

## **Code Breaker: Terry Trudeau Has a Bad Day**

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*Specific locations are not mentioned and names and locations have been changed to protect key contributors, though all events are true.*

Synonymous with untamed beauty, New York's Adirondack Park is the largest piece of public land in the Lower 48. At six million acres, it's a quilt of private and public property 100 miles wide and 130 miles tall. With such impressive dimensions, many feel the "Big Sky" moniker is as applicable to New York as it is to Montana. One can only presume that the 250 downhill ski runs, 350 kilometers of maintained cross country ski routes, and 1,500 miles of foot trails inside the Adirondack Park offer enough for every skier. But a few skiers feel this Adirondack landscape is not good enough. Such was the case with an Adirondack backcountry skier named Terry Trudeau.

During October 2005, two men, yours truly and Jeff Rand, were hiking off-trail in McKenzie Mountain Wilderness Area, a jumble of peaks nestled near the villages of Saranac Lake and Lake Placid. This same day, Terry Trudeau was in the McKenzie Mountain Wilderness Area, moving off-trail just like Jeff and I were. It was an extreme case of coincidence. To have three off-trail navigators within the same Adirondack county, let alone the same clump of woods, is highly improbable.

As Jeff and I hiked off the north side of a peak, we entered an enormous birch glade. We paused as Jeff spoke. "Man, what a forest. Glad we decided to drop off the back side of this – " But Jeff's words were cut short when he noticed the glade was formed not by nature, but by man. Stump after stump revealed someone had been felling trees at a feverish pace. We then noticed, only 300 feet in front of us, a man rolling a paper birch log into a hole. This was Terry, who was oblivious we were above him.

Upon descending to him, Jeff asked a simple question. "So... whatcha doin'?" Terry stood there silent, in total disbelief that someone had stumbled upon him. When no answer was given to the inquiry, Jeff stared at Terry with interest, squinting and thinking. Eventually he said slowly with a smile, "I know you. You're Terry Trudeau." Terry's identity was confirmed by his

own silence. "Man," Jeff surmised, "this just isn't your day, bud. You might be in a heap of trouble, cutting trees back here."

Going back and forth, Jeff and Terry traded pointed questions for vague answers, Terry slowly revealing that he had been visiting the wilderness area for years with axes and handsaws and his Stihl 036 chain saw that lay half-hidden in the brush. He had been cutting ski trails and backcountry glades, his clandestine activity being illegal. In Terry's opinion, God's design and the skiing infrastructure put in place by man weren't good enough. He had only one question for Jeff and I, his ace in the hole question.

"You guys backcountry skiers?" Terry received nods numbering two. He smiled. "Great. Me, too. That means we can keep this just between us, right? I mean, there's no need to tell McKay about this." Terry was referring to the local forest ranger, who had a penchant for busting people who abused the Adirondacks. Terry looked around and then back at us. "This is fine skiing here, boys."

Obviously, Terry was employing the "skier's code." It is the this-is-our-dirty-little-secret wink. Fortunately, Jeff and I knew right from wrong. I retorted with a smile, "Like Jeff said, Terry, this just isn't your day." Then we walked away, leaving Terry to his worrisome self.

We continued our descent and scouted another peak before calling it a day. When we got back to my place in Lake Placid, I reached for the phone book and ran my finger down the M's. "MacKay, MacKay... MacKay. Here he is. Up on Ardsley Road?"

Jeff replied, "That's our man." Jeff knew MacKay better than I did, so he made the call. He looked at me as the phone rang, then sat up straight when a voice on the other end greeted him. "Hi, is this Pete MacKay?" Jeff asked. He received an "affirmative" and continued. "This is Jeff Rand. Yeah, okay, okay. How are you? Good. Hey, I'm glad I caught you. You got a minute? Great." Jeff lounged back on my couch with optimism. Then he got to our story.

"Well, me and my buddy just met this guy way up in the McKenzies when we were out scouting for deer sign." Jeff paused as MacKay jumped in. "Yeah," Jared said with a laugh. "Oh, I know. We didn't expect to see anyone up there either. What are the chances?" After several minutes of narration, Jared reached the end of the story. "So when we got back here we picked up the phone."

MacKay had one question: Did we know who this guy was? After he heard the name, MacKay went silent. It was a bittersweet moment for him. Though it appeared that scores of

trees had been cut down, trees legally protected 120 years ago with creation of the Forest Preserve, the good news was that Terry was the guy – *the* guy – that a platoon of rangers had been trying to catch for a decade. Us stumbling upon Terry was a huge score.

True to what we told Terry that day, it really wasn't his day. After rangers investigated the cutting site, 500 counts of "cutting and/or injuring trees" were levied against Terry. The photos rangers took of the glades didn't make Terry look good. When the dust settled, a \$5,000 civil penalty was levied against Terry.

However, many park residents think he got off easy. Others see Terry as a victim, a martyr of the skiing community. From one Adirondacker came, "If he was an ATV'er? My God! He would have been lynched. Everyone hates four-wheelers. This guy got off wicked easy." Here, though an ATV wasn't involved, the rider somewhat felt the victim for he knew he would have been nailed to the judge's bench. The rider was right. He probably would've been lynched, unlike the skier.

A backcountry skier countered, "Shit, there's nowhere to ski!" In this response, Terry is not to blame. No, it's the Department of Environmental Conservation, the agency that maintains park trails. According to a handful of Adirondack backcountry skiers, Terry was the victim, criminalized by an agency that didn't bother cutting hiking trails eight feet wide for skiers. They begged the question, "What was he supposed to do?" as if skiing the 250 downhill runs, 350 kilometers of cross country ski trails, and 1,500 miles of foot trails in the Adirondack Park was an unreasonable option.

The blame game is as well-established in the Adirondack Park as it is in Yellowstone, Glacier, the Great Smokies, or Grand Canyon. From contractors to climbers, Wal-Mart to the Wilderness Society, certain user groups care more about criminalizing and debasing other user groups than they do identifying environmental damage done by all and then doing something about it. No one I interviewed for this article said anything to the effect of "That's terrible" or "Those poor trees." In conversation after conversation, people either went after the skier or defended their own pack.

Since I mentioned early into this article that Terry was a skier, you probably had a measured like or dislike of Terry even before I told you of the damage he caused or the penalty he received. I probably would have done the same as you. Therefore, I have made a pact with myself to be objective in such matters. If I pick up the paper and read an article like this one

here, I will not choose sides like the people I interviewed did. I will only ask, Should I be defending someone who did wrong because I identify with them, or should I defend the land that brings me so much joy?

It doesn't matter what part of the country this story took place in. Land is land. The important thing is that when you examine Terry's case objectively you will see him not as a backcountry skier, but as a man who thought public land wasn't good enough for him. Reminding ourselves of this, who Terry really was that day, Jeff and I have never regretted abandoning the skier's code and calling Pete MacKay the moment we got in my door.