

NORTHERN EXPLORING



SUMMER 2023



THE ADIRONDACKS & THE HIKER

ONE WITH THE RIVER

IN THE OPEN AIR

THE SECRET GARDEN

KNOW THE ROPES, KNOW THE ROCKS

NORTHERN EXPLORING

SUMMER 2023

PUBLISHERS

William & Bridgette Studley

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Teah Dowling

CREATIVE TEAM

Meghan McBreairty

Brett LeClair

MARKETING

Laurie Recore

Dana Studley

CONTRIBUTORS

Catherine Hernandez

Skylar Hunyadi

Rob Fountain

Casey Vock



PRINTING & BINDERY

Jud Studley

Wade Studley

Kevin Waterhouse

Donna Wright

DISTRIBUTION

Cynthia Nadeau

Tammy Rock

Tom Canning

Michael Lavigne

STUDLEY PRINTING

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One With the River

Story by Skylar Hunyadi

Photography by Rob Fountain

Amid the lush forests of the Adirondacks are miles and miles of rivers connecting land, supporting aquatic wildlife and providing opportunities for sport and recreation. A perfect way to relax, Adirondack Riverwalking offers a sensory immersion experience that calls upon the calming qualities of the Ausable River to soothe the mind and body.

Rivers present a wellspring of opportunity. Historically, they have deep ties to waterway transportation and supporting the economy through trade. They are an essential source of water supply and hydropower, which we rely heavily on in modern times. On a more spiritual level, rivers in literature often symbolize the inevitable changes in life and represent certain emotions.

In the present, properly appreciating nature is more difficult. The busyness of day-to-day life can be all-consuming and wearisome. But with abundant nature in the Adirondacks, activities, such as Riverwalking, are readily at our fingertips.





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Local River Guides

Adirondack Riverwalking offers guided outdoor sensory immersion experiences to people of all ages to facilitate a connection to nature. Co-owners Helene Gibbens and Suzanne Weirich guide Forest Bathing, Sensory Snowshoeing and, of course, Riverwalking. "For us, our objective is to connect people more deeply with nature because we protect what we love," says Gibbens. Putting down roots in 2017, Gibbens and Weirich, who are Certified Nature Therapy guides with years of knowledge and love for the outdoors, guide trips year-round — embracing all seasons of the Adirondack Park.

Riverwalking began in 2016 when Gibbens and her partner took to the river for fly fishing. Being new to this river activity,

Gibbens went into the experience with an open mind but quickly realized that as a wellness educator, she was not enthused with catching and harming the fish. But she still observed the calming effects of the river and endeavored to enjoy the river differently. "It took me a couple of years to realize that I could be in the river without a fishing rod," says Gibbens. She wanted to share this experience with others by integrating sensory activities and river lore, so riverwalking came to be. "We hope people walk away with a greater appreciation for water and all the ways in which it's amazing and essential to us all."

Experiencing The River

Riverwalking is a great opportunity to experience a river in a different way. An outing lasts about three hours from gearing up to gearing down and is unique to the Ausable River. Each section of the river has distinctive qualities and characteristics and will produce a different Riverwalking



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experience. This activity is for ages 10 and up, and safety accommodations are available for those who cannot swim. However, knowing how to swim is not a prerequisite for enjoying Riverwalking, as no actual swimming is required.

Preparing for a river excursion starts with eating a nutritionally dense meal in the morning; these trips can often be physically exerting, as we use up more energy doing outdoor activities. Next, it's essential to dress appropriately. Consider the weather the night before and your exposure to

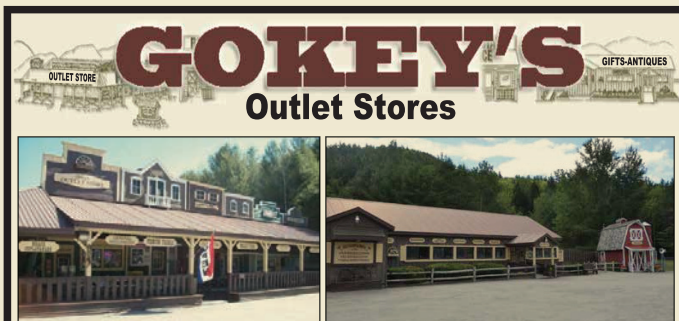
"We took the sensory focus of Forest Bathing into Riverwalking because using your senses is relaxing and makes you more present in what you are doing and experiencing,"
says Gibbens.

the sun, especially with the reflection of the water. Wearing sunscreen and a hat with a brim is crucial. You'll also want to wear slim pants that can be comfortably worn under waders and a breathable top that can protect from sunburn and insects. Bring a warmer layer if it's a chillier day. Footwear does not matter, as your guides will provide waterproof boots. Consider also bringing polarized sunglasses, a small water bottle, a snack and any necessary medical items.

Because you're in the water for most of riverwalking, it's best to pack light. It's encouraged to disconnect from the outside world and focus on your interactions with nature. Some people opt to bring a waterproof carrying case for their phones and other personal effects; however, the guides take plenty of photos during the outing.

The environment of the river will prompt you to begin slowing down. Your guides will encourage you to attune to nature before even entering the river. "We took the sensory focus of Forest Bathing into Riverwalking because using your senses is relaxing and makes you more present in what you are doing and experiencing," says Gibbens. The sensory experience starts as you put on your gear, adjusting to the waders' fit and the heaviness of the boots. There will also likely be a brief trek to the river. Your guides will give a history of the river and start making mindful observations about the environment to help you ease into the experience.

Once you've reached the riverbed, Riverwalking starts in earnest. As you take your first steps into the water, you'll feel a pressure around your legs of your clothing being compressed by the water. "There's always that ah-ha moment



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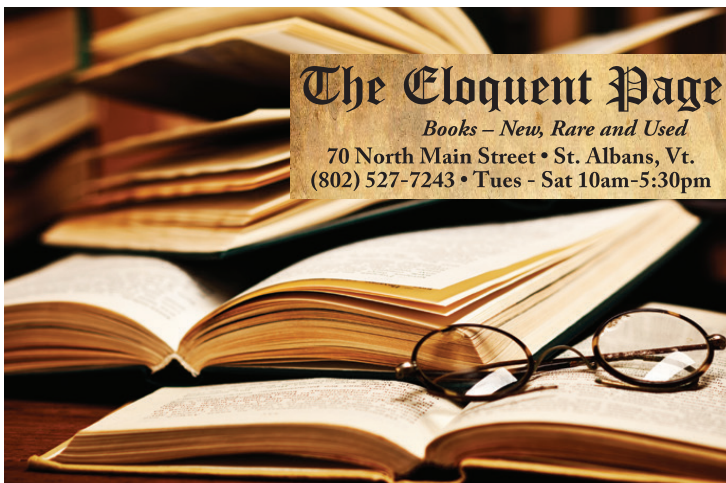
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when people step into the river," says Gibbens, with this, a sensation of cool, but not wet, as you're protected from moisture by the waders. There is a brief period to get used to this sensation, and most people enjoy the compression.

Every tour with Adirondack Riverwalking begins with some

sort of opening sensory invitation. You may be asked to close your eyes and notice the sounds of the river, or you feel the sensations of the water against you. The introduction concludes by learning how to wade, and so, participants practice finding their "river legs." Participants will notice the change of pace and riverbed texture as they begin to wade in the water. "The river



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"It's an opportunity to get to know a river, really from inside," says Gibbens. For example, you may sit in silence while wearing a blindfold, tuning into the many sounds of the river. "You're immersed in the river but comfortably, without getting wet."

makes you slow down," says Gibbens. Time is spent getting comfortable wading the river.

Once you've settled into the river's rhythms, the remainder of the experience consists of a series of playful guided sensory activities combined with free time to explore the river. "It's an opportunity to get to know a river, really from inside," says Gibbens. For example, you may sit in silence while wearing a blindfold, tuning into the many sounds of the river. "You're immersed in the river but comfortably, without getting wet." Or you may explore more closely the textures of the environment. On tougher terrain, you will buddy up with someone and take on the currents in tandem, maneuvering the strength of the water together. After each of these sensory invitations, there is the opportunity to share your observations and experiences with the group.



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Wading with Care

Adirondack Riverwalking also aims to have as little negative impact on the rivers as possible. They choose to wade in a section of the river that is impacted by road sand; the silt builds in the river, and aquatic life is diminished, so there is less chance of disturbing aquatic life. They also use three river locations on the West Branch of the Ausable River along River Road in rotation to avoid treading continuously on the same section of the river. After each trip, they wash off all wading gear to avoid transferring anything from river to river. Their season for Riverwalking lasts about three months, and they only guide tours one to two times a week at any of their three sites to minimize potential environmental damage.

Source of Calm

After a morning of wading in the Ausable River, one might feel a noticeable sense of calm and ease. Nature practices, such as Riverwalking, reduce stress and improve mental clarity. This phenomenon is also called "Blue Mind," or the idea that water has meditative qualities that can positively impact cognitive and physical well-being. Wallace J. Nichols compiles these findings in his book *Blue Mind*: "We are beginning to learn that our brains are hardwired to react positively to water and that being near it can calm and connect us, increase innovation and insight and even heal what's broken." Knowing that, as humans, we benefit from being near water, just imagine what immersing yourself in a river for a few hours could do.

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Riverwalking has not only mental and emotional benefits, but also physical ones, as well. The compression of the waders gives one the sense of a massage, and being in colder water is excellent for circulation. The slow and steady movement in the water echoes water aerobics and connects the body to the mind.

Refreshing Summer Activity

Living in the North Country has its perks. The nature of the Adirondack Park is at our fingertips, and Adirondack Riverwalking is an excellent option. Wade into new waters this summer, and welcome a sense of calm.

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Adirondack Riverwalking offers guided experiences in the Saranac Lake and Lake Placid area. Riverwalking trips can be booked from June through September, weather depending. To learn more or book an experience, visit adirondackriverwalking.com; call 518-637-2963; or email info@adirondackriverwalking.com.

Skylar Hunyadi is a freelance writer and licensed mental health counselor. She has lived in the North Country since 2004 and has a passion for sharing the beauty and opportunities of her home.

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