

Resolved Refuse Removal

BAG BY BAG, LOAD BY LOAD, TONS OF TRASH SUCCUMBED TO PERSISTENCE, DETERMINATION, AND THE PASSING HELP OF MORE THAN A THOUSAND A.T. HIKERS — RESULTING IN A NEWLY PRISTINE EXPERIENCE IN THE BIGELOW MOUNTAIN RANGE. BY DANIEL SIMONDS

APPALACHIAN TRAIL LEGEND MYRON AVERY, writing in 1949, described Mount Bigelow as: “Maine’s Second Mountain — Distinctive from all points of view, Mount Bigelow’s location affords an unparalleled outlook ... wild, rugged, possessed of an extensive trail and shelter system, Mount Bigelow well deserves the esteem in which it is held as the premier of the four-thousand-foot peaks of the mountains of western Maine, and may justly be considered second only to Katahdin in the entire state.”

This remarkable 10-mile-long ridge is the centerpiece of the Bigelow Preserve, which was established in 1976 as the first land in the United States to be set aside for preservation by public referendum. Managed by Maine’s Bureau of Public Lands, the 10,000-acre preserve includes 17.6 miles of the A.T., two of Maine’s 14 4,000-footers (including one named for Avery), and two of the highest and most remote campsites in the state. Southbound A.T. hikers remember Bigelow as the first in a long series of grueling ascents that make up Maine’s High Peaks region. For northbounders, Bigelow can offer a panoramic view that includes both Katahdin and New Hampshire’s Mount Washington.

Bigelow’s remarkable and unique landscape position — standing 3,000 feet proud over the Dead River valley and overlooking a vast stretch of forest to the north and east — made it an attractive location during the development of a forest-fire suppression network early in the last century. A fire tower (only the third in the U.S.) was built on Avery Peak in 1905. It was replaced eventually by a wooden cabin on a stone foundation. This fire lookout station was maintained in regular use until 1976 — a total of 71 years in operation.

After it was taken out of service, the Avery Peak lookout station fell swiftly into disrepair. In spite of occasional efforts at maintenance, it became both an eyesore and a hazard. In 2011 the state removed the immediate problem by burning the structure, but this left the foundation packed with charred wood, nails, glass, and other unsightly debris. This unfortunate and unappealing situation was the state of affairs on Bigelow at the start of the 2013 hiking season. It sets the stage for the remarkable story to follow.

For many years the Maine Appalachian Trail Club (MATC) has staffed Bigelow Mountain with a caretaker based at Horns Pond campsite. The MATC caretakers are tasked with a challenging job of Leave No Trace education, outreach, and communication with the hiker community on the Trail. They propagate Trail ethics and encourage users to respect and protect the wild environment



around them. As a high-use area with unique and fragile ecosystems, the Bigelow Ridge has always been a high priority for the MATC and a challenging position for its caretakers.

In 2013, MATC was fortunate to recruit Ian Fitzmorris to fill the caretaker position on Bigelow. A native of Pittsford, New York and 2012 graduate of Boston College, Ian came to MATC with an impressive resume of skills and experience, having spent much of his youth hiking in the Adirondacks and two seasons employed by the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) as a remote site caretaker in New Hampshire’s White Mountains.

The MATC volunteers who hired, trained, and supported Ian knew that they were fortunate to have him. Ian’s friendly smile and passion for backcountry ethics made it clear that he was a natural for the job. His easy competence in coping with a Memorial Day snowfall on his very first day demonstrated that he could handle himself in the woods. They knew from the start that the Bigelow Ridge was in good hands. They did not realize, however, just what Ian would manage to accomplish in the next five months. But, of course, neither did he.

Ian first encountered the mess in the fire tower foundation in the course of his regular ridge-running duties. With spring snow still clinging to the mountain, Ian began by removing debris from the tower foundation on his own and carrying bucketfuls to the campsite at nearby Bigelow Col for sorting, bagging, and eventually packing off the ridge. In his spare time, between groups of spring hikers, Ian worked steadily at emptying the debris from the tower foundation. Hikers naturally began to

inquire about just what he was doing, and many of them offered to help. Soon, there was an informal bucket brigade of volunteers carrying junk down the one-third mile trail to Bigelow Col.

Before long, Ian discovered another site that was even more disturbing. Near the old tower location, there was a debris field containing hundreds of old batteries, glass soda bottles, wood, shingles, paint cans, wires, and even some old parachutes. Most of this material had been there for decades and had attracted attention for years. A 1981 entry in a MATC caretaker’s log noted:

“All the trash behind the rock ... looks pretty bad, but it doesn’t look like the kind that can just be stuck in our packs and carried down. That could possibly be a future project for a group of workers.”

That caretaker had seen the summit dump as a frustrating problem without a solution. But Ian just saw a problem. He didn’t have “a group of workers” but he did have some buckets, a backpack, and a bunch of friendly hikers. After cleaning up the fire tower foundation, he just kept on working. Bucketloads of old trash flowed to Bigelow Col, where they were sorted, bagged, and carried out to the roadside. Ian did much of the work



Caretakers’ log entry is a good example: “A Question: Can anything be done about the mound of junk in front of the old cabin. The dump is an eyesore, despite the stumps over it, and the junk unfortunately is not biodegradable and will last for years. We’ll pack some stuff out, but something more drastic should be done — like all caretakers packing out as much as possible.”

Ian found a way to get it done. Having just completed “something more drastic” at Avery Peak, he began to tackle the mess at Bigelow Col. Earlier caretakers and maintainers had made an effort to cover and contain the trash dumps using brush, tarpaulins, and stumps. Ian removed all this and dove right in. Thousands of intact bottles were dug from the dumps and regularly stacked on the tiny porch of the warden’s cabin, with a sign asking passing hikers to please take some down with them. Ian estimates that 6,000 to 8,000 bottles were disposed of this way. Most of the glass, however, was broken and required more careful handling. The solution was a 100-liter heavy vinyl “dry bag” (itself ironically salvaged from the dump) which fit inside Ian’s backpack. Glass could be compacted with a sledge hammer until the bag was full and weighed 100 lbs; then Ian would pack it out on his next trip.

The warden’s camp also had a woodshed. Originally, it must have been used to store and dry firewood. After the end of the fire warden’s tenure, however, the shed became a convenient place to store (or perhaps hide) trash. By 2013, the shed held an alarming accumulation of trash collected and piled over many, many years — including three mattresses, 12 windows, a pile of old shingles the size of a sofa, and three oil drums packed

full of broken glass, iron, and nails. The ground nearby held an ugly collection of oversized junk like propane tanks, wood stoves, and fuel cans.

Bag by bag, load by load, over the course of nearly five months, tons of trash succumbed to persistence, determination, and hard work. Ian and his volunteers bagged up thousands of loads and handed them out to willing hikers headed to the trailhead. He saved the most awkward loads for his own shoulders and never allowed himself the luxury of a trip off the mountain without a very heavy pack. In the end, the woodshed and the nearby dump sites were emptied. The shed’s rotten structure was dismantled and scattered in the forest, and the unsightly mess was reduced to three patches of bare ground that will soon revegetate, disappear, and be forgotten.

In addition to the continuous and informal assistance of more



himself, mixing it into his regular duties on the ridge and trips up and down the mountain. He also became good at soliciting help from passing hikers, who were surprisingly cheerful about pitching in on such a challenging project.

For much of the 71 years of fire watch on Bigelow, the wardens lived in a small cabin located in the narrow fold of the ridge, Bigelow Col — between West and Avery Peaks — today the site of a MATC campsite. This was a time before “carry in — carry out,” when backcountry ethics were different than they are today. The warden’s household trash and other unwanted junk was disposed of in the usual way for the time — in a nearby dump. These dumps were left behind when the wardens left, and before long (like the mess on Avery Peak) began to attract attention and concern. This 1979

Clockwise from far left: The breathtaking view of the Bigelow Preserve — by Paul Mitchell; Thousands of intact bottles were dug from the dumps and regularly stacked with a sign asking passing hikers to please take some down with them — more than 6,000 bottles were disposed of this way; Indomitable caretaker Ian Fitzmorris in Maine last year.

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than 1,500 hikers, without whom this project could never have succeeded, Ian had some help from other sources. The most important of these, by far, was the active collaboration of another energetic and enthusiastic young man named Mike McDonald. Mike was an AmeriCorps intern, working for the Maine Conservation Corps as an environmental steward assigned to the Bigelow Preserve. His duties allowed him to use a state-owned pickup truck to collect the thousands of bags of trash that volunteers left at the trailheads and transport it to local municipal transfer stations — often on a daily basis. Without Mike's tireless support, much of the material so laboriously lugged off the Bigelow ridge would still be sitting at the base of the mountain.

Ian and Mike's efforts inevitably drew outside attention — including an encouraging write-up in the local press, which led, in part, to discussion about the possibility of arranging for a helicopter airlift to remove the last oversized pieces of junk too big to be carried out. This took a bit of arranging, of course, but in the end a helicopter operated by the Maine Forest Service lifted four cargo nets full of junk, prepared for them by Ian and MATC volunteers. The excitement and spectacle of a helicopter even brought out the media and a short piece appeared on a local outdoors television show.

The real lesson in this story doesn't really have much to do with removing trash from a beautiful mountaintop. Instead it has to do with what any of us do when we're faced with a difficult problem. The trash on Bigelow had been there for a long time. But the problem of removing it seemed just too big. Then along came a determined young man named Ian Fitzmorris, who simply picked up a bucket and got to work. The result was five tons of litter — a mountain of trash — removed from one of the most beautiful places on the A.T. If you ask Ian about all this, he'll just laugh and say, "I'm just glad the trash is gone." If you press him, though, he'll tell you about the other 141 fire tower sites in Maine. Stay tuned. This story is not over. [▲](#)

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