



# The Rules

By Chris Bagg

Ten miles south of Bath, Maine, Route 209 turns left, toward Popham Beach, where millions of summer beachgoers converge each season. Most of them will never pass the Popham turnoff, unless they've made a mistake, to continue south on 216, which would take them into Small Point, along the most unwelcoming strip of pavement in mid-coast Maine.

Less than a half-mile along 216, the No Parking signs start. They appear at 50-yard intervals, on both sides of the road, and they continue all the way to the end of Cape Small. The roads and drives, almost exclusively, are possessives: "Warren's Way (PVT)," "St. John's Drive (PVT)." You can drive route 216, as long as you continue to the end, where there is a private campground, and there you can either spend the night or turn around. Lingering is impossible along the Small Point road.

It wasn't always like this. Six years ago when I was learning to surf, it was frowned upon, but acceptable, to park on 216's shoulder and make a quick, quiet jog down a private road to the southern end of Seawall Beach, one of the best—and quietest—beachbreaks on the coast of Maine. Seawall works at all tides, and the sandbars there turn most ocean swells into clean, well-organized waves. My friend Jesse Dukes taught me to surf here, and I remember one particular day when he glimpsed the breaking waves through the trees as we walked past summer cottages and tennis courts and said, "Wow, it looks great." The wind died that evening, and the four-foot waves were as smooth and clean as the water in a drinking glass. I don't remember much from that session other than standing up for the first time and feeling borne aloft as I paddled back out again and again, looking up the face of the waves into the pale sky beyond.

If you are a surfer in New England, the sport is probably at the margins of your life. You need to wear a wetsuit year-round. The water is dark and murky. The Atlantic Ocean, much smaller than its Pacific sister, needs some kind of serious Caribbean or Canadian storm to send waves to the predominantly rocky coastline. You endure long wave droughts in the summertime's warm water and weather before hurricane season gets rolling. Long drives to the beach turn up nothing but small, crumbling waves or disorganized wind slop. During winter, big, powerful swells drive good waves, but the water temperature hovers in the

40s, and the surfing population drops even further. The others, for whom surfing is at the center of life, have moved away to where the waves are bigger, cleaner, and more regular, to where the sport fits more naturally in the expansive, laid-back mindset of the American West.

If you surf in Maine, these problems are compounded. The beaches are on points that jut from the mainland at the ends of narrow, two lane roads that can't accommodate the state's steadily growing tourist trade. Most of the beaches are rocky, and Cape Cod to the south creates a calm shadow that southern swells bypass on their way to Nova Scotia. Surfers in Maine live between two narrowly spaced poles of frustration and grace: the conditions are never very good, they are hard to read, and days that look similar on the surf report can be wildly divergent once you are out there—in the soup—trying to figure out if you are blessed or a fool.

Small Point seems to be an exception to these conditional vagaries. If the surf is small, it is clean, breaking in long rights that you could ride for a hundred yards and more. It was the perfect place to learn how to surf with the bonus of such abundant beauty that, as you stood up in the shallows after a long session, you felt like exclaiming "My God!" looking at the trees in the fog above the multicolored rocks.

"It's a very dear place to me," says Scott Anchors, 57, who has been surfing the break for seven years. "It's sad, it's just sad what's going on there. It's a tragedy of access." He's talking to me about the issues that have cropped up at Small Point during the past decade, issues that have rendered the perfection of the waves almost moot. In the last two years, the homeowners who live along Hyde Road (the dirt track that Jesse and I walked along to get to the beach) erected a huge, three- by five-foot plywood sign that says, in severe black letters:

POSTED  
WARNING  
PRIVATE PROPERTY  
PERMIT REQUIRED  
FOR ENTRY OF RESIDENTS  
AND TENANTS  
NO PARKING  
NO SHORE ACCESS

If you park on the side of 216 and walk down the road, something will happen to your car. The Small Point Association (the collection of homeowners in the area) hires people to leave notes on cars, informing the owners that they are parked illegally and notice has been taken. The registration number is noted, and the police are informed. Sometimes the notes are left under windshield wipers; sometimes they are left under heavy rocks. Scott still walks the road: he parks, legally, at a lobster shack a half-mile away and heads in, surfboard under his arm. “It’s gotten hostile,” he says. “And I’m a 57-year-old guy who’s pretty friendly. For me to get overt rudeness and sarcastic comments, it’s unbelievable. But I’m going to keep doing it. It’s the best break in Maine, maybe in all of New England, with the exception of a few places in Rhode Island.”

Scott is not an intimidating guy. He is polite, bearded, and knee paddles his longboard with a combination of confidence and quiet power. We surfed together one day at Popham Beach, which shares the same stretch of sand as Seawall Beach, only about a mile-and-a-half northeast of Small Point. “The guys that surf around here,” he says, “aren’t disrespectful or loud. They know that when you go to Small Point you’re walking on eggshells. They keep clean. We even went down there one day to help clean up the beach—pick up the trash that just accumulates along the upland edge—and someone came down from the houses and told us to leave. I think there’s just a cultural image of surfers that they have there that we’re a rowdy bunch.” He pauses a moment, and then says: “There are striped fishermen down there; they don’t seem to be a problem. There aren’t many surfers in the area, you know. If we all showed up at Popham and walked down the beach, there wouldn’t be more than a dozen of us. I can’t believe we’d be that much of an eyesore.”

But they have become an eyesore. Development in Maine, which once consisted of the government giving away large tracts of “worthless” coastline, is, like most business in America, big. Of the mammoth 3,500 miles of coastline in the state, 93 percent is privately owned. Most of that smaller, public percentage is rocky or island coastline. All told, Maine boasts less than 40 miles of public sandy beach (1.14 percent for you mathy types).

Out of the private landowners in the Small Point area, it’s hard to miss the St. John family. They have lived in Small Point for most of a century, and they have been a force for conserving the territory. Constance St. John, the mother of the several St. Johns that manage the cottages on the St. John property, originally preserved the area with her husband, in 1937. Then, hoping to further protect the 600 acres of hill and salt marsh they maintained, between the Sprague and Morse rivers, they formed a corporation with Bates College, making the Bates Morse Mountain Conservation Area Corporation, whose mission is to: “conduct educational programs, scientific research,

and scientific and literary study consistent with the conservation of the ecological and aesthetic values of the property in its natural state, and the protection of its indigenous ecosystems.” I met with Judy Marden—who oversees the BMMCAC—one afternoon, and she showed me around for a few hours. We talked about the land, its history, and how surfers have or haven’t fit in at the beach. She said, wistfully, at one point, that “The surfers used to be more than tolerated. They were responsible, quiet, clean; they kinda looked after the place. But it got out—the Internet, I guess, word of mouth? And more people started coming here to surf in the past couple of years. There was a backlash, and now almost no one surfs here.”

I try, during the few days after talking with Judy, to get in touch with the St. Johns. I work with one of them, Elizabeth, during the year in Putney, Vermont, but she hands me off to her sister, Susan, who is an expert on the family’s history. It ends up being a short interview after she finds out I am writing an article for a surfing magazine. “We don’t want more publicity, we want less publicity,” she says. We talk briefly about the possibility of Small Point being used in a responsible manner, but she ends by saying, “One way you protect a place is by keeping a low profile.” I thank her and hang up, but what she just said lingers. I’m reminded that surfing is, itself, a hermetic sport; that surfers are impossibly cagey about their favorite spots, probably because surfing—especially in the crowded, moneyed, active Northeast—is such a shifty proposition. Sandbars come and go, conditions change, what was perfect last month hasn’t been anywhere near good for weeks. Surfers, once they get something good, tend to hold it as close to their chests as possible. I have a surfing friend who once he heard I was writing this article said, “If things weren’t the way they are down at Small Point, I’d tell you stop writing. You don’t want a place to get too big, but Small Point’s like a no-go zone now, so it doesn’t really matter.” Later that week, I overheard a Bowdoin surfer—the guys who have surfed here all their lives call the Bowdoin students who surf “four-year locals,” in a mocking tone of voice—asking my friend how to get to some of the more remote breaks in the mid-coast area.

“I can’t do that,” my friend—who asked not to be identified—said.

“Why not?” the kid from Bowdoin asked.

“I’ll take you there,” my friend replied. “But I won’t tell you. Those are the rules.”

As he’s talking, I realize—with the same shock and regret of injuring a friend—that I am part of the problem I am trying to chronicle. It’s like being faced with visible proof of your own irresponsible actions, like seeing assembled in one place all the things you’ve thrown away in your life that you should have recycled. As my friend continues to heckle the Bowdoin kid, I think, not for the first time, that I am helping love a place to death. ⑤