

Holyoke

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Yes, I gave up. Fly fishing wasn't feasible, it seemed. So I did what I had said I'd never do: I threw myself at the mercy of Bait Man, and start using the large surf-casting rod that the owners of our rental left behind for their guests.

Bait Man had a storefront a half mile away, and he seemed an amiable, if ominous, sort. He told me what I needed to buy (sand fleas, as it turns out), and gave me a few tips.

"Pompano love 'em," he said. Then he paused and leaned closer, as if to pass along a dark secret.

"Of course, when you get a fish on, you'll want to reel as fast as you can," he continued. "Sharks love pompano. And if you don't reel fast enough, you'll end up with half a fish on your line. The shark will have the other half."

Needless to say, I was a bit alarmed.

"So there are really sharks this far down the beach?" I asked. "I thought they were all up at Ponce Inlet."

"Oh, no," Bait Man told me. "They're everywhere. Even in ankle-deep water."

Then he leaned forward to



BDN outdoor editor John Holyoke prepares to cast a pompano rig into the waves at New Smyrna Beach, Florida, last week.

GEORGIA DOORE

share another secret.

"I've got a guy who comes in here, flies planes that haul the advertising banners," he said. "He told me if I ever saw what he sees flying over the beach, I'd never go back in the water again."

Bait Man also told me

about a man who'd taken eight stitches a week or so earlier after a bluefish mistook his wristwatch for a snack, and about another swimmer who'd lost his ring finger after a bluefish tried to munch on his wedding ring.

Then he sold me my sand fleas and wished me happy fishing.

And that's what I did: I fished. Happily. (Carefully, but happily).

For a bit, family members watched as I cautiously waded into waist-deep

water, threw my bait rig as far into the surf as I could, then scampered back to terra firma to plant my fishing rod in the sand.

After several hours of fish-free fishing, they stopped paying attention. I was left on my own, with

only a couple of fishing buddies — snowy egrets looking for a sand flea or two — to keep me company.

And that's when I finally hooked a fish.

As I grabbed the rod, I heard Bait Man's voice: "Reel in as fast as you can ... sharks love pompano."

So I reeled. And reeled. After a few frantic waves toward our rental, which I hoped would attract the attention of my wife or one of my stepchildren, I realized I was on my own.

Eventually, the shiny pompano was at my feet. Luckily, no shark had followed it ashore.

After releasing it back into the water, I proudly walked up the stairs and shared the good news.

"I caught a fish!" I said. "A pompano!"

Skeptical — my family knows my track record — my wife asked me the question I knew she'd ask. "So ... where is it?"

It was, of course, back in the ocean. I had no photo. I had no proof.

All I had was another fish tale.

That, I figure, is better than nothing.

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This fox in the woods near Poland Spring Campground in Poland inspired author Tamra Wight's 2016 book, "Mystery of the Missing Fox," the third book in her Cooper and Packrat mystery series for ages 8-12.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TAMRA WIGHT

Wight

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And it's a busy lifestyle but I really do enjoy it all."

In the shade of tall white pines, Wight strolled past empty campsites to the shore of Lower Range Pond. At the water's edge, she steadied her camera on a monopod and focused its 500mm lens on an eagle's nest located on a nearby island. Constructed atop a big white pine tree, the nest was a giant bowl of sticks, and standing smack dab in the middle of it was an adult bald eagle, its white head shining in the afternoon sun.

As Wight scanned the nest with her camera, looking for the gray, fuzzy heads of newly hatched eaglets, a loon called out from the water nearby.

"I think that I'm a full-fledged nature geek now, at age 50," Wight said, "so much so that if I go for a walk, my husband pretty much knows that I won't come back for an hour or more. I'll find something and just want to take pictures or watch it, observe. It's a way for me to de-stress too. Life is very busy, and taking those walks is very calming."

Her walks also help her gather information and ideas for her books. Each book in the Cooper and Packrat series focuses on a different species of wildlife. The first book, "Mystery on Pine Lake," was inspired by a pair of loons that Wight watches every year on Lower Range Pond. And the second book, "Mystery of the Eagle's Nest," is based on Wight's observations of local eagles.

"There's always I think a part of me that hopes the kids will bring out of the story, not a lesson, but maybe a 'what if' of their own," Wight said. "What if they go outside and explore nature and find their own inspiration?"

Wight originally planned for the third book in the series to feature bears, but her plans changed after she stumbled upon a fox den in the woods near the campground. Instantly taken with the adorable fox kits playing near the den, Wight set out a game camera to learn more about fox behavior without spooking the family away from the den.

"I found them quite by accident, and the opening chapter is a little bit of a twist on my having found them," she

said. "They're just so darn cute, those foxes."

"Mystery of the Missing Fox" is Wight's most complex book yet, with multiple storylines, a large cast of characters and the most action-packed scene she has written to date. Also, Wight introduces one of the most fascinating and mysterious characters yet — a pet raven brought to the camp by an equally mysterious camper.

"It has a lot of layers," Wight said of the new book.

Though busy with teaching and opening up the campground for summer, Wight is already hard at work on the fourth book in the series, which will feature bears. And since there aren't any bears around Poland Spring Campground that Wight knows of, she has been conducting research at the nearby Maine Wildlife Park in Gray, which serves as a permanent home for wildlife that cannot survive in the wilderness. At the park, Wight has purchased a special photographer's pass to observe two captive black bears up close.

Wight also does a great deal of her research while teaching full time at Bruce M. Whittier Middle School in Poland, home to some of her biggest fans.

"Just being in the lunchroom at lunch time, there's a lot of research I can do right there on middle schoolers," she said laughing, "what they like and what they don't like, and how they talk — those kinds of things."

Wight also finds fans at Poland Spring Campground, where she sells her campground-themed series to people of all ages from the campground's small store and office.

"I have campers who read the books," Wight said, "but then I have readers who show up to check in at the campground."

The Cooper and Packrat series, illustrated by Carl DiRocco, is available where children's books are sold, as well as at www.islandportpress.com in hardcover for \$16.95 each. Readers can stay up to date about Tamra Wight's books and her life at Poland Spring Campground on her website www.tamrawight.com, with more wildlife-specific content on her "Words and Wildlife" blog at www.tamrawight.com/words-wildlife-blog/.

Hike

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hooded mergansers, according to the Maine Bureau of Parks and Public Lands. While there on April 21, I watched two pairs of buffleheads swimming in the pond, as well as a large group of gulls.

Most visitors start their hike at the edge of Simpson Pond on Starr Trail, which starts out as a series of narrow bog bridges, then enters the woods, where you'll need to step carefully over a jumble of twisted tree roots. The trail then travels through a stand of old apple trees and an overgrown field, where it meets Houghton's Hill Trail, Pond Cove Trail and Mihill Trail.

Another entrance to the trail network is off Roque Bluffs Road, where Houghton's Hill Trail ends at a small parking area. Both of these trailheads are marked on the park trail map, available online at www.maine.gov/roquebluffs and posted on a kiosk at the park's main parking lot. On the trail map, you'll see that the trails intersect in ways that allow hikers to plan several different loop hikes. The largest loop hike in the network is about 4 miles long.

The park is a great place to go birding. In addition to the variety of waterfowl that frequent Simpson Pond, an abundance of shore birds such as plovers and gulls visit the beach, and bald eagles are often seen in the area year-round, according to Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands.

Also, both Englishman Bay and Simpson Pond are great places for paddling a canoe or kayak. In the summer, rental kayaks are available at the park for use on Simpson Pond, which is stocked with both brook and brown trout.

Between the beach and the pond is a group of picnic tables, and nearby are two outhouses for visitors. And for wheelchair users, a wooden platform near the beach was constructed to be wheelchair accessible.

From May 15 to October 20, the park's gate and facilities are open 9 a.m. to sunset daily. Camping is not permitted. Visitors are welcome to enjoy the park during the off-season but must park outside the gate. Also, facilities such as outhouses are closed during the off-season.

Admission varies depending on age and residency. The cost for a day pass for Maine residents is \$4; nonresidents, \$6; senior nonresidents, \$2; children 5-11 years old, \$1; and Maine seniors and children under 5 are free. For information, call 255-3475 or visit www.maine.gov/roquebluffs.

Personal note: After a week of resting an injured paw, my dog Oreo was ready to get outside and explore the trails of Roque Bluffs State Park on April 21, a sunny Thursday with temperatures climbing into the 60s. Though dogs aren't allowed on the park's sandy beach, they are welcome on the trails. Starting on the Starr Trail, we made our way into the trail network, tracing the edge of



AISSLIN SARNACKI | BDN

A picnic table is located at a viewpoint along the Pond Cove Trail in Roque Bluffs State Park.



AISSLIN SARNACKI | BDN

A sign marks the trailhead of Starr Trail at Roque Bluffs State Park at the edge of Simpson Pond. Starr Trail leads to several other hiking trails in the 6-mile network.

Simpson Pond, where I spotted two pairs of shy bufflehead ducks, the males' iridescent heads shining in the sun.

Early in the outing, we came across a group of young girls led by two women. They were just finishing up their hike and appeared tired but excited about their accomplishment. The sight of the young hikers lifted my spirits. The uneven terrain must have been a special challenge for them. I imagined them ending their excursion with a picnic by the pond or playing on the beach.

I decided to take the Pond Cove Trail so we could walk along the beautiful, rocky

coast. At a view of the ocean, we scrambled down the steep embankment to a place where Oreo could splash about in the salt water while I inspected small cliffs of sharp, reddish rock. There I watched a loon fish offshore and tried to prevent Oreo from eating seaweed, lest he end up regurgitating it in the back seat of my car on the long ride home.

Turning away from the coast, Mihill Trail climbed partway up Houghton's Hill to enter one of the mossiest forests I've ever seen. The entire forest floor was covered in spongy moss, except for the trail, where hikers

have worn the green away.

After the hike, I left Oreo in the car (with the air conditioner turned on) while I checked out the beach. There, I met Mary Szewc of Perry, and her two grandchildren, 6-year-old Alexis and 8-year-old Zachary, who were on school vacation. The three had been exploring different locations in eastern Maine that week. As they sat on a blanket and ate chips, they told me about how much fun they had learning about canoe building and ocean creatures at the Wabanaki Culture Center in Calais, and how they'd enjoyed hiking at Moosehorn National Wildlife Refuge in Baileyville. I've put both of these Maine attractions on my list of future adventures.

When it was time for me to leave the beach, Zachary got up from the towel and gave me a hug. Not getting to spend much time with children, I was a little surprised by the innocent and kind gesture. It was something so small, but I left the beach with a big smile on my face.

For more of Aislinn Sarnacki's adventures, visit her blog at actoutwithaislinn.bangordailynews.com. Follow her on Twitter: @1minihikegirl.

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