

Climbing the Northeast 770: All the Pain, Half the Elevation

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In the United States, bigger is always better, not only for sport utility vehicles and presidential campaigns, but for mountains as well. Simply put, it's all about the elevation. Most climbers have heard of the West Coast's Mount Rainier, topping the 14,000-foot level, while east of Washington State the names Idaho and Montana conjure images of snow-capped peaks. Utah, though having a reputation for being dry and desolate, is also regarded as a mountaineering destination, possessing nearly twenty peaks above 13,000 feet. Utah's name itself describes the original mountaineers of this terra firma, the Utes, the "people of the mountains." Ice rides through summer at 13,000 feet in the Wind River Range of Wyoming. Continuing east, you meet Colorado, a state bigger and better than all others concerning elevation. More than fifty 14,000-foot mountains reside within the Centennial State's borders.

But once you travel east of the Rockies, elevation drops considerably. By the time you get to the Northeast, you have mountains that Westerners call hills. Ten break the 5,000-foot level. Only one of them, Mount Washington of New Hampshire, is daring enough to soar above 6,000 feet. As one Coloradoan summed Northeast heights, "I'd have to drill a well to get to that elevation." However, mountains in both the West and East are legitimately challenging. Western mountains are tough because of the snowstorms that envelop them from October to April, the enormous scree fields and cliffs that guard their flanks, and, most noteworthy, the elevations they attain. In the East, mountains are tough because of the lousy weather, the antagonistic bugs that congregate in clouds of Biblical proportions, and, most noteworthy, the thick vegetation. Tangles of spruce, hobblebush, briars, and blown-over trees guard each trailless peak's apex. These thick forests lead me to conclude that trailless Northeast peaks are often tougher to climb than Western peaks, even down to the 3,000-foot level, an elevation those Colorado wells dare not sink to.

My molehill addiction started in the mid-1990s. I was on top of Mount Abraham, a 4,000-foot peak on Vermont's Long Trail, enjoying a gorgeous winter day. A blue sky stretched from horizon-to-horizon. Three state highpoints – Mount Marcy of New York, Mount Mansfield of Vermont, and Mount Washington of New Hampshire – could be seen to the west, north, and

east, respectively. The sun reflected off the snow pack, baking my face red. The other resident of the summit was a man with an ice-encrusted beard whose well-worn gear spoke of his experience. He politely inquired about the patches on my pack that declared I had climbed the forty-six 4,000-foot mountains of the Adirondacks and the thirty-five 3,500-foot peaks of the Catskills. I told him that with completion of those two hiking goals, I was looking for a new list of mountains to climb.

My summit partner suggested I take up hiking on an accelerated level, a task best completed, he insisted, on mountains lower than what I was used to climbing. He suggested I contact a man who had the mother of all lists, a directory of the 770 3,000-foot peaks of the Northeast. He mentioned not to get too excited though, for only two people had successfully climbed all 770. They were the guy who had the list and a friend of the guy who had the list. The gentleman said both of them were "crazy."

Once I returned home, I wrote the list bearer in New Jersey, asking if he would mail me a copy of the list. Two weeks later I opened a New Jersey-postmarked envelope containing thirteen crisp, white pages listing every 3,000-footer in Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. I scanned page after page and realized that I had not hiked much in the Northeast, at least compared to the guy who mailed me the list. I calculated that to hike all 770 would require hiking 2,400 miles and ascending 800,000 vertical feet. More than 400 peaks have no trails to their summits. Seventy have no names. Many possess reputations as "slag hills," "heinous bushwhacks," and "miserable, little peaks."

I decided not to climb all 770. It was too daunting to even think about. But just for kicks, I examined the list closer, checking off peaks I had already climbed. Without even getting up from my desk I learned that I had already climbed 160 of them, most of them being 4,000-footers. How hard could the remaining peaks be? The little ones? Not a problem. Besides, there was no way I was going to hike them all.

I bought some topographic maps of northern Vermont, packed my day pack, filled my Subaru wagon with fuel, food, and water, and drove to the Northeast Kingdom to spend six days bushwhacking pint-sized peaks on the list. The morning of day one I left my car at the end of a logging road and donned my pack. My attitude was that if I had hiked and biked out West a bunch already, these little mountains would be easy. The Western peaks surely had to be tougher than these Northeast molehills, no? Hell, I had slept at elevations three times higher than 3,000

feet. However, by the end of my trip – complete with crashing through forests, tip toeing across moose bogs, and following dozens of confusing compass bearings – the little ones showed me they were tougher than I had assumed.

By the end of day one, my bruised legs looked like they had been beaten with a broom handle. My pants, by the end of day two, looked like they had been peppered with buckshot. When the sun set at the end of day three, my lacerated arms looked like they had been attacked by a crazy squirrel. By the fourth day, I could see out of only one eye. A spruce branch scratched one of my eye's lens. My shins lost part of their feeling sometime during day five. By the end of my six-day trip, I resembled one of the characters from Steven Kings' *The Long Walk* more than a peakbagger. I departed the 3,000-footers a beaten man. I was hooked.

The modesty of these lower mountains was a welcome change from the high-profile 4,000-footers, which were often covered with people who took hiking too seriously. On the moose paths and briar fields of low ridges it wasn't about "summit bids," "base camps," and "topping out." On the low, lonely hills it was about real hiking while covered in real mud and real bruises, sometimes with a real sprained ankle. No glory words need be assigned to a 3,000-foot hill that had no name and no view. The non-glorious bushwhacking made me sometimes wish I was on a peak with a trail, but the challenges the off-the-beaten-track peaks offered were welcome. These peaks demanded I be decisive, making competent decisions in navigation and risk management. If I made a bad decision on a mountain that was a four-hour bushwhack and three-hour drive from the nearest hospital, I would be in deep with no one to blame but myself.

Remaining hard charging and positive, I reached peak number 300 and figured, "Ah, what the hell?" I decided to tackle the remaining 470. This decision was made under the assumption that I had gotten the worst ones out of the way already. But like how these modest peaks checked my attitude in Vermont, the ones that followed showed little mercy. After peak 300, the blowdown seemed to be stacked higher and more precariously. The evergreen forests seemed denser. The wind seemed stronger, the cold more biting. And at the end of each day, the sun set behind scores of peaks I still hadn't been up. I grew tired of being beat down and became revengeful. I started hiking like I was "crazy."

During the next year I climbed 180 peaks to reach number 500. I felt like I had accomplished much, climbing more mountains in a year than I usually did in three years, but the routine was getting old. The "ascend through second growth hardwood forest – bushwhack

through evergreen scrub – reach the top with no view – reverse course" script on a stage of slag hills and miserable little peaks was predictably painful. But for some perverse reason, it was still enjoyable. A year later, with 170 mountains left to go, I realized I could actually finish this list, especially after I heard a third person had completed the 770.

I must have subconsciously left the hardest peaks for last. The three toughest peaks on the list – Barren Mountain, Big Spencer Mountain, and Lily Bay Mountain, all of Maine – put up quite a fight. But after those three horrendous hikes, the remaining twenty peaks offered a calm after the storm. The forests seemed more open, the weather clearer. Some of the summits even had views like all the ones in the West do. I felt the improved setting was my reward for spending the last ten years visiting some of the lowest and thickest recesses in the East.

When I reached peak number 770, a trailless 3,588-foot mountain deep within Plum Creek logging land in Maine, during the fall of 2004, I was flushed with accomplishment and exhaled relief that it was finally over. During the decade-long relationship I fostered with the Northeast 3,000-footers, I was like an addict. I kept running back to these peaks, salivating for one more scar, one more bruise, and one more bushwhack. Just one more stick in the eye on the little peaks of the Northeast.

The five-way tie for toughest

Barren Mountain, Maine (3,696') The easiest route to this summit is crashing off a nearby 3,700-foot peak where a pace of half-a-mile-an-hour is common. The south side of Barren is composed of cliffs and hurricane-damaged forests, with occasional beaver swamps thrown in for good measure.

McDonnell Mountain, New York (3,957') A seventeen-mile, 3,300-vertical-foot hike, which includes a bushwhack off a 4,000-foot peak, will take you to a summit forest that was destroyed by hurricane Floyd in 1999.

Bull Mountain, Maine (3,136') This summit looks more like a spruce swamp than an apex. Thick moss, blowdown, and red and black spruce forests tear at hikers. The start of the hike is on a logging road 31 miles from the closest stretch of pavement.

Big Spencer Mountain, Maine (3,194') Two qualifying peaks lay on either end of this long ridgeline. More than a mile of stunted spruce and fir, along with many minor summit knobs, offer strong resistance.

Lily Bay Mountain, Maine (3,234') Thick stands of red spruce and balsam fir cover the southern slopes, while tree trunks and briars litter the summit ridge. This peak is usually climbed in conjunction with Lily Bay's east peak to double your pleasure.