

## **Let it Snow, Let it Snow: But Only So Much**

Copyright © Erik Schlimmer

From the April 2011 edition of Darn Tough's Adventure Blog

After taking a two-week vacation to sunny South Carolina during the first half of January 2011, and then hiking easy farmland peaks in the Catskill Mountains during the second half of this month, February was the month to get to work on winter peaks.

On the first day of February I rendezvoused with my buddy, Brian, at his house in Saranac Lake, a small village set in the middle of New York's Adirondack High Peaks. My plan was to snowshoe twelve trailless mountains within the week. The morning of February 2 we followed a trail into a deep, long valley and then left this path to bushwhack up Nye Mountain's north peak and Peacock Mountain. On top of Nye Mountain's north peak, under partly sunny skies, I recorded in my journal, "Lots of snow, not very consolidated." There were 24 inches of snow, which isn't a lot for that time of year, but my thirty-inch snowshoes sunk down a foot. On Peacock Mountain the snow pack was similar, but by the time we reached the top a snowstorm enveloped the mountain.

With our two peaks done it was time to descend back to the trail through the storm. Identifying a series of wetlands on my map, we headed straight for them. The plan was to travel across the open wetlands and not through the thick forests. By the time we got to the other end of the wetlands, we were exhausted. They were only half frozen, and the snow was wet, heavy, and knee-deep. Once back at my Brian's place that evening, I wrote in my journal, "Deep snow on unfrozen streams and half-frozen swamps to get out of the mountains. I am smoked." Brian said it was the toughest day hike he had ever done. That night it snowed five inches.

So sore on February 3, I decided to climb something easy, which was Scotts Cobble. Since I'd be hiking solo, I would have to break trail on my own, but the summit was only two miles from the nearest road. Piece of cake. When I got out of my car to begin the hike, though, I realized I had forgotten my map. So, I winged the route from memory and went bushwhacking without a map.

After wandering around the wilderness for three hours in search of Scotts Cobble, I finally reached the top. But then, I looked at the altimeter on my watch. It read 2,990 feet. Scotts Cobble is only 2,580 feet high. I had no idea where I was. Though my unknown peak did

have a nice view, I still would have rather been on the peak I set out to hike. Disappointed, I followed my tracks out. My time in the Adirondacks was off to a rocky start. The night of the "unknown peak" hike it snowed another five inches.

On February 4, Brian and I set out for the east and west summits of Kate Mountain. Less than a mile into the hike, Brian broke his snowshoe nearly in half. We repaired it with cord and zip ties and had to keep adjusting those repairs, and adding new repairs, for the rest of the day. But we got up our peaks. This night it snowed another five inches.

On February 5, we tackled two more mountains, which were the Ampersand Mountains' unnamed west peak and far west peak. Now the snow was very deep, and breaking trail uphill was particularly difficult. It took us twenty minutes to ascend the final 100 vertical feet to the top of the west peak. Then it took a mere four minutes to descend this same section. By the time we reached the top of the far west peak, we were in another snowstorm. We returned to Brian's car at the trailhead through five inches of new snow. Six more inches fell during the night.

On February 6, I climbed Scotts Cobble (I remembered my map this time). This peak offered a great view, which is rare for an Adirondack summit, and the sun shined all day long, which is rare for an Adirondack day. The snow pack was four feet deep yet still unconsolidated. The ascent took nearly three hours. The descent took fifty minutes. This four-hour hike felt more like an eight-hour hike.

A bushwhack up the east side of Boot Bay Mountain was the plan for February 7. This hike was supposed to start with a snowmobile ride across Lower Saranac Lake to the mountain's base. The hike was to be done with a former professor of mine, Jack. I showed up at Jack's only to learn he got his snowmobile stuck in a foot of slush on the lake the day before. He enlisted me to help get it unstuck. But we got his ATV stuck driving across the lake to get the snowmobile unstuck. After wading through shin-deep slush and pushing and yanking his ATV back to the shore, we gave up trying to reach his snowmobile and the east side of Boot Bay Mountain.

Instead, we took his truck to the north side of the mountain, donned our snowshoes, and headed towards the summit. But a mile into the hike, Jack's hip hurt so badly that he could not continue (he had surgery on it only a year earlier). I hiked out, Jack hobbled out, and we got in his truck, bound for his home where he could recuperate. But then he got his truck stuck. After getting towed out, we reached his home in the afternoon. Only an impressive dinner prepared by Jack's wife salvaged the day.

The last day of my weeklong trip in the Adirondacks dawned sunny. I skied three miles to the base of Little McKenzie Mountain, part of the approach including a crossing of McKenzie Pond, which was blasted in sunlight. Once on the far side of the pond, I stashed my ski gear, put on my snowshoes, and headed for the top. The snow was ridiculously deep due to 26 inches falling within the past six days. The half-mile ascent took ninety minutes. The descent took twenty.

I arrived back at the trailhead after covering the ski out in just thirty minutes. I dumped my pack, snowshoes, and skis in the trunk of my car and looked at the snow banks on the shoulders of the road. They were eight feet tall and solid as rock. The snow in the woods was half as deep, but it had the consistency of marshmallow, not rock. My twelve-peak goal was reduced to a measly seven, but I found one thing reassuring. That is, snowshoeing on four to six feet of firm snow this April is going to be fun.