

# Circumnavigating 50-mile loop around lake traverses remote backcountry

BY SHERMAN CRAIG AND JAMIE SAVAGE

Are you seeking a new long-distance hike for your pleasure and challenge? “The Cranberry Lake 50” will, it is hoped, encourage people to explore and enjoy the expansive natural scenery of the Cranberry Lake region. As one former explorer of the area, Bob Marshall, put it, such wild scenery is comparable to “great works of art.” And when he further noted in 1930 that “Wilderness furnishes perhaps the best opportunity for pure aesthetic rapture,” he was surely referring to places like the Cranberry Lake country.

Respected authors such as Phil Brown, Bill Ingersoll, Peter O’Shea, Herb Keith and Christopher Angus have written enthusiastically about the region. Peter O’Shea affectionately describes it as “the most remote and unknown part of the Adirondacks and the area where the old ways have lingered longest.”

## HOW IT GOT STARTED

The new loop trail was conceived and briefly described in the most recent Unit Management Plan (UMP) for the Five Ponds Wilderness Area (1994, page 43):

“The State should provide a vital link between the trail system [of the Five Ponds Wilderness] and the extensive system on the adjacent Cranberry Lake Wild Forest through the construction of a 2.1-mile South Bay Trail between the Six-mile Creek Trail and Chair Rock Flow and utilization of the Otterbrook Trail, which is an old logging road in reasonably good condition. Completion of this trail will result in a 50-mile route around Cranberry Lake.”

Soon after the release of the UMP, state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) personnel contacted the private residents of “the head of the lake,” who represent multigenerational ownership in their properties. The historic grouping includes some of the first hunting clubs and inns on Cranberry Lake. They always maintained a private trail that linked their properties with the state trails. The DEC was hoping to include that trail so that a separate state trail would not be needed.

While many residents did not object, not everyone, understandably, wanted to have hikers in their backyards. Consequently, no additional work was done to promote the “South Bay Trail.” However, in the ensuing years other trails helped make possible “The Cranberry 50.” The Otterbrook property was added along with its interior trails, the Peavine Swamp Trail was built, and the Ranger



*CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Beaver dam on High Falls Loop; view from summit of Cat Mountain; Curtis Pond; and Lady's Slippers along the edge of Dog Pond*

*PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SHERMAN AND ANNETTE CRAIG*



School extended a trail from its campus in Wanakena to the Peavine trail.

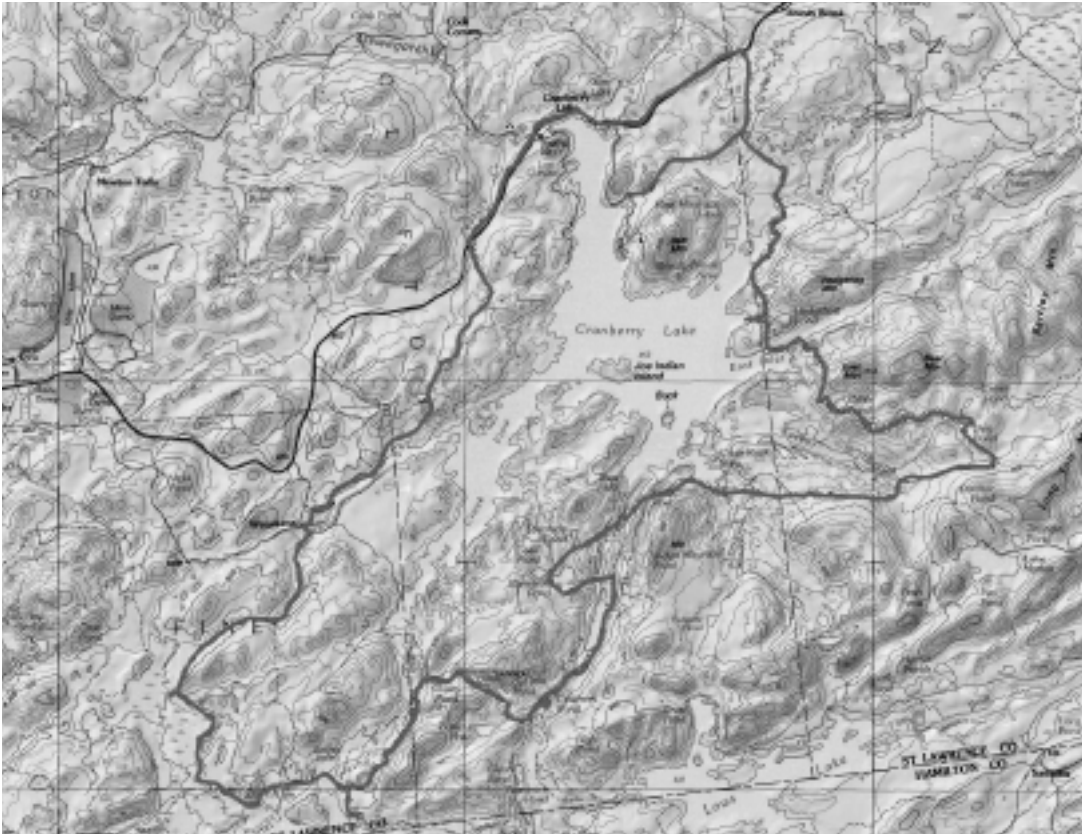
## **BUT WHAT ABOUT THE MISSING LINK?**

**I**n 2002, the Clifton-Fine Economic Development Corporation established a subcommittee, The Five Ponds Partners, to focus on maintaining the natural beauty and diverse recreational resources inherent to the area. Of particular concern was the need for trail clearing in the wake of the 1995 “microburst” and the need to link the existing snowmobile trail system. The Five Ponds Partners enthusiastically took on these and other projects deemed consistent with the group’s mission, which states in part, “In order to promote sustainable economic development in the Towns of Clifton and Fine and adjacent areas, the natural beauty and forest recreation resources of this part of the park need to be accessible to area residents and visitors.”

The Five Ponds Partners have developed a strong relationship with the DEC and consider the DEC’s Cranberry Lake trail crew the reason for success in the renewed vitality of trails in the region. ADK has also been a major partner. Scores of ADK members and other volunteers participated in National Trails Day events in Wanakena, Cranberry Lake and Star Lake in 2003, 2004, and 2005, providing much-needed work on the existing trail system. Another group of volunteers, working cooperatively with the DEC, has rebuilt the area lean-tos with new foundations, floors, roofs, and paint. ADK has coordinated a dedicated group of lean-to adopters.

## **ADK AND THE MISSING LINK**

**B**uilding on the success of these activities, the Five Ponds Partners now looked to fulfill the dream of a trail around Cranberry Lake. One clear need was the South Bay Trail. Some preliminary work was done to evaluate the work and costs associated with this trail when ADK was contracted to build the Fishpole Pond Trail in 2000.



WHEN BOB  
MARSHALL  
NOTED IN  
1930 THAT  
“WILDERNESS  
FURNISHES  
PERHAPS THE  
BEST



*Top: Map of the Cranberry Lake fifty-mile hiking trail.*

*Center: Trail sign on the Dog Pond Loop*

*Bottom: Irish Pond*

*PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SHERMAN AND ANNETTE CRAIG*

OPPORTUNITY  
FOR  
RAPTURE,”  
HE WAS SURELY



REFERRING  
TO PLACES  
LIKE THE  
CRANBERRY  
LAKE  
COUNTRY.

terrain of the area, and be kept as short as possible. Several alternative routes were explored. Finally, with the leadership of the Five Pond Partners and strong support of the DEC, APA, and ADK, an ADK professional trail crew was contracted to build the long-awaited trail. The crew offered continued assistance by rebuilding a rickety bridge across Six-mile Creek, marking the new trail—and clearing the entire fifty-mile loop.

The spring of 2008 saw the first hikers to officially complete the Cranberry 50. Three young women, all recent graduates of St. Lawrence University, excitedly knocked on the door of a home in Wanakena one evening looking for information about “The 50.” They planned to start the next day. Three days later they again knocked on the door, filthy and sore, but with bright smiles on their faces as they exclaimed, “We did it!” One of the hikers, Katie, said, “I like the 50 because, unlike climbing the 46, it is not about bagging peaks, it is about walking in and enjoying the woods, which happen to be amazing “

---

## DESCRIPTION AND ACCESS

The Cranberry 50 uses trails and sections of trails that give hikers an opportunity to experience lakeside views, deep forests, backcountry ponds, and diverse wildlife, as well as peaceful campsites, nostalgic lean-tos, and the fading signs of the area’s rich logging, milling, and tourism history. For the most part, the terrain is gentle, following traditional hunters’ paths, old logging roads, and the railroad beds of the lumber companies that once operated in the region.

There is no right and wrong way to attack this circular route. Most, however, will start in the northern region and enter at the Route 3 Burntbridge Pond trailhead or the DEC Cranberry Lake campground (Bear Mt. trail). Begin by hiking the Burntbridge Pond trail to the eastern half of the Dog Pond trail past Proulx clearing (where remnants of a logging crews’ equipment remain), turning back west on the Otterbrook Trail to the Darning Needle Trail. Cross Chair Rock Creek and hike the new South Bay Trail to the Six-mile Creek Trail. Hike south on Six-mile, loop around Olmstead Pond, and continue south on Six-mile to Cowhorn Pond. Follow the Cowhorn Junction trail to Sand Hill Junction, and then hike the High Falls loop trail to High Falls and on to Wanakena. Walk through Wanakena and east past the Ranger School to the Peavine Swamp Trail. This trail will return you to Route 3, about 5.5 miles west of where you started. An easy walk or stashed bicycle will bring you back to your starting point.

Alternatively, some hikers like to start in Wanakena and hike to High Falls first. Or for those with boat access, other options are available that combine travel by boat and foot. In fact, there are several possibilities for dividing the route into reasonable distances based on time, interest, season, and preferred mode of travel. And, of course, if you have some extra time on your hands, there are several extended side trips that will be hard to pass up, such as a hike up Cat Mountain, or a journey into the remote Five Ponds themselves, south of High Falls. There you can see impressive and regal stands of old-growth yellow birch and white pine. Of all the hikes Bob Marshall did in the area, he rated the latter trip his favorite.

During this hike you will pass nine ponds, six lean-tos, numerous campsites, and some old logging camps and equipment from both

the Rich and Emporium lumber companies. You will travel along the fabled Oswegatchie River, see the lake six times, and gain only 400 feet of elevation. You will experience old-growth forests, vigorous sapling stands created by the 1995 windstorm, and numerous beaver-engineered wetlands.

---

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit the loop’s Web site for more specifics: [www.cranberrylake50.org](http://www.cranberrylake50.org). There you can find detailed trail descriptions and a list of area businesses, including restaurants, lodges and general stores. You can also read more about the trail and the area in general in two published guidebooks:

\**Guide to Adirondack Trails: Northern Region*, Adirondack Mountain Club, Second Edition, 2000.

\**Discover the Northwestern Adirondacks: Four-Season Guide to the Oswegatchie Wilderness*, Barbara McMartin and Bill Ingersoll, Wild River Press, 2007.

---

## JOIN THE CLUB

Each person who completes the fifty-mile loop will receive a patch designed by the Five Ponds Partners, will have his or her name listed on the Web site and can add pictures and/or trail condition updates for others to see.



Please see [www.cranberrylake50.org](http://www.cranberrylake50.org) for details.

◆ Sherman Craig is chairman of Five Ponds Partners; Jamie Savage teaches at the Ranger School and wrote about hiking with children in the July/August Adirondac.