

One Big Push: Six Days Across the Catskills

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Being the little sisters of the Adirondack Mountains to the north, the Catskill Mountains still deserve respect by possessing 35 peaks above 3,500 feet, two of which exceed 4,000 feet. A goal since the early 1950s, climbing all 35 puts the "35er" rank on your sleeve, proving you've visited the highest peaks in the land. Still, during the past 55 years no solo hiker had tackled these mountains via a continuous unsupported hike. In April 2008, I planned my route, which was 140 miles of hiking and 42,000 vertical feet of climbing across these 35 peaks. I would travel off-trail for twenty of those miles, camp each night, carry my own gear, not accept outside help, and enjoy one food resupply. The biggest sign of civilization would be the hamlet of Pine Hill and its 300 residents.

When my friend deposited me at the Peekamoose Mountain trailhead on May 10 at 9:30 a.m., I could hardly contain my excitement. In hindsight, I had done minimal training. But I did follow the golden rule of long-distance hiking, which is less is more. With a scant 8.3 pounds of gear, my 2,900-cubic-inch pack looked like a day hiker's load.

Cranking out the initial 2,600-vertical-foot climb up Peekamoose Mountain put me in a fine mood. In my journal I recorded, "#1 of 35. Gonna be a hell of a trip! Moving fast. Very nice." A strong sense of reality ended this entry. "We'll see how fast I'm moving at 8:00 p.m."

I descended the north side of Peekamoose Mountain and quickly scaled Table Mountain. Pulling out my compass was the prelude to my first off-trail section. Stretches of the five-mile bushwhack across Lone Mountain, Rocky Mountain, Balsam Cap, and Friday Mountain to Cornell Mountain have been described as "rugged," "most difficult," and "pesky" by other hikers. Five hours later I reached the Wittenberg-Cornell-Slide Trail and sped down it to Wittenberg Mountain. I then backtracked up Cornell Mountain and set my sights for the king of the Catskills, Slide Mountain. By the time I reached the 4,190-foot summit via a trail so steep it has ladders bolted to rock, the sun was dipping low. I shortened my summit break and sped down to Slide Mountain Road. A short walk on pavement took me to the last climb of the day and to my campsite on Giant Ledge. Nine down, 26 to go.

Up before the second day's rays could touch my tarp, I hiked Panther Mountain, a massive peak set off by itself. After backtracking for five miles, I hit the second off-trail section, a tough bushwhack through ice storm-damaged forests on Fir, Big Indian, Doubletop, and Graham mountains. Reaching Graham Mountain's abandoned television relay station on top, its concrete walls crumbling with the freeze and thaw of dozens of winters, I followed an old path off the summit and took a foot trail up Balsam Lake Mountain. From the fire tower on top of Balsam Lake Mountain, I couldn't discern my end point among a jumble of peaks 100 miles to the north. With an apprehensive gulp, I realized the Catskills were much bigger than I had imagined. I descended and reached my second campsite as darkness fell. Fifteen down, twenty to go.

The third day is usually the turning point. Confidence builds but so do blisters. My pack gets lighter but so do my legs. It's a give-and-take that marks life on the trail and tests my ability to adapt. I covered Eagle and Balsam mountains, sped through the hamlet of Pine Hill, and climbed Bearpen and Vly mountains far to the north, bushwhacking to an improvised campsite on a trailless ridge. Nineteen down, sixteen to go.

It takes a certain personality to enjoy bushwhacking. If you like the feeling of bee stings and bikini waxes, for instance, you'll similarly like the painful business of bushwhacking. The route to my next peak, Halcott Mountain, was bushwhacker paradise: seven miles of briar fields, stinging nettles, blowdown, and ice storm damage with no trail in sight. The route so choked with antagonistic vegetation, I could only stop the blood-letting of my legs by wrapping my extra thermal tops around them to serve as makeshift chaps. I wrote in my journal, "Not brilliant to not bring pants. The little extra weight would have been worth it. Bummer."

I crashed down Halcott Mountain still sporting my homemade chaps, recording an unflattering assessment of the route I chose. "Descent into Deep Notch was about as nasty as Governor Spitzer's sex life." I dragged myself up three more peaks: Mount Sherrill, North Dome, and West Kill Mountain. Arriving at the Spruceton trailhead after these three peaks, I gave thanks that my food cache was intact. Twenty-three down, twelve to go.

Day four dawned crisp and clear as I woke in a spruce plantation. I packed my three-and-a-half days' worth of food and tackled Rusk Mountain, my favorite high peak. Hiking through a cool, shady forest, my other 4,000-footer, Hunter Mountain, was next. With Hunter Mountain and its southwest peak done by lunch, I began a descent into Stony Clove Notch.

A name says a lot. Titled after Lucifer himself, the advocate of all things foul, the Devils Path climbs a very challenging grade out of Stony Clove Notch. In a matter of hours I climbed Plateau, Sugarloaf, Twin, and Indian Head mountains via numbers from hell: 1,900 vertical feet up, 1,200 down, 1,200 up, 1,000 down, 800 up, 500 down, 500 up, 1,600 down to my campsite. Two words summed the Devils Path in my journal. "Long day." Thirty down, five to go.

The next morning, on top of High Peak, I comfortably realized that the past five days had provided me with a simple and satisfactory life. Get up, hike, eat, drink, don't stop, stop, eat, drink, sleep. This may seem monotonous, but what I saw – fresh bear scat, brilliant wildflowers, budding leaves, clear water, brilliant stars – made it so rewarding. That is, until it started to rain.

After 110 miles, the smile I had at the Peekamoose Mountain trailhead was reduced to a pout while rain pitter-pattered off the hood of my jacket. With blistered feet, sore legs, and a shirt that smelled like a neglected locker room, I plodded along. The downpour filled my sneakers, soaked my running shorts, and turned my fingers into little prunes. I was not a happy camper. But the Catskill high country is quirky, unpredictable, and able to turn bad times into good times in less than a half hour.

I slogged down a flooded trail at my mental low point, out of water. But then, I saw my light at the end of the tunnel. From the hand of God Himself, there it was. A can of beer! Wedged into a rock cleft, this can of Busch was perfectly chilled from the night prior. I picked it up. The storm stopped. The sun came out. And then a white-tailed deer walked onto the trail, standing not twenty feet in front of me. We watched each other for five minutes, me sipping my beer, he browsing the springtime buds of a birch. It was a surreal experience where my spirits were infinitely lifted. I then summited Blackhead and arrived in camp, writing, "Good times. Thirty-two down, three to go."

I had planned on taking seven days to complete the 35 peaks, but after each day an even six built its possibilities. I woke at 4:30 a.m. to grind up Black Dome and Thomas Cole Mountain. Then I descended into Black Dome Valley as the sun rose over the Hudson Valley to the east, dying the horizon purple and pink. The adrenaline kicked in. Without breaking stride, I flew up number 35, Windham High Peak, covering three miles and 1,500 vertical feet in one hour. Reaching the top was a turning point, but it wasn't the end. The real end of my trek was a trailhead three miles away.

I took my time on the way down, feeling guilty for speeding through the 35 peaks. I strolled along, enjoying the company of juncos, chickadees, red squirrels, and even a porcupine. But soon enough, I reached the conclusion of my Catskill odyssey, ending at exactly 9:30 a.m., six days after my first step. With my hike ending so fast – it was an average of 23.3 miles of hiking and 7,000 vertical feet of climbing per day – I realized this trek wasn't about setting records or quenching the need for speed. It was about the Catskill Mountains themselves, a range that can be merciless with punishing climbs, ferocious briar fields, and nearly-impenetrable forests. But I learned the Catskills can be kind as well, offering stunning views, true wilderness, and the occasional free can of beer.