A black and white photograph of a person hiking on a narrow path through a dense forest. The path is dappled with sunlight filtering through the trees. The person is in the center, slightly out of focus, walking away from the viewer.

L<LO>ST

DOZENS OF ADIRONDACK HIKERS AND
HUNTERS GO MISSING EVERY YEAR.

MODERN TECHNOLOGY IS NO MATCH
FOR BAD LUCK **BY ADAM FEDERMAN**



JACK COLONEY WAS LAST SEEN ON JUNE 6, 2006. HE VANISHED SEVERAL DAYS LATER IN THE MOOSE RIVER PLAINS WILD FOREST, ONE OF THE MOST REMOTE YET ACCESSIBLE REGIONS OF THE ADIRONDACK PARK.

A 10-day search, totaling more than 4,000 man-hours by a team of 56 Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) forest rangers and assistant rangers, the New York State Police, the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department and scores of volunteers who combed an approximately 35-square-mile area, failed to turn up a single clue. A slightly heavyset man in his 40s, Coloney had told family and friends that he was planning an eight- to 10-day camping trip. An assistant ranger fishing on his day off passed Coloney's campsite near the Lost Ponds trailhead on June 14. When he returned two days later and saw that nothing had changed he notified his superiors. The search commenced on the morning of June 17, a dispiritingly windy and rainy day.

The Moose River Plains, and particularly the area north of the Lost Ponds trailhead where rangers focused their search, is challenging terrain. The brush and forest cover are so dense that, off trail, you can travel no faster than half a mile per hour. Greg George, a forest ranger with 26 years of experience in the central Adirondacks, said that searchers on opposite sides of Sumner Stream were unable to spot each other. Coloney's younger brother Jay, who joined the search, said that pockets of spruce were so thick that "he could have been lying five feet away and you never would have seen him." In addition to being the largest expanse of backcountry easily accessible by motor vehicle in the Adirondacks, the Moose River Plains is bordered by wilderness areas on three sides, including the 168,920-acre West Canada Lake tract, which has been described by the DEC as "some of the remotest lands and waters" in the park.

They also seem to be some of the most bewildering. Over the years, the area between Blue Mountain Lake, Indian Lake and the West Canada Lake Wilderness Area has accounted for a disproportionately high number of missing hikers. In June 1990 David Boomhower, a 38-year-old postal worker from Latham, New York, set out to hike the Northville-Placid Trail. Recently divorced, the solo odyssey seemed to be a kind of test for Boomhower, who traveled with very little food and equipment. Beset by hunger and fatigue early on, he apparently struck out along the Colvin Brook-Sucker Brook trail in search of help and lost his way. Four months later, a hunter uncovered his body near Lewey Lake state campground.

In October 1992 George Woltjen, a 60-year-old hunter from Queens, disappeared in the Pine Lake area northeast of Indian Lake. Three and a half years later his remains turned up in the

Cedar River, less than a half-mile from where he was last seen. Sometime thereafter, forest ranger Thomas Eakin recalled, DEC staff began to refer to that territory as the Blumuda Triangle, or simply the triangle. "It's just because over the years we've had so many searches that have been ex-

tended searches in that area," he said.

Two months before Coloney disappeared and about 20 miles from where he was last seen, George LaForest, an avid fisherman with a home in Stillwater and a camp near Indian Lake, went missing. His truck was found near his favorite fishing hole with his wallet, cell phone and worms inside. The weekend before the search began a torrential downpour raised the level of the Cedar River four feet in 24 hours. "That rain washed out his tracks before we even started looking," forest ranger lieutenant Steve Preston told the *Adirondack Daily Enterprise* in May 2006. Though LaForest was a two- to three-pack-a-day smoker, not a single cigarette butt was found over the course of the two-week search that included dive teams and canine units.

Last December I drove out to the Indian Lake DEC headquarters—a wireless dead-zone, rendering my cell phone good for little more than telling time—to meet with Greg George and Thomas Eakin, senior rangers and search-and-rescue veterans. Eakin, with 35 years of experience in the Lake Pleasant area, is as much a wilderness detective as he is a forest ranger, carefully reconstructing the lives of lost hikers. As the authors of a study on lost-person behavior in Alberta, Canada, write, "It is often the case that the geographical setting is well known to the search manager, but the psychology of the lost person is not." Although the detective novel has traditionally been an urban form, its heroes unsentimental city dwellers, one can imagine Eakin cast as a character in a Raymond Chandler tale.

In the Coloney search, Eakin painstakingly reconstructed the hiker's whereabouts and movements stretching back a year to 2005. On the second day of the search, a red kayak was found on Sumner Stream with a map of a different area printed off the Internet. Searchers weren't sure the boat was Coloney's, but Eakin traced it back to where he purchased it and when. Judging from changes of clothes at the campsite, rangers were able to conclude that Coloney went missing three or four days after he set up camp. "We really don't know what happened from there," Eakin told me.

At headquarters I saw a record of the search. On a topographic map, layers of plastic indicated the area covered each day. A dotted black line showed the 4.5-mile range within which 85 percent of people in Coloney's class would likely be found (80 percent of missing hikers turn up within a three-mile radius of their last known location). The 4.5-mile range,

along with borders such as roads and streams, served as unofficial guidelines. The next step was to scour areas where the subject would most likely have gone missing, especially trails and drainages, in search of clues that might direct the efforts.

"We hate circles when we're searching," George explained, peeling back layers of plastic. "We want to narrow it down to a piece of pie." In both the Coloney and LaForest cases, though, not a single footprint, scrap of paper or piece of clothing was found. Both men—45 years old and relatively experienced in the outdoors—had disappeared.

One year later, in June 2007, two fishermen in the West Canada Lake Wilderness found an abandoned tent 16 miles from the nearest trailhead just below Mud Lake. It was linked to Irene Horne—a wanderer and hitchhiker who had been in and out of prison and was believed to be squatting in the region—and contained most of her personal belongings. The tent had collapsed. There were two to three years of leaf litter inside and small trees growing out of the top. There has been no sign of Horne since.

The Adirondacks was one of the first wilderness areas

set aside in the United States. It was also one of the last to be fully explored, the interior reaches remaining a kind of terra incognita until the mid-19th century. In his two-volume chronicle of the park, *A History of the Adirondacks*, Alfred C. Donaldson wrote, "Stanley had found Dr. Livingstone and familiarized the world with the depths of Africa before the average New Yorker knew anything definite about the wonderful wilderness lying almost at his back door."

The earliest known map of the region, published in 1570 by Abraham Ortelius, father of the first modern atlas and geographer to King Philip II of Spain, showed an area in New France referred to as "Avacal," which covered much of what is now northern New York. Nearly 50 years later a map of the New Netherlands described territory on each side of Lake Champlain as "Irocoisen," but showed little detail. Governor Pownall's 1776 map of the British colonies acknowledged that the region was largely uncharted. Written across the top of the map was the following: "This vast tract of land which is the Ancient Couchsachrage, one of the four Beaver Hunting Countries of the Six Nations, is not yet surveyed." Only with Claude Joseph Sauthier's map of 1777, Donaldson noted, is it that a "faint dawn of definiteness ... begins to break over the mystery of the Great Wilderness."

Not long after the Adirondacks had been mapped people were losing their way in it. Charles Dudley Warner, an essayist and friend of Mark Twain, wrote one of the earliest accounts of being lost here. (The phrase "Everybody complains about the weather, but nobody does anything about it," often attributed to Twain, is actually Warner's, and perhaps it came from spending so many summers in the Adirondacks.) In an essay titled "Lost in the Woods," first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in February 1878, Warner described how he got turned around trying to return to Keene Valley from a camp on the Upper Ausable. Hoping to do some fishing along the way, Warner veered off the cart road he was following

Boomhower had been missing for several days before the Department of Environmental Conservation was notified, hampering search efforts.

and made for the river. "So sure was I of my whereabouts," he wrote, "that I did not note the bend of the river, nor look at my compass." There was thunder, rain, and the skies grew dark. Warner eventually found his way to the road, about three miles from where he thought he was. The experience clearly humbled him and even modified his view of nature and wilderness. "The society of the least human being is better than this gigantic indifference," he wrote. "The 'rapture on the lonely shore' is agreeable only when you know you can at any moment go home." In *Walden*, Thoreau took a slightly more romantic view of getting lost. He wrote, "Not till we are completely lost, or turned around,—for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost,—do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature."

The majority of hikers who set out for some kind of wilderness experience in the Adirondacks do return home. According to DEC spokesman David Winchell, the Adirondack/North Country region has averaged 84 searches a year since 2006, nearly all successful. In the cases of hikers who aren't found, it is almost always a result of late notification, among other variables. Coloney, LaForest and Boomhower had all been missing for several days before the DEC was notified. The first 48 hours after a hiker has gone missing are absolutely crucial. Rangers often say that the best protection against perishing in the woods is making sure that someone knows precisely where you're going and when you plan to return. Traveling with a map and compass (and knowing how to use them), proper clothing and utilizing trail registers are also simple ways to diminish the chances of getting—and staying—lost.

LOST



DAVID BOOMHOWER
"UNCLE DAVE"

AGE - 38, 5'7", 160 LBS., CAUCASIAN, REDDISH-BROWN HAIR, MOUTHCACHE, HAZEL EYES.

LAST SEEN WEARING: GREY SWEATPANTS, RED SWEATSHIRT WITH U.S. POSTAL SERVICE EMBLEM ON LEFT CHEST, HIKING BOOTS (MED. HEIGHT).

KNOWN EQUIPMENT: OLIVE DRAB FRAME PACK, HIP PACK, DOME TENT, SLEEPING BAG, HAND AX, SHEATH KNIFE, ADK GUIDE BOOK AND MAP, FOOD IN PLASTIC BUTTER TUBS.

LAST KNOWN LOCATION WAS AT THE REGISTER AT CEDAR LAKES DAM ON JUNE 8, 1990; EARLY AFTERNOON. DIRECTION OF TRAVEL WAS NORTH ON THE NORTHVILLE-LOKE PLACID TRAIL WITH LAKE PLACID BEING HIS DESTINATION.

ANY INFORMATION CONCERNING DAVID OR ANY OF HIS EQUIPMENT IS IMPORTANT TO OUR SEARCH EFFORT. HOWEVER DO NOT PICK IT UP, MARK THE LOCATION AND REPORT IT TO ANY N.Y.S. FOREST RANGER OR

CALL 1-891-0235.

At the same time, the likelihood of erratic behavior and poor decision-making increases the longer a hiker is lost. Several rangers told me a story of a lost hunter who crossed the Northway and kept on going. Another waded across a river and back with no recollection of ever having done so. In addition, hypothermia is always a risk. As the DEC Unit Management Plan for the Moose River Plains Wild Forest states, “Frost can occur any month of the year.”

“What it comes down to is, when you break your ankle in a hole on the side of a river and you can’t self-rescue, it doesn’t

matter how experienced and knowledgeable you are,” said DEC forest ranger captain John Streiff.

That may have been the fate of E. F. Crumley, a 69-year-old pharmacist and former mayor of Fort Ann who disappeared in August 1951 near Bear Brook between Raquette and Blue Mountain Lakes. After a massive 17-day search, no traces of the experienced woodsman were found. Six years later, a hunter who had been part of the original search came across a rubber raincoat buried under dense brush and foliage. Pieces of the coat, a small metal box, a tie clasp, fishing tackle, two stub pencils, a .32

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT IT >>>>



Contents of DEC spokesman David Winchell's pack: 1. Mess kit 2. Extra socks 3. Pain relievers 4. First-aid kit 5. Toilet paper 6. Bug repellent/sunblock 7. Head lamp and batteries 8. Matches and fire starter (a mixture of dryer lint, sawdust and linseed oil) 9. Snack bars 10. Whistle (doubles as a waterproof container for matches) 11. Multi-function pocketknife 12. Water-purifying kit 13. Two water bottles 14. Pen and paper 15. Map and compass 16. Business card or other identification 17. Bivy sack 18. Rain gear and warm, noncotton clothing



Above, from left to right: Rangers confer before a 2007 search for missing kayakers near Newcomb. A High Peaks map used during the search for Thomas Carleton, in 1993.

Winchester special cartridge shell and five small bones were also found. Crumley's son identified the tie clasp and told the *Elizabethtown Post* that his father always carried an empty shell of that kind to use as a whistle in the woods. Hamilton County cor-

oner John Sullivan ruled Crumley's death accidental.

The case of another avid hunter, George Bombardier, remains one of the park's longest running unsolved disappearances. He vanished in November 1971 near Paul Smiths (not long after the disappearance of eight-year-old Douglas Legg from a family camp outside Newcomb, which also remains unsolved). The night before the search began, longtime forest ranger Gary Hodgson recalled, it snowed more than a foot. "We found some snowed-in tracks but nobody knew whose they were."

The remains of hikers who have been missing for several decades do sometimes turn up. One of the more intriguing cases was Howard Gilroy. Described as a recluse who frequently hiked alone, Gilroy went missing on October 10, 1958, near Santanoni Peak. A member of the Adirondack Mountain Club, his real name was Leslie A. Wiggs and he was the son of a well-to-do Virginia attorney. There were reports that he had refused his share of an \$80,000 estate—allegations that his father denied. Whether he had shunned his family's wealth, there is no question that he had turned his back on them. During the search for Gilroy the Associated Press wrote, "A missing man being sought as lost in an Adirondack wilderness may simply have resumed a long, lonely flight to anonymity." (In some ways, his story resembles that of Christopher McCandless, the subject of Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, who severed ties with family, adopted a pseudonym and eventually perished in the Alaska wilderness.)

The last sign Gilroy left behind was a note in the register on top of the mountain that read, "Cloudy, not raining yet." That night, according to *Adirondack*, a bimonthly publication of the Adirondack Mountain Club, heavy rains and hurricane winds pummeled the area.

In June 1988, three decades after Gilroy's last sighting, hik-

STAYING FOUND

Advice on not getting lost can seem so basic that it's easy to dismiss. From the seasoned woodsman to the first-time hiker, many of us cut corners, take chances on the weather and assume that we'll make it back before dark.

Following a few simple rules could make the difference between staying lost and being found.

- > Tell more than one person exactly where you're going and when you expect to return so that if you don't they can contact the DEC quickly. The first 48 hours are critical in search-and-rescue efforts. After that, chances of being found decline rapidly.
- > Always sign in and out on trail registers.
- > Carry a map and compass and know how to use them.
- > Familiarize yourself with the general area before you set out. Take note of landmarks as you hike.
- > Know how to build a fire in all conditions.
- > Be physically prepared for the terrain and carry proper gear for the weather.

"PEOPLE ARE NOT LEARNING THE GOOD COMPASS-AND-MAP SKILLS AND SURVIVAL SKILLS. AND THEY JUST FEEL THAT THEY CAN PUSH THEIR PERSONAL LOCATOR BEACON OR SPOT FINDER AND SOMEONE WILL JUST FALL OUT OF THE SKY AND BRING THEM HOME."

ers found a skull poking through pine needles and brush on Santanoni. The next day rangers and state troopers uncovered a partial skeleton, a rusted thermos, light meter and Kodak camera. Eastman Kodak dated the film to the late 1950s. "We tried to develop the film and got nothing," state police investigator Thomas L. Hickey told the *Schenectady Gazette*.

The elements have a way of covering our tracks. Whatever record Gilroy may have left of his final hike, perhaps even his final days, had been erased.

In the decades since Gilroy perished, the number of tools available to help us find our way (or help others find us) has increased exponentially. Eastern Mountain Sports and other outfitters now sell a SPOT Satellite GPS Messenger or personal tracker that lets you check in with friends and family and automatically sends and saves your location using Google Maps. Stores also carry a "fast find" personal locator beacon for about \$300. A German inventor has designed a belt (the feelSpace belt) that uses an electronic compass and a series of vibrators to tell you which direction you're going. If you're heading west, the sensor on your right hip vibrates. "Eventually, I felt I couldn't get lost, even in a completely new place," one of the belt's users told *Wired* magazine in 2007; however, he was walking around cities, not the woods.

THE MISSING >>>>

E. F. Crumley went missing on August 10, 1951, between Raquette and Blue Mountain Lakes. Six years later a hunter came across traces of his remains.

Howard Gilroy (né Leslie A. Wiggs) was lost on October 10, 1958, on Santanoni Peak. Thirty years later hikers uncovered his skeleton, a Kodak camera and rusted thermos.

Douglas Legg was lost on July 10, 1971, near Santanoni Great Camp. No sign of the boy has been found.

George Bombardier disappeared on November 29, 1971, near Paul Smiths. His automobile was found near the Hayes Brook truck trail.

Steven Thomas vanished on Mount Marcy on April 11, 1976. During the search for Thomas, the belongings of another missing hiker, **George Atkinson**, who disappeared on March 15, 1973, were found in Panther Gorge.

Alaim Dufresne disappeared in October 1974 on Algonquin Peak. His remains were found the following spring.

Michael Croteau was lost on Ampersand Mountain in October 1982. Three years later hikers came across his sleeping bag with his skeleton inside.

David Boomhower was lost in June 1990. Four months later a hunter found his body near Lewey Lake.

George Woltjen disappeared on October 24, 1992. Four years later his body was found in the Cedar River.

Thomas Carleton was reported missing in October 1993, after he failed to return from a solo-hiking trip in the High Peaks. There has been no sign of him.

Arthur Birchmeyer was reported missing in December 2002 and found deceased three days later near little Indian Lake, in the Moose River Plains Wild Forest.

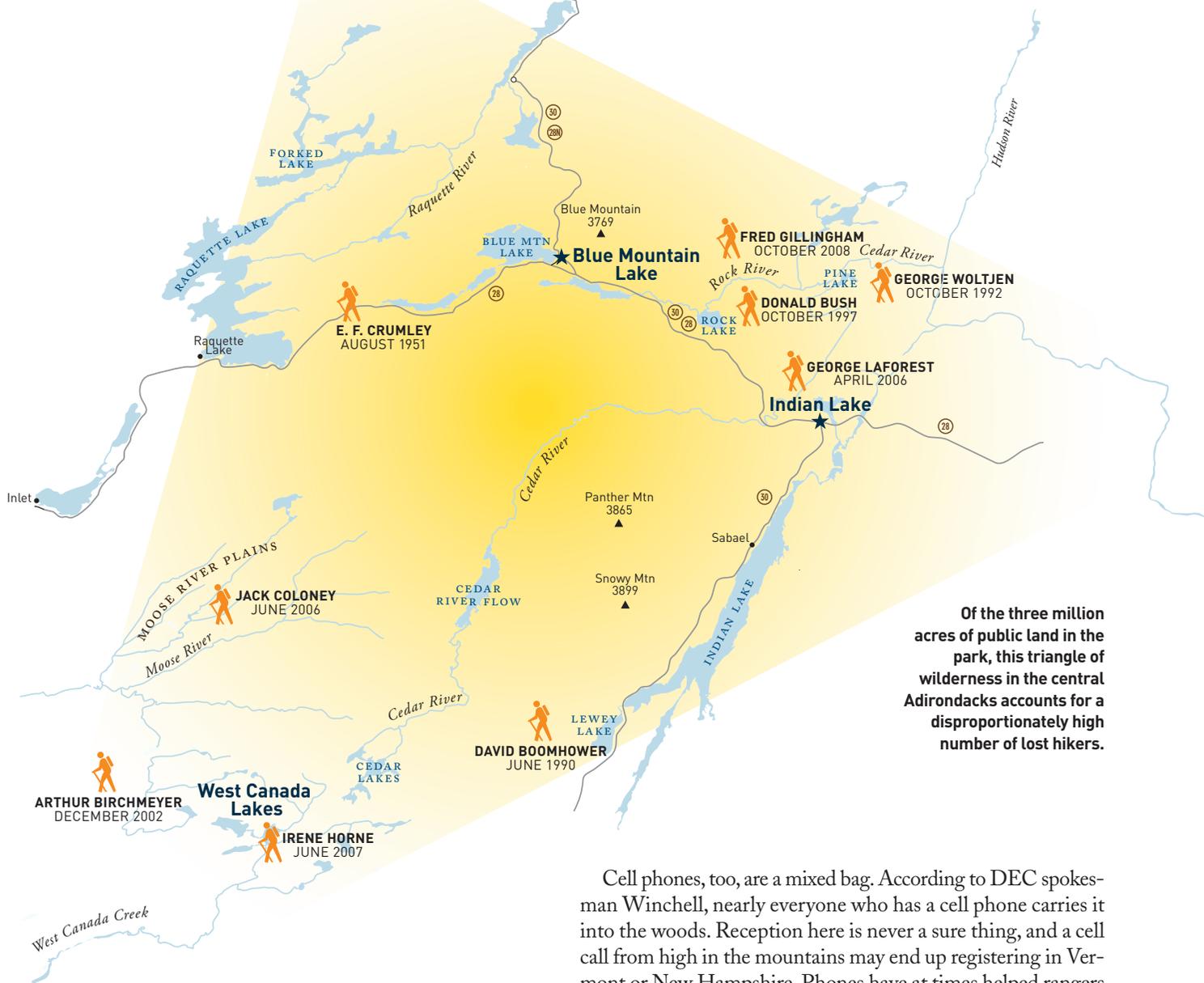
George LaForest was last seen on April 21, 2006. His truck was discovered near his favorite fishing hole along the Cedar River, near Indian Lake. No sign of him has been found.

Jack Coloney signed the trail register at Wakely Dam on June 6, 2006. He disappeared a few days later in the Moose River Plains Wild Forest.

Irene Horne's tent and belongings were found by fishermen in the West Canada Lake Wilderness Area in June 2007. There has been no sign of her since.

Fred Gillingham, a 72-year-old California resident, became lost on October 12, 2008, along the Rock River trail, between Indian and Blue Mountain Lakes. After searching for 12 days, nothing was found. A month later a hunter came across his body north of the Rock River.

Donald Bush went missing in the same area in October 1997. His body was found the following year.



Of the three million acres of public land in the park, this triangle of wilderness in the central Adirondacks accounts for a disproportionately high number of lost hikers.

For rangers, though, the new technology—GPS devices, personal locator beacons and cell phones—has only limited use. Many fear the tools may be encouraging a false sense of security or a reckless approach to wilderness survival. Personal locator beacons, for example, have been employed in situations that may not be emergencies, triggering expensive and sometimes dangerous rescue efforts. “People are not learning the good compass-and-map skills and survival skills,” said Streiff. “And they just feel that they can push their personal locator beacon or SPOT finder and someone will just fall out of the sky and bring them home.”

Carl Skalak, a 55-year-old from Cleveland, Ohio, was the first civilian to use a personal locator beacon in the continental United States. In November 2003 Skalak triggered his device after a three-day snowstorm in the Five Ponds Wilderness Area where he was camping and was airlifted by helicopter. When he returned later that month to retrieve his gear, it snowed again. Skalak’s clothing and boots were soaked, and he made use of his handy gadget a second time. He was airlifted again, but this time charged with two counts of falsely reporting an incident and spent a night in the Herkimer County jail.

Cell phones, too, are a mixed bag. According to DEC spokesman Winchell, nearly everyone who has a cell phone carries it into the woods. Reception here is never a sure thing, and a cell call from high in the mountains may end up registering in Vermont or New Hampshire. Phones have at times helped rangers assist an injured or disoriented hiker, perhaps even preventing a large-scale search. Yet, said Winchell, “we still get the calls of, ‘It’s four in the afternoon, I’m lost, I’m unprepared, come find me,’ and the cell phone goes dead. We have stories about people finding their way out of the woods barely by the light of their cell phone screen because they never thought to bring a flashlight or proper gear.”

GPS units have probably had the greatest overall impact on how people approach the wilderness—especially hunters who use them frequently and often wander off trail. Forest ranger lieutenant Robert Marrone said that GPS devices have significantly decreased the number of searches for hunters every year. They’ve also transformed the documentation of the search process. Today, search crews carry GPS devices with them and at the end of a day download where they’ve been onto a program called Mapttech. Drawing on plastic has gone the way of the compass.

In addition to encouraging a false sense of security, some see the reliance on navigational tools and cell phones as having more profound implications. In his recent book, *You Are Here: Why We Can Find Our Way to the Moon, but Get Lost in the Mall*, Colin Ellard, an experimental psychologist at the University of Waterloo, in Ontario, makes the argument (Continued on page 52)

LOST

Continued from page 43

that our inability to navigate without the aid of trails, roadways, signs and now GPS devices may signify a deeper problem. “Losing such wayfinding skills,” he writes, “has helped propel a dangerous trend whereby our connections to our natural environment have become seriously severed.” Ellard is not advocating a return to a premodern civilization or even that we try to emulate the ways of Polynesian seafarers and Inuit navigators, who could travel long distances guided by ocean swells or patterns of wind etched into the snow, but that we try to retrieve some of the lost arts of reading the landscape and knowing our place in it. In *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit writes, “There’s an art to attending to weather, to the route you take, to the landmarks along the way, to how if you turn around you can see how different the journey back looks from the journey out, to reading the sun and moon and stars to orient yourself, to the direction of running water, to the thousand things that make the wild a text that can be read by the literate.”

Such skills may not have helped Coloney, LaForest and others who have disappeared in the Adirondacks. The terrain is unforgiving, often surprisingly so. During the search for Douglas Legg, in 1971, the Sierra Madre Search and Rescue Team was flown in from California to look for the boy and said they had never seen brush so thick. There were reports that searchers used flashlights even in daytime to “pierce the forest darkness.” In the hunt for Steven Thomas, a 19-year-old who disappeared in April 1976 while camping with friends, the slopes of Mount Marcy were “studied with near microscopic intensity,” according to the *Adirondack Daily Enterprise*, and revealed nothing. The same could be said of the searches for Coloney and LaForest three decades later.

On Google Maps you can pull up a satellite image of the Moose River Plains and Lost Ponds; you can scroll over Sumner Stream where Coloney’s kayak was found and the precise spot near the Cedar River where LaForest’s truck was parked when he went fishing in April 2006. Zoom in for a closer look and it all turns to a sea of green, a wilderness of trees in every direction. 🌲