



Walt McLaughlin
Blowdown

When the remnants of Tropical Storm Philippe slammed into a cold front just off the Atlantic coast a week ago, a weather bomb detonated in the Northeast. That is, a rapidly deepening low-pressure system churned up some incredibly high winds. “Bombogenesis” is what meteorologists call it. My wife and I were visiting our granddaughter in the Berkshires when the windstorm hit. Our two-hundred-mile ride home the next day gave us a grand view of the damage caused by it. There were trees and tree branches down everywhere – in some places more than others – so it was easy to grasp the sheer force and mind-boggling arbitrariness of nature’s most capricious element.

Atop Mount Washington, the wind gusted to 131 miles an hour that day. In 1934, the wind surface speed there measured 231 miles an hour – a planetary record not broken until just recently by a cyclone in Australia. It’s hard to imagine anything standing up to that kind of punishment, especially a tree. And yet some do. So what’s more amazing: the wind that blows or the trees that sway with it?

Sometimes trees fall with little or no provocation. While hiking through the Adirondack forest dappled with sunlight on a quiet, windless morning, I heard a loud crash not far away, directly ahead. A few minutes later I came upon a huge tree sprawled across the forest floor. The leaves on its branches were fresh and dirt was still dropping away from its exposed roots. What was a majestic tree towering into the canopy was now only blowdown. Its time had simply come. Soon, very soon, bacteria, beetles, fungus, and the other engineers of decay would set to work. And the forest cycle would go on – a process that has been underway for thousands upon thousands of years.

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Every tree must eventually fall, wind or no wind. That said, the wind does most of the work. We hikers call every downed tree that we come upon blowdown because it's safe to assume that the wind had something to do with it. A gentle nudge or a powerful blast then a tree comes down. It's all just a matter of physics and could be calculated if one knew the structural integrity of the tree in question as well as the slope, gravitational force, the wind speed, the load, and the many other factors at work. But that's a tall order. More often than not, we don't see it coming. A downed tree usually takes us by surprise, even during a big weather event.



The wildness of the wind was something that the naturalist John Muir knew quite well. In 1874 he hiked into the Sierras just as a storm was brewing with the express intention of experiencing the wind from a unique vantage point. After coming upon a tight copse Douglas spruces that he thought were unlikely to topple, he climbed up one to literally ride out the howling storm. "I kept my lofty perch for hours," he recorded later, "Frequently closing my eyes to enjoy the music by itself, or to feast on the delicious fragrance that was streaming past."

While clinging to a tree swaying in a storm is not something that I would ever do, I can appreciate the sentiment. Once I climbed out of a ravine, where I'd taken cover for the night, and into the teeth of a storm roaring across an alpine snowfield. I did that just to experience the sheer intensity of an 80 to 100 mile-an-hour wind. I quickly learned that it isn't possible for any mere mortal to stand upright against a force like that. Then I too began to appreciate, as Muir did, the way trees sway.



Windstorms, tornados, hurricanes – a fierce wind blows and the wise take cover. But sometimes even taking cover isn't enough. Along with trees, manmade structures come down as well. Sometimes they are completely blown apart. Growing up in the Midwest, it was routine for my family and me to head for the basement whenever there was a tornado warning. We crouched up against the wall just in case the building overhead came down. Those living in coastal areas do the same when a hurricane is expected to make landfall. Either that or they flee inland.

A fierce wind is no laughing matter. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote: "Nature, as we know her, is no saint." I imagine him reaching that conclusion after experiencing a terrible storm, or some other "Act of God." Despite the wonder and beauty of the natural world on display each and every day, Mother Nature has her dark side as well.

Like most wild things, wind is a mixed blessing. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Aeolus, the Greek god of wind, gave Odysseus a closed bag containing all the winds to help him on his journey. One his companions opened that bag, thinking it contained gold, and Odysseus's ship was blown every which way. The wind is not something we can control. It is barely something we can predict. So when it blows hard, we had better take heed.



The wind took me by surprise back in 1987. An intoxicating breeze slipped through the open door of my bookstore as I was conducting busi-

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ness. I was restless on that unseasonably warm day in early October, and longing to go into the woods overnight one last time before winter came. After getting someone to cover the store for a couple days, I did just that, paying little attention to the weather forecast. My soon-to-be wife, Judy, drove me out of town and dropped me halfway up the winding access road to the Bolton Ski Area. From there I bushwhacked in shirtsleeves into the mountains, fishing a clear, cascading stream for a while before tracing it back to its source.

The air was dry and the temperature was near seventy degrees when I commenced that short backpacking trip. By the time I had hiked back to where the stream fragments into rivulets, the air temperature had dropped into the low fifties and a thin drizzle was coming down. I entered the rock-strewn and thickly vegetated notch between Bone and Woodward Mountains just as the drizzle turned into steady rainfall. Soaked and with daylight fading, I made camp on the other side of the notch. Then I switched into dry clothes, donned a rubber rain jacket, and built a fire to warm myself.

The air temperature continued to drop as darkness fell. The small thermometer attached to my pack dipped into the thirties. That's when I went to bed. I slept warm and cozy beneath a tarp with my back against the remnant of a downed tree. A strong wind was blowing by then so I wanted that much protection from anything that might fall, anyway. When I awoke early the next morning, there were several inches of white stuff on the ground and it was still snowing. And the wind was blowing hard, very hard. I broke camp in the first hint of predawn light, knocked the ice off my rain jacket before putting it on, then headed out.

Bushwhacking south out of the mountains, I tagged a stream that I'd fished during a previous trip. It was slow going, thanks to the slippery wet snow covering the sloping ground. By the time daylight washed through the forest, the trees overhead were swaying precariously in a gusting wind. Some of them were loaded with ice. Soon branches were coming down, then entire trees. When I heard a sharp crack immediately behind me, I jumped as far forward as I could. The top of a birch tree whipped across my back before I landed in the clear. I got up, brushed myself off, then kept moving downhill as fast as possible.

Stumbling upon a trail, I was able to get out of the woods quickly. But I wasn't home free just yet. It was a two-mile slog along an empty highway to a convenience store where I could call Judy. I trudged into windblown sleet all the way, with plenty of it freezing into my beard. Finally entering the store, a blast of dry heat welcomed me. The clerk behind the counter pointed out the pay phone. I called Judy to come get me. There were still a few icicles in my beard when she arrived.

It wasn't until much later that I realized how lucky I was to have exited the woods unscathed. There were downed trees all over the place. The October 4th Storm was the earliest snowstorm on record to date, with up to a foot of snow in some locales, and hundreds of thousands of people without power in the region. The conditions creating that storm were quite similar to what transpired only a week ago: a cold front meets a wet air mass. And the intensity of it took nearly everyone, including weather forecasters, by surprise.

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“Take long walks in stormy weather, or through deep snow in the fields and woods if you would keep your spirits up,” Thoreau once advised, “Deal with brute nature. Be cold and hungry and weary.” That I have done on many occasions and, yes, I’ve found that it is good for the soul. But there’s a limit to how far one should push it, if one is keen on keeping body and soul together. Nowadays I pay close attention to weather reports before venturing into wild places. I pay even closer attention to what the wind is doing, knowing how quickly it can change everything.

While hiking down trails or bushwhacking through the forest, I often wonder how the downed trees all around me got that way. Sometimes I imagine the sudden collapse of an old, decayed tree on a sunny day, but more often one of the big storm events of the past springs to mind. The wind has plenty of help when it comes to dropping trees. That said, a strong enough wind doesn’t need any help. Whenever I encounter firsthand the utter wildness of the wind, I can’t help but wonder how much of nature can actually be controlled. We sapient creatures manipulate the natural world in many ways. In fact, there’s little on this planet that doesn’t feel our influence. Yet the wind remains its own master.