting and fishing clubs are scattered across the Plateau, affording members a unique private hunting and fishing experience. Some clubs have been there for decades and play an integral role in passing along family sporting traditions.

The Plateau also offers visitors the chance to pursue a number of other recreational activities, including hiking, swimming, mountain biking, cross-country skiing and bird watching. And while much of the land in the Rensselaer Plateau is privately owned—be respectful and don't trespass without landowner's permission—there are a number of public lands that offer plenty of recreational opportunities for everyone (see map on page 29).

For more information about the Rensselaer Plateau region, contact DEC at (518) 357-2450, or check out the following DEC webpages:

Places to Go:
www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/347.html

State Lands Interactive Mapper:
www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/45478.html

Google Maps:
www.dec.ny.gov/pubs/42978.html

