

Trail town

Hikers help shape small Maine community



A sign on Pleasant Street in Monson points toward the town and the Appalachian Trail.

ASHLEY L. CONTI | BDN

BY AISLINN SARNACKI
BDN STAFF

With a large backpack secured to his thin frame, the young man walked briskly along the shoulder of the dirt road. It had been raining all morning. His curly hair was dripping wet and his boots coated with mud.

He was dirty, he smelled and he knew it. Jason Rakes, a 23-year-old from Arkansas, had been hiking and camping practically nonstop for 2,000 miles. He was ready for a shower and a warm bed, and he knew where to find it.

Monson. Less than 2 miles ahead. With an estimated population just shy of 700 residents, the tiny town of Monson is located near the Appalachian Trail, a famous footpath that stretches from Springer Mountain in Georgia to Katahdin in Maine. For hikers, the town is an important place to purchase supplies, rest and plan.

"There's a bakery and a gas station," Rakes said, referring to his guidebook. But first, he was headed to the Shaw's Hiker Hostel to drop off his pack, claim a \$25 bed and change into some dry clothes.

Of all the towns located along the AT, Monson is especially important because it is located on the southern edge of the 100-Mile Wilderness, the most remote section of the trail. For hikers headed north, it is the last glimpse of civilization they see before hiking 100 miles to Baxter State Park. And for those hiking south, it's the first town they reach after walking through the woods and over mountains for several days.

Former high school teachers and AT thru-hikers, Kimberly and Jarrod Hester moved to Monson with their 3-year-old daughter, Julia, in May after purchasing Shaw's Hiker Hostel. Known as one of the oldest AT hostels, Shaw's has been in operation for 38 years and has a reputation of serving a "killer breakfast" of blueberry pancakes, home-fries, eggs and bacon.

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Shaw's Hiker Hostel owner Kimberly "Hippie Chick" Hester makes lunch at the hostel on Pleasant Street in Monson recently. Shaw's has become a staple to Appalachian Trail thru-hikers looking to rest.

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The town of Monson is seen recently.

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Moose season starts Monday

Beginning this weekend, moose hunters will start rolling into the Maine woods to get ready for the first (of four) "opening days" of the multi-session hunt.

According to the state's moose biologist, the calendar will give first-season hunters an advantage they don't always receive. "[The seasons] wind up a little bit later this year, because [starting dates] are all tied into the timing for bear baiting, and the calendar year," explained Lee Kantar of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. "So once in awhile we get these years where the September [moose] season is kind of a week late and it runs into the beginning of October."

The good news: That just means that the moose are more apt to be amorous, and actively "chatting" about possible love connections.

"We know right now that moose are right at it," Kantar said. "They're getting pretty early right now and essentially breeding season is upon us. It's really a two-week time when the peak of breeding season is."

That breeding — or "rutting" — behavior isn't dictated by weather, Kantar said, but is triggered by the amount of sunlight the area gets in a given day. That's why the rut is so predictable.

"[This year] I think that's good news for moose hunters because the rut itself is at the end of the month, so it's perfect timing for [the first week of the season this year], really."

When moose are talking to each other, it's easier to figure out where they are. And when hunters start doing their best moose impressions — calling to lovesick bulls — they have a better chance of luring one of those burly critters within range.

This year a total of 2,740 moose hunters won the right through a lottery to hunt moose during one of the four seasons, in predetermined Wildlife Management Districts.

The first six-day session begins Monday and runs through Oct. 3. The hunt will be staged in eight northern and northeastern WMDs, with 850 bull tags in play during that period.

Other hunting sessions: — Oct. 12-17 in 19 WMDs, with 1,210 permit-holders also looking for bulls.

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JOHN HOLYOKE

Migration isn't the organized system you may think it is

Migration is a system of organized chaos. Sure, songbirds fly south for the winter. But they might fly north, west or east, or just fly around randomly before heading south. Eventually, most of them will end up on their normal wintering grounds, but getting there is half the fun.

I grew up thinking that birds flew south in prearranged fashion, following the arrows drawn on maps that depicted the Atlantic Flyway, the Mississippi Flyway, the Central Flyway and the Pacific Flyway. That's what my books told me. I suppose most birds do behave according to such models, but there are a bunch of

rogues out there that make life interesting this time of year.

In early September, our birds depart predictably, following favorable winds southbound. If our own birds wander elsewhere we wouldn't know it — out of sight, out of mind. What we do know is that some birds departing from elsewhere end up here. By late September, anything can happen, and often does.

Many species enter a period of



BOB DUCHESNE
GOOD BIRDING



MARK SZANTYR

Rufous hummingbirds drift into Maine later in the autumn.

post-breeding dispersal. They nest in predictable places, and when those chores are over, they wander.

The best example in Bangor has been teasing birders for over a month. Great egrets nest in southern Maine. This year, a bunch of them wandered up here during post-breeding dispersal and took a liking to Essex Woods. They are so conspicuous, they can be seen from the highway by passing motorists. Eventually, they'll fly south.

Some birds deliberately wander. Ruby-throated hummingbirds are the only nesting hummingbirds east of the Mississippi, but some western hummingbirds wander east when they are done nesting. The rufous hummingbird, in particular, has a habit of drifting into Maine later in autumn. Although most of our hum-

mingbirds are gone by mid-September, I always advise leaving feeders up until frost. You never know what might visit in October.

Some birds get blown off course in bad weather, especially those that have a habit of wandering anyway. Cave swallows nest in the Caribbean, with small colonies in Florida and Texas. They are famous for wandering after breeding, and they aren't particularly troubled when blown north. They sometimes show up along the Maine coast in October.

Migration forces many species to fly long distances over water. They really don't want to. It's a big risk. But their wintering

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