

A Walk on the Wild Side

BY SALLY NASER AND ELLEN GASS

To many A.T. enthusiasts, the name “Mahoosuc” evokes imposing thoughts of the infamous “notch” and its well-earned reputation of being the toughest single mile of the Trail. Beginning at the Maine/New Hampshire state line, however, lies an equally, if not more daunting stretch of Mahoosuc mileage known as the A.T. corridor boundary. Due in large part to the ruggedness of the terrain and the remote back-country setting, few have walked the Mahoosuc boundary lines since the surveyors’ original work was completed in 1987. With the exception of a few A.T. volunteers familiar with the duties of corridor monitoring and boundary maintenance, the existence of the boundary in this area, as well as in many other places along the Trail, goes largely unnoticed by hikers and some Trail maintainers as they pass nearby.

Similarly, many know the length of the entire Trail or its southern and northern terminus, but not that the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and its surrounding corridor are an officially recognized unit of the National Park Service (NPS). Beginning in 1978, NPS began acquiring land on both sides of the A.T. between southwest Virginia and Maine. These individual tracts fit together to form a large jigsaw puzzle of ownership, providing a permanent, protective buffer, or corridor, for the A.T. The boundary is the edge of the corridor, where the NPS lands end and adjacent landowners’ properties begin.

The biggest and most noteworthy unknown of all though, is this: as of 2007, NPS has spent more than \$149 million to create and permanently protect a 111,269-acre corridor surrounding the A.T. In addition, NPS has spent over \$9 million to contract professional land surveyors to monument, mark, and map 1,373 miles of exterior corridor boundary in 11 states. In comparison, that translates to six times the

Ray Brassington tackles some typically edgy terrain on the A.T. corridor in the Mahoosucs.

Ellen Gass hangs a boundary sign with a view of Gentian Pond.



surveyed boundary of Yellowstone National Park. Without question, the A.T. land acquisition ranks as one of the most complex and successful conservation-oriented land protection efforts ever undertaken in the United States.

It may seem that the NPS investment in the A.T. corridor makes these lands secure, and to some extent, it does. Unfortunately, if the surveyed boundaries are not monitored and maintained, the primary line of defense for protecting the Trail is lost. In the case of the Mahoosucs, the threat of losing part of the protected corridor is becoming increasingly more real because of changes in neighboring land ownership and a more aggressive style of timbering. These conditions combined with 20 years of fading paint, thick stands of successional spruce-fir regrowth, and a shortage of volunteers to monitor the corridor, have raised the red flag even higher.

Although Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) field staff has undertaken short-term boundary recovery efforts in the Mahoosucs in the past, their ability to make any substantial progress in a short period of time, and with only a two-person crew has been severely limited. On Labor Day 2007, a year and a half of proactive and creative planning was set into motion with the goal of recovering as much of the Mahoosuc corridor boundary as possible. Among the challenges were the persistent difficulty of just getting to the boundary on a daily basis, and once there, navigating and cutting through almost impenetrable stands of spruce and fir trees. The biggest obstacle of all though is that the boundary line is not laid out like a trail. Instead, it follows a set compass bearing and distance, so there are no such things as switch-backs. It's not uncommon, especially in a place like the Mahoosucs, for a survey line to go straight up one cliff and then drop off the next rock ledge.

The next six weeks would prove to be some of the toughest and longest each member of the ATC Boundary Crew had ever logged in their service to the Appalachian Trail, but the reward of knowing that each day's backbreaking work would help to ensure the corridor's future safety made it all worth-

Sally paints a yellow blaze on a sheer rock face (the line goes through the cliff).

Ray gives Sally a hand during the commute along the boundary.

Sally and Ellen near the top of Mt. Success.

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while. Many keys to the crew's success were gleaned from past Mahoosuc work trips. In the fall of 2005, while base camping from the Carlos Cols Shelter in Maine and hiking daily to the boundary in New Hampshire, the ATC crew of two recovered only 1.2 miles of the severely faded and overgrown boundary. It was clear to ATC's boundary manager that something needed to change. To be successful in such a rugged and remote area as the White Mountains, a more significant block of time would need to be devoted. It was also time to take the advice of Dave Field, monitor overseer for the Maine Appalachian Trail Club, and purchase some power equipment.

The major keys to the 2007 crew's success included having a minimum of a three-person crew working to reclaim the boundary line on a daily basis, caching supplies and equipment on the corridor at the project start, a Stihl 450K Forestry Clearing Saw in the arsenal of hand tools and the creative recruitment of thru-hiker "boundary sherpas" to assist with the initial carry-in. The result of this monumental boundary reclamation effort was that over half of the Mahoosuc corridor boundary was recovered.

Just as with the initial NPS acquisition of A.T. corridor lands, the freshly cleared, painted, and signed Mahoosuc boundary from the Maine/New Hampshire line to Gentian Pond still needs the help of local volunteers to serve as corridor monitors. Monitoring is the first step in identifying problem areas and planning remedial actions to protect the investment in both land acquisition and the surveyed boundary line.

Anyone with an adventurous spirit, a love of getting off-Trail, and a strong land conservation ethic is encouraged to sign up for training to become a volunteer A.T. corridor monitor and to experience "Life on the Edge" firsthand. If you are interested, contact your local Trail club's monitor coordinator/overseer or email ATC boundary program manager, Sally Naser, at snaser@appalachiantrail.org.

To see more pictures and commentary about the ATC Boundary Crew's Fall 2007 adventures in the Mahoosucs and elsewhere, check out their blog at:

www.atcboundary.blogspot.com



Ellen with her friend, the Stihl clearing saw.

The crew with thru-hiker "boundary sherpas" to assist with the initial carry-in.



The ATC Boundary Crew
(pictured left to right)

**Sally Naser
Ellen Gass
and Ray Brassington**

would like to thank

**Hawk Metheny
Larry Ely
Emily Meacham
Aaron Olson
Tom Wheeler
Steve Paradis
Matt Stevens
Adam Brown
David Schochet
Ben & Lauren Thompson
and Dick Potteiger.**

This project epitomized the cooperative effort that embodies the Appalachian Trail. Each of their individual contributions made this project possible.