



The Highlands, discovered

Elliott Ruga's southern Highlands road trip

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I thought I knew New Jersey.

It's where I was born and raised, where I spent my college years and where I have decided to put down roots. It's where I have spent countless hours in pursuit of my passion, hiking wooded sanctuaries that look nothing like the New Jersey portrayed on television.

But on a tour of the southern Highlands stretching from Boonton to Phillipsburg, I stood in awe of places I never knew existed. That, in fact, was the promise made to me by Elliott Ruga when I agreed to take his Highlands roadtrip, which traced more than 100 miles of scenic roads passing fertile farmland through five counties and as many watersheds.

Ruga has gotten to know the hills and valleys of the New Jersey Highlands over the past three years as a policy analyst for the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, driving to public meetings to defend the 860,000-acre region that supplies drinking water to more than half the state's residents. He returned with his dog and camera to further explore the farm communities that dot the region and accumulated a vast knowledge of and a deep appreciation for the area's history.

"I don't think people really know how quaint the little hamlets are in this part of the Highlands, and the river systems, such as the Musconetcong and Pequest," Ruga said. "In these former industrial towns like Phillipsburg, Milford and Alpha, you can just squint a little and see that something really vibrant happened here at one time — and that's the history of the Highlands: the canal, the railroads, the iron, the river towns that grew up around mills. There's history, there's beauty, there's variation."

Along for the ride were Julia Somers, executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, and Lee Wallace, a Morris Township resident whose foundation has contributed to the organization.

The road trip

We set off from the Highlands Coalition's Boonton headquarters at 10 a.m. one day last week in a blue Nissan Versa, a washed out grey sky threatening rain. Not five minutes later, we arrived at our first destination and parked outside a run-down building behind the town's recycling center

off Plane Street. We walked down a path lined with thick underbrush that parallels the Rockaway River, flowing strong from the wet season.

Visible from the trail is what looks like an overgrown aqueduct set off from the woods, the remnants of furnaces like those used to forge cannonballs Gen. George Washington's Army fired at the British during the Revolutionary War.

"In the early 1800s, Boonton was a small manufacturing town, to the north men worked the mines of Rockaway extracting assay iron, the highest quality of iron ore," Ruga said. "Boonton became alive after the 1820s when George Macculloch built the Morris Canal and reshaped the region."

The canal, rendered obsolete by the railroad, is long gone, but the beauty of this tucked-away place remains open to all.

After pausing at Indian Rock, named for its distinct profile of a face, we load back into the car and head west toward Rockaway Township, passing homes where deer openly graze on lawns and large swaths of forest speckled with muted tones of scarlet and gold.

"By the mid 19th century, this area of the Highlands was just barren," Ruga said. "The way settlers operated furnaces, they needed all the charcoal they could get, so they took down all the trees. There was no wildlife and rivers were fouled. This is all second-growth forest."

As a light rain fell, the car hugged Split Rock Reservoir, enjoyed for its serenity by paddlers. The reservoir is part of the Jersey City reservoir system and the forest around it plays a vital role in the natural, self-sustaining system that has produced drinkable water here for centuries, Ruga says.

"These swaths of green are a path of least resistance for companies that want to build utility lines," Ruga says. "We can't allow the Highlands to be cut into ribbons lest we want to lose the tremendous value they provide in filtering water. It takes a large contiguous forest to have that function. Once you make cuts, invasive species like deer move in and disrupt the ecological balance."

I've lived in the area long enough to know the Highlands is a political issue that draws equal measures of enchantment, vitriol and blank stares. But before borders were drawn and mayors elected, the Highlands were a geological feature, and when Ruga puts it this way, I remember in grade school decorating the four sides of a shoe box with New Jersey's four regions — coastal plain, piedmont, highlands and ridge and valley — and placing inside items representing the state's economy, such as shells, cranberries and rocks. I never thought of clean water as a commodity before, but it may one of New Jersey's most precious.

The land opens up here

We take Route 80 west and get off at exit 19, Allamuchy in Warren County. The highway bisects the Highlands not just geographically but also culturally, Ruga says. The land opens up here in a

mix of small and sprawling farms and the rhythm of life is different. Instead of Quick Check, you'll find the general store.

We pull off Hope Road in Independence to a spot overlooking Great Meadows, a vast sediment-rich field that was once the bottom of a glacial lake. It's now a sod farm, albeit a flooded one as water from the rolling hills around it channeled the excess rain of Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee to the bowl-shape depression.

It's definitely a place I never expected to find in New Jersey. In the foreground, a home with a clothesline and a pen holding two horses, in the background, the field surrounded by the soft ridges of the Allamuchy and Jenny Jump State Forest. This vista could just as well be Minnesota.

We pass through the center of Belvidere, where Victorian homes flavor the landscape, and reach the Delaware River. Across its banks in Lower Mount Bethel, Pa., is the smoke stacks of the Pennsylvania Power and Light coal-fired plant.

Warren County has some of the state's worst air quality because of its proximity to the coal plants, Somers says.

"A lot of coal-fired plants are not running at their capacity because the grid cannot handle it," she said. "But that may change."

The towns here, such as Phillipsburg and Alpha, Somers said, are opting into the Highlands Regional Master Plan as a way to rebuild their town centers.

"There will be tremendous development in the Highlands, it will be redevelopment and it needs it," Somers said as we drive through Phillipsburg's sleepy downtown. "As a society, we are moving back toward centers instead of suburbs."

'These are our mountains'

We snake our way on Route 57, a national scenic byway, to the hump of Musconetcong Mountain, climbing Mountainview Way in Lebanon Township. The ridge overlooks Scott's Mountain and Musconetcong Valley Farm, which hummed with the sound of drying grain. It was an awesome sight, the sun shining on the farm's two silos, clouds casting shadows on the golden fields.

"When I first took this job," Somers said, "I called my father in Scotland. The first thing he asked was, 'What's the elevation of those mountains?'" I told him it's all relative, that these were our mountains."

That message stuck with me as we drove toward the Musconetcong River — which offers exactly the picturesque views you'd expect from one of the best trout fishing rivers on the East Coast — before we stopped for lunch at the nearby Asbury Deli.

The mountains in New Jersey are no higher than 1,803 feet, the summit at High Point, but it's

not height that defines a memorable hike, it's a feeling that you are connecting to nature. Ruga's road trip, even though much of it was spent in a car, accomplished that.

Wallace, a New Jersey native who developed an appreciation for nature as a Boy Scout, remarked on the trip's unexpected vistas.

"I live in the Highlands, I am concerned about the Highlands. I'd hate to see it all go away," he said. "I don't do the things I used to do, I'm not a camper, I'm not an avid hiker, but I want my children's children to be able to enjoy the same things that I did in this state."

Nearly everywhere we drove, there was an absence of concrete. Instead, we passed rivers — the Rockaway, Pequest, Delaware, South Branch of the Raritan, Upper Raritan and Musconetcong — and large swaths of forests and preserved farms. It was refreshing.

"We never left the Highlands," Somers said. "You don't have to."

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