

Our Yankee Landscape

*Seeing New Haven from the
ground up*

Matt Cornish

If you want to see New Haven, walk or drive to the top of East Rock or West Rock, the twin sentinels of the Long Island Sound. There, 500 feet up, atop the parallel traprock cliffs of the Metacomet Ridge, bare rock face prevents the growth of trees and you have a rare opportunity to view, steadfast and stubborn, our Yankee landscape. Between you and a thin stretch of ocean: the gothic spires of Yale, the bank buildings downtown, the Quinnipiac river; beyond, on clear days, bits of Long Island itself. As you turn and walk down English Drive in East Rock, you can see clear through Hamden, but what you will not see, especially in summer, are signs of human habitation. Virtually unbroken treetops cover houses and roads running north all the way to Sleeping Giant.

During my six years in New Haven—ending this fall, just before the leaves give way again—it has been my pleasure to walk our hills many times, and I did not see why I should not make an article, like Thoreau's *Cape Cod*, on Connecticut's landscape: unremarkable, yes, but, I decided, worth remarking on. Wishing to get a better view of our city, I have often hiked and run the trails in and around East and West Rock Parks, alone and with friends and dogs. I have found that one does not actually come to know our landscape simply by viewing it.

Connecticut's low, rolling hills are the result of its ancient, much eroded geology, muted in comparison to the bright young Rocky Mountains, where I grew up. Our state's subtler geography allows for few vantage points. The Rockies are sublime, imposing themselves on the beholder. They threaten to crush you at any moment, and paradoxically reinforce your sense of yourself as somehow immortal when you succeed in climbing to 14,259 feet on the summit of Longs Peak. Ascending the Rockies, you pass the treeline relatively quickly, probably just after dawn if you leave camp early to avoid afternoon thunderstorms. In Connecticut, there is no above-

the-treeline—unlike, say, New Hampshire or Vermont. The highest point in Connecticut is in the northwest corner of the state on the slope of Mount Frissell, at 2,379 feet; the peak of Frissell (appropriately) is actually located in Massachusetts. Peaks in the New Haven area are only measured in the hundreds: East Rock, 366 feet; West Rock, 627 feet; Sleeping Giant, 739 feet at the left hip. This, combined with reforestation, frustrates: hikes here mostly deny us the spectacular climax of the long, wide view.

If you want an unobstructed outlook on our sober New England landscape, you should walk, often, in all four seasons. Connecticut's landscape can only be understood incrementally. (The best guide is the *Connecticut Walk Book*, in East and West versions, published by the Connecticut Forest and Park Association and updated regularly.) Two trails in particular form the foundation of the New Haven walk: the Quinnipiac and the Regicides. The Quinnipiac trail begins at water tanks in the corner of Cheshire and Prospect, and runs south, following the traprock ridge that will become West Rock; when it reaches West Rock Park in Hamden, the trail turns east and north to connect to the Sleeping Giant system, before cutting under Wilbur Cross Parkway and then south through Quinnipiac River State Park. Stretching some 24 miles, mostly in public and private wilderness, though occasionally on roads (perhaps you have come across its blue blazes on Route 68 in Cheshire or West Woods Road near Sleeping Giant), the Quinnipiac trail in its entirety forms a fishhook with a barb on the end. And where the Quinnipiac hooks northeast, you can instead continue south and onto the Regicides trail, which begins on the west slope of York Mountain (685'), and runs seven miles along the entire ridge of West Rock State Park, ending at the overlook of New Haven and the Sound, finally granting you your view.

At dawn on July 4, carrying about two liters of water, my girlfriend Rachel and I, with her golden retriever Jude, set out to walk the eleven miles from Cheshire/Prospect to York Mountain, and then seven miles to the West Rock overlook. This was the most ambitious hike

we've attempted in Connecticut—and it fell on one of the hottest days of the year. We are both in fine shape, but in this situation, as my mother might say, our eyes were larger than our stomachs. Did I say we began at dawn? Almost. We woke up a bit after dawn, 5:30 a.m., and ate a leisurely breakfast. Stumbling out, we drove in separate cars to a parking lot on Wintergreen Avenue, then caravanned up to Cheshire. I have walked this entire trail, with the exception of a mile or two in the middle, in bits and pieces over the years. During a year living in Cheshire, I must have hiked the beginning of the Quinnipiac trail at least ten times. This is what I told Rachel as we shoved our way through scratching underbrush on a steep decline, wishing we had machetes, battling mosquitoes despite our generous allotment of (expired, it turns out) DEET: “At least ten times. The trailhead is just up here.” It was not. It was back there, an understated curve to the right almost immediately after the water tanks, near a small granite pillar, carved with a “C” and a “P,” that marks the town lines. Tramping back, we each ate a wild raspberry and began our hike, twenty minutes after we started.

Leaving the marshlands, which form at the base of the gradual slopes of traprock ridges, we ascended upland past white ash trees, hemlocks, and pines, then oaks, battling fewer and fewer shrubs as we moved uphill. As soon as you make the correct turn on the Quinnipiac trail, the woods open up and begin to feel wild and remote; in the winter, you can see occasional houses and hear traffic on Routes 10 and 69, east and west of the trail, respectively, but the summer growth limits sight and dampens sound. Isolated in the forest, you might think of these trails as anomalies. Connecticut has no national parks, and its state parks tend to be contained: Sleeping Giant comes in at 1,500 acres, which would be hardly noticeable in Yosemite National Park's 747,956 (roughly the size of Rhode Island). So, where else in southern Connecticut can you walk in the forest, for tens of miles, uninterrupted?

The answer, as Jim Sterba argues in *Nature Wars: The Incredible Story of How Wildlife Comebacks Turned Backyards into*

Battlegrounds, is pretty much anywhere. The Northeast in general, but Connecticut in particular, is almost all forest, regenerating for a century and a half: acres and acres of suburban and exurban settlement, “areas of sprawl ... so covered with trees that they have the feel of a forest, and ... for many wild creatures ... all the comforts of forest.” Sterba writes that about two-thirds of northeast forest lost after European settlement have regrown. Reviewing the contentious scientific literature on pre-Columbian forests in New England in his book *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created*, Charles C. Mann makes an even bolder argument: that there could plausibly be more trees now than there were when the forests were managed by Native American tribes. This would be pre-1492 of course, before smallpox and other diseases ravaged native populations and left the trees to grow unmanaged, possibly helping spawn the Little Ice Age of 1550–1750. In *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus*, Mann calls the pre-Columbian forests gardens, collaborations between Native Americans and natural forces. The wilds the early settlers found were these gardens gone to seed.

Native Americans managed the forests thoroughly, among other things setting fires to clear underbrush and to keep hunting trails passable and prey easy to find. Albert Bierstadt’s oil on canvas paintings of Yosemite Valley provide an example of what happened after Native Americans were pushed out of areas or killed. Among other paintings of what would become Yosemite National Park, Bierstadt’s arcadian visions depict a stunning landscape of meadows and clearly visible rock formations that no longer exists. Why? With no one left to manage them after the area was desettled, the meadows reverted to forests. Bierstadt and his predecessors in the Hudson River School helped to create the environmental movement, showing us in glowing oils the natural wonders we were cutting down, strip mining, and generally turning into commercial shitholes.

The Hudson River School is, surprisingly perhaps, intimately connected with our landscape in New Haven, as Wesleyan geology professor emeritus Jelle Zeilinga de Boer shows in his beautifully

published book *New Haven's Sentinels: The Art and Science of East Rock and West Rock*. William G. Wall, for example, a forerunner of the Hudson River School, painted his pastoral vision "East Rock from the South" in 1834 (two years before Thomas Cole painted the Connecticut River oxbow), with the towering rock reflected in the marshy Mill River, cows grazing in a meadow and tiny figures floating in a canoe. Environmentalists were wildly successful at shifting our attitudes towards nature—so successful that de Boer, like many geologists, now actually regrets how reforestation has rendered extinct unobstructed views of geologic formations including East and West Rock. From the paintings collected by de Boer, one can discern the narrative I'm describing: in a print from 1786, the land goes from wild hills beyond the town to terrain used for farming in the nineteenth century ("Cider Making in the Country," by George H. Durrie, 1862), to industrial site (a photograph of a quarry in West Rock from the 1920s); visit today, and you will see only forest, with few signs of the former meadows and industry. And the environmental effects of reforestation has not been confined to parks: even as we move deeper into now exurban forests, the forests and their critters are moving deeper into the suburbs, rewilding our neighborhoods.

In the New Haven area, such critters include white-tailed deer, fox, beaver, skunk, raccoon, possum, muskrat, turkey, heron, and a pair of nesting bald eagles just off, of all places, State Street by the DMV. The magnificent, the funny-looking, the thieving, the tick-ridden—to see them stuffed, posed in replicas of their ecosystems, visit the third floor of the Peabody Museum, with its "Birds of Connecticut" exhibit and "Southern New England Dioramas."

Soon after Rachel and I gained the hill for our long walk south on July 4, what did we see but several excellent examples of those fine creatures Benjamin Franklin declared ought to be our national bird: turkeys. (No offense to the eagles.) Jude spotted them first, and even with a golden retriever's good recall and love of humans, we felt lucky she eventually returned, while such a delicious and slow-

moving feast was so close, but just able to fly away from her.

Already it was hot, and we began to sweat in the heavy humidity. A swarm of mosquitoes surrounded Rachel's calves; good thing, I thought to myself, she was wearing leggings that left only her ankles exposed. Protected from the sun by the thick canopy, we made good time, and, after two hours of ups and downs on rocky hills, we reached Roaring Brook Falls in Cheshire, where Jude bathed and we admired the highest waterfall in Connecticut while rehydrating. Roaring Brook Falls is one of our state's little treasures, a bit cluttered by beer cans, but nice to listen to. A pleasant point of repose, easily reached not just from the Quinnipiac, but also by a much shorter trail that begins off Mountain Road. This whole area is reforested: if you walk up the hill from the trailhead off Mountain, you soon cross the foundation of an old watermill. In the late nineteenth century, sightseers rode to the Falls in buggies, and posed for pictures by the water. The Falls were much more visible then, surrounded by pastureland.

Rachel and I moved on after only a short respite, quickly getting lost again—several trails, not all marked, crisscross the blue-blazed Quinnipiac here. There followed a pulse-raising five minutes straight uphill and back to our trail. It was 10 a.m., bright light refracting through the leaves and forming dancing patterns on the ground. So far, we had not seen a single person. The temperature was 85 degrees.

Walking steeply downhill, we soon passed a horse farm, and crossed Route 42, the first road of the day, before marching back up hill in Hamden's Brooksvale Recreation Park. Here, we began looking out for that most exciting of southern Connecticut megafauna: *Ursus americanus*, the black bear. Between August, 2012, and May, 2013, Hamden boasted ten confirmed black bear sightings, and this does not include the bear that disturbed joggers and bikers along the Farmington Canal trail near Brooksvale in July, 2012. Of all the comebacks of animals to their habitats, I find that of the American black bear most impressive. (Though the migration of moose into

northeastern Connecticut is exciting as well.) Extirpated by the mid-nineteenth century, bears began to return in the late twentieth century. The Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection claims evidence of bears in the state since the 1980s, identifying the abandonment of farms late in the nineteenth century as a key reason for the return of forests, and thus, eventually, of bear food.

I can give you a quick idea of why the farms were abandoned. Rachel has a dahlia habit—in fact, you may know her as the former Dahlia Lady of the Wooster Square Farmers’ Market. Ever the supportive partner, I spent a day this past spring helping to prepare the plot of land she has been using to grow her late-blooming flowers. This was her fourth year of farming the plot, of tilling the land by hand using a large pitchfork, turning over the soil and removing rocks. She pulls out stones every year; this year, we pulled out enough to build new walls along two sides of farm. Moderately successful at growing dahlias, Rachel, like all Connecticut farmers, is tremendously successful at growing rocks. Walking the Quinnipiac trail, you often come across stone walls snaking their way across the hills, beautiful ruins that mark farmers’ struggles to raise food from soil totally uninterested. (“I farm a pasture where boulders lie,” Robert Frost wrote in “Of the Stones of the Place.” In the poem, an old man thinks about sending a stone to his grandson in the west, a place with “every acre good enough to eat.” He would ask the young man to say of the stone, that it is “The portrait of the soul of my grandsire Ira. / It came from where he came from, anyway.”) In Portland, you can dance in circles throwing seeds in the air, and end up with marionberries, heirloom tomatoes, funny-colored carrots, roses, and, of course, dahlias. Homeowners there use strawberries in the place of grass, for god’s sake! And their plants produce the entire summer. The recent return of community farms to Connecticut is delightful, but as for growing dahlias (or enough food to make a living): Go west!

But back to those bears, one of which we were pleased to have

sighted ourselves while riding our bikes in Farmington. Black bears are generally not dangerous, though individuals certainly can be if they grow to regard humans as suppliers of easy calories. Just wave your arms, make noise, and back slowly away. You can carry bear mace, but it's not really necessary here. In the Colorado Rockies, officials have gone to the trouble of reintroducing wolves, in the hope that they will feed on large herbivores running amok, and also for sentimental reasons: rewilding the Wild West. We haven't been crazy enough to reintroduce large predators here, where the population density would definitely put humans at risk, but we are on a collision course with the returned black bears. Not only have bears adapted to the exurban, and even suburban, forest, they're thriving. Omnivores (though they don't often hunt deer, unfortunately), bears love our trash, our birdfeeders, our gardens, and our roadkill, that increasingly ubiquitous result of driving cars 40+ miles per hour through forest. In January 2012, legislators quietly floated the idea of creating a lottery in Connecticut for bear-hunting permits, similar to recent legislation in New Jersey. In May, a mother bear attacked a woman and the woman's dog in West Hartford; the bear's cubs were tranquilized, but the mother bear was killed (to check for rabies, and because she now represented a threat to humans). Our population of bears has reached at least 500, possibly as many as 1,000, and is estimated to double every five to seven years. We can expect more of such incidents in the future, humans getting in the way of hungry bears, as well as campaigns for new trashcans and other attempts to make our suburban forests slightly less welcoming to bears. If a bill that cleared the General Assembly's environment committee in March passes, the Department of Energy and Environment Protection will study the feasibility of a Connecticut bear hunt in order to stabilize the population and to raise funds for environmental management. This will be protested vociferously.

On our trek on July 4, however, we observed no signs of bears—no scat, prints, or tree scratches—as we continued south, down Mount Sanford (860', the highest of the day's summits), skirting the

edges of YMCA Camp Laurel. The trail then runs for about a mile on Downs Road. Relieved to be walking for a moment on level ground, after the rocky ups and downs of the trail, our bodies relaxed—even better, there were far fewer mosquitoes to swat away. Luckily, we were still protected from the sun by a leafy canopy; but for the road, it felt almost as if we were still on a trail. At the corner of Downs and Gaylord Mountain Road we paused in Westwood Cemetery, the final resting place of many of the very common Doolittles of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, as well as a few Gaylords, for whom the mountain is named. After the old cemetery we passed several hilarious new-built houses—the meadow-muffins that seem to be spreading rapidly through exurban areas. Taking to the trail again, we walked uphill until we found a spot with a little breeze, and sat down in a grove of mountain laurel for lunch: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and crushed bananas. Jude especially loved her portion of banana.

Sitting there on fallen logs, we could not see more than twenty feet in any direction. All through our walk that morning, we had been unable to see much further than that. At first this feels unsettling, as it is difficult to monitor your progress except for landmarks every couple of miles. On foggy days especially, there's a kind of white noise buzz in the back of your mind, a feeling that almost hints at madness somehow. But as you settle into the pace of the walk, the same feeling can be freeing: timeless, placeless, even selfless, the reward of hours of meditative movement. And there are the observational pleasures: noticing the colors, the scents of the flora and fauna that track the seasons. This is within-the-woods observation, not the ego-trip pride of summiting and surveying (as much as I enjoy that too). For me, the landscape of south-central Connecticut can only be experienced through this meditative state, brought on not just by one hike, but through many, the dirt on the ground always the same material, and always transformed through the seasons and subseasons. And not just in Cheshire, Hamden, Bethany, and New Haven, but also in the wetlands of Branford and Guilford, and the rocky

beaches of Hammonasset, where not even the frozen sand of January can keep Jude out of the water.

On this particular July day, it was clear—as we started walking again after lunch—that Rachel was feeling the strain of the heat. We slowed the pace as we continued up to Rocky Top, passing several overgrown foundations, including the remains of a stove. The ruins could not have been older than a century, but looked abandoned for hundreds of years. Back down the hill, we crossed West Woods Road where it becomes Brooks Road—in Bethany for a moment—and began the ascent of Mad Mare’s Hill (720’). We didn’t make it up. Rachel sat down, feeling nauseous, and we called a friend to pick us up on West Woods Road before heat exhaustion could really set in. It was 1 p.m., and 92 degrees in the sun. We sat by a brook in the wetlands by the base of the hill, feeling defeated and sticky.

The next morning, we found that Rachel’s legs were covered in mosquito bites. Hundreds—it looked like she had a particularly horrible case of the measles. I’m no expert, but I’d say she lost a half liter of blood, causing the weakness. Maybe not that much, but the bites certainly didn’t help with the hiking. So it turns out that polyester/spandex pants provide exactly zero protection from mosquitoes—and the same goes for expired DEET. Be careful in the woods! Bears should be the least of your concerns, at least for now. If you should become a platter for mosquitoes, Rachel recommends pointing a hair dryer at the bites until you can’t take the heat anymore; apparently it helps greatly with the itching.

Had we continued over Mad Mare’s Hill, we would have shortly reached the beginning of the Regicides trail at the northern end of West Rock State Park, to commence the long walk along the trap-rock ridge, the most spectacular of Connecticut’s limited geologic spectacles. The first European to sail the Long Island Sound, Adrian Block—who charted and named Block Island on the same journey, in 1614—made port in what is now New Haven Bay, and made special note of our dramatic red cliffs. These cliffs were not carved by glaciers, unlike much of the geology in the northeast. Rather, lava flows

around 200 million years ago, during the Triassic period, hardened into basalt (traprock) with mud and sand slowly forming brownstone (a sandstone often used to build, well, brownstone rowhouses) on top of the basalt. While the brownstone then eroded over millions of years, the volcanic basalt, which had slowly tipped twenty-five degrees or so east, was exposed, eroding much more slowly than the brownstone. Basalt rock is dark grey, but it rusts, and it fractures in clean lines where the lava originally formed—leaving us today with west-facing rusty cliffs that have little soil on them, and thus remain mostly exposed, free from trees. De Boer discusses these tectonics in chapter four of *New Haven's Sentinels*, and the Peabody Museum has a great permanent exhibit on the geologic history of Connecticut, including maps and mineral specimens.

Almost the entire Quinnipiac trail up to the Regicides follows the eastern slope of the traprock ridges, going up and down, from marshlands to laurel groves, occasionally touching the summit of a hill. This up and down is tiring, requiring much water as you are repeatedly overheated and then rapidly cooled off. The Regicides trail, on the other hand, follows the summit of the ridge line almost the entire way. While the slopes of the ridges were logged and used as farmland—our trails often follow old logging or farming roads—the ridges themselves were undisturbed except for sightseeing, as the lack of soil and the harsh western winds make it as tough for humans to build houses there as it is for trees to grow. Between 1912 and 1933, however, the basalt itself was quarried—most obviously on the western slope of the Sleeping Giant's head—then crushed into gravel for roads and concrete. Still, it is no accident that the parks and trails follow the traprock ridgelines, which have been little developed historically and today are of more service for recreation than for logging, quarrying, farming, or even real estate.

So, unlike the nine miles of road, marsh, slope, marsh, slope that precede it on the Quinnipiac trail, the Regicides trail offers a series of excellent long views. Walking south along the ridgeline—which I often do, despite our failure on July 4—you see Lake Wa-

trous, Lake Dawson, and then Konold's Pond, all dammed and used as reservoirs. You will not see Lake Wintergreen, a favorite swimming hole of the golden retriever, because it is hidden by the forest on the eastern slope of the ridge, though you will pass several trailheads that lead down towards it, marked with purple, golden, and orange blazes. The high, open cliff faces allow you to spy on turkey vultures, to watch them soar close up, wheeling in the wind, sniffing for carrion. The Regicides leads over Heroes Tunnel, past a tower seemingly built for a James Bond villain that funnels out the roar of Merritt Parkway traffic below. And just before it ends, the trail runs into the much-graffitied Judges' Cave, actually a glacial erratic, where, in 1661, Edward Whalley and William Goffe, later joined by John Dixwell, hid from "officers of the Crown" (according to the plaque attached to the cave). The King was Charles II, lately restored to the throne, and he ordered the signers of his father's death warrant hunted down. These three men are, of course, the Regicides. Ezra Stiles gave a rousing account of the regicides' adventure in his 1794 book *A History of Three of the Judges of Charles I. Major-General Whalley, Major-General Goffe, and Colonel Dixwell: Who, at the Restoration, 1660, Fled to America; and Were Secreted and Concealed, in Massachusetts and Connecticut, for Near Thirty Years*. Here's my favorite section:

Mr. Joseph Sperry [the grandson of Richard Sperry, who brought food to the three judges and helped conceal them] told me that the incident which broke them up from this Cave was this, that this mountain being a haunt for wild animals, one night as the Judges lay in bed, a panther, or catamount, putting his head into the door or aperture of the Cave, blazed his eye-balls in such a hideous manner upon them, as greatly affrighted them. One of them was so terrified by this grim and ferocious monster, her eyes and her squawling, that he took to his heels, and fled down the mountain to Sperry's house for safety. They thereupon considered this situation too dangerous, and quitted it. All the Sperry families have this tradition.

The eastern mountain lion was eradicated by the end of the nineteenth century. All biological evidence indicates that if we do have cougars in the Northeast, they have come from other areas, such as the one killed on the Merritt Parkway in 2011. Do we want mountain lions here? It would be neat, I suppose, the ultimate confirmation that we've transformed the state we live in back into wilderness. (Consider: The young male mountain lion killed on the Merritt was able to migrate 1,500 miles all the way from the Black Hills, through Ontario and then down through New York State, eating the entire way. It must be pretty wild out there already.) But we do live here. And I'm okay that none of my hikes have been interrupted by the blazing eyeballs of a grim and ferocious monster.

Past Judges' Cave, it's a mere jaunt to the south overlook. On the entire trail thus far, winding through the woods, you will rarely come across another hiker; on the overlook, there's always a small crowd. There is Southern Connecticut State University, there are the neighborhoods of New Haven, there is the East Rock ridge, there is Long Island Sound. And, to the east, beyond the rusty red cliffs of West Rock: wilderness, seemingly endless wilderness under trees on undulating hills, waiting to be walked. It's strange that we have invited the forest back into our daily, and sometimes dangerous, lives—even just going into the backyard can be a Lyme disease-causing adventure—since most of us clearly have no idea how to handle ourselves in nature. Still, our reforested landscape is a kind of miracle, truly restorative in addition to hazardous, and we won't learn how we can—or how we want to—manage it by continuing to stay indoors. So don't. Find a blue-blazed trail and hike on autumn's slippery leaves, winter's frozen earth, spring's mud, and summer's moss and dirt, again and again, tracking through time on these hills that track through our unique Yankee landscape.