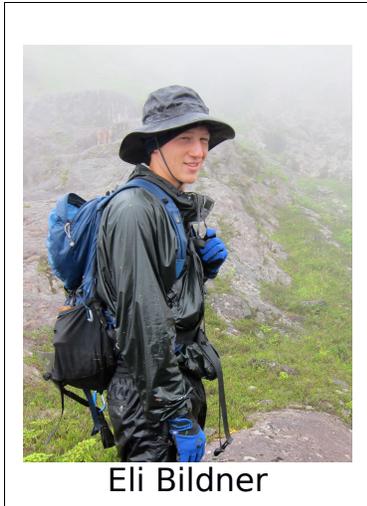


# East Coast meets Southeast Coast



It was a little less than a week ago that I bade farewell to Baranof Island and began my cross-country return to the Eastern Seaboard. Along with my dear college friend, native Sitkan Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins, I'd spent the previous week-plus exploring the hinterlands of the South Baranof Wilderness. I was sad to leave. At the airport, Jonathan handed me a parting gift: a rumpled plastic bag bearing a pair of used Xtra Tuffs. It might not seem like much to a homegrown Alaskan, but it was just about enough to make this "Southerner" tear.

I write now from my home in western Massachusetts, surrounded by the rolling hills and temperate forests of the southern Berkshires.

Growing up, when I thought of "wilderness," I thought of these woods behind my house. Today, I glance at my battered and bruised extremities – victims to the thick Baranof brush and swarms of little black flies – and the equating of "wilderness" and these Appalachian woods seems hopelessly understated. Returning from Alaska, I am glad to be reminded that wilderness has no obligation to be a comfortable place.

Wilderness isn't comfortable? This seems so obvious as to be a tautology. But for most of us who live safely within the domain of the "great indoors," our vision of the wild can easily grow unrealistic. Our consumer culture ensures that our most proximate windows to the "wild" are often television shows and Patagonia catalogs.

I realize that these words probably make me sound much more jaundiced than I actually am. I don't begrudge anyone for seeking comfort. But I do think that many of us have grown so used to expecting comfort – to controlling our natural environments – that we forget that there are still certain places where nature sets the rules. Like the South Baranof Wilderness, for instance. If it's too foggy – and it's almost certainly too foggy – then your float plane will have to wait for another day. If it's wet and rainy – and it is wet and rainy – then throw on your Xtra Tuffs and suck it up. And there's no piece of Patagonia gear that can save your legs from the brush or your skin from the horse flies. Or if there is, please let me know. I'll need to pick up a set before I make a return visit.