

## Exploring Vermont's Glastenbury Wilderness

By Brian Mohr

Finding a cozy nook in the forest, we dropped our weighty backpacks. I sprawled out on the sun-warmed ground, finding comfort between a few sticks and rocky lumps hiding beneath the leaves. Gazing into the canopy, I watched wispy clouds stream by, a sea of trees swaying in the wind and energetic birds at play. We were finally free of nearly all things modern and motorized, in the heart of Vermont's new Glastenbury Wilderness Area.

Something crawled across my neck. I reached for it — a small daddy longlegs — cupped it in my hands and placed him next to a tall flower at my side. A fresh breeze pushed through the forest. A few leaves floated down from above, but were soon lost in the colorful camouflage of the canopy. I drifted off for a moment, overwhelmed by the peace and quiet of this Green Mountain gem.

I stirred a few moments later to a bag of honey-crusted sesame sticks being dangled over my head. "Here, eat some of these," the voice accompanying the bag said. "These are too good to keep around."

Our group — consisting of my sesame-stick dangling wife, Emily Johnson, her sister Leah, and our good friend, Richard Savory — had just spent the morning hiking into our new mountain home here in southern Vermont. We were day one into a three-day hike around "the Glastenbury," and happy to be done with the hiking part of our day.

Richard, who traveled from north to south along the entire Appalachian Trail in 2003, could have gone on hiking all day. But Richard doesn't hike — he walks. Though, like the girls and me, he was also content to make camp and relax. Pulling out the map, Richard noticed that we had likely traveled about one third of our three-day, 20-mile route. It was a route that would ultimately carry us on a clockwise loop around the Glastenbury.

Starting just east of Bennington on the north side Vermont Route 9, our route climbs steadily west from a trailhead off Hollow Road, before turning north at the top of Bald Mountain and onto the West Ridge Trail (Day 1; 4 miles). From our off-trail camp here on the West Ridge, our route traverses north and east along the West Ridge Trail toward the summit of Glastenbury Mountain (Day 2; 7 miles). We planned to wrap up our trip by gradually descending, southbound, along the Long Trail/Appalachian Trail back to Route 9 (Day 3; 10 miles).

Within our cozy nook high up on the heavily forested West Ridge, we spent the afternoon relaxing and letting the mountain nourish our souls. Emily spotted the marks of a black bear climbing a giant beech tree in search of beechnuts. Richard and Leah lounged around our chosen camp kitchen, replenishing calories lost from the morning's climb up over Bald Mountain. After pitching our tent and watching Emily crawl in for a nap, I hung my hammock between two trees, and followed her lead.

The night was calm, nearly windless, and after dinner and a few good ghost stories, the clear call of a barred owl helped to carry us off to sleep.

Back on the West Ridge Trail the next morning, the sun shone bright overhead while a summer breeze kept the air fresh. With a rolling seven-mile approach to the summit of Glastenbury Mountain, we settled into a relaxing pace, following a winding and relatively faint trail through high elevation fern grottos, around moss-covered boulders, and past countless springs. Eventually, the freshwater springs gave way to an impressive collection of beaver ponds, by which we sat in hopes of spotting a moose, beaver or bird of prey. Eventually, Emily spotted a lone beaver. It greeted us with the whap! of his tail. We gave him his space and moved on.

In the gentle uphill approach to the summit of Glastenbury Mountain (3,748 feet), the predominantly hardwood forest that defines the West Ridge gives way to a world cloaked in conifers — the same spruce and fir trees commonly found above 3,500 feet along the entire Green Mountain Divide. With little notice, we popped out at a clearing just below the summit, where the newly rebuilt Goddard Shelter awaits hikers needing a place to rest. The open, lean-to shelter is a work of art, beautifully timber framed and detailed. With sleeping space for at least eight, the shelter offers a nice view into the depths of the wilderness area. Remembering the relatively sad state of the old shelter, Richard was impressed.

The shelter also marks the end of the West Ridge Trail and its intersection with the Long Trail/Appalachian Trail. Although the shelter was empty, we ran into a few through-hikers stopping for a rest in a sunny clearing nearby, and wished them happy trails.

Just north of the shelter is the true summit of Glastenbury Mountain and what is to many the highlight of any trip through the Glastenbury — the Glastenbury fire tower. With clouds creeping in from the west, we wasted no time getting up there to enjoy the views. The Green Mountain Club describes the view from the tower as “more wilderness than is to be seen from any other point on the Long Trail.” Taking in the Green Mountains to the north and east, the Berkshires to the south and the Taconics to the west, the view from Glastenbury Mountain is not to be missed. Because Glastenbury’s summit is really no more than a high point amid an extensive network of high elevation ridgelines, the summit doesn’t tower above its surroundings, making it difficult to see down into any nearby valleys where roads and towns exist. Rather, the view is dominated by distant layers of higher elevation terrain stretching all the way to the horizon, and it gives one the feeling of being truly remote.

With several hours to spare before sunset, and not another soul around, we took advantage of the solitude by quietly riding out the balance of the day in the fire tower. Although we spotted no wildfires, we managed to identify many of the prominent peaks in view — Haystack, Bromley, Equinox, Stratton, Monadnock, Greylock — as well as the mountains of Vermont’s Lye Brook, Peru Peak, Big Branch and George D. Aiken Wilderness Areas. We also took an hour stroll to the north of the summit into the nearly

impenetrable, high-elevation conifer forest that defines it. Leah had us on the lookout for porcupines. We watched our faces in a cool stream.

Gradually, moisture streaming in from the south and west obscured the sun's direct rays while casting an ever-softening hue on the world around us. As the day wore on, nature painted the land and sky with an unlimited palette of colors. It was all we could do to stare out across the land in total amazement, feeling fortunate to have a window of clear weather. Leah and Richard broke out some cheese, crackers, peanut butter and chocolate, and later brewed up some warm tea. Tempted to spend the night in the fire tower, we thought about our indigenous ancestors who believed it was unwise to linger on the summits of mountains, especially Glastenbury. Shortly after sunset, we retreated to an established campsite in the forest, well below the summit.

Someone brought up Big Foot over dinner that evening. Local legend has it that such a creature roams the Glastenbury and is connected to several unexplained disappearances that have occurred in these woods over the years. Countless local newspaper articles and a handful of books have been written about this supposed Big Foot and the other mysteries of the Glastenbury. Although Leah was excited by the idea of spotting a Big Foot, none of us seemed to buy into the idea of a Big Foot roaming the Glastenbury, and we all slept peacefully. Still, the legend lives on.

A thick fog revealed a wholly different world upon our waking. The forest glowed green around us — with every conifer needle, clump of moss and green leaf appearing nearly fluorescent in the supersaturated air. Sensing an impending downpour, we hastily packed up camp and headed back to the Goddard Shelter. Within seconds of arriving, a few powerful blasts of wind shook the shelter, and one of the heaviest downpours we had witnessed all summer roared to life.

Emily and Leah whipped up a tasty batch of hot cereal, stirred in some maple syrup and passed it around. I sprinkled some chocolate chips and raisins into mine, and fed myself one spoonful after the next while staring into the rainy abyss below the shelter. The downpour had a soothing effect on our souls, and we all contemplated crawling back into our sleeping bags. Meanwhile, Richard had brewed a thermos-full of hot tea, and each sip warmed us to the core.

The downpour eased, slightly, and sensing that it was going to be a very wet and slippery day no matter how we cut it, we decided to hit the trail. To complete our three-day loop, we still had a 10-mile journey along the Long Trail/Appalachian Trail to enjoy. Following a prominent ridge for the first few miles as the trail approaches Little Pond Mountain, the wind and rain entertained us to no end. Every few minutes, powerful gusts of wind roared out of the sky like a giant freight train, sweeping through the forest canopy and threatening to snap limbs and trees. The forest hissed, creaked and cracked in defiance, and falling leaves filled the air as if it were October. At ground level, the earth squished beneath our feet.

At a few points along the trail, small clearings usually offer limited views of the surrounding Green Mountains, but we found these clearings to be nothing shy of fog-shrouded wind tunnels. We enjoyed them immensely by dropping our packs and leaning into the raging storm. The storm's energy was exhilarating, and the whole experience was made even sweeter by the alternating scents of wet earth and a distant of flower carried in on the wind.

As the rain let up, we spotted an old stone wall and a crumbling foundation amid rotting tree trunks and a cluster of birch saplings. Tucked into a spacious south-facing nook on the mountain, with a healthy spring nearby, it seemed a fine spot for a homestead, albeit remote and high in elevation. We tried to envision life up here in the hills, and we wondered what lessons from the past might be finding new meaning in our modern lives today.

In the final miles of our journey, we crossed the upper reaches of Hell Hollow Brook, where another shelter awaits hikers, and we soon became lost in the sights and sounds of the living, breathing Glastenbury. Reflecting in these quiet miles, we felt lucky to be living in state whose residents and leaders continue to recognize the value of wilderness within our overall public lands strategy. And we felt deeply satisfied, both physically and spiritually, having immersed ourselves in a place where nature has been left to run its course. In a world where humans seem to be wriggling their way into every last nook and cranny on the planet, places like the Glastenbury give us hope — hope for a future in which humans give nature more respect than we give her today.

**For more information:**

**Maps/Trail Guides**

The Green Mountain Club — [www.greenmountainclub.org](http://www.greenmountainclub.org)

**Wilderness Info**

Vermont Wilderness Association — [www.vermontwilderness.org](http://www.vermontwilderness.org)

Leave No Trace — [www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org)

**Trip Planning/Gear**

Nature's Closet — Located in downtown Bennington, VT, (802) 442-0476