

Eastern Bushwhacking: The Challenge of Being a Contrarian

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From the June 2012 edition of Darn Tough's Adventure Blog

When tackling the most popular peakbagging lists of the East, there are no significant off-trail challenges to speak of. All but one of the Northeast's 109 4,000-foot peaks have trails to their summits, while in the South the challenge increases only a little. Nine of their 36 6,000-foot peaks do not have trails to their summits, and these off-trail routes rarely exceed a half-mile.

Let the traditional peakbaggers have their trails to their summits. The peakbagging contrarians who greatly expand their lists by lowering the cutoff elevation, pursuing the Northeast's 770 3,000-footers or the South's 198 5,000-footers, for examples, are forced to take a walk on the wild side by bushwhacking up scores of trailless peaks. Anyone who has completed one of these expanded lists probably has nearly as many stories as a World War II veteran. Tales of struggling through stunted forests, crawling under blowdown, and fighting through briar fields are commonplace. These storytellers rarely embellish for a simple reason. That is, they don't have to. Off-trail travel in the East is exciting enough as nonfiction.

What follows are, in no particular order, the ten most challenging characteristics of Eastern off-trail travel. Fittingly, below this descriptive list are the ten most important things to do while traveling through the "thick of it."

The challenges

Blowdown: Born in the Northeast from windstorms, and in the South from invasive species that kill trees, these toppled forests can be stacked up to ten feet high and cover up to fifty acres.

Spruce thickets: Pushing through these dense forests is like pushing through a carwash that scrubs your car with stiff brushes instead of cloths.

Cliffs: These can be spotted and evaded while ascending, but by the time you encounter them while descending, it's too late. You'll have to climb back up and attempt a different descent.

Swamps: There are thousands of these avoid in the Northeast. Swamps also serve as breeding grounds for billions of biting insects.

Obscurity: The sub-4,000-foot peaks of the Northeast and sub-6,000-foot peaks of the South get no press in guidebooks or online. They are *terra incognita*.

Scree fields: Found mostly in the Northeast, these boulder fields are composed of microwave- to couch-sized rocks, many of them unstable.

Remoteness: In the Northeast, obscure peaks are approached via desolate dirt roads where you might get crushed by a logging truck. In the South, peaks in Great Smoky Mountains National Park require up to twenty miles of hiking.

Winter: It gets cold down South, but surely nothing like the Northeast. If tackling Northeast peaks year-round, be prepared for subzero temperatures, biting wind, and deep snow.

Rhododendron thickets: The antithesis of Southern hospitality, these thickets, sometimes dubbed "hells," may be too dense to penetrate via hiking. Crawling on your hands and knees on wild hog paths may be the best option.

Briars: There's nothing like thrashing through briars while wearing a long-sleeved shirt and work pants when it's 80 degrees out, thank goodness.

Do it

Carry two maps: Losing your only map while in a trailless wilderness is like losing your paddle on You-Know-What Creek. Carry one map in your pocket and another in your pack.

Tell someone where you're going: To be honest, they possibly won't ever find you, but they'll at least know where to look.

Wear pants, not shorts: No matter how hot it is, just do it.

Know how to use a compass: Don't rely on global positioning systems, which can fail. Compasses are sturdy, reliable instruments. Like maps, carry two of them.

Know how to find direction by using the sun: A backup to your compass, sometimes you can navigate wholly by the sun. This is a valuable and rewarding skill.

Be in great shape: Bushwhacking is tough business for tough people. In general, five miles of bushwhacking feels like ten miles of trail hiking.

Carry communications: When traveling solo, it's a good to be able to reach emergency personnel if you become injured.

One peak at a time: Remember why you're out there. It's to go where few have gone and to see what few have seen. When tackling lists hundreds of peaks deep, your goal can seem too far away, nearly unobtainable and more discouraging than exciting. Take it one at a time.

Be prepared to spend the night: Bring extra clothing, rain gear, headlamp, tarp, fire starter, and extra food in case you're caught out by sundown.

Have style: Since you're being bold by going off-trail, be bolder and pick routes that are rarely climbed, are more remote than others, or offer dramatic scenery. You'll thank yourself later.