

Bean Boots: when practical becomes fashionable — Are you a lumbersexual or just from Maine?

Alan Bennett

Originally published Jan. 26, 2015

In December, when L.L. Bean reported its famous boots would be on backorder until after the holiday season, more than 100,000 shoppers were left wondering when they would finally have the most sought-after fashion trend of the year on their feet.

The boots are a long-standing tradition for Mainers. They are the Maine company's iconic duck hunting boots, one of their few remaining fashions still made in the U.S., and a staple of Maine's outdoor identity.

But with an expected sale of 450,000 Bean Boots this winter, according to Yahoo! Style, more than 100 newly hired workers will spend their winter months inside, working a newly added shift at the company's Brunswick and Lewiston factories to meet the demand, according to local NBC affiliate WCSH-6.

Why such a surge in orders?

In addition to their typical fan base — those who have the legitimate need for waterproof, leather winter boots — the boots have gained a popular following among city dwellers, college students and high school students, according consumer analysis website The Consumerist.

While many women enjoy wearing the boots — often worn as a statement with leggings or skinny jeans — we can attribute the emergence of the “lumbersexual,” the latest men's fashion, for holding up orders. No doubt, you've seen him: a flannel shirt, jeans (probably rolled slightly at the bottom), a scraggly beard hanging off his face.

He leans against a barn door, a harness in one hand and an axe in the other. He is cool with his muted earth tones against the red-painted wood. His hair is unkempt and he probably should have shaved a week ago, but he doesn't care. Why? Because he oozes woodland sexuality and everyone is completely fine with it.

Who is he? The lumbersexual.

You look down toward the ground and at his feet, pounded into the dark earth, what do you find? Boots. Laced, unlaced, rolled down or tied to the top, it doesn't matter. Boots are the icing on the lumbersexual's cake.

So it comes as no surprise that L.L. Bean is not only embracing the growing trend of lumberjack-inspired fashions, it's capitalizing on them.

In 2010, the company launched L.L. Bean Signature, an attempt to draw a younger, well-dressed market to its stores. Promising styles that are "slim, modern and made for today," it is the epitome of overstated lumbersexuality with fitted work pants that taper at the ankle and camouflage tote bags crafted of leather and canvas.

But for those of us who live in Maine, we're left wondering: "What's the big deal?" If you live in the state, chances are you might actually know a real-life lumberjack, although their typical attire has changed from plaid shirts to orange hard hats and fleece vests — which will, most likely, never catch on in the fashion sphere.

There are 17.6 million acres of forest in Maine — with an estimated 24 billion trees currently being sustainably sourced — supporting an \$8 billion forestry industry, according to *Mainebiz*, a Maine magazine which reports on and analyzes business trends in the state.

It's a state with a long-standing tradition of forestry, and it's frivolous to say that Maine alone is a state full of so-called lumbersexuals, especially based on the number of boot sales in recent months.

For most Mainers, L.L. Bean Boots symbolize a part of our identity, a statement that good, quality products don't have to be made overseas.

"I wear Bean boots because they're comfy and practical, and they're from Maine and I like to support Maine businesses," Elsa Thibodeau, an international affairs student at the University of Maine, said.

"I'm a Maine girl at heart," she added.

Despite the deeply held beliefs about what the boots symbolize, they are still storming the nation in terms of popularity.

"There is a huge wave of popularity among students, from college to high school... If you stroll through Tribeca, you are going to see Bean Boots," Mac McKeever, a spokesperson for L.L. Bean, told the *Bangor Daily News* in December.

McKeever described the current situation as a "pleasant dilemma" and said the "lumber-chic look has helped" the company's sales figures grow.

Even in Maine, many students agree that Bean Boots are the hottest thing right now.

Thibodeau admitted she's one of the people who are part of the trend.

"I think they're very trendy, they're 'so college,'" she said.

Countless others described the boots as "comfy" or "cute," but few could properly define the term lumbersexual.

Maybe so few people know what a lumbersexual is because, in Maine, lumbersexuals don't stand out amongst the crowd. In a state where forestry is a primary economic driver, it's only natural that the clothing styles will come to match. In Maine, we just dress like this.

So what's next from L.L. Bean? The company expects to start shipping its backordered boots by late February — it takes 26 weeks for a bootmaker to properly learn the stitching — just in time for spring break.

In the meantime, you can jump on the lumbersexual bandwagon by shopping at any store in the world right now. Chances are, you'll find some kind of distressed jean, more flannels than you'll know what to do with and, probably, a decent pair of boots. But be warned, no self-respecting Mainer would shop anywhere but at good old Beans.

Molly Joyce contributed to this report.