

OUTDOORS/Nelson Bryant

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Maine's Bounty Fills the Larder

SALMON STREAM LAKE, Me.

By the time we had carried gear, food and clothing from our canoe past towering white pines to the camp and I had kindled a crackling blaze in the fireplace with the aid of birch bark stripped from a storm-dropped tree, the day was nearly done.

Sliding down beside Mount Katahdin 30 miles to the northwest, the sun gleamed on the yellows and reds of shoreside maples and birches. The lake's two resident bald eagles soared past and a little later the quivering wail of a loon came across the dark water.

To better view the mountain, my companion, Ruth Kirchmeier, visited an open spot on the boulder-strewn shore that we call the bathing beach. Returning, she reported finding moose tracks in the sand, but what pleased her even more was encountering a female black-backed woodpecker and watching a flight of about 50 green-winged teal hurtle past, twisting and turning.

Situated on the southern tip of a peninsula flanked by Salmon Stream Lake on the west and Salmon Stream on the east, our family camp is the only dwelling on the lake. Much of the peninsula is wetland and the camp itself is on a forested, bog-surrounded "island" accessible only by water.

The lake, the stream and Little Salmon Stream Lake a mile to the north are part of the Penobscot River watershed. Despite their names, the lakes hold no salmon, although wild brook trout flourish in some of the brooks that enter the lakes and in the lower reaches of the stream. The shallow lakes and the slow-flowing stretch of Salmon Stream that connects them hold smallmouth bass, pickerel, and white and yellow perch. The smallmouth fishing is superb, with bass in excess of four pounds not uncommon. The lakes get limited angling pressure, there being only a few informal boat launching spots.

When Ruth and I began our nine-day stay at the camp in October, the smallmouth season was closed, although — on the two lakes — catch-and-release angling for the species is allowed from Oct. 1 to Nov. 30. I wanted to augment our larder — much of it freeze-dried food — with fresh fish, and decided to concentrate on pickerel. There's no closed season on pickerel in Maine.

We awakened to a bright dawn, a wind-ruffled lake and below-freezing temperatures, but the fireplace and the sun streaming in through picture windows and glass doors soon removed the chill. Late in the day, we paddled up Salmon Stream on a quest for pickerel and wild cranberries.

We went ashore where the bog reaches the stream's edge and soon found good numbers of berries. The low-lying plants were cushioned on water-saturated sphagnum moss and they often grew in conjunction



Nelson Bryant for The New York Times

Ruth Kirchmeier exploring the Salmon Stream Lake and Little Salmon Stream Lake region of Maine, part of the Penobscot River watershed.

with a small shrub, a member of the heath family, called leatherleaf. The leaves of this shrub are olive green in spring and summer and turn red-brown in fall.

I wearied of berry-picking, which Ruth never does, and went for pickerel in the stream directly opposite the bog. Casting a topwater lure along extensive beds of lily pads and pickerel weed, I was soon rewarded with a good fish. I kept it and one other — and hooked and released or hooked and lost four more — before retrieving Ruth and her two quarts of cranberries from the bog.

We had one of the pickerel for supper, and dessert was bannock and just-made wild cranberry sauce, the last-named a haunting, sweet-sour blend of fen and fall and wild places.

It blew half a gale from the northwest the next two days, making exploration with the canoe uninviting, so I took my chain saw and cut up some dead spruces while Ruth worked on carving out a woodcut. Having announced that while in camp I always try to cut and split more wood than I burn, I was distressed to find that the handles on the camp's splitting maul, splitting axe and wedge-driving sledge hammer were broken. I replaced those handles with spares that I had on hand, then penned a treatise, illustrated by Ruth, that offers advice on how to avoid the overstrikes that destroy handles and pinned it on the camp wall. Overstrikes are usually a product of youthful exuberance. Once past 70, a log splitter rarely wastes energy, time and expensive ash handles in that fashion.

The following day, we were pleasantly surprised by four women in three kayaks, women whose families had once had camps where ours now stands: Reni (Rush) Qualey of Sherman, Me.; her daughter, Erica; and her first cousins Mary (Rush) Hall of Patten, Me., and Anne (Rush) Johnson of Hilo, Hawaii. Edward Rush of Sherman, the father of Mary and

Anne who still climbs Mount Katahdin at age 84 and continues to fish the Salmon Stream watershed with his son Greg, owned one of the original camps, both of which have returned to the earth.

The next day, Jason McLaughlin of Medway stopped by with a friend, Bryan Kimball, to say hello. Jason, who watches over our camp in the off-season, had a much-appreciated gift for us, a ruffed grouse that he had shot earlier in the day. We dined on it that night along with rice pilaf, wild cranberry sauce, butternut squash and freeze-dried green beans with an almond-butter sauce.

Near the end of our stay, Ruth and I paddled up Salmon Stream to Little Salmon Stream Lake in the afternoon. Our intent was to explore Mud Brook, which flows, through an extensive bog, into the lake from the northwest.

Before we reached Mud Brook, we were intercepted by three large otters. They circled our canoe for 10 minutes, sometimes coming within 15 feet, rearing far out of the water to look at us, chattering loudly all the while, seemingly more curious than disturbed.

We paddled up Mud Brook for about a mile before realizing that we didn't have time to visit its upper reaches, to get to where — I had been told by Jason — it narrows and is crossed by beaver dams that create holding pools for wild brook trout.

But headed back downstream — pausing to pick a cattail spike so that I could pluck at it and explode its fluff on the late-day breeze — I was content. I had yet another chance to anticipate becoming acquainted with the mysteries of Mud Brook and the vast, brooding fen through which it wanders. The following dawn, our last and coldest at Salmon Stream this year, Mount Katahdin was white with snow.