

# Searching for winter birding in mild weather

I went looking for winter last weekend, but I couldn't find it. Even my own backyard has me puzzled. A persistent flock of 30 American goldfinches has been devouring the Nyjer seed in my thistle feeders for the last month. They've realized I am a pushover, and they can dine on my porch at will.

It's like watching 30 tiny yellow vacuum cleaners emptying my feeder and wallet.

They also like the lack of competition. There are no redpolls or pine siskins contesting the seed ports. Six American tree sparrows scavenging beneath my feeders are the only evidence of any subarctic breeders coming to my yard this winter.

I blame the exchange rate. The U.S. dollar is so strong that not many Canadians are visiting. However, wiser heads blame El Nino. That sounds like the nickname of a Mexican drug lord, but it is really a warmer than normal ocean current in the Pacific that recurs every few years. It warms the prevailing wind just as it begins to cross the American continent. Weird things happen. Maryland gets 3 feet of snow and Maine gets crocuses. This has been the winter that wasn't.

I heard rumors things were beginning to change.

For instance, John Wyatt reported a flock of 2,000 bohemian waxwings flying by his house in Winterport last week. There hadn't been many reports yet this year, and waxwings were overdue. If a flock that size finds an ornamental berry tree in a shopping center, I pity the cars parked underneath it. Buoyed by this waxwing invasion, I decided to go look for winter.

My search took me to the ornamental gardens on the University of Maine campus. If bohemian waxwings or pine grosbeaks are around, chances are they'll go there to feast among the crab apples and abundant fruits. But they didn't. There weren't even any partially chewed berry pieces or berry-colored poop in the snow to show they had been there.

So I next went off to the Stud Mill Road in Milford to look for finches. Along the way I was rewarded by the sight of a barred owl, sitting in a tree directly above the County Road next to Sunkhaze Meadows National Wildlife Refuge. The Sunkhaze area is infested with

owls, so I was not surprised to see one in daylight. During hard winters, they often are forced to hunt during the day. In this case, he was just warming himself in the morning sun before roosting deeper in the woods.

There are large concentrations of spruce and balsam fir along the dirt roads east of Milford. If there are any unusual finches around, they can usually be found there. Yet I found no redpolls and only a scant few crossbills. I was surprised, however, to find the area teeming with pine siskins. These streaky brown mini-finches are closely related to goldfinches. They share the finch trait of being constantly noisy. Wherever I stepped out of the car, I could hear a handful. Some were singing. Most were just doing their short calls that sound like PEE-you or peanut.

Because siskins and crossbills breed in Maine, technically I had not found winter. No redpolls, no pine grosbeaks, no bohemian waxwings. I turned my attention to northern shrikes. Usually, I can find a couple along the Stud Mill Road. They like the open hunting areas adjacent to the road and under the power lines. They perch atop trees and saplings, looking to prey on small rodents and songbirds. This makes them

wicked easy to spot. Yet none were present. I had to content myself with resident birds, including a couple of gray jays.

By all reports, the snowy owl invasion has ended, too. There's at least one on Sargent Mountain in Acadia. A couple of others have been hanging around the old Brunswick Naval Air Station. But otherwise, the big incursions of the last three years are history. Either owl populations are returning to normal or the weather up north just isn't bad enough to send them our way.

I'll give winter another try. I have plans to explore interior Washington County, and I'm overdue to visit the logging roads above Milinocket. Surely I can find winter there. Meanwhile, a couple of turkey vultures have been seen in southern Maine and a flock of red-winged blackbirds turned up in Cape Elizabeth last Sunday. They're a month early. I had better hurry up and find winter before spring finds me.

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# Avoid spring starvation with winter feeding

It is such a pleasant change, after the last couple of years, to see our mild winter continue as it started off. But the beekeeper should be aware of the implications. Whereas last year bees were lost to brutal cold, this year the dangers are different and perhaps a little bit surprising.

The mild November and December saw many more

days warm enough for bees to fly. Flying bees b u r n t h r o u g h much more food than clustered bees, and it was noticeable last month that my bees had eaten significantly more honey than would be typical. This can be assessed by "hefting" the hive — that is, carefully lifting the back of the hive to get an estimate of its weight. Right now hives should still be heavy, having used about half their honey stores. Hives that feel light — less than 60 pounds — may need feeding. Spring starvation is a real risk after a warm winter.

Feeding bees in winter is not like feeding in other seasons. You cannot feed sugar syrup, as the bees cannot deal with the high water content in the cold. Instead, bees should be fed "solid" food, such as winter patties, candy, fondant or even dry granulated sugar. Having tried all the above, my favorite is the winter patty, which is almost all sugar but has small amounts of pollen substitute, feeding stimulants and essential oils. At this time of year it's important not to feed more than trace amounts of pollen substitute; otherwise bees will prematurely start brood rearing, which in turn will accelerate the risk of starvation.

It's a good idea to get out to the hives and heft them as soon as you can. If there is any doubt about them being heavy enough, buy or prepare some food. As soon as we have a day nudging the low 40s, crack open the hive and you are likely to see the cluster at the top of the top hive body. Have a quick check to see whether you can see that the cluster is in contact with capped honey, which will tell you how soon you will need to go back to feed again. Your hive should be fitted with a winter feeding rim. If not, get one. This cavity is where you can place your food. Once you have added the food, quickly close up the hive.

Do not be tempted to pull out frames during these feeding events, even if the bees look dead. Sometimes bees can be almost motionless in the cluster. I remember one of our new members in PCBA telling us that having opened his hive, he found the cluster of dead bees and decided to do an

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autopsy, finding the bees face down in the cells of the comb. He brought one of the frames of bees into the house to show his wife the sad sight. Several hours later in his living room, a bee flew in and landed nearby. Thinking this strange, he went back to the mudroom, where he had set down the comb of dead bees and found the room was full of crawling and flying bees, very much alive.

As we start getting days in the 40s and 50s, we will see short spells where hundreds or thousands of bees will fly. These cleansing flights give the bees a welcome bathroom break and an opportunity to carry out many of their dead sisters. Hives that do not show this activity almost certainly are dead, and it is time to order new replacement bees.

Once spring has arrived, we will need to do some early checks for mite levels. Warm winters are often followed by an early rise in varroa mite populations.

I again will have 3-pound packages of Italian bees arriving in Maine on or about April 23 for \$128 each. Every year these sell out well in advance. If you need them, order early. Nucs also will be available in May and June at \$165. I have a full range of beekeeping equipment, winter patties and protective equipment in stock.

My beekeeping classes for 2016 have begun. There is still time to join one of my weeknight adult education beginner or intermediate beekeeping classes in Bangor, Bucksport, Ellsworth, Hampden, Howland, Newport, Pittsfield and Sullivan. Contact your adult ed office. For those who cannot make weeknights, I will again be giving several one-day classes at my home in Hampden on Saturdays in April and May. These start at 8 a.m. with four hours of classes and are followed by going to some of my beehives in the afternoon, weather permitting. Morning coffee and lunch provided. Call me on 207-299-6948 to book your place.

**Peter Cowin, aka The Bee Whisperer, is president of the Penobscot County Beekeepers Association. His activities include honey production, pollination services, beekeeping lessons, sales of bees and bee equipment, and the removal of feral bee hives from homes and other structures. Check out "The Bee Whisperer" on Facebook, email [peter-cowin@tds.net](mailto:peter-cowin@tds.net) or call 299-6948.**



PETER COWIN

## Book

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continuously since 1876, Appalachia is America's oldest mountaineering and conservation journal.

Intrigued by the subject matter and the overall mission of the proposed book, Kick agreed to take on the project.

"One of the difficulties I faced in this book was the contemporary nature of these stories," Kick said. "Most of these events took place in my lifetime. ... Most of the people that are affected by these stories are still living, and they're going to read this book and be affected by it one way or the other."

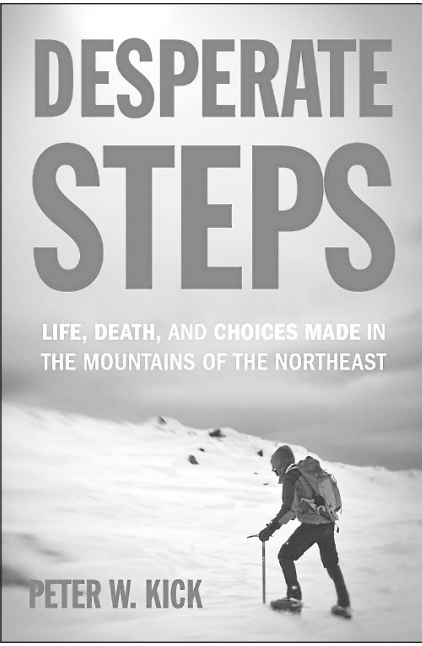
The first incident featured in the 269-page book is the oldest, and it's of particular interest to the people of Maine. The story is of Baxter State Park Ranger Ralph W. Heath, who was stationed at Chimney Pond in October 1963, when a hiker became stranded in the high elevations of Katahdin. Seeing that the weather was taking a turn for the worse, Heath decided to climb the mountain solo to rescue her. Both ultimately perished, becoming Katahdin's first known fatalities since the park opened in 1931.

While Maine is home to the oldest incident in the book, it also is home to the most recent story, that of long-distance hiker Geraldine Largay, who disappeared in 2013 while hiking along the Appalachian Trail in western Maine. Her body was found in October 2015, while "Desperate Steps" was going to press. This information was added to the book via editor's note.

To recount each story with accuracy and with as much detail as possible, Kick did a lot of digging.

Research into an event usually began with him submitting a Freedom of Information Act request to gain access to incident reports from various government agencies involved in the rescue efforts. Then, with the framework of the story in hand, Kick sought out first-hand accounts of the event from people involved, including survivors, the family and friends of those who died in incidents, search-and-rescue personnel and park rangers. While interviewing these people, he often was faced with a spectrum of strong emotions and opinions.

The stories include avalanche victims who were skiing in the Adirondacks, a young hiker who perished because of exposure in the White Mountains and hikers who decided to leave the established trail



to bushwhack and became hopelessly lost.

"Some people were reluctant to share any information with me, and that included people from government agencies all the way down to aunts and uncles and children," Kick said. "Others were effusive and very happy to have these stories explored and publicized. They felt if anything good could come from an incident or fatality, then sharing that would help make sense out of these events."

Kick talked to people in whatever way they felt comfortable, from phone and email to visiting their homes and having dinner with them as they poured over old photo albums.

"In many ways, a lot of these stories, this is the final epitaph," he added. "In many cases, nothing more will be written about these people. ... There's a great responsibility in that, and that was difficult."

Kick and editors at AMC Books drafted a letter explaining the seriousness of the endeavor, which he gave to each person he interviewed. The book's purpose is to educate, Kick said, to help others understand the risks involved in outdoor mountain sports. He hopes the book will encourage people to put in a little extra thought into planning their outdoor adventures.

"People were very wary about having anything to do with sensationalism or the kind of book written to shock and entertain," Kick said. "I think, if the book actually does what it's supposed to, people will say to themselves, 'gee, maybe I just ought to think a little bit more about preparation.'"

While writing, Kick consciously avoided any sensationalism, he said. He tells each story chronologically and in detail, including different perspectives from people directly involved in the event. Furthermore, he tells the story with the compassion and unique understanding of a person who has spent a great deal of time in the Northeast mountains and has taken his own fair share of risks.

In the book's introduction Kick starts off by recalling a time when he had a close call while skiing in the Adirondacks. He was crossing a frozen pond and broke through the ice. At that moment, he thought, "this is it."

Clearly, that wasn't the case. He survived. But the scary experience sticks with him today.

"Everybody is susceptible to calamity or errors or misjudgment," Kick said. "I didn't want to appear to be didactic or condescending or judgmental."

"One of the things that is especially apparent in these stories is that most of the people involved were experienced outdoors people," he continued. "They weren't beginners aimlessly wandering into something they had no idea about."

At the end of each story, Kick wrote an "Aftermath" piece in which he attempts to analyze each incident objectively to point out where things went wrong or could have been done differently. Typically in this section, he quotes the opinions of outdoor professionals and others involved in the event to show different perspectives.

"We're all prone, as human beings, to lay blame and fault and point out errors," Kick said. "I think ultimately, in the end, you can't do that. You can't judge. You don't know what's going on in these people's minds when they got into trouble."

Also in the "Aftermath" section, Kick looks at the big picture, how the incident affected communities, policies and attitudes about mountain sports.

The book ends with a section on safety, which includes several lists that would be helpful in preparing for an outdoor adventure, no matter how big or small.

"I want people to know that it can happen to anybody," Kick said. "That's really the theme here. We don't know when or how this sort of thing will occur or to whom. None of us are immune. ... Imagine what *could* happen and plan for that."

**"Desperate Steps: Life, Death, and Choices Made in the Mountains of the Northeast," is available for purchase at the AMC website [outdoors.org](http://outdoors.org).**

## Hike

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The park is also a spectacular place for bird watchers. At several of the trailheads is a bird checklist for the park, which includes more than 200 species of birds, as well as their seasonal occurrence and relative abundance on the property. Common species found on the property include the common loon, great blue heron, American black duck, red-breasted merganser, bald eagle, ruffed grouse, killdeer, great black-backed gull, belted kingfisher, northern flicker, gold-crowned kinglet, cedar waxwing, dark-eyed junco and more.

The park is open to the public year-round, from 9 a.m. to sunset, for hiking, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing, though trails are not groomed. Dogs are permitted if on a 4-foot leash at all times. Hunting and camp-

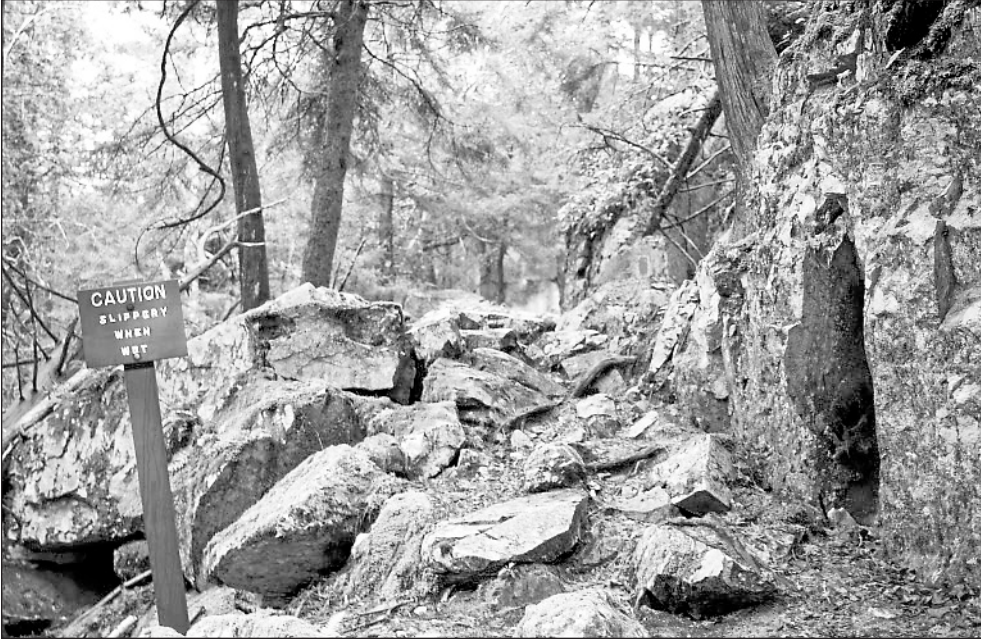
ing are not permitted, and fires are permitted in park grills only.

For information, call 326-4012 or visit [maine.gov/holbrookisland](http://maine.gov/holbrookisland).

**Personal note:** In an effort to embrace the warm front that swept through Maine last week, I took my dog Oreo on a hike at Holbrook Island Sanctuary State Park. It was Feb. 4, and the temperature was hovering in the low 50s — extremely warm for this time of year in Maine. I hiked in a T-shirt.

I figured we only had time to complete two of the park's nine trails that afternoon, so I chose the Summit Trail and the Back Cove Trail so I could visit a mountain and the ocean. I plan to return in the spring or summer to do a little birdwatching at the park's pond, beaver flowage and saltwater marsh.

The Summit Trail traveled through one of the most beautiful mossy forests I've ever seen. To be surrounded by that much green in Feb-



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**The Summit Trail becomes steep and rocky as it nears the forested summit of Backwoods Mountain in Holbrook Island Sanctuary State Park.**

ruary was a real treat.

The trail started out easy and gradual, then became rocky with a few steep, slippery sections. As we hiked

along the foot of a small cliff, I spotted two giant piles of porcupine droppings, which told me that a porcupine must be denning up nearby

— likely in the many nooks and crannies of the cliff. Seeing that, I was especially glad to have Oreo on a leash.

Near the summit of the

mountain, we ate a snack while sitting on a bench at an overlook. Through the trees, we caught glimpses of the nearby ocean, where we were headed next.

The Back Cove Trail was completely different from the mountain trail. It led through overgrown fields and past several old foundations, an old root cellar and a family cemetery, on its way to the ocean. The trail ended at a rocky beach, covered with seaweed, mussel shells, periwinkles and barnacle-encrusted rocks. Oreo went straight to the water, where I allowed him to wade and climb over mounds of seaweed. The sun, dim in the overcast sky, was just touching the tree tops when we left the beach to return to the car.

**For more of Aislinn Sarnacki's adventures, visit her blog at [actoutwithaislinn.bangordailynews.com](http://actoutwithaislinn.bangordailynews.com). Follow her on Twitter: @1minihikegirl.**