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John Serrao began writing 'Pocono Outdoors' for the Pocono Record in 1988. - [File photo/Pocono Record](#)

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### **24 years and 1,156 columns later, John Serrao bids Poconos goodbye**

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Way back in the summer of 1986, I was making weekly trips to the Poconos from New Jersey to check on the progress of our new home being built in Tobyhanna. Driving through the Delaware Water Gap symbolized the portal to a new life for me and my young family — my wife, Felicia, and our three kids, Vanessa, 10, Holly 6, and Roy, 3.

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The Pocono area represented a land of sparkling clean streams and rivers, magnificent waterfalls, remote boreal bogs, vast forests, black bears, river otters, porcupines, snowshoe hares, timber rattlesnakes and an infinite array of other animals — all things that were alien to our former environs in suburban Bergen County, N.J.

As a naturalist, I longed to raise our family surrounded by nature and undeveloped open spaces. I'll never forget those feelings of excitement and anticipation that took over when we reached our destination on top of Pocono Plateau, and the sense of exhilaration that we all felt about our new home.

Over the years, I made a conscious effort — mostly successful — to never take this region for granted, and to always appreciate those wonders of nature that first greeted us in 1986.

As we explored the Poconos, these natural areas and their plants and animals even exceeded our expectations. Northeastern Pennsylvania's amazing diversity of habitat-types, and the roster of trees, wildflowers, insects, reptiles, amphibians, birds and mammals that inhabit them, became my everyday world.

My passion for becoming familiar with every aspect of the “Pocono Outdoors” was gradually realized, not only in my personal life but in my growing career as a naturalist, educator, writer and photographer. I vividly recall the time I looked at my wife sometime in the early 1990s and proclaimed that I was the luckiest guy in the world.

Now, after 24 years, it's time to move on.

The Poconos still enthrall and impress me, and Felicia and I will always retain countless fond memories of raising our three children here and exposing them to all the outdoor wonders of this beautiful region. But the kids have moved on to distant states, and as a naturalist I feel a strong need to explore a completely new part of the country.

There's a quote by naturalist Pete Dunne, in his book “The Feather Quest,” that reflects my feelings: “... One day you realize that all the old paths have become too familiar. Because there is a world of discovery waiting and the first step toward the future is a step away from the past.”

And, more importantly, we want to live where a wealth of life surrounds us at every season, not just from late April through October. Winter has always been my least favorite season, a long interval of every year to suffer through until the arrival of spring and its return of nature's abundance.

Whenever we made our annual escape to Florida, Georgia, South Carolina or other warm areas in winter, my adrenalin level increased, my reflexes sharpened, and it was like releasing a child in a candy store. I couldn't get enough of the butterflies, wading birds, frogs, turtles and — most of all — the warmth. As an outdoor exercise fanatic, running and biking in the Pocono winters have recently become dreadful chores rather than the stimulating, rewarding activities they are in warm, sunny weather.

So, on Jan. 5, we move down to our new home in DeLand, Fla., and begin a new chapter in our lives. It's the home of Stetson University, Blue Springs State Park and Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge, and it's bordered by the enormous, 430,000-acre Ocala National Forest. Thirty miles to the east is Daytona Beach, and right below that is Canaveral National Seashore and Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge. The opportunities to explore by foot, bicycle, canoe and kayak are virtually unlimited, and many of the plants and animals will be new additions to my “life lists.”

Every day promises to be a new adventure, with all the time in the world to explore — no deadlines, no appointments for the first time in my adult life.

Some people are good at saying “goodbye,” or at least they seem to have no trouble leaving. They happily, glibly give their farewell speeches and ride off into the sunset. I’m not one of them. I fumble over the words and get choked up with nostalgia. To avoid the finality of a farewell, I’ll say something like, “I’m sure we’ll see each other again,” even when I’m certain that will never happen.

So how do I let go of the place where I’ve spent the greatest portion of my life? It’s not easy.

I’ve already been given a few opportunities at “farewell dinners” and “final nature walks.” But that involved only a small fraction of the 200,000 people I’ve probably met on my nature programs since 1986 at hundreds of places in the Poconos. I’m thankful this column gives me another chance to say “goodbye” to many of you who have been reading “Pocono Outdoors” since 1988 (1,156 consecutive columns ago).

I won’t attempt to thank all the people who have opened doors to me and helped make my career in the Poconos so satisfying and rewarding. There have been so many, and I wouldn’t want to leave anyone out. To everyone who has hiked with me on a trail, attended a slide program, read this column or simply called with a question or observation, thank you for keeping me on my toes.

To my editor, Andrea Higgins, I say a special “thank you” for presenting this column so beautifully and professionally over the years.

And to all of you, please keep working to preserve the beautiful, bountiful Pocono outdoors.



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