

TRACKING THOREAU—  
FIELD BIOLOGY 118

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*Editor's note: To fulfill one of the requirements for Biology 118, Randall Miller decided to follow in the footsteps of an earlier naturalist/writer, Henry David Thoreau. He reports his observations while hiking the woods of New England.*

*September 25–October 8, 2001*

*Sites: Walden Pond, Concord, Massachusetts; Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, Concord Massachusetts; Mount Katahdin, Baxter State Park, Maine; Plymouth, Massachusetts; Cape Cod National Seashore, Massachusetts*

**W**e visited a variety of sites along the eastern United States flyway—ponds, marshes, woods, seashore. We enjoyed some of the same pleasure in discovery as did Henry David Thoreau in his day. Louisa May Alcott reported that “Thoreau used to come rushing up to his neighbors to announce that the bluebirds had arrived, with as much interest in the fact as other men take in messages by the Atlantic cable.”

Our first outing took us on an early morning walk around Walden Pond, including a brief stop at the spot where Thoreau's house stood when he lived at the pond from July 4, 1845 until September 1847. The woods are heavier now around Walden Pond and throughout Concord than they were in Thoreau's day when much of the woods had been cut, in some places twice over since colonial times. The two dominant trees were the oak and a conifer with long, fine needles in clusters of 6-8 (eastern white pine?). The oaks were constantly dropping the ripened acorn, so we hiked to their drum beat on the ground and occasionally on our heads. We observed a loon dive and then sit on the water with its wings spread wide to the sun. The pond water felt relatively warm in contrast with the cold morning air. Soon there would be bathers; already there was one fisherman out in a boat. Along the shore were schools of 1-2-inch minnows. Soon there were also school children swarming in pilgrimage to Thoreau's house site.

On a cloudy afternoon with storm threatening, we walked around the lower pond area of the Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge which is bordered on the north by the Concord River. Here we saw great blue heron, Canada geese, red-tailed hawk, blue jay, and a small bird with white underside and dark upper similar to the black capped chickadee but with milder contrast between the light and dark areas. The wetland area contained a variety of cattail that looked to have thinner leaves and thinner and longer seed heads than do western varieties. Maples,

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a few beginning to turn yellow & red constituted the major tree along the river.

We arose early in Millinocket, Maine, to be in Baxter State Park when the entrance gate opened at 6 a.m. Just after we passed through the entrance gate, we stopped to view as large a bull moose as I've ever seen, displaying his huge horns for the mating season. We chose not to take the most difficult trail up Katahdin which Henry David Thoreau took on his visit here in September 1846; instead we hiked the Chimney Pond trail which was a very strenuous and relentless climb through and over granite rocks and boulders. Thoreau described the mountain as "a vast aggregation of loose rocks, as if some time it had rained rocks, and they lay as they fell on the mountain sides, nowhere fairly at rest, but leaning on each other, all rocking-stones, with cavities between, but scarcely any soil or smoother shelf." Mount Katahdin is not a single peak but a long ridge along a glacial cirque, and our hike took us to the ponds in the moraines left by the glacier. Dams, ponds and chewed up and downed trees gave evidence of a large beaver population. We did see one beaver swimming leisurely across one of the ponds. We enjoyed the fall colors, the thick woods and cool, calm, sunny day. None of the trees were especially old—the area has apparently been logged within the past century. The woods are birch, spruce, and cedars.

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In Plymouth we visited Plimoth Plantation, a re-creation of the colonial settlement as it would have been by 1627, complete with docents taking the parts of key historical inhabitants of the town. Nearby is the re-creation of a Wampanoag village with present day Native Americans prepared to give insights about their people's history to the present. Among the rocks along the wharf we watched an abundant population of Norway rats scurry about in their busy search for food. The gulls along the seashore at Plymouth and along Eel River at Plimoth Plantation were white bodied with gray wings which when opened show an angled edge of black and the tail also tipped in black, similar to what the Audubon Field guide for the Rocky Mountains show as herring gulls or California gulls. Sparrows frequented the grass in front of our lodgings on the wharf early in the morning—plain sparrows, brown with flecks of white and black. Since this is New England, these must be English sparrows.

For three days we hiked on the Cape Cod National Seashore with a dozen other members of the Thoreau Society and with Adam Gamble, author of *In the Footsteps of Thoreau: 25 Historic and Nature Walks on Cape Cod*. We drove there on a highway bordered by pines and hardwoods. According to the guidebooks, most of the trees were removed from the cape by 1900, but the soil is poor and farming meager so the trees have grown back, mostly pitch pine and oak. Another indicator of how the cape has changed in the past century is the bed & breakfast where we

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stayed which seemed misnamed as Overlook Inn because woods surround it cutting off all views. But when the house was built in the 1800's, it offered a view across Nauset Marsh to the Atlantic Ocean. Our hikes took us through three or four different ecological areas: salt ponds and marshes, seashore, woods, and sand dunes.

Geologically, Cape Cod is a glacial moraine left behind by the last ice age. It is constantly undergoing change and erosion from wind and water. The coastline loses a few feet to the ocean each year—eventually the cape will be gone. Our hikes took us along several miles of beach where we saw evidence of the high ground being undercut by the tides and storms. We were pleased to have our chance to see it before it washes away.

Along the beach we saw remnants of crustaceans including crabs, horse shoes, razor clams and various sea weeds. Sea gulls (great black backed and herring gulls) dived for fish, and occasionally an otter would bob briefly to the surface.

Along the salt ponds and marshes we saw American coot, sandpipers, blackbirds and crows. In his book, *Cape Cod*, Thoreau recorded that:

In 1667 the town [of Eastham] voted that every housekeeper should kill twelve blackbirds, or three crows, which did great damage to the corn; and this vote was repeated for many years. In 1695, an additional order was passed, namely, that 'every unmarried man in the township shall kill six blackbirds, or three crows, while he remains single; as a penalty for not doing it, shall not be married until he obey this order.' The blackbirds, however, still molest corn. I saw them at it the next summer, and there were man scare-crows, if not scare-blackbirds, in the fields, which I often mistook for men. From which I concluded, that either many men were not married, or many blackbirds were.

This area and into the woods had poverty grass or beach heather, tough low-lying shrub oak, salt spray rose, and bayberry. The salt spray rose bushes were loaded with large rose hips. Bayberry has a small gray berry and odoriferous leaves. In the area between the beach and the woods we encountered beach grass with its tough tangle of roots to protect its life as the sands shift. When the wind blows, the grass makes lovely carved circles about itself in the sand. Surely we should hang to life as tenaciously as the beach grass and leave some beautiful but unobtrusive and evanescent evidence of our having been here. ∞

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