

# ADVENTURES

RAINBOW COALITION: THE SPLASH OF FALL COLOR BELOW MT. LAFAYETTE IS ONE OF THE WHITE MOUNTAINS' MANY DRAWING CARDS.



>>>THE TRIP

## Through the Kaleidoscope

Cozy huts, five-course meals, and world-class foliage highlight one family's fall trek. *By Jonathan Dorn*

"LOOK DADDY, FREE PANCAKES!" Abby tugs me toward the kitchen and whispers again so her sister won't hear. "Can I have one?" She gestures at a small, hand-printed sign folded tent-style on a rough wooden table in front of two heaping stacks of whole-wheat flapjacks. Eight years old with the appetite of a sumo wrestler, she peers at me quizzically, not quite believing

her good fortune—or wanting to share it.

It's these moments that sorely test a father's parenting skills. I consider my options, mull the consequences (it's 4:30 p.m.), then hand her a pancake. It's the only sensible thing to do. We'd worked sort of hard to get here, and the kids would need lots of calories for the miles ahead. Besides, I really want them to

enjoy this trip.

We've come to New Hampshire for a four-day trek across the White Mountains in prime leaf-peeping season. Our plan is to string together three of the Appalachian Mountain Club's full-service backcountry huts, which lets us lighten our loads to clothes, snacks, and sleeping bags.

This first day has been easy: less than three miles of slightly uphill walking through brilliantly colored forest and a series of lush beaver bogs. We've arrived at Zealand Falls Hut late in the afternoon to find a few other families—and the bounty of leftover pancakes.

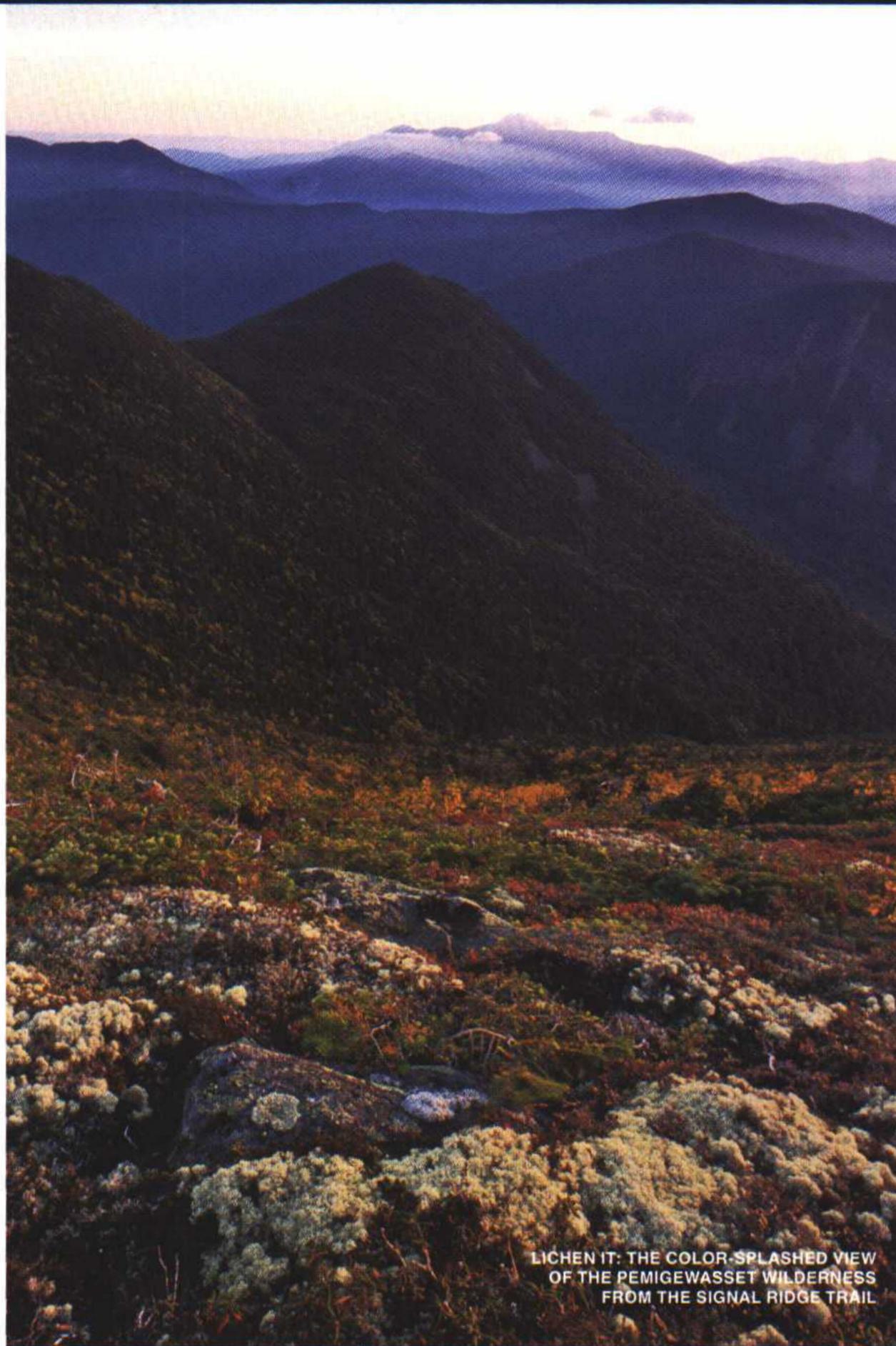
Day two will bring eight miles of rough trail and 2,000 feet of elevation gain. Ditto for day three, with 5,260-foot Mt. Lafayette thrown in. The forecast is typical early October fare: steady drizzle, winds gusting to 25 mph, and temps in the 30s above treeline. In other words, this is no time to get strict about a little snack before dinner.

IT'S SOMETHING of a miracle that the 36-bunk, hydro-powered wood hut at Zealand Falls even exists. Built in 1932 by legendary AMC crew boss Joe Dodge, it sits at ground zero of one of this nation's worst ecological disasters.

In one of the earliest documented cases of industrial-scale clearcutting, turn-of-the-century teams working for New England timber magnate J.E. Henry carted off almost every tree in the Zealand Valley. (The valley sits on the northern boundary of the Pemigewasset Wilderness, less than 10 miles west of Mt. Washington. We'll follow the Appalachian Trail south from the hut to Franconia Ridge.)

At first, historians say, Henry was content to harvest mature trees with trunks at least eight inches in diameter. But after an 1886 fire burned more than 20 square miles of valuable lumber, he accelerated the cutting.

Because the logging operation left behind piles of dry brush, the fires continued. And with mountainsides across the Whites increasingly denuded, a



LICHEN IT: THE COLOR-SPLASHED VIEW OF THE PEMIGEWASSET WILDERNESS FROM THE SIGNAL RIDGE TRAIL

vicious cycle was born. Without fir trees, whose fine needles pull moisture from the mist, the region's air got drier. Without roots to absorb runoff and prevent erosion, its soil dried up—or washed into streams in giant mudslides. Without shade, winter's deep snows melted earlier, reducing late-summer flow so much that barges occasionally couldn't float the upper Connecticut River, to which this range's snowpack is a major contributor.

The situation became so dire that

locals dubbed the area Death Valley. One visitor from Boston described a "vast scene of waste and desolation." Another reported, "There's not a living thing to be seen in the entire valley."

The federal government finally stepped in and purchased the land almost exactly a century ago, then set it aside without a true rehabilitation plan. Fortunately, the forest regenerated on its own, first with shrubs and pin cherries from seeds that survived the fires or blew in, then with second-generation

hardwood trees like beech and birch. Sugar maples followed, and now climax forest is taking over, as cold- and moisture-tolerant spruce and balsam fir replace the deciduous species.

Later in the trip, we'll see scars on a steep hillside from one of Henry's railroads, but to a layperson, this landscape looks pretty damn healthy. In fact, the century-old trees around us are almost indistinguishable from the region's isolated patches of virgin timber, which lack the massive stature of the West's old growth. By the time we hit 3,500 feet, we'll marvel at how dense the spruce has grown—so thick and primordial we can barely see 100 feet through it.

WHEN WE SET OUT from Zealand Falls in the morning, I ask the kids to imagine the lush, dripping forest around us as a desert wasteland of scorched rock and smoking embers. It's like asking Hadley, my 10-year-old, to imagine life without chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream: impossible, and impossibly sad.

The closest she can get is one of those intuitive leaps that reminds me how fast her brain is growing. "I can't see the desert in my mind," she says, "but I can draw the map a lot easier when I think of it without trees. The part we're climbing now would be a bunch of V's really close together, pointing uphill. And the part back there, in the valley by the hut, would be wider-apart U's."

Between card games last night, Hadley earned a junior naturalist patch by working through an educational packet on topo maps, one of several hut activities the AMC provides for kids. My wife, Heather, and I curled up with books, then quickly fell asleep, lulled into a caloric stupor by a dinner that piled on split-pea soup, fresh-baked wheat bread (with real butter), a green salad with peppers and carrots, a main course of shells stuffed with spinach and ricotta, and chocolate-dipped almond biscotti.

The rustic luxury didn't end in the morning. Staffed by crews ("cru," in hutspeak) of three or four college-age kids, the AMC's eight backcountry huts are spaced a day's hike apart in the Whites. For \$87 a night, you get a bunk, pillow, blankets, breakfast, and dinner, the meals being elaborate family-style feasts complete with singing and gongs and stories by the hut naturalist.

The most surprising treat was the crew's morning ritual: a song to wake the guests. At 7 a.m., before the steaming bowls of oatmeal and our departure, a soft soprano voice drifted from the kitchen, soon joined by a guitar and low, strong tenor. It was the hutmaster, Heather, and Geoff, last night's cook.

They sang something melancholy, a plaintive farewell from a woman to her lover at the end of a romance both always knew was fleeting. It's appropriate to the moment: The crew, together all summer, would soon disperse. And

with them would go the leaves, the crowds, and another too-short season in the mountains.

ON A SUNNY DAY, the open summit of South Twin Mountain is a place to linger. At 4,902 feet, it's the highest spot along a seven-mile ridgetop section of the AT known as the Twinway. It rises hundreds of feet above its neighbors, and because it sits midway between the Presidential Range (to the east) and Franconia Ridge (to the west), the peak commands the area's finest view of the Whites' two most iconic features. It's also a tough, steep, remote hike no matter how you approach it, so it's rarely thronged with daytrippers.

On a cold, drizzly day, with gusts strong enough to make you weep, the exposed summit of South Twin is a thing to scurry across, hooded head bent into the wind and hands shoved deep into pockets.

Those are the conditions we find after five hours and 2,200 feet of steady climbing. The hike up isn't bad—damp, to be sure, and socked in, but enjoyable in different ways. Without big views to distract us, we focus inward, inventing games, talking about school, and generally enjoying more uninterrupted family time than we ever manage at home. Our senses seem to sharpen, too. Against the solid gray overcast, clusters of mountain ash berries look like tiny candy apples, their color as saturated as blood splotches in an animé cartoon. In flat sections where the trail tunnels through swampy thickets of green, we smell decay, then vanilla, then the musk of wild animal.

Above 4,000 feet, we're cloaked in constant cloud, the mist so thick we can't tell it apart from the vapor in our breath. The kids' mittens are drenched from a few slips and the adult-sized boulders they had to climb. The temperature drops sharply; we have to keep moving to stay warm.

At treeline, the trees shrink to shoulder-high, and I tell the kids about krummholz forest and rime ice. Ground-hugging fog streams past the stunted spruce, obscuring everything but their wind-whipped heads. The flow creates an illusion of movement, and for one surreal moment I imagine a disembodied army of little green ghost soldiers marching across the slope to attack us.

Then we're back into the forest, plunging down the steepest, most eroded section of trail yet. It's one of the few spots J.E. Henry didn't penetrate, and if it wasn't fit for lumberjacks, it's certainly no picnic for kids. Hadley and Abby have to crabwalk across some slabs and crawl down others.

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It's hard work, but they seem to find a rhythm.

We hear Galehead Hut 20 minutes before we see it. The crew at Zealand had warned us: Wind howls across the col where Galehead sits, making the hut's turbine whine like a blender. Three times in recent years, it's been blown clean off the roof, and in the morning, when the skies clear, we'll understand why. The col sits at the vortex of two long ridges that come together sharply, creating a weather funnel of epic proportions.

That view will be the best we see for another 36 hours, until we descend through Franconia Notch to our car. Tonight, we'll wolf down a big pan of cream-cheese brownies and have Galehead all to ourselves. Tomorrow, we'll sun-dry our clothes, start hiking as a new front rolls in, and duck into Greenleaf Hut just as the crew is serving up black-bean soup and warm challah bread. We aren't getting the big color we came for, but it's hard to be disappointed. At the huts, we're discovering a new kind of wilderness refuge. Atop Lafayette, the kids will beg to keep going. And rain or no rain, these mountains offer some pretty memorable hiking.

BELOW GREENLEAF HUT, the forest explodes in color. At around 3,000 feet, the spruce give way to maples, ash, beech, and birch. Leaves are everywhere: plastered to the ground, fluttering from the sky, twirling a few times before the next gust cuts them loose. They come in every imaginable shape and color. We see tiny orange hearts, green spades, and giant yellow platters with thick stems, fuzzy backs, and big, scalloped lobes that remind us of the fans that fine ladies used in old John Wayne westerns. In puddles along the

trail, tannins leached from the deep-crimson veins of maple leaves, staining the water reddish brown. Even the mosses seem to be showing off. We count seven shades of green, from nuclear lime to a not-so-drab olive.

As we walk, we call out other colors. Hadley marvels at the fleshy pink behind a sheet of peeling birch bark. Heather kneels to study what she thinks is foliose lichen (plant identification is another AMC activity). Its tendrils are a splotchy aqua, and it's dotted with spores as bright as cranberries.

Then Abby discovers the kaleidoscope. She runs over and takes my hand. "Daddy, just focus your eyes on some leaves way out there and let everything else go fuzzy. Then walk straight down the path without moving your eyes," she tells me. The words tumble out. "I'll guide you. You'll love it. It's like being inside one of those telescopes that you spin and sparkling snowflakes twirl around."

The effect is amazing and slightly hypnotic. Sunbeams pierce the canopy, spotlighting bits of color as the leaves dance around the periphery of my gaze. It really *is* like a kaleidoscope.

I think of Heather the hutmaster and Geoff the cook. Maybe they were singing for the forest, not themselves.

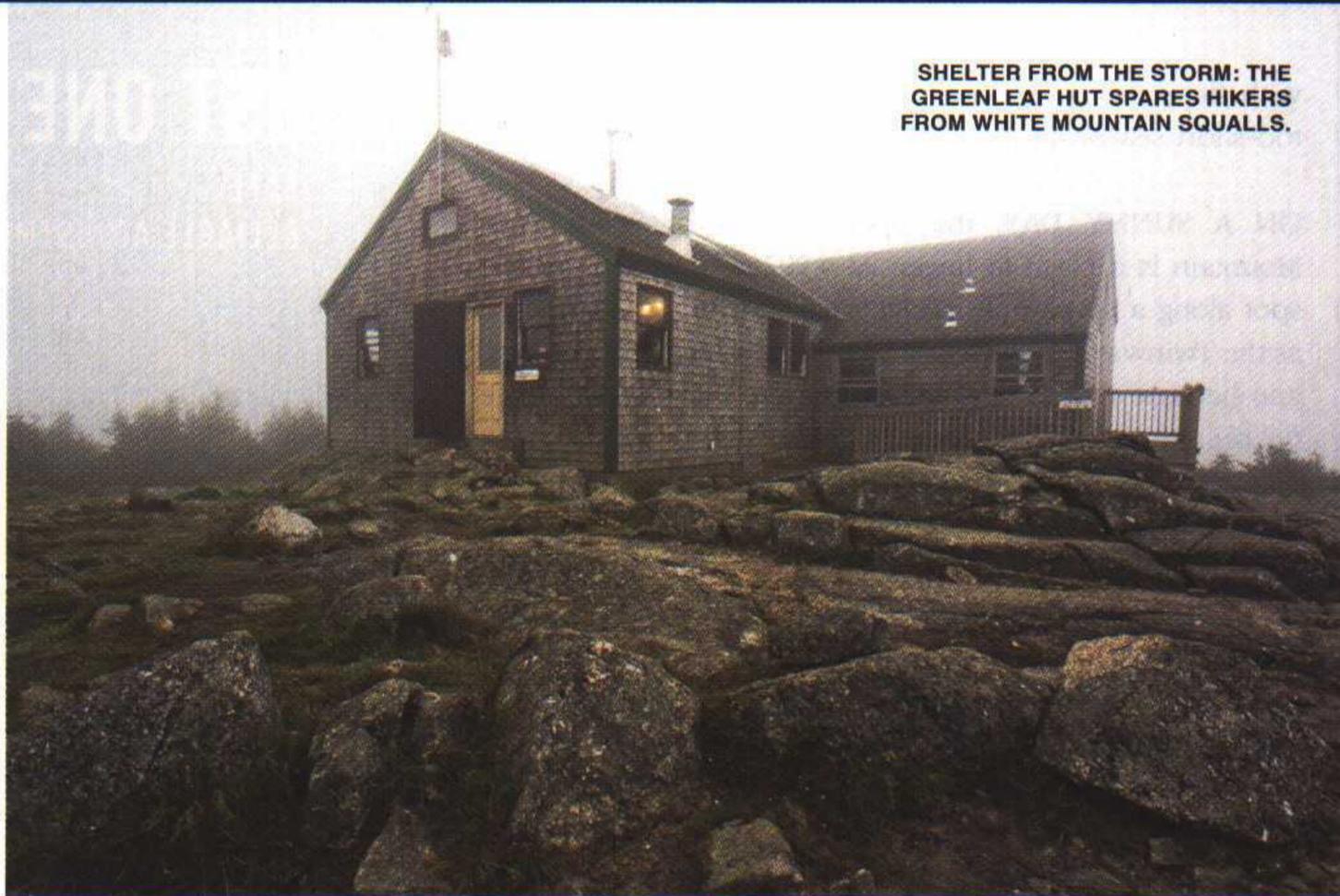
It, too, is ready to turn over; in a few days, winter's first snow will fall. Like us, these trees are cycling through their own patterns of combustion and quiet. They only lack the ability to feel that bittersweet pang of another season passing too quickly.

As we stretch out the final mile to our car, I squint to look through the kaleidoscope one last time. Instead of colors, I flash through images of my kids in the huts, on the trail, laughing in the mist. Some day very soon, I'll blink and my two baby girls will be all grown up. I don't like that thought, but I can't change it—leaves fall, crews depart, children grow up. So I take solace in the knowledge that some part of this experience will survive. Even in Death Valley, something always survives. 🍂

## PLAN IT HUT-HIKE THE WHITES

**Reservations** The AMC staffs huts full-time June 1 to October 27; some huts close in September, and some are open year-round on a self-service basis. Fall weekends fill up months in advance. Rates are \$87/night for nonmembers, less for members and kids. Hut and shuttle info: [outdoors.org/lodging/huts](http://outdoors.org/lodging/huts)

**Mandatory gear** For an October hike, pack multiple warm layers, extra mittens, dependable raingear, and waterproof boots. We also carried an emergency tent. **Guide** AMC's *White Mountain Guide* (28th edition) comes with excellent maps (\$25).



**SHELTER FROM THE STORM: THE GREENLEAF HUT SPARES HIKERS FROM WHITE MOUNTAIN SQUALLS.**