

Name Bagging: The Challenge for Contrarians

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During the past few years in the Adirondacks there has been stout promotion of hiking "challenges." These specific goals, which range from climbing three small peaks near Tupper Lake to hiking High Peaks Wilderness Area's 270-mile trail system, each come with just rewards. Beyond the hiking itself, completers enjoy recognition, usually in the form of a patch they receive and having their names included in completer rosters, regarding their accomplishment. What each person gets out of each challenge may vary, yet the strong demand for such challenges does not. Nearly a dozen challenges now accompany the oldest and most widely-promoted and completed Adirondack challenge of them all, which is climbing the 46 High Peaks.

Since I'm a contrarian, officially-sanctioned challenges just aren't my thing. I love wild land, and I love pursuing specific hiking goals, yet I don't require recognition. The thought of being part of a community makes me socially queasy. To paraphrase Groucho Marx, "I don't care to belong to a club that accepts people like me as members." Being in wild land purely for the sake of being in wild land may well be a good enough reason to be in wild land. Remove the rewards and sense of community, and you end up with a challenge that few are interested in, which makes it all the sweeter for those who are. This is name bagging, which works like this.

1. Pick a state land management unit, like a specific wilderness area, for example
2. Compose a list of every named topographic feature within that area
3. Visit every feature

Name bagging is strangely addictive and firmly esoteric, this assessment coming from the Adirondacks' only dedicated name bagger. That's me. During the spring of 2011, I completed my first list of named topographic features by reaching Pharaoh Lake Wilderness Area's Desolate Hill. The two-year-long pursuit of this wilderness area's 106 named features included consistent solitude, scenic lakes, remote peaks, wild meadows, and, what I liked best, lots of bushwhacking. I was hooked. Next came Lake George Wild Forest's 92 features, Wilcox Lake Wild Forest's 134 features, and Hammond Pond Wild Forest's 99 features. But 431 features just weren't enough to

fill me up. I'm now pursuing every named feature in Ferris Lake Wild Forest, Shaker Mountain Wild Forest, and Silver Lake Wild Forest for another 344 landmarks. I doubt I'll end there.

Visiting named features is the best way to fall in love with a piece of land. We tend to fall in love with people we know best, and the same can be said for certain regions within the Adirondack Mountains. Within both of these types of relationships, quiet "alone time" proves most productive and cherished. For example, while throngs of hikers were having flings with Treadway Mountain in Pharaoh Lake Wilderness Area, I was spending days climbing disregarded peaks such as Goose Pond Hill, Thunderbolt Mountain, and Ellis Mountain. As groups ran up and down Sleeping Beauty in Lake George Wild Forest, I spent my time slowly plodding across untrammelled Morton Mountain, Eddy Mountain, and Catamount Mountain. Campers huddled near each other in the lean-to at Murphy Lake in Wilcox Lake Wild Forest as I crossed Crystal Brook, Kibby Creek, and Twin Brooks, features they had never heard of. Hikers sunned themselves near popular Bass Lake in Hammond Pond Wild Forest while I tiptoed around the shores of Triangle Pond, Eagle Lake, and Schofield Pond while not knowing the last time a human stood where I then was.

I got to know the lovely, inviting personalities of these four pieces of land well, like when the sun set at remote Buttermilk Pond and the sun rose beyond trailless Bald Peak. I experienced their mean, selfish sides begrudgingly, like how Sharps Ridge enjoys being choked with blowdown and thickets in an attempt to stop bushwhackers. There was no joy meeting the loose boulder fields that surround Ash Craft Pond that like to grab boots and twist ankles, especially when it's raining. But Mother Nature, like lovers, can be kind one moment and cruel the next. Similar to relationships built with humans, relationships with wild land are all about the duration – the long haul – and not the fleeting moments of love or frustration we tend to remember.

Fleeting moments are what hikers experience when they visit the features everyone else is visiting, especially during meager day hikes. They'll usually enjoy good weather, and maybe encounter no biting bugs if they're lucky, and they'll chalk it up as a good day. Or perhaps they'll endure some rain, and maybe be harassed by lots of biting bugs if they aren't lucky, and they'll deem it a bad day. Yet I was incapable of noting specific good days or bad days since I was armed with a collection of named landmarks that runs 431 features deep and took years to tackle. Week after week, backpacking trip after backpacking trip, and season after season each named feature was checked off each of my lists until there were no more left to check off. No worries though. Another list was composed, and off into the wilderness I went.

Being the author of two place name books, I was of course attracted to the names themselves, no matter what type of feature the name was attached to or what that feature actually looked like on the ground. There is Bullpout Pond, Paradox Creek, Spectacle Ponds, and Montcalm Point that are named after a type of fish, water flowing in a contrary direction, a shape that looks like a pair of eyeglasses, and a French officer, respectively. There is Desolate Swamp, Grizzle Ocean Mountain, Horseshoe Pond, and Spuytenduivel Brook that are named after a remote location, a logger who caught fish in his own personal "ocean" of a pond, the curving shape of a shoreline, and a Dutch term translating to "in spite of the devil," respectively. Nearly all names I became familiar with confirmed what I had written within my first place name book. "Behind every named feature there's a story, and the story's usually pretty good."

My pursuit wasn't singularly a series of one-, two, and three-day trips – or at least it never felt like that – because it was about the experience, the *journey*, not the numbed act of hiking away from the car, hiking back towards it later that day, and then driving home. My hiking challenge feels personal and special because it's different from everyone else's challenge and because it's a love affair. So, in the end, what did I find after hiking hundreds of miles and following scores of compass bearings to swamps, ridgelines, mountains, meadows, and streams with no hope for accompanying recognition or sense of community? That's easy. I found wild land. More importantly, I found true love.