

Between Cairns

BY MARK R. JOHNSON

I rubbed a steamed-up windowpane with my palm and peered out into the morning. Overnight, a cold front had clamped down on the White Mountains and the day had broken gloomily, bringing with it thick fog and frigid rain.

Visibility compressed down to mere meters. It was a first-hand demonstration of how bad the weather on Mt. Washington can get — even in the middle of July.

I was 19, spending the summer working for the Appalachian Mountain Club at Pinkham Notch, and a two-day break from lodge duties found me logging some trail mileage. I'd had a little backpacking experience prior to that summer, but was really just beginning to discover the joys of putting on a pack, let alone setting out on my own.

Everyone at the Lakes of the Clouds hut seemed to be taking their sweet time packing up while waiting for the weather to clear; at 5,000 ft., high above tree line, we were totally soaked in. Breakfast was a lingering affair. Some folks nursed mugs of hot tea, others broke out board games. Eventually, I got a wrenching sense of cabin fever and reached for my boots. The previous afternoon I wore shorts and a T-shirt: Now I pulled on polypro, rain gear and a knit cap.

Leaving the hut was like entering a dreamscape: Just a few strides from the door I was completely swallowed up. And though it was cold enough to see your breath, you almost couldn't, as it blended easily into the air. I adjusted my hood, buried my hands deep in my pockets, and headed off, up the rocky path that disappeared into the elements.

Floating along like something at the bottom of the sea, I came to an alien object that rose out of the mist: a water-whipped trail junction sign. Here, I pulled out the map and weighed my options. I could follow the more predictable main route, the safer way out, or I could stumble down the lesser-traveled trail, involving a bit more in the way of homing instincts. I opted for the latter and decided I could always turn back if things got any worse.

Within moments, I was aware that the route was a lot

harder to follow. Visibility was reduced to maybe 30 feet, the alpine landscape seemingly merged with the sky, and instead of sighting my way along a trail shaped by lug-sole traffic, here the ground was untrammelled and there were only cairns to bind me to the path. I peered with anticipation for each and every rock pile as they slowly took form from the formless. Aside from the occasional boulder that materialized out of thin air, the surroundings were without definition. I could just as easily have been wandering along a Scottish moor. Werewolves came to mind.

Rain tapped down on me like the drumming of a thousand impatient fingers. My leather boots went to mush. I pressed through the mist, following a phantom trail that seemed to thread into nothingness. In places, I would enter a stretch that hovered between two cairns, one behind me and one out in front, but neither one visible; a veritable trail "free fall." It was a bit unnerving and during those moments I'd move faster, anxiously, as if I had to hurry to catch up with the rock markers before they vanished. The pace was unnatural and my rain gear rustled back

and forth in a frenzy. I stumbled once or twice. Of course, soon enough, piles of granite would rise eerily out of the mist, like stone sentinels observing my passage. But after nearly an hour of this I stopped up, frustrated, feeling as if the predicament was playing me. I dropped my pack and sat down on a rock, somewhere between cairns.

Blowing puffs of steam into the sharp air, I sat there eating Oreos, hands crimson from the cold. Water dripped off my hood's brim. A cold wind pricked my face. I studied what I could see of the wet landscape — rocks dulled, grass glossed. I don't know how long I sat there — maybe I ran out of cookies — but then I was back on track, picking my way through the fog, paying more attention to the terrain and less to the cairns. Eventually, I made my way down from the ridge, out of the clouds, and back to a world with dimension, of trees, well-used trails and, finally, hot showers.

It seems that cairns are piled up everywhere in life: signs that we're on the right track. Following these beacons provides direction, affirmation, a sense of security. But I guess it's the fog-shrouded footsteps in between the cairns that are most important. For it's here, lost in the thick of it all, we have the presence to know exactly where we need to be. **D**

