

Fastpacking the High Peaks: Call Me a Lightweight

Copyright © Erik Schlimmer

From the July 2008 issue of *Metro Sports New York*

During September 1994, I participated on a Wilderness Education Association (WEA) leadership course, a 33-day trip through the Adirondack Park's High Peaks. Designed to mold average citizenry into hardened outdoor leaders, the WEA's credo concerning packing lists was "It is better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it." When I laced up my boots on day one of that trip, all the things I "needed" totaled a pack weight (that's everything but food and water) of forty pounds. When three quarts of water, group gear, and ten days' worth of food topped off my 5,500-cubic-inch pack, I carried a 98-pound load. Due to my pack standing more than three feet tall and pushing nearly into the triple digits, my peers dubbed it "The Patriot." But despite its unwieldy size, none of my colleagues could argue one thing. That is, toting a 98-pound pack made me look like I was on my way up Mount Everest. Wearing a pack that was bigger than life itself was just plain cool. Or was it?

In the 1990s, there were only a few lightweight backpackers roaming the forests, and one of them was Ray Jardine. A former rocket scientist, Jardine retired and went "the Ray Way." Going fast and light, comfortable and progressive, he turned the traditional packing list on its head. The new motto was "If I need it and I don't have it, then I don't need it."

Though a handful of Northeast hikers have gone the Ray Way or found their own enlightening change during the past decade, overall we're still the tortoises of the hiking world. While it seems everyone out West is cooking on homemade alcohol stoves and sleeping under one-pound tarps, we of the East are cooking on stoves that put out enough BTU's to melt steel and are hunkering in tents designed to survive a winter pitched on K2. It may be high time we take a lesson from our brothers and sisters of the West. For in this fastpacking fairy tale, the hare always wins.

There I stood in a trailhead parking lot during September 2007, thirteen years after my WEA misadventure. The Elk Lake trailhead, located at the end of a five-mile-long dead end dirt road, marked the start point of my first Adirondack fastpacking trip. It was a lonely morning. The trailhead was empty. The sky was azure from horizon-to-horizon while nearby leaves painted

with pale reds hinted of an approaching fall. Over the past decade I had learned a lot about going light. Not from Jardine, but from hiking on my own and bringing less stuff each time. Through trial and error I had trimmed my gear list to what it is today. That's eleven pounds of equipment, which drops to less than nine pounds when a bear-resistant food canister is not needed.

My plan was to hike an enormous figure eight-shaped circuit around 192,000-acre High Peaks Wilderness Area, the largest wilderness area in the Northeast. It was a formidable challenge that totaled 110 miles of hiking with 19,000 vertical feet of climbing. It was an enticing route, including the highest peak and rock face in the state, a section of the Northville Placid Trail, twelve bodies of water, a slide climb, and hikes of two 4,000-footers. If I was successful in my High Peaks hike, I'd reenter the Elk Lake trailhead less than five days later.

After lacing up my sneakers, donning my streamlined pack, and grabbing my trekking poles, I headed west. I started a 2,400-vertical-foot grind up Elk Lake-Marcy Trail to the shoulder of 5,344-foot Mount Marcy, the highest peak in the state. But what goes up must come down. After reaching a height of land on the shoulder of this massive peak, I descended and cruised past Lake Colden and Flowed Lands. I then followed Calamity Brook Trail to the south end of Indian Pass.

By this point I had covered more than twenty miles and my destination for the day, Duck Hole, still lay five miles away. I carried the most food of the trip, which slowed me down hour after hour. Yet good things come to those who hike fast. Just as I started to climb towards Duck Hole, a new lean-to not shown on my map greeted me 22.0 miles from my start point. Though I like to hike until dusk, this spot was too good to pass up.

Lesson #1: Think big and go big. During the 1990s, it would have taken me two days to hike up and down Mount Marcy. Now I was past this peak by lunchtime. As the writer Arthur Clarke wrote, "The only way to discover the limits of the possible is to go beyond them into the impossible."

With a handful of miles behind me by 8:00 a.m., day two seemed perfect. Hardwoods and evergreens framed another blue sky. In the 45 degree air I worked my way past Preston Ponds to Duck Hole, a small body of water nestled among still forests. The area got prettier when I turned onto the Northville Placid Trail, New York's oldest long-distance path, and headed

south along the Cold River, following it downstream. By the end of day two I again covered 22.0 miles, this time in a remote region. I saw two people during ten hours of hiking.

Lesson #2: Question the word "need." One reason I couldn't average more than twenty miles a day a decade earlier was because I was carrying all the items others told me I "needed." But there I was, many years and many miles later with Jardine's "I don't need it" quote in my head.

Since I wake up early and don't cook breakfast, I covered Calkins Brook, Mud Pond, and Raquette Falls trails by 10:00 a.m. and T-boned Coreys Road, which winds east towards the Seward Mountains. After completing this three-mile road walk in one hour, I reached the Seward trailhead. I continued east on Blueberry Trail and Ward Brook Trail back to Duck Hole, revisiting this quaint pond by mid-afternoon. Thus I had completed the western half of my figure eight loop in two and a half days. From Duck Hole I backtracked under building storm clouds. I raised my pace to more than three miles an hour, just in time to dive into the Wallface lean-to as the rain came down. After hiking 28.6 miles and climbing 3,200 vertical feet, dinner went down faster than normal.

Lesson #3: Dissolve traditional thought. I wore sneakers though most claimed I'd sprain my ankles. I didn't treat my water though most believe sources are infested with Giardia. I threw other traditional approaches to the wind realizing that just because something has been in place forever doesn't mean it's correct.

With some good hiking legs under me by day three, I set out through cold rain into Indian Pass, its western flank being 900-foot-tall Wallface Cliff. Indian Pass was a massive jumble of wet, geologic obstacles. "Unpleasant" is the word that describes my sloppy, slippery experience through this pass that's rugged enough to have ladders bolted to bare rock. The descent down the north side of the pass was equally challenging. At times I was hiking in a trail-turned-streambed.

With Indian Pass behind me, at 1:00 p.m. the day increased in excitement when I took a "shortcut" on the Mr. Van Ski Trail. This route turned out to be an overgrown deer trail blocked by beaver dams instead of the easy thoroughfare I expected. At times a bushwhack, I eventually managed to pop out at the South Meadow trailhead. Next was Klondike Notch Trail to Johns

Brook Valley, then Woodsfall Trail into the Great Range where judgment beat machismo. I decided to cut my day short due to the chance of cold rain turning to bitter snow. I ate dinner and was sound asleep by 5:00 p.m. after hiking 17.1 miles and climbing 3,500 vertical feet.

Lesson #4: Pack for the near-worst. Though my pack weight totaled eleven pounds, I managed to stay warm through 40 degree rain. The key is go light, yet be safe.

First thing in the morning I completed a climb to the summit of 4,173-foot Lower Wolf Jaw Mountain, one of two 4,000-footers I'd reach. With thick clouds blocking any view, I started the 3,000-vertical-foot descent on W.A. White Trail to the East Branch of the Ausable River. At 1,300 feet, this river marked the lowest point of the route.

I traversed Old Dix Trail between Noonmark and Round mountains to reach the North Fork of the Bouquet River and start the biggest climb of the trip, a 2,500-vertical-foot push up 4,839-foot Dix Mountain, sixth highest peak in the state. I followed Dix Trail to the bottom of a massive rockslide and veered from the trail, taking the wilder option upwards. Hiking and friction climbing up the slide to a point not far from the summit, I then bushwhacked up and west, to regain the trail. From there it was a short walk to the top. The view was amazing, especially since it was hard-earned. I gazed west from the highest point on the route and could see where I had been two days earlier, which was to the west of the Seward Mountains. It seemed ridiculously far. At 26 airline miles away, I had trouble believing I wound a course double that length in such a short time.

After enjoying the view to its maximum, I started the second biggest descent of the route, down-climbing nasty eroded sections of trail and butt sliding steeply-angled bedrock down the south side of Dix Mountain. Three hours later I reached the Elk Lake trailhead where it had all started. The trailhead was lonely still. Only a few cars had been added since I stood there four days and eight hours earlier. My last day totaled 19.0 miles but included a thigh-burning 6,000 vertical feet of climbing. Overall, I averaged 25.6 miles with 4,400 vertical feet of climbing each day.

Lesson #5: Concentrate on the experience, not the gear. It's not about the speed – it's about seeing more each day. It's not about the gear – it's about simplicity and comfort. It's not about the ounce counting – it's about common sense.

When I recall the traditional backpacking philosophy I was taught thirteen years ago, I remember pain and complexity. When I think of today's fastpacking curriculum, I extend a welcoming hand. Now is the time for us Easterners to find our enlightenment. But to be fair, old-school backpacking's blown knees, slipped disks, and crushed shoulders are still being discussed by Westerners. Chances are good they're in stories that describe their distant past.