

Monson

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Since opening for the season on May 15, the Hesters have been catering to hikers nonstop. They offer free rides to the trailhead, cold drinks on arrival, hot showers, soft beds, laundry services and foot soaks in epsom salts.

"We plan on making this a redneck Riviera of sorts," Jarrod Hester said.

In the short time they've run the business, they've also developed a small gear shop where they sell items that include dehydrated meals, lightweight camping gear, cookstove fuel and first aid products.

The Hesters know firsthand about hiking the AT. In 2008, the couple hiked the entire trail, and along the way, they adopted the names "Hippie Chick" and "Poet." It's a longstanding tradition for long-distance hikers to adopt "trail names."

On Sept. 11, when Rakes arrived at the hostel, fellow AT hikers "Hasselhoff," "Little Red" and "Fly Away" were sitting at the kitchen table chatting. Rakes introduced himself as "Silent," a trail name reflecting his reserved demeanor.

"Since June 5, we've had guests every night," Kimberly Hester said. "We've definitely had our share of full houses, with all 24 beds full and five to eight tents in the yard."

This year, an all-time high of more than 3,000 people attempted to hike the entire AT; next year, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy expects this number to climb even higher.

"We're ready for it," Jarrod Hester said. "We're kind of excited about it."

"Monson really appreciates the hiking community and recognizes that hikers bring a lot of life to the town," Kimberly Hester said. "I feel like the town

definitely sees that ecotourism might be its future."

Not all good business

Three years ago, registered Maine Guide Phil Pepin opened 100 Mile Wilderness Adventures and Outfitters, a complex of rustic cabins tucked in the woods on Pleasant Street in Monson.

His intentions were to lodge and assist thru-hikers (those attempting to hike the entire trail without any significant breaks) and section hikers (those attempting to hike just a section of the trail). But since then, he's had some negative experiences, including guests writing on walls, stealing money from his donation jar and trashing rooms. "These problems always seem to involve thru-hikers, not section hikers. As a result, he now turns away most thru-hikers. Instead, he focuses on serving section hikers, mainly people attempting to hike through the 100-Mile Wilderness.

"This generation is going to have to change their attitude because more and more places like myself are closing their doors to thru-hikers," Pepin said.

Pepin has thru-hiked the AT three times — in 1971, 1982 and 2010 — and has spent many years maintaining sections of the trail as a member of the Maine Appalachian Trail Club.

However, in recent years, he's been discouraged by the changes he's seen on the trail.

"There's just way too many people," Pepin said. "I hate to generalize, but it's become a party crowd. ... I hope it can change and something can be done. I'd be sorry to lose the trail I grew up with."

The more the merrier

Just down the road, Shaw's Hiker Hostel has served approximately 1,000 hikers so far this season, many of them thru-hikers,

and the hostel owners haven't had any bad experiences with guests so far. The Hesters have heard of problems with AT thru-hikers, but they suspect the troublemakers are few and far between.

"It's 1 percent of the hikers, if that," Jarrod Hester said. "And that 1 percent gets a lot of publicity. We've got to focus on that 99 percent who are just loving and rocking this trail."

From Shaw's, hikers need only walk a few hundred feet to reach "downtown" Monson. On Main Street is a post office, gas station, Spring Creek Bar-B-Q, the Lakeshore House (a restaurant lodge) and a bakery-diner called Pete's Place.

"Business is really growing now that the word has gotten out on the trail," Pete Weymouth, who opened Pete's Place about two years ago, said.

The walls of the bakery are covered with AT memorabilia, along with taxidermy mounts and odd antiques. On the chalkboard menu is a special called "100 Miler": three eggs, three pancakes, choice of meat, homefries, toast, coffee, juice and a choice of baked beans, grits or hot cereal. The \$15 meal was designed to satisfy the appetites of hungry hikers.

"[The hikers] are here because they want to be here," Colleen Pinkerton, co-owner of Pete's Place, said. "They have either just came off the 100 Mile Wilderness or are just about to finish their long journey. They're usually pretty happy — and hungry."

During the hiking season, Pete's Place serves breakfast to hikers starting at 5 a.m., an hour before the bakery opens to the public, so they can catch an early shuttle to the trailhead. And the owner never intended to offer hamburgers or ice cream, he does now because so many hikers suggested it. "We do whatever it takes to

help them continue on their journeys," Pinkerton said.

Changes are afoot

At a wooden table at the back of Peter's Place on Sept. 11 sat Warren Doyle, a man from Tennessee who said he's hiked the Appalachian Trail 17 times — nine thru-hikes and seven section hikes. He was in Monson that day to take a break while leading a group hike of the trail.

Over the years, Doyle has become well acquainted with the AT — and the communities the trail visits.

"In 1975, there were no hostels here [in Monson]," Doyle said. "I was hiking with 19 students from the University of Connecticut, and we stayed in the town's gazebo."

At that time, the AT had a slightly different course. Instead of striking through the forest 2 miles west of downtown Monson as it does today, the AT followed Pleasant Road to Main Street, where it turned left and traced the busy road to Ellitsville Road.

In 1982, the AT was moved off the roads of Monson and onto a new forest path. At that time, many sections of the trail were being moved off roads in an effort to make the hike more of a wilderness experience.

Despite the trail being taken out of the heart of town, Monson remains an important stop for AT hikers. In July 2012, Monson became the first town to earn the designation as an Appalachian Trail Community by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

"I think Monson still sees the same amount of hikers [as it did before the trail was moved], if not more," said Keith Shaw Jr., son of the late Keith Shaw, who founded Shaw's Boarding House — recently renamed Shaw's Hiker Hostel — in 1977. "They still have to come into the town to resupply before they hit the 100-Mile."

Holyoke

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— Nov. 2-7 in five WMDs, 550 cow tags

— Nov. 2-28 (including Oct. 31 for Maine residents) in five WMDs. The 105 holders of permits during that season can shoot a moose of either gender.

Each of those seasons has a different feel, and hunters will encounter different scenarios. Here's Kantar's brief on each:

September season: "The September hunt is absolutely, clearly a world-class bull hunt," Kantar said. "There's a limited amount of permits, they're all bull permits, and it's got to be one of the premiere experiences because it provides the highest probability to actually call in a bull and be close [to the animal]. That sets it apart."

October season: "You've got an October season when the rut is waning, but the cows are still calling and there's still breeding activity going on. It may be a little bit more of a challenge and there might be less talking between bulls and the cows out there, but there's still that opportunity," he said. "And in October, for the most part the leaves are off the trees, so you have increased visibility, which helps as far as distance is concerned."

November 6-day season: "This is pretty much a cow hunt," Kantar said. "Cow hunts are very important because we have places where we have a moderate to high density of moose. Too many moose, so to speak ... can impact the health of that population. The way to keep that population in check is to have some level of cow removal. And you remove cows at that

point [in the year] because it gives the longest period of time, if that cow has a calf in tow, for that calf to benefit as long as possible from being with a cow."

Monthlong November hunt: "[This hunt] corresponds with our rifle deer hunt. It's four weeks, it's any-moose, it's a lower success rate in places where moose are at a low density," Kantar said. "The people of Maine decided many years ago that it was acceptable to them to have some level of hunting in what is called the 'southern' part of the state, although it's not all southern."

Many Mainers — or visitors to Maine — make a point of stopping by a tagging station to check out the activity during the moose hunt, and starting Monday, Kantar said there are a couple of spots that will take lead billing.

"Quigley's in Fort Kent, it doesn't get any better than that," Kantar said. "Between that and Gateway [Variety] in Ashland, those two stations see more moose than anybody else, any time. And if people are wandering through Presque Isle, they can stop at Ben's Trading Post."

BDN heading to Ashland

The BDN Outdoors crew — at least photographer Linda Coan O'Kresik and I — will be headed to Ashland on Monday, and we'll be hanging around at Gateway Variety to hear the moose tales as happy hunters begin arriving.

If you're in the area, stop by to say "hi."

And if you're unable to get out to a tagging station on Monday, be sure to check in on the BDN website. We'll have a story up as soon as possible that afternoon, along with plenty of cool photos.

Birding

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grounds are on the far side of the Caribbean and there is little choice. Songbirds from Atlantic Canada typically work their way down the coast of Nova Scotia, meandering back and forth until they get up the courage to cross the Gulf of Maine. They touch down on the first land they find, or even on boats if necessary.

Maine islands are notorious migrant traps. King of these is Monhegan, 10 miles from the midcoast mainland. While many Maine inns are reaching the end of their peak seasons, the inns on Monhegan are typically full this time of year. Birders flock from everywhere to see what rarities have fallen out there.

Although Monhegan is only a mile long, there are 17 miles of walking trails crisscrossing the island. However, many of the visiting birds merely forage around town where there are bushes, hedges and ornamental fruit trees. It can be possible to find 20 species of warbler in a morning. Generally, the birds are so tired and hungry that they ignore people. Close, easy views are the norm.

However, it is the likelihood of rare birds that attracts so many birders to Monhegan in late September. Lark sparrows nest from the Great Lakes to the west coast, nowhere near Maine. A few turn up on Monhegan every autumn. Clay-colored sparrows are expanding their breeding range eastward into Maine, but only in minuscule numbers. The ones that turn up on Monhegan in autumn have likely gotten lost and wandered from the Midwest.

Summer tanagers are a southern bird, with a nesting range north to New Jersey. Somehow, a few end up on Monhegan every autumn, and that is decidedly in the wrong direction for a bird that should be heading to the tropics.

You'd have to go to the grasslands of central states to find a nesting dickcissel. I saw my first in Tennessee on June 26, 1999. Western kingbirds reside west of the Mississippi. Both species are infamous wanderers in the fall, and Monhe-

gan vacuums up any bird that roams into the Atlantic.

Don't think of yourself as planning too late for Monhegan this year. Think of your-

self as planning early for next year.

Bob Duchesne serves as vice president of Maine Audubon's Penobscot Valley

Chapter. He developed the Maine Birding Trail, with information at mainebirding-trail.com. He can be reached at duchesne@midmaine.com.



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