



“Our job is to protect the mountain and the wildlife here.”

BY LOUISE JONES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HUBERT SCHRIEBL

Life at the Top

Artists Hugh and Jean Joudry live in the summer house of their dreams—no electricity, no phone...and the view is to die for.

They're sitting on top of the world! At the peak of Stratton Mountain, close to 4000 feet above sea level, is a lone rustic cabin in an idyllic setting, home from June 1 to mid October every year to Jeanne and Hugh Joudry, summit caretakers for the Green Mountain Club.

The cabin looks totally isolated on a map or an aerial photograph, but, according to the Joudrys, "during the hiking season, about 40 people pass right by our cabin every week day and as many as 75-125 on the weekends." When they first came to Stratton in 1968, only an alternate Long Trail route went by the cabin. "We saw about four people a month."

Visitors include day, short-term, and through hikers on the Long Trail and Appalachian Trail and tourists who ride up to the summit on the ski gondola, which runs all summer in good weather from the Stratton Base Lodge. The steep hike from the Lodge to the cabin, when it's too windy for the gondola, takes an hour and 20 minutes. The Joudrys manage it without breaking a sweat. They're both short, sturdy and strong, with the healthy skin and bright eyes of people who spend a lot of time outside. Jeanne, 56, an abstract landscape painter with a gentle wit, shows a photograph of them taken their fourth summer. "Here are the hobbits," she says. They do resemble Bilbo and friends, except that he's in bell-bottoms and a John Lennon billed cap; she's in a miniskirt, her hair flowing.

"The Green Mountain Club's forte is protecting the oldest long-distance hiking trail in the US. Our job is to protect the mountain and the wildlife here," says Hugh, 63, an intense outdoorsman with degrees in science and mathematics who is also an accomplished abstract sculptor. "Stratton claims a unique role in hiking path history," he says. "It was right here at the summit, in 1909, that James Taylor conceived of a 'Long Trail' through Vermont from Massachusetts to Canada." Taylor founded the Stratton Mountain Club, forerunner of the GMC. At the same site in 1921 Benton MacKaye, a forester, author, and philosopher, expanded that concept into what became the Appalachian Trail.

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THE JOUDRY'S GET PLENTY OF DROP-IN VISITS FROM FRIENDS, STRANGERS AND THE MERELY CURIOUS

The Joudrys also provide information to people who want to climb the 55-foot fire tower that stands about 50 yards from their cabin. The 360-degree view is stupendous. "On a clear day we can see Mount Marcy and Whiteface in the Adirondacks, the Holyoke range, the Catskills, Mount Washington in New Hampshire, and through a notch, even Wachusett Mountain that overlooks Boston, about a 200-mile diameter," Hugh says.

How do you find a dream job in a dream location like that? In 1968 the Joudrys were living in Buffalo, Jeanne's hometown, where Hugh, originally from

Ontario, attended a playwriting course. He says, "A fellow student, Francis O'Malley, who was a ski bum, worked in the summers as a fire lookout. One day he asked me, 'Do you want to go live in the woods?' There was an opening at the Stratton fire tower, and Jeanne and I decided to try it even though we didn't have any experience."

"It was a chance to escape the urban turmoil of the late 60's," she explains. "Junior Harwood was the supervisor of the area for what was then the Vermont Department of Forests and Parks. Although he was dubious, he said he'd give us a chance." Harwood, who the Joudrys revere as the "Paul Bunyan of our area," is now retired.

Hugh continues. "He took us up the trail and said we had to climb the fire tower. I was determined not to show my fear—the tower looked shaky and it

started to hail. Junior told us to learn the territory and he'd be in touch, then he disappeared." "We were totally ill-equipped," Jeanne says. "We had one book, Dostoyevsky's *The Insulted and the Injured*, an aging smokey Coleman lantern, some cans of Spam and Dinty Moore beef stew [they're now vegetarians] and half a book of matches. At daylight we discovered that 18 inches of snow had fallen—on May 20!" Hugh says, "The first day I went to the top of the tower, and it was like being in a space ship. We had contour maps, and I had to correlate them with what we were seeing.

"In those days all hikers made big fires. I could use trigonometry to lo-



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cate the fires, but I had to know the turf, too. We had a primitive phone to get in touch with the 12 other towers, which were put out of commission in the late 70's and replaced by airplane surveillance." The Fire Tower Look-out Association maintains the remaining towers that are in good condition for recreational viewing, including the Stratton tower which was built in 1934 by the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Caretaking is strenuous but exhilarating work. The Joudrys maintain about nine miles of the trails that radiate from the summit. "We keep the corridors open by cutting back brush, plugging up mud holes, collecting litter and often restructure water bars to prevent trail erosion," says

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Hugh. "It's always a labor of love to work on the trail." Jeanne adds, "Last summer was the wettest we've had, and the trail was dissolving, but the hikers just walked through it or on the sides. That caused some widening of the trail that we had to repair." There are about 20 seasonal caretakers, from Glastonbury to Sterling Pond, on the Long Trail system, which includes the 270-mile Long Trail and 175 miles of side trails. It coincides with the Appalachian Trail along about 100 miles of its length. A six-person Long Trail patrol does heavier maintenance; the Joudrys are part of a volunteer patrol in the National Forest.

The Nature Conservancy purchased Stratton summit from the International Paper Company in 1985. The land was then resold to the federal government and added to the Green Mountain National Forest. In 1987 the Green Mountain Club and the US Forest Service relocated the Long Trail and Appalachian Trail to the current summit route.

The Joudrys' eight by ten foot abode, the restored original fire watch cabin, is provided by the US Forest

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We've been asked if it's a time-share, but most people can't believe we live here for more than four months every year.

Service for the GMC Caretaker and is equipped with simple furniture, a wood stove, an outhouse, and a two-way radio, but no electricity, heat, or plumbing. "We're the only caretakers who live in a cabin by ourselves," Jeanne says. "The others live in shelters or lodges. People often think the cabin is a restroom, especially women who ride up on the gondola. They make a beeline for it."

"On the other hand," Hugh adds, "we've been asked if it's a time-share, but most people can't believe we live here for more than four months every year." The cabin isn't a public shelter (hikers may use a skiers' warming hut near the gondola landing) or a restaurant. "People are so hungry when they come up the trail," Jeanne says. "When I'm making dinner they'll appear at the door. We don't feed them, but we tell them they can get all-you-can-eat meals at the Base Lodge." However she did serve pancakes to 15 starving hikers one morning when she'd accidentally made too much batter.

When a hiker is injured, the Joudrys coordinate with the rescue units in Arlington, Wardsboro and Winhall Rescue in Bondville, whose work Hugh praises highly. Last summer a teenager wrenched her knee during a downpour as her group descended from the summit to Stratton Pond. While the pond caretaker, Todd Owens, carried her, Hugh contacted USFS Law Enforcement Officer Kim Kinville, and Jeanne climbed to the north summit to coordinate the successful ambulance rescue.

Hugh says, "Many people have no sense of distance. A sign at the top of the gondola landing says the fire tower is point eight miles. Once an environmental activist covered the decimal point to discourage hikers. A disheveled guy came staggering up to the tower saying he'd never walked that far in his life. He thought he'd walked eight miles when he hadn't even walked one!"