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JOURNEYS; Hiking the Wilds of New Jersey (Yes, New Jersey)

By DANA WHITE

YOU can tell most designers by their signature style, whether it's the soaring, twisting buildings of Frank Gehry or the body-hugging contours of a Zac Posen dress. The people who design hiking trails are no exception. When it comes to his own creations, Bob Moss takes a minimalist approach. "I like to keep it natural," he said recently. "I don't like the tread way too wide, like a street. We hope the beaten path is only a foot and a half wide. My goal is, if you can see where it goes, I'm happy."

Mr. Moss, a former computer programmer turned volunteer trail designer, is the New Jersey supervisor of the Highlands Trail Committee. The trail is a work in progress that, when completed in three years or so, will extend 160 miles from the Hudson River in New York to the Delaware River in New Jersey.

As the state supervisor, Mr. Moss has helped plan, design and build -- "all of it with muscle power and hand tools" -- the newly cleared New Jersey sections of the trail, about 40 percent of the route. He also wrote the meticulously detailed descriptions for the hikers' guide. "I've not only hiked the trail, I've crawled it; literally pulled the weeds out of the ground," he said.

Many trail designers are known for their preferences for rocky ledges or for the swooping hiking paths they etch into the wilderness. Not so Mr. Moss. "I'm not opposed to rocks," he explained, "but generally I want to get the thing in and not spend a year excavating a section."

Carving into the terrain to create the ever-popular lookout isn't high on his list of priorities, either. "I've learned that if you have really nice sections with a lot of variety, you don't have to have a lot of good view points."

The Highlands Trail is one of several ambitious long-distance trail systems in the works across the country. In Southern California, the San Diego Sea to Sea Trail will stretch 300 miles, from the Salton Sea near the Mexican border to the Pacific Ocean near Del Mar -- by the time it's finished in 2006. The 300-mile Chinook Trail will ramble south from Vancouver, Wash., to Portland, Ore. The Grafton Loop in Maine will open 42 miles of trail in the Mahoosuc Range. Other trails are being built in New York, Virginia, Kentucky, Georgia and Nevada.

"There is a lot going in," said Frank Hugelmeyer, the president of the Outdoor Industry Association, which estimates that a third of Americans age 16 and older hiked in 2002. One reason for the building boom, he said, is financial. "There is new federal funding that comes

from the Transportation Equity Act," he said. The act allocates money from gas taxes for the development and preservation of pedestrian trails, considered part of the transportation system.

Another reason: nostalgia. "The outdoor recreation lifestyle really came into its own in the 1970's and 1980's," he said. "Now those people are parents, and they're not only stewards of children and the next generation, they're stewards of the land."

Compared with your average freeway, the pace of building a trail can be glacial. On the Grafton Loop, professional field crews paid by the Appalachian Mountain Club and the Maine Conservation Corps, reinforced by scores of volunteers, have cleared brush, removed rocks, graded slopes and built bridges.

"We spent the entire summer of 2001 on three miles of trail because it was very rocky and steep," said Heather Clish, who oversees 1,400 miles of trails for the Appalachian Mountain Club. Almost three years after work began, and a decade after its inception, the loop is half-finished; it should be completed by 2005.

A long-distance trail is a patchwork affair, pieced together on public and private land. In the past, permission to route a trail through a certain piece of property was often based on a handshake, Ms. Clish said. "But more and more it's being seen as a good idea to get some level of written agreement. If they change their mind, you have to go back and reroute it."

Recently, Mr. Moss, who is working on the Highlands Trail in New Jersey, volunteered to show me a new trail he and his crew built from scratch in 2001, as well as a four-mile loop he is planning off the main Highlands Trail.

Since 1995 the New York/New Jersey Trail Coalition has worked from north to south, piecing the route together from a jigsaw puzzle of existing and new trails. Almost 140 miles are open now; the last two miles opened on June 7, National Trails Day.

My husband, David, and I met Mr. Moss at Lake Hopatcong in Warren County. We crossed a road and entered the woods to reach the trail, about 30 miles north of the trail's end in Hunterdon County. "This is one of my favorite trails," said Mr. Moss, 56, a slender man who was wearing a black baseball cap and an Appalachian Trail T-shirt. "It's very pretty, with interesting rock formations, change of scenery and habitats, sometimes within a few feet."

The maintenance crew hadn't done its post-winter cleanup yet, and as Mr. Moss walked, he moved fallen limbs with such gusto that soon David was following suit, tossing aside small trees with Herculean zeal. The woods were so verdant and damp I felt as if we had taken a wrong turn and ended up in the Pacific Northwest.

We passed wetlands choked with marsh grasses and skunk cabbage and huge rock formations upholstered with all manner of lichen and moss. Thorny berry branches sprang exuberantly from the earth, dainty violas dotted the path, and vibrant shooting stars sprouted from cracks in the rocks.

Before this outing I was one of those hikers who wanted an epic vista as the payoff for my exertion. But this trail utterly charmed me. It had

the subtle appeal of an independent film: the special effects are minimal, but the sm all moments -- fiddleheads unfurling on a hummock, deep-green moss wrapping a tree like a fur collar out of Dr. Seuss -- did my soul jus t as much good. (The Highlands Trail does have its share of scenic payoffs, particularly at Wyanokie High Point in northern Passaic County, wi th blockbuster views of the Manhattan skyline and the Hudson River Valley.)

As Mr. Moss sees it, the Highlands Trail is both symbolic and recreational. "It draw s attention to New Jersey as a place that's got scenic value and something worth going to see besides Atlantic City," he said. "It emphasizes th at we've got to get as much open space as we can while it's still there. We can get people out there, especially in new areas, who'll say, 'Wow, this ought to be protected.' "

The existence of this part of the trail is a bit tenuous. It is on private property, part of a quarry up the road. Mr. Moss explained that the Highlands Trail Committee has a fully revocable agreement with the owner, a nonbindin g written contract that is easy to get but also easy to lose. "He plans to quarry all of this eventually," Mr. Moss said. "He could tell u s he's closing the trail at any time." He chuckled ruefully. "I should have worn my anti-quarry T-shirt."

At a massive boulder nicknamed Gumdrop Rock we veered off the trail, bushwhacking thr ough shin-high blackberry bushes. Not to worry, Mr. Moss said. "You can't get lost in New Jersey," he said. "Walk a mile in any di rection, and you'll hit a paved road."

We followed the orange surveyor's tape Mr. Moss had tied to trees to mark the route. He estimated he had spent 20 hours scouting out the best path. "The first place you put the flags may not be the best place," he explai ned. "The more of the area you've seen just walking around, the better choices you make."

We crossed another property line onto a private estate called Hudson Farm. Mr. Moss h as been negotiating for a conservation easement with the owner and had been advised the trail could come no closer than 1,500 feet to a pl anned skeet-shooting range.

Eventually the tape stopped. Mr. Moss stood in a small clearing, looking this way and that, deciding which way to take the trail next. He mentioned another trail builder he knows, whose trails tend to zig and zag because he wants the hikers to see every lovely thing.

"I'm not worried about that," Mr. Moss said. "If I miss something, then that's a s ecret treasure even the hikers don't see."

A week later, David and I took the Highlands Trail from Voorhees State Park near High Bridge, N.J., to its current conclusion on Musconetcong Mountain in Hunterdon County. After exiting a thicket of fragrant autumn olive trees, we crossed a road and followed the freshly painted trail markers -- turquoise diamonds, turquoise being the Highlands Tr ail's color -- into a scenic wildlife management area.

The wide trail, a former tractor road, passed overgrown farmland and climbed a small mountain dotted with wild roses. Just before the summit, the trail turned left, segueing into a gentle descent through stands of young beech trees, their new leaves so green they glowed. At an old logging road, the turquoise diamonds stopped. This was the end.

We stood there, looking back up the trail for a few minutes. The traffic noise that h ad dogged us all day had finally diminished, replaced by

the patter of a light rain on leaves, and my mind drifted back to an exchange I had with Mr. Moss. When I suggested that there was a sort of power in creating a hiking trail, he demurred modestly, then later reconsidered.

"You know, you may be right," he said. "There is a power. You choose the route, and if all goes well, everyone follows it for centuries."

Correction: June 27, 2003, Friday An article last Friday about hiking the Highlands Trail in New Jersey misstated the location of Lake Hopatcong. It is in Morris and Sussex Counties, not Warren. The article also misstated the name of the group that has been working to complete the trail. It is the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, not the New York/New Jersey Trail Coalition.

In discussing several other long trails around the nation, the article referred incompletely to the 300-mile Chinook Trail, which will connect the nearby cities of Portland, Ore., and Vancouver, Wash. Most of it is a loop that will follow the Columbia River about 100 miles upstream from the two cities, crossing it at Biggs, Ore., and returning on the other side.

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