

Crazy on Nelson Crag



After an evening rain, the morning dawned bright and windy, with mounting promise for an unexpected adventure – that is, if you’re willing to suffer up a wet, slippery, unremittingly steep trail with giant, sharp, moss-covered rocks. But if you don’t know what’s coming, hey, anything’s possible.

WHY CHASE SUCH PERIL?
Because during June sweet tiny flowers bloom up in the Alpine Garden—that desirable plateau just beneath the summit of Mount Washington. Some are rare,

and you want to see them before you die. So you set out through the dripping woods, batting away black flies, mosquitoes, and other indeterminate insects that sting.

We began that day on the Old Jackson Road, a gentle, rolling path running north from the Pinkham Notch trailhead to the auto road up Washington. Our plan was to get on the Nelson Crag Trail to the Garden,



If you don't know
where you're going,
any road will take
you there.

– *Lewis Carroll*

“going as far as we feel like and then turning around.”

Now this is the kind of hiking I like, said David, one of our threesome. His comment gave me pause as *this* was to change radically and soon. Plus, despite our plan, my own idea was to go the full 8-1/2-mile loop up the Crag, across the Garden and down Lion Head, the prominent ridge overlooking Tuckerman Ravine, meeting up with the Tuckerman trail out to Pinkham. What risk too great when blooming tundra the reward?

Trail maps don't lie, but neither do they tell the whole story. You peer through bifocals at the tiny contour lines—this looks steep, but how steep? How large the rocks? How long the reaches? How much creeping on all fours? In sum, how can you really know ahead of time? Or, if you did the trail 50 years ago, what do you remember? It all remains to be seen, and perhaps seen too late to turn around.

Soon we turned at right angles onto the Nelson Crag Trail. As

Previous page: Jennifer Anderson (left) and her sister Lisa Schoonmaker high up on the Nelson Crag Trail (higher than they have the right to be given their ages and physical conditions).

Below: The southern end of Pinkham Notch from the Nelson Crag Trail.

Above right: To the south, a ravine. (Photos: David Anderson)





expected, the way abruptly steepened. The rocks greasy from rain grew more fantastic in size and configuration. My companions, who use poles, slapped them down, scooted them forward, stashed and unstashed them as we grappled roots, bushes and saplings for handholds. It was hot, wet, dirty work. All the while, I promised, “We’ll be getting out of the trees soon. I see light. We’re really getting up there.”

We were getting up there. The ski slopes of Wildcat Mountain were visible across the notch. Surely we were close to treeline and the wonderful trail across the Garden. Then we were level with Wildcat. We were up there! But still not out of the trees. Where was treeline? Where the wonderful trail?

**The world’s
big and I want
to take a good look
at it before it
gets dark.**

– John Muir

Before I go too far with this tale, I should say something about the members of our group. You might think us poorly matched.

David, relatively new to the activity, is a strong hiker although he may not think so. His speed, however, is directly proportional to his awareness of where he is. As long as he is talking about French history, foreign film or some topic remote to the surroundings, he hikes a good clip. My sister Jennifer, who loves the mountains from childhood, takes a contemplative approach. She works her way along in a dream, her poles clicking. She pauses to take a photo, sight a bird’s flight, or comment on a tree or rock formation. Then there’s me. Though barely able at times, I am restless to move, to see what’s beyond

the bend, and to get up there. Once there, though, my feet slow, and on the way down, they positively drag as I hate to leave.

Still in the trees and questing for the break, I had moved on ahead. No longer did I hear their voices behind me. As I looked back down the trail, a young couple with fresh faces, firm physiques and flawless attire climbed effortlessly up and around the rocks toward me. The woman, packless, saw me and touched her hair, as though to make herself more presentable. Her partner, hardly less immaculate, carried a pack, with the water, food, and first aid perhaps.

Where are you headed? I asked. The summit and then down Tuckerman Ravine. You'll make it in fine time, I thought.

Have you seen my companions—an older couple—down below? Yes.

Were they moving? No. They were eating lunch in a patch of sunlight.

I remembered the patch, the only real sun on the trail. But eating lunch now? Well, it was noon after all.

Before I could decide my next move, another twosome arrived from below. Leading the way was a 50-something man with a big pack, broad face and sunny air. They were on their way to the Alpine Garden, descending Lion Head. With the

summit right there, the first man said, it's so tempting to detour to the top.

The second man—dark featured, hunched and brooding—did not share his partner's enthusiasm.

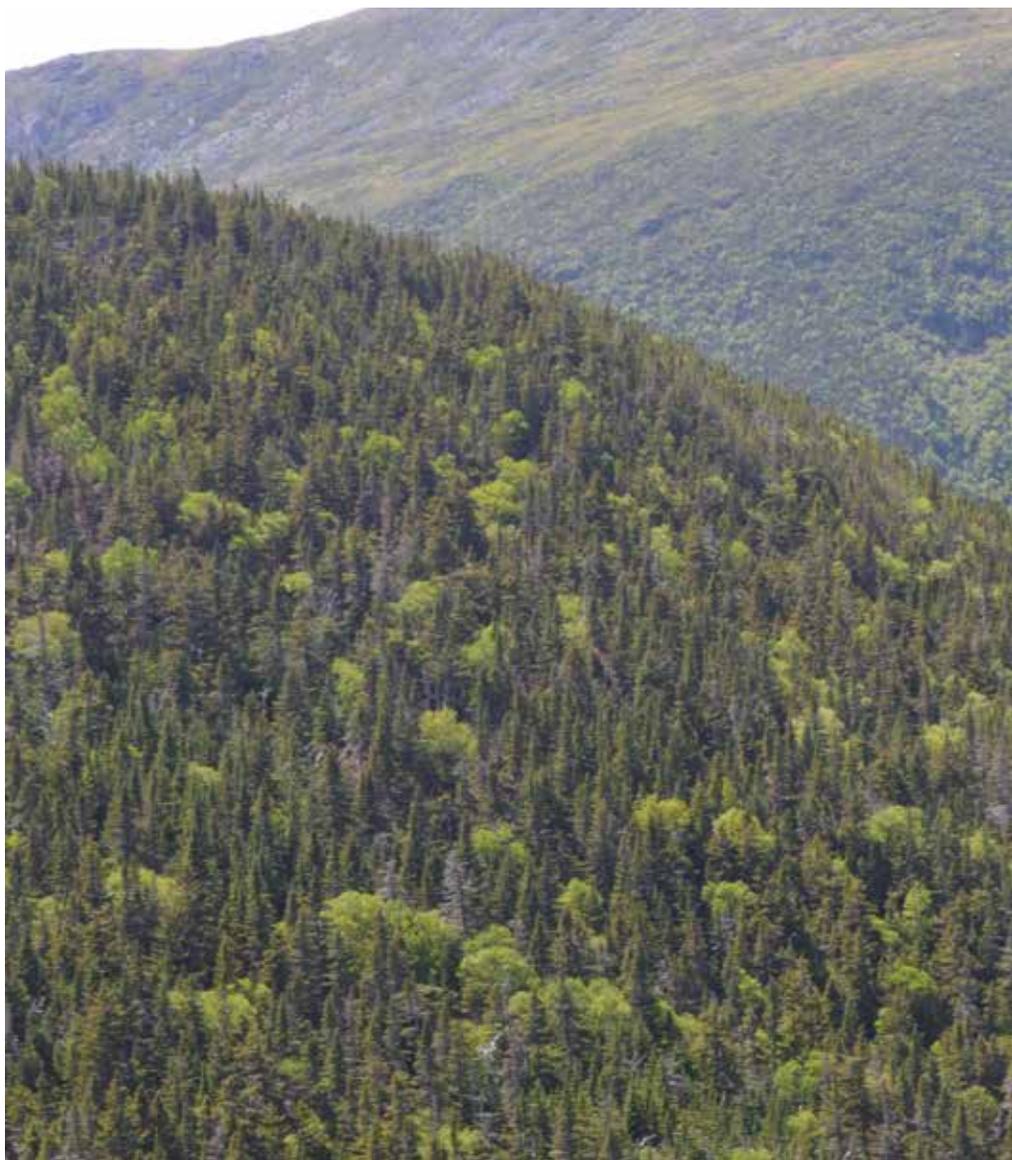
I'd forgotten what this trail is like, he growled. No way am I going back down this trail.

I agreed silently. This trail would be wicked slippery to descend.

And where were Jen and Dave? They were probably sitting there in the sun, waiting for me. I started back down. But then, here they were,

coming up the trail! They wanted to go on, do the whole loop. In fact, NO WAY were they going back down this trail.

With a burst of shared energy, we attacked the mountain and soon were blasted with bright sun, cold air, and the brilliant blossoms of alpine azalea, harebell and mountain cranberry right smack at eye level. We had reached the open ridgeline leading to Nelson Crag. Hauling on our wind breakers, we hunkered down among the rocks to take in the view of Wildcat, the mountains beyond,



and the whole southern length of the notch.

When you're young, you can take your time, even dawdle, on the way up. As the day wanes, you simply beat feet and tear down the mountain, jumping rock to rock. As you get older, each step takes longer, and if you waste or miscalculate the time you need, it's much harder, sometimes impossible, to make up.

Turning back to the mountain, I scanned the slope for signs of the

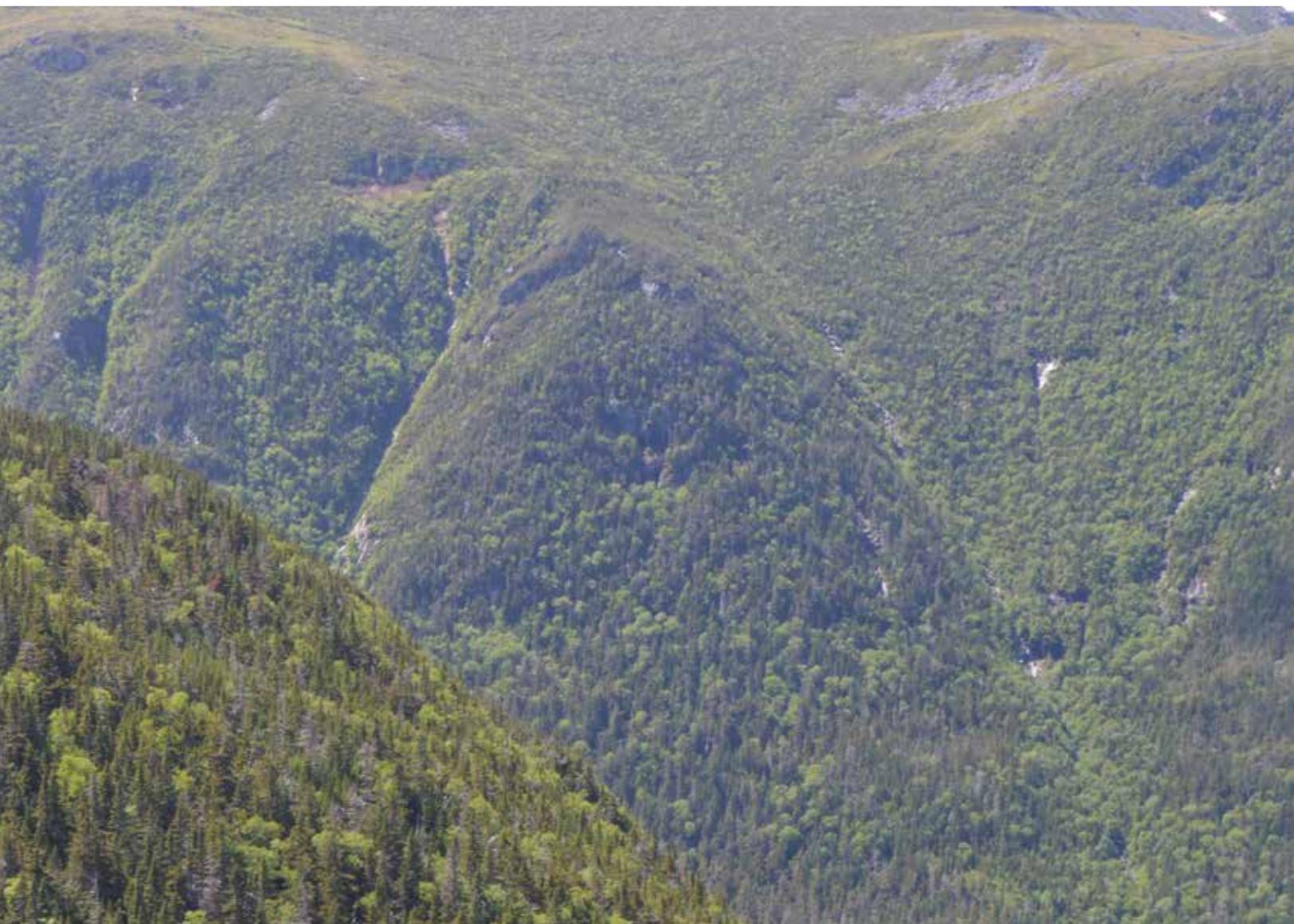
Garden and the trail crossing it. A line of cairns continued up a gentle incline, disappearing in a band of bushes to the north. To the south, where I expected to see the Garden, a ravine dropped out of sight. It was one-o'clock—time to go down—and the trail was nowhere to be seen.

As we talked quietly about next steps, reading the map, it occurred to me that at several strategic points the Nelson Crag Trail circled close, even touched, the auto road. It would be

possible to access the road a-ways up the trail, walk down three miles, and reconnect with the Old Jackson Road, the gentle path from Pinkham. A good solution, we all agreed.

Problem is, I couldn't let go of the Garden. Going down the road was a comforting idea—safe and practical, particularly given my sketchy physical condition and that back injury a year ago. I could do the Garden another time. But when would I be here in this spot again, with this drive to go on?

The Great Gulf Wilderness from the Auto Road. (Photo: David Anderson)



These thoughts roiling around in my head, I broached the idea of separating—Jen and Dave going down the road, me continuing on. Would they be OK with that? The wind was brisk, the sky blue with few high clouds, and the day long, almost the solstice.

I've hiked alone off and on since my twenties, starting one summer working as a maid cleaning rooms in a hotel in Aspen. I'd race to get the beds made, tubs scrubbed, and rugs vacuumed so that I'd still have time to head out, stuffing my little pack—a Greek shepherd's bag—with a sweater, a piece of fruit and Hostess Twinkies. No rain gear, first aid, or water even. Knowing this, Jen said, I'm OK with it, though I knew she wanted to come with. David said nothing, and I knew he thought it crazy.

We separated. The plan was, if I didn't make it down in time for dinner at six, I'd come by the dining hall window and look in. If I didn't make it down by eight-thirty, only then should they start to worry.

Excited, I hit the trail, continuing on up and over steep slabs. At a large outcrop, I stopped and watched the two walk briskly down the road and out of sight.

For the next hour, it was up rough black rocks, all a-jumble, increasingly bigger and darker as I went. What was this rock? Looks like summit rock. Am I on the summit cone? Have I

missed the trail to the Garden? It's almost two o'clock, and I'm still going up!

At the top of the ridge looming over me was a huge black cairn, and fixing my eye on it, I worked my way rock by rock, slab by slab toward it. It was tough going and I had to push. Finally, one more slab, several more rocks. Then the wind hit hard and the world opened up.

To the north lay the immense Great Gulf, the dark shapes of Mount Adams and Mount Madison rising above it. To the east, now far below, were the slopes of Wildcat. To the south stretched the great green plateau of the Garden, dotted with tiny distant cairns all the way to Lion Head. To the west rose the desolate rock of the summit cone, so near at hand it was unnerving. I was on Nelson Crag just below the summit, and I was utterly alone.

Pulling my ski cap down over my ears, I steadied myself. It was getting later, my strength was limited, and there was much careful work to be done—lots of tricky rocks to navigate,



some with deep crevices between them. But where was the trail to the Garden? From where I stood, the line of cairns snaked toward the summit. I traversed the line back and forth with my eyes. There, barely visible, halfway to the cone, was the intersection. I took a drink of water and set off.

The Garden trail winds gently among grasses and sedges. The mountain avens, a rare yellow flower, bloomed in profusion everywhere. I stepped around many small clumps of diapensia, but only a few of its tiny white flowers were open. As I moved into the lee of the summit, the wind dropped and the day turned mild. A small stream surrounded by rich green ferns tempted me to linger, but I had little time to delay.

Soon I was upon Huntington Ravine, which dropped steeply away to my left, dark and forbidding in the afternoon light. A middle-aged couple sat on the rocks at the lip. Where were they going at this hour, I wondered, but did not stop to ask. Within minutes, I was at the juncture

The deeper you go, the finer it is.

– *Han-shan*

of Lion Head overlooking Tuckerman Ravine. I was home.

Tuckerman I know like the back of my hand, having hiked it since I was fifteen when the mountain mists so spooked me that years later I'm still drawn back. Lion Head is steep going, though, so I ate, drank, and prepared for the descent.

It was fast going down, and I watched the sun lower in the sky over the headwall. Snow remained in pockets among the rocks—my husband, who has skied there, would be interested to know. But once I met up with the Tuckerman trail, I was seriously spent.

Right below the juncture, four backpackers appeared on the trail coming up—three men and a woman in their twenties. They were camping at the leantos at Hermit Lake.

How're you doing? one of the men asked. Great, I said.

The woman looked at me doubtfully. It's a long way down—looong way down, she said.

How irritating, I thought, and true. The Tuckerman trail, when you're tired, is an eternity. I could easily blow it here, twist an ankle, fall—I've broken ribs this way at the ragged end of a day. So I told myself that this was my life. For the rest of it, I would be walking rock by rock down this trail, so get used to it.

After that, I saw few people, and it was getting on six. Jen and Dave were going in to dinner. Just below the falls, nearly there, a family group smelling like shampoo came up the

trail from Pinkham. Are we near the end? the mother asked. I am, I thought.

The end of what? I said. She held out a brochure in her hand. Are we near the Crystal Cascade?

Just up the trail, over the bridge and to the right.

Then suddenly I was down. Dragging over to the dining hall, each step an effort, I looked in. Small groups of people were seated at the tables, eating and talking, perhaps sharing stories of their day.

Jen's arm shot up in greeting. Seeing her, Dave beside her, I was as happy as I've ever been.

Note: Howie Wemyss, General Manager, Mt. Washington Auto Road, informs us that hikers, walkers and runners are allowed to use the auto road during the spring, summer and fall when it is open for normal wheeled vehicle use, except during special events, such as road or bicycle races. Although the road is always available as an escape route down from the summit, hiking on the lower half is not permitted during winter except in emergencies. The lower half in winter, which is part of the Great Glen Trails system, is groomed for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, and users are required to have a trail pass.

*Opposite page bottom: Mountain avens.
Opposite page top: Diapensia.
Left: Lapland rosebay.
(Photos: Mike Jones, Beyond Ktaadn)*

