

RIDGELINES

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"I enter some glade in the woods, perchance, where a few weeds and dry leaves alone lift themselves above the surface of the snow, and it is as if I had come to an open window."

Henry David Thoreau, January 1857 Journal

Remarkable Journeys

By Robi Josephson, Research Associate

I start at the gap where Trapps Bridge perches over Route 44/55. Passing by two old friends, I nod hello to them, the giant gatekeepers to my left and right. I wonder, oddly, if these fallen slabs of conglomerate feel December's chill. I listen to their stony silence for a moment and, as Walt Whitman invited us long ago, "take to the open road."

The open road before me, Undercliff Road, quickly passes the black birch and chestnut oak forest at the top of the Trapps. The view widens southeastward to the broad stark beauty of the Wallkill Valley. On my right across the highway, the Near Trapps, sporting dress golds, smartly salute the rising sun.

The quiet hush is broken by my boots crunching on two inches of fresh snow. The cliffs rise on my left, with the boulder rubble or talus tumbling away to the right. Hundreds of feet up, gnarled pitch pines cling to the sheer rock face. Shallow crevices pinch their roots. How do they survive for decades on such narrow ledges and vertical cliffs? Do they sense the sting of January's storms?

Constructed almost a hundred years ago, Undercliff Road provides sturdy footing across the talus slope. This morning's leisurely walk would be impossible without it. My gaze eases to the ground. Tracks crisscross the snow. A white-footed mouse. A gray squirrel. They have no need for carriage roads. What is survival like for them? A nest in the rocks, a bed of dried leaves, nuts cached from the summer, foraging for leftover berries. A precarious existence at best. How many of these small creatures will survive the deepest cold of February to raise young come spring?

High above, a guttural quarking barks through my reverie. I scan the sky. There! One, then two, and a third raven appear. Black silhouettes, juveniles born last summer, swoop and swing behind the bare canopy. What a joyful noise, heard once again in the Hudson Valley only about fifteen years ago. Eagles are now seen more regularly in the valley, too. And within the last two years, we witnessed the first successful peregrine falcon nest in the

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Shawangunks in over forty years. These sightings give us all hope as we ring in the new millennium.

Undercliff Road approaches Sleepy Hollow, then skirts the swamp on its way to Rhododendron Bridge. Later in the season, when winter loosens its grip, an annual journey takes place here and in wet areas throughout the region. With emerging wood frogs croaking in chorus, salamanders move over the snow toward their vernal breeding pools. In her booklet *Tune in to Nature*, Ruth Smiley wrote that the "...salamanders migrate from their places of hibernation under rotted logs and stones to special ponds. They travel over snow and wet leaves at night. Large numbers migrate when conditions are just right, and sometimes can be heard as they move over twigs and leaves in their path to water.... The eggs are laid and the adults return to the woods leaving their young to develop and mature through the ensuing weeks." The crunching of my feet on the snow mostly signals physical exercise. By contrast, that of the tiny salamanders mean the very continuation of their species.

I arrive at Rhododendron Bridge. In the surrounding woods, a few red maples and hemlocks stand with the chestnut and black

birch. Tracks follow the road then disappear into the trees. A flock of turkeys, a family of deer. I look for coyote tracks, but see none this morning. My breath condenses, hangs for a moment, then dissipates into the cold. I think about the energy it takes for each plant and animal to survive over a winter in the northern hemisphere.

Retracing my tracks, I marvel at all of the remarkable journeys witnessed or thought of this winter's day - the survival of our fellow creatures, the return of long-missed species, even my walk on this carriage road across the slope of the Trapps. Stepping again between my two stone friends, with the bridge in sight, I'm happy that the truck is nearby, waiting to take me home to food, warmth, and family.



Undercliff Road was built in 1903 by the Mohonk Mountain House. It is part of the carriage road system linking the lands of the Mohonk Preserve, the Mountain House, and Minnewaska State Park Preserve. Constructed between 1870-1929, the carriage roads were engineering marvels of their day. Undercliff Road, in particular, is remarkable for it traverses the otherwise impassible boulder rubble at the base of the Trapps.