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photo by Pat Allen

ERIC D. LEHMAN

The Birds and the Silence

by Eric D. Lehman

Much as I hate to admit it, Connecticut is not the best state for views. We do not have many open ridges or cliffs, due mainly to the prodigious forests that now cover both highlands and lowlands. I'm certainly not going to complain about that. But amongst our wooded kingdom, a few lonely crests surface, and the overall lack makes us walkers appreciate them all the more. I search for these lofty apertures with preoccupied regularity, but the reasons are somewhat of a mystery.

Few would argue that the best vista in the state is not from Heublein Tower on Talcott Mountain north of Hartford, the first public look-out tower in the United States. Talcott Mountain is one of the high points of the Metacomet Ridge, which divides Connecticut's central valley in two, providing a huge obstacle for early settlers of Hartford and New

Haven who wanted to trade. The ridge was formed by volcanic activity that left it harder than the surrounding brownstone, which eroded away into soil, leaving this mighty crinkle in the earth's surface. All around the ridge, the rich alluvial plain provided and still provides sustenance for farmers. I saw many of these farms, most of them tobacco, as I drove up the steep road one gorgeous summer day.

I knew about this ridge from early explorations, but didn't discover Heublein Tower until I had lived in Connecticut for three years. I parked across from Penwood Park in a overpacked lot, noting the strange popularity of this walk. I found out why soon enough: our car had done the serious work and barely any hill remained to climb. As the trail hit a traprock ridge, a view from the cliff over the meandering Farmington River opened to the west. Down the hill at the nearby bridge lived the Pinchot sycamore, the largest tree in Connecticut, like a giant cupped hand with dozens of fingers, mottled white and gray. But the real bonus of this walk waited at the tower. I paid a small fee and climbed up and up the worn steps, finally popping up into the glass-encircled top-bulb. Immediately, I spun around wildly. On this clear summer day, I could see south across our beautiful state to the far-off ridge of Sleeping Giant. Directly below were the twin cities of Hartford and Springfield, seemingly adjoining each other, linked by the short strip of Interstate 91. The view stretched north across Massachusetts to the shoulders of Mount Tom and beyond. East and west, ranges of green hills rolled away, distances unlike anything I had thought possible in southern New England. The view was truly magnificent, giving a sense of geographical space that has been burned onto my brain like a tattoo. And that is certainly one reason to find these viewpoints and outlooks, the satisfaction of seeing a giant's blueprint, a living map.

Other towers dot the state, but one I had always wanted to try only a few miles north of my house in Hamden, the heroically named Castle Crag in Meriden. So, on a rare weekday off, I parked near a large pond, where dozens of geese and swans croaked for handouts from bright spring families. I searched for the gateway from tourist park to walker's haven in the concrete walls of the highway. Finding the entrance, I ducked under Route 684, taking a barely used path straight up the steep hill. I humped up the slope quietly, planting my stick and treading on rocks. Reaching a flatter area, though not nearly at the top yet, the path wound through a stand of witch hazel. It exploded with a terrible crack and a deer sprang out, bouncing thirty yards away and staring at me. I stood there quietly. Why wasn't she running? And then I knew. A fawn probably lay in the sense thicket and she was leading me away. This was confirmed as I moved up the trail on an oblique angle towards her position. The trembling doe leaped another twenty yards and resumed her staring contest. I continued, waving to the frightened mother as the path veered away and up. I passed a run-down gazebo, over which an out-of-place, old-style diving wetsuit draped unceremoniously. The blue rubber had not yet rotted and must have been recently abandoned. I shrugged and continued up a rocky path, unsure of my position on the map, only knowing that if I continued skyward, I would reach my destination. A small rat snake hissed at me as I clambered over the rocks. I stopped and waited for the gray reptile to slide down into a dark gap and then proceeded, thrilled by this close encounter. The trail led me to a small peak, but not the chief one. Nevertheless, I plopped down on a flat shelf and ate a snack, watching a covey of hawks soaring over Meriden far below.

Studying the topographic map, I headed west, toward the afternoon sun, and after dipping into a gully, I ascended onto a previously developed area near the lookout tower on Castle Crag. A road gave evidence of the past here, when anyone could drive to this peak and climb the tower. But now, places like this and West Rock in New Haven have been closed to car traffic, leaving wonderful hill-roads for walkers and cyclists. I obviously approved.

I could see Talcott Mountain to the north and Sleeping Giant to the south, and wondered if I could find enough towers and peaks to map the entire state with my eyes. I considered all the other high points I had reached, all the bare ridges I had traversed, Mohawk Mountain, Mount Higby, Haystack Mountain, the list went on and on. I pondered the fact that many of these hikes had not been very difficult, yet the recollection remained strong. No doubt this was due to the sense of completion that a panoramic exclamation point gives. Walking without a goal can be satisfying in its own way, but a hike to a high point certainly gratifies our memories.

Of course, hiking to the top of a mountain can be an accomplishment in its own right. One fine August day, having just returned from a seven-day hiking tour of England's Lake District and being in fairly good cardiovascular shape, I decided it was time I hiked up Bear Mountain, the highest peak in Connecticut. The shoulder of Mount Frissel, whose summit is in Massachusetts, is technically the highest point, but that didn't quite have the same romantic ring. So, I drove up Route 8 and west on 44 to Salisbury, where I found the Undermountain Trailhead and parked. Grasping my walking stick firmly, I shouldered my light pack and tramped up the hill. The rocky path became steep fairly quickly, but I was able to endure without stopping, keeping a slow but regular pace. I followed a loop suggested by *Fifty Hikes in Connecticut*, passing under the peak to the east, encountering no one, listening to the joyful August birds.

Bear Mountain is part of the Taconic Plateau, which has an elevation of approximately 1800 feet, over a thousand above the surrounding valleys. This is one of four identified plateaus in our state, all formed of a more resistant granite and schist bedrock. Below are the marble lowlands that have eroded away in the acids of northeastern rainwater. It is the only place in Connecticut that I have found gives one the illusion of being truly above the world.

After a remarkably short interval, I reached the Massachusetts border and entered a grove of large hemlocks, where the trail ended at the white-blazed Appalachian Trail. After munching on an apple, I turned left and pushed steadily up the ledges and boulders to the remains of a crumbled monument on the peak. I climbed to the top and enjoyed the three-hundred-sixty degree view of the Riga Plateau and the Taconic Mountains: trees, trees, trees, as far as the eye could see, rolling ridges of rippling green. This was one of the prize views in Connecticut, quite frankly, mostly due to the fact that it is the only one involving significant mountains. I peered down at the Twin Lakes in Salisbury, where a year before I had unsuccessfully attempted to find and break into a lost, closed-up cave. North was our neighbor Massachusetts and I fancied I could see the gorge where I had once relaxed in the big trees of Bish-Bash Falls park. As I ate a small lunch, a family reached the summit from the other direction and then an entire class of Wesleyan University students. They were freshmen out for their introductory weekend. I had no idea Wesleyan used this unorthodox but brilliant method for initiating their students. I satisfied myself with unauthorized hikes in the company of my English students around the body of Sleeping Giant.

I chatted with the teacher and students for a while, and then tramped down the AT with views south and west into New York, where I glimpsed the storied peaks of the Catskills glimmering above the Hudson River Valley. Hitting the Undermountain Trail again, I trundled quickly down to my car. The book suggested four hours for this trip. I had taken two and a half, including at least forty-five minutes relaxing on the summit. I was sure I would never be in such great shape again. But I hoped that I would find another fine spectacle worthy of the effort. I knew I would keep trying.

Why are these views from high places so meaningful to the human psyche? People I

know who have no love for the outdoors still treasure these rare, visionary moments. I have no real answer, only a story. Once I hiked up High Rock in Hamden after the loss of a friend, who was not much older than I was. He had wasted away with cancer, becoming a shell of himself, withdrawing into bitterness before dying. I felt old, like my life was also tipping into the void. As I walked up the path, a large black snake, at least five feet long, slithered across the trail and into deep, matted leaves. I found an unusually rounded boulder, like half an egg, and perched on top, reading Henry Miller's famous travelogue of Greece, *The Colossus of Maroussi*. A strangely diurnal bobcat bounded up the cliff edge, out of the brush, and stopped, astonished at my presence, then loped off into the woods.

As I sat on that wild island of stone in midst of civilized Connecticut, gazing over the small metropolis of New Haven, I meditated on my mortality, on inevitable change, on the power that loss has to destroy our will. The grim ghost of death had stalked me for the past few months, ruining my seemingly steadfast appreciation for walking. My steps had been weak and unenthusiastic lately. But now I stared down at the world I enjoyed and death seemed far away. The memory of my friend rustled the green backdrop of leaves, blessing rather than cursing me. I smiled, suddenly in love with everything around me, with the trees and the city, with the birds and the silence. I walked down the hill and into the summer of my life.

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Magnolia Florida Journal

Last Updated October 17, 2009