

A History of Northeast Peakbagging: Part I, Non-Winter

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In *Forest and Crag*, the authoritative history of the mountains of the Northeast, authors Guy and Laura Waterman introduced their "Superhiking" chapter with an observation that rings true today, 31 years after this book was published. "From time to time in every age and mountain range, individuals of exceptional strength or determination set out to show what they can do in that most rugged of physical testing grounds, the mountains."

No strangers to strength and determination themselves, the Watermans were ranked among the Northeast's best rock climbers during the 1970s and 1980s and lived for thirty years in a Vermont cabin sans road access, running water, and electricity. Guy, the only person to have ever climbed New Hampshire's 4,000-foot peaks during winter from each cardinal point, spent the last day of his life on the Appalachian Trail, specifically on top of 5,260-foot Mount Lafayette. On top of this peak on February 6, 2000, he intentionally sat down in the snow in single digit temperatures to die. Laura, *Backpacker Magazine's* first associate editor, went on to found the Waterman Fund to perpetuate "Guy's work and spirit on behalf of the wilderness values he championed."

Since *Forest and Crag* was released, superhiking – peakbagging in particular – has reached a fever pitch. With the most accomplished hikers now tackling lists hundreds of mountains deep, hiking the Adirondack 46 seems blasé. But, unknown to many modern adventurers, Northeast peakbagging has an inspiring pedigree worthy of study. So saddle up and get ready for a mountain climbing chronology that will humble any mountaineer of good conscience.

It all started in the Adirondacks. On August 15, 1916, brothers Bob and George Marshall and Herb Clark, an employee of the Marshall family, climbed their first mountain. Bob was 15 years old, George was 12, and Herb was 46. Reaching a maximum elevation of 3,330 feet, the Ampersand Mountains stand near the former lakeside summer home of the Marshall family, and it seems the duo's hike to the top of this tiny range was a "Why the hell not?" adventure. Little did they know this innocent climb would lead to a peakbagging mission the Watermans assessed as having "the aura of a quest."

The three of them climbed their first high peak, 4,867-foot Whiteface Mountain, on the first day of August 1918. During the winter of 1920/1921, after they had summited a few more 4,000-footers, they got the idea of climbing every Adirondack peak above that elevation, however many there may have been. The trio pored over United States Geological Survey topographic maps and eventually identified 46 high summits – today's sacred Adirondack 46. To qualify as a genuine mountain, as opposed to an unworthy bump on a ridgeline, each peak needed to rise at least 300 feet on all sides or stand at least three-quarters of a mile from another qualifying peak. This is a unique rule considering modern Northeast lists employ a 200-foot rise rule and nothing else.

Long story short, Bob, George, and Herb reached their final peak, 4,039-foot Mount Emmons, on June 10, 1925. It had been a wild eight years. Many of these mountains that have trails today had none back then. They probably made eight first ascents. Today, climbing "the 46" is commonplace. More than 11,000 hikers have finished this list. In 2018 alone, an average of two people a day became 46ers. The elevations of many of these mountains have waxed or waned due to recent, more-accurate surveys. Four of them – Blake Peak, Cliff Mountain, Couchsachraga Peak, and Nye Mountain – don't even reach 4,000 feet. Yet, for historical reasons, all 46 are still climbed.

More than twenty years passed until the next Northeast peakbagging list was completed. On August 13, 1948, the husband and wife team of J. and Lillian McKenzie completed a list of more than 100 summits. This Connecticut couple reached a 4,000-foot peak in New England that day to finish climbing all mountains in the Northeast above that elevation. Often referred to by the old-time moniker "the 111," this list now totals 115 and consists of two peaks in the Catskills, five in Vermont, 14 in Maine, 46 in the Adirondacks, and 48 in New Hampshire. It should be noted that the McKenzies concluded a 23-day climbing spree to knock off the Adirondack peaks eight days before their Northeast grand slam. They were the 58th and 59th people to climb the Adirondack 46.

Like within the Adirondacks, climbing the 4,000-foot peaks within New England is routine today. As of this writing, more than 14,000 people have climbed the 48 New Hampshire 4,000-footers, more than 3,600 have climbed the 67 New England 4,000-footers, and almost 1,000 have summited the 115 Northeast 4,000-footers.

While the two 4,000-foot peaks of the Catskill Mountains, 4,190-foot Slide Mountain and 4,050-foot Hunter Mountain, had been climbed many times over by the time the McKenzies reached them, no one had composed and climbed a list of the high peaks of that range, those above 3,500 feet. In 1952, William and Elinore Leavitt, another husband and wife team, finished climbing the 34 Catskill peaks above 3,500 feet (an overlooked peak was "found" decades later, raising the total to 35). More than 3,000 people have now hiked these mountains, and some have gotten quite obsessive about it, climbing all of them at night, during each season, during each month, or in one fell swoop via a 140-mile traverse.

By circa 1964, at least one hiker had summited the 100 highest peaks of New England, a list that ranges from 3,769-foot The Cannon Balls to 6,288-foot Mount Washington and spreads across Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. By 1968, at least 23 people had finished this list. More than 1,000 have now summited these 100 peaks. Early completions of the New England 100 highest is likely what led the Watermans to note that what soon followed was "a major escalation in the vision of peakbagging...."

The Adirondack Mountains had been regarded as terra incognita, and so it wasn't until 1972 that a variation of today's Adirondack 100 highest list was climbed. While today's list uses the widely accepted 200-foot rise rule and nothing else, when Lee Barry and Jim Boomer climbed the 100 highest peaks of the Adirondacks that year, they used a nontraditional 300-foot-rise rule.

With New England's 100 highest and the Adirondacks' 100 highest climbed, it made sense to take this number to the White Mountains. During the mid-1970s, the New Hampshire 100 highest list was climbed. This list, which bottoms out at 3,500 feet, has been finished by fewer than 300 people.

Lee Barry and Jim Boomer returned to the Adirondacks during the late 1970s to expand their peakbagging prowess in that range. During that decade, they completed a variation of today's Adirondack 3,000-footer list in which they again used a nontraditional 300-foot-rise rule. Their list had somewhere around 190 peaks.

"Escalated peakbagging" spread into the Catskill Mountains during the late 1970s. That's when Bill Riemvis became first to climb the 98 Catskill 3,000-footers. Riemvis had been the 171st person to climb the Catskill 3,500-foot peaks and 81st to climb them all during winter. Fewer than 100 people have summited this range's 3,000-foot peaks.

Two things happened in 1977 to make it a bellwether year for peakbagging. One, it was the first time someone took a list down to the 3,000-foot-level, while using a 200-foot-rise rule, to identify nearly 200 peaks. Two, it marked recognition of one of the Northeast's greatest hikers. His name is Tom Sawyer, and if you think the name is fake, you will be equally suspicious of the fact that he is married to a woman named Diane Sawyer. No matter the intrigue of his name, Sawyer is the man who became first to climb the 175 New Hampshire peaks above 3,000 feet. He finished this list on April 25, 1977, on 3,081-foot Mount Pisgah, a scrubby peak in the northern White Mountains. Sawyer had overcome a formidable challenge. His list nearly doubled the typical "100 highest" goal, and about half of the mountains on this list have no trails to their tops.

The 3,000-footer theme quickly spread to Vermont, for it was in 1979 that Deane Morrison finished climbing that state's 109 peaks above that elevation (this list now totals 110). Like in the Granite State, about half of the Green Mountain State's 3,000-foot peaks have no trails to their tops. Somewhere around 100 hikers have tackled these Vermont peaks.

After Tom Sawyer finished the New Hampshire 3,000-footers in 1977, he quietly ticked off the Vermont 3,000-footers and grabbed the two 3,000-footers of Massachusetts. On June 23, 1980, Sawyer left all other peakbaggers, as the Watermans put it, "in the dust" by reaching Maine's "sentinel of the north," 3,550-foot The Traveler. With that climb he finished summiting all 445 New England peaks above 3,000 feet (since then, six more were "found," raising the total to 451). That day he also became first to summit every Maine peak above 3,000 feet, all 165 of them. The idea of climbing these New England peaks came about during the 1970s when Gene Daniell, of Four Thousand Footer Club fame, composed such a list. The peaks that Sawyer completed in 1980 remain elusive. Fewer than fifty people have climbed this list, and years typically separate one completer from another.

Though an Adirondack 100 highest list had been composed by using a quirky 300-foot-rise rule, a new list of this range's 100 highest mountains using a traditional 200-foot-rise rule was composed by John Swanson, a New Jersey native, during the 1990s. He made quick work of the 100, finishing on July 19, 1997, on a nameless peak in the rugged and remote Sawtooth Mountains. Fewer than 100 hikers have finished this list.

John Swanson and Dennis Crispo then became first to summit every peak in the Adirondacks above 3,000 feet (using a 200-foot rise rule). They finished on 3,366-foot Kempshall Mountain. This list totals 217 summits. To reach them all, one must cover about 1,000 miles and

climb 250,000 vertical feet. But it's the notorious Adirondack bushwhacking that defeats prospective peakbaggers. Of these 217 mountains, 141 have no trails to their tops. Crispo, climber of all 3,000-foot peaks of the Northeast, feels that "New York is undoubtedly the toughest state to complete, especially the Adirondacks, because of the remoteness and restricted accessibility of many peaks." Approximately fifteen people have summited the Adirondack 3,000-footers.

If you thought Tom Sawyer's accomplishment of climbing New England's 3,000-foot peaks was impressive, hold on to your hats. During August 1997, John Swanson and Dennis Crispo hiked up the highest peak in Pennsylvania, 3,213-foot Mount Davis, to finish climbing the 770 peaks above 3,000 feet in the entire Northeast (an extra one has since been "found" in Vermont, raising the total to 771). This list consists of two peaks in Massachusetts, four in Pennsylvania, 98 in the Catskills, 110 in Vermont, 165 in Maine, 175 in New Hampshire, and 217 in the Adirondacks. To summit them all requires hiking about 2,400 miles while ascending 700,000 vertical feet. More than 400 peaks have no trails to their summits. Seventy of them don't even have names.

At one point, the pursuit of the 770 had become competitive between Swanson and Crispo, and Crispo had outpaced his competitor. When Swanson had 280 peaks to go, Crispo had 100. In good taste, Crispo waited for Swanson to catch up. The two then finished together (though they sprinted the final few hundred feet, playfully trying to outdistance each other). Those were the pure days of peakbagging. As Swanson remembered, likely with fondness, "Back then all the navigation was done with map, compass, and altimeter using paper copies of the old USGS maps. Any route data was shared by word of mouth and marked-up maps. It was an adventure not knowing what you would find." It is likely that eleven people have climbed "the 771."

After Swanson and Crispo bagged nearly 800 peaks, perhaps John Person's climbing of the 300 highest peaks of New Hampshire didn't seem like a big deal, but it was. This list, which bottoms out on a 2,424-foot unnamed peak, is formidable, and that's why fewer than twenty folks have completed this list. Person finished on Mount Weetamoo's 2,435-foot unnamed east peak.

With Tom Sawyer climbing more than 400 peaks and John Swanson and Dennis Crispo bagging 770, someone had to raise the bar. The man to do it was John Person. On October 30, 2009, he finished climbing New England's 1,000 highest peaks, a list that took him to every mountain above 2,400 feet in Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. Two others have repeated Person's feat.

A humble list of New Jersey peaks should be mentioned not for its difficulty – it's the easiest list in this article – but for the creativeness it took to compose it. New Jerseyites mustn't drive to the Catskills or southern New England to take on a legitimate list of mountains. This is where the New Jersey 1,000-footers come in. This list of 51 peaks tops out on the highest point in the state, aptly named High Point, at 1,803 feet. More interesting peak names include, some official, some not, Jenny Jump Mountain, Drag Hill, County House Mountain, Upper Pohatcong Mountain, Mount Paradise, Ilgenstein Rock, and, my favorite, The Tornfell. At least fifteen people have visited each of these modest mountains. First to knock off this list was William Maurer, who reached his final summit, a 1,470-foot peak on Bearfort Mountain, on January 3, 2010. The creators of this list are Eric Koppel and Jeff Bennett, completers two and three, respectively. Appropriately, Koppel and Bennett don't take Garden State mountain climbing too seriously. "Well, there's nothing we can do to make New Jersey's mountains any higher, and we don't have the decals yet, but at the least we can have a New Jersey peakbagging club."

The Catskill 100 highest peaks were climbed during the 1970s, yet systematic hiking of sub-100-highest peaks didn't happen until 2000, the year I finished the top 100. I then started exploring lesser-known mountains within this range, the ones with no names and no views and, thus, no other hikers. My Catskill Mountain molehill mission concluded March 16, 2012, when I reached 2,230-foot Sheridan Mountain to finish the 387 Catskill peaks above 2,000 feet. Of these mountains, 328 have no trails to their tops, and dozens are privately owned. Permission must be sought for those elusive peaks. No one has repeated this list.

On November 23, 2016, the 500 highest peaks of New Hampshire were hiked by Bryan Cuddihee. He finished on 2,005-foot Slope Mountain. The lowest peaks on this list are in a three-way tie for last. Thompson Hill's south peak, Garnet Hill, and Tinkerville Peak are each 1,942 feet above sea level. About ten hikers have taken on this list. That day, Cuddihee also became first to summit the 2,000-foot peaks of New Hampshire, all 473 of them. When asked how he felt upon finishing these lists, Cuddihee reported "a nice feeling of having accomplished something, but also a sense of disappointment that there weren't more summits to hike." This feeling of discontent is common among elite peakbaggers when they complete long lists, which invariably become intimate.

I had finished climbing the Adirondack 3,000-footers by 2002, and, like other hikers within this article, I was slowly but surely being drawn to the low and lonely peaks. Surprisingly, they

consistently offer better views than higher peaks do. Not surprisingly, the chance of running into someone on a low trailless peak is near zero. After all, while climbing the Northeast's 3,000-footers I encountered eight people while bushwhacking – one person for every fifty trailless mountains. On October 18, 2018, I finished climbing the 601 Adirondack peaks above 2,500 feet. The final mountain was a fine one, a 2,700-foot nameless peak in Silver Lake Wilderness Area. This list has yet to be repeated due to the remoteness of peaks and the hundreds of miles' worth of bushwhacking. Spencer Crispe, climber of the Adirondack 3,000-footers, summed the remoteness of the 2,500-footers well. "Some of those are waaaayyyy out where the buses don't run."

A year after the Adirondack 2,500-footers were climbed, Pierre Lefebvre, a Canadian, finished hiking the 536 New Hampshire peaks above 1,850 feet. His last peak was 3,210-foot West Royce Mountain, which he reached on August 11. Perhaps one other person has repeated this list.

The day after Lefebvre finished New Hampshire's 536 highest, he climbed Vermont's 3,148-foot Monadnock Mountain to finish the 1,669 New England peaks above 2,000 feet. This trek took him to every New England state except Rhode Island. That day also marked the first time someone had climbed Vermont's 2,000-footers. Lefebvre's passion for the mountains runs deep. One must be passionate to complete a list so extensive. When asked how he started pursuing New England's 2,000-footers, Lefebvre explained, "Initially, peakbagging was a sport for me... giving me an opportunity to keep in shape while enjoying the woods. However, over the years it became a way of life for me. So, while others paint, read, play music, or write poems, me – I climb mountains for the pure joy of doing so. Completing lists is entirely secondary for me."

And there you have it, folks. From Bob Marshall, George Marshall, and Herb Clark kicking off the peakbagging craze more than a century ago to modern hikers climbing lists upward of 1,000 summits, peakbagging in the Northeast possesses deep antiquity. To conclude, perhaps it's best to share the words of Tom Sawyer, a man who was fortunate enough to have hiked with the Watermans. When I asked him why he climbed New England's 3,000-footers and still hikes today (he recently finished a round of New Hampshire's 4,000-footers at age 73), there was no mistaking Sawyer's passion. "I enjoyed the physical and mental challenge. And more than that, hiking a mountain, trail, or bushwhack always gave me such a great feeling – a sort of a spiritual relationship that I find hard to find in the non-mountain world. Was it the history of the mountains?"

Partially. The need to get away from other hikers? Not really. The natural beauty? Yes! The challenge? Yes! The mountains are a indivisible part of me, part of my being, my soul."