

## Erik Schlimmer's Big Adventure

By Ed Winchester

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Erik Schlimmer hasn't broken a sweat. After two hours slogging up a bootleg trail on 3,700-foot Mount Bemis, I've managed to soak through my t-shirt, shorts, and the entire contents of my wallet. My hiking partner, on the other hand, remains preternaturally cool as we push through waves of spiny blowdown in a waist-deep understory. On this steamy August morning in New Hampshire, Schlimmer is decked out in Dickies workpants, polyester ranger's shirt, and a Tilley hat. But the journeyman trail builder and adventurer has a reason for dressing like he's on the job.

After years of seasonal employment, Schlimmer has set his sights on becoming a professional adventurer, funding his far-flung expeditions through writing and motivational speaking. For the last fifteen years, Schlimmer has sought adventure in places others wouldn't think to look. He's ticked off all 770 Northeast summits greater than 3,000 feet, made winter ascents of New York State's 131 peaks above 3,500 feet, and biked the 1,950-mile-long border between Mexico and the United States. His book, *Thru Hiker's Guide to America*, passes on established routes for lesser-known footpaths like Pennsylvania's Mid State Trail. "I like to do things that tend to be unpopular," he says.

Schlimmer leaves for his next big trip at the end of the month. He says this latest adventure, a two-month, 2,640-mile bike ride from the Canadian border to Mexico, will be the last one that takes him away from home for that long. "It's a curse and a blessing at the same time," says Janine DeFilippo, Schlimmer's girlfriend of two years. "He spends time out there, he loves it. But then he comes out into the real world. He's living in between. He's not entirely in the woods, but he's not like you and me."

He's not like most people. As we hike, even just the insinuation of a view stops Schlimmer dead in his tracks. "Mmm-mmm. Look at that," he says, gesturing to the forest sea below us as though I were in the market for mountain real estate. "No, it doesn't get any better than this." Schlimmer's enthusiasm for the outdoors is contagious,

and alone on this secluded trail, maybe a little over the top. In many ways, he reminds me of a kid who went out into the yard to play and never came back inside.

But as we plod toward this seldom-visited summit deep in White Mountain National Forest, I have a hard time seeing how he'll turn this passion into a full-time job. So far, Schlimmer has failed to parlay his wanderlust into meaningful employment. And whether or not his brand of backyard adventure – he calls it “adventure for mortals” – finds an audience, at the moment there are signs the lifestyle is wearing on him. At 32, I wonder if his time is running out.

Growing up in Poughkeepsie, New York Erik Schlimmer spent his days hanging out at the mall and hucking his BMX over whatever obstacle he could find: garbage cans, wood blocks, cats, dogs. In 1986 his family moved to Chestertown, New York, a tiny Adirondack State Park hamlet with 1,200 year-round residents. Schlimmer went to the local high school where he graduated in 1991 in a class of 32. One week later, he shipped out for basic training to Fort Benning, Georgia.

Schlimmer, whom friends describe as “fiercely independent,” was miscast in the military. He chalks his enrollment up to a persuasive Army recruiter and the promise of college tuition on the other side. During his two years of service as a paratrooper, Schlimmer learned desert warfare and spent four months in Honduras guarding two remote CIA listening posts. He also learned how to drive a Hummer and parachute out of a plane with a missile strapped to his body. At night. “It was about as much fun as it sounds,” he says wryly.

But Schlimmer learned greater life lessons during his military detour. “In the Army, it was ‘discipline, discipline, discipline,’” says his friend Ryman McLane, who worked with Schlimmer at the U.S. Forest Service in New Hampshire. “Everybody has to look the same, eat the same, and dress the same. That experience turned him off wanting to be like everyone else.” In 1994 Schlimmer was granted an honorable discharge and eventually enrolled in Plattsburgh State University where he graduated in 2001 with a BA in Speech Communication. Then it was on to the string of seasonal jobs that remain Schlimmer’s principal source of income: backcountry ranger, Appalachian Trail ridgerunner, trail crew member, wilderness instructor, wildland firefighter.

Schlimmer works hard not to be, as he puts it, another blade of grass in a giant lawn. He has closely shorn reddish-blond hair, multiple piercings (two in his right ear, one in his left), and a compact-but-powerful frame that seems purpose-built for bushwhacking up trailless mountains or pedaling his bike across desert terrain. He also sets himself apart by measuring the success of his adventures in originality rather than vertical feet or degree of difficulty. “Everything hasn’t been done; you just need to know where to look. The 3,000-foot peaks is a great example,” explains Schlimmer. The Appalachian Mountain Club’s Four Thousand-Footer Club was formed fifty years ago to introduce hikers to what once were lesser-known areas in the White Mountains. “But no one had climbed the Northeast’s 3,000-footers until 1995,” he says. “Adventure’s not dead. All it takes is a little creativity.”

With much of this creativity occurring off-trail, those who consider bushwhacking a high-impact activity have occasionally taken exception to Schlimmer’s backcountry travel. Schlimmer’s loose definition of adventure also opens him up to critics who look at his made-up routes-with names like Borderland Mountain Bike Expedition. They ask one question: So what? A few people I spoke with even questioned his motivation, suggesting his adventures might simply be a means to drum up sales of his *Thru Hiker’s Guide to America*. Schlimmer’s response? “How would I increase the sales of my book by hanging out in the desert by myself?”

I’m not nearly as cynical. But listening to Schlimmer talk, it’s clear he’s given plenty of thought on how to best position himself. “You have the elite off in their own little world doing their own thing. And they’re the core of media attention when it comes to adventure. On the other end, you have a regular Joe hiking who is not going to get any attention at all. Then there’s this guy, like me, who’s doing firsts, climbing really big lists of mountains, thru-hiking trails that are unpopular. It’s not radical enough for the Ed Viesturs crowd, but it’s a little too un-established for the people who hike the AT. I don’t know where I fit in there so I’ve been trying to create my own world.”

Whatever his reasons, it’s hard not to admire his threshold for suffering. When Schlimmer designs a route, he’s not always looking for the easiest way to get from A to B. He will purposely seek out hobblebush-tangled trails or plot cycling routes that require backtracking if the net result is a wild and unique experience. If Schlimmer were

a runner, his event would be the steeplechase. “I’m kind of the black sheep of the adventure world,” he continues. “You won’t find me on Denali and you won’t find me on Everest. You would never find me on the Appalachian Trail. If I could be the first one to do the kind of project I want to do, that’s great. But it’s not for my ego at all. It’s to have a feeling of exploration, adventure, first tracks.”

Schlimmer was already an accomplished peak bagger when somebody suggested he try hiking every 3,000-foot peak in the Northeast. There are 770 such peaks between Pennsylvania and Maine. Four hundred and twenty have no clear routes to their summits; seventy have no official names. Only three people had ever completed this list, which fills thirteen pages when printed out. Finishing became a multi-year obsession for Schlimmer. “I went down to the Catskills with him in 2003 and we did three peaks a day for ten days,” says McLane. “It was near zero degrees the whole time and we were car camping. Anyone else would have cracked. But every day, it was ‘get up and hike.’”

Schlimmer reached No. 770 in the fall of 2004. Alone atop a trailless, 3,588-foot summit in western Maine, he celebrated by downing a can of Coke and then went home. “Many people go out into the woods for solitude, to find some sort of inner quiet or inner peace,” says his friend Nick Gully. “He finds it better when he’s out there on his own.”

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Rising a vertical mile out of the central Utah desert, the Wasatch Plateau is an 11,000-foot tabletop brushed with bristlecone pine and rimmed by cascading stands of juniper and aspen. Schlimmer awoke on the morning of September 6, 2005 refreshed and ready to take it on after spending the night in the home of a Provo, Utah newspaper editor he’d met a few months earlier.

It was Day 23 of his Western States Mountain Bike ride and Schlimmer was making stubborn progress along his invented off-road route from Montana to Arizona. By piecing together portions of the Great Western and Arizona Trails with ATV routes and sections of unmapped singletrack, Schlimmer was hoping to establish the longest off-pavement bike route in the world. So far, so good. Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming were

behind him. Ahead lay the 170-mile long Wasatch Plateau after which it would be all downhill to the borderlands of Arizona.

It was an auspicious start to the day. A pack of local cyclists accompanied him out of town, one rider swapping his lightweight road bike for Schlimmer's loaded-down Jamis. After saying their goodbyes, Schlimmer was alone again and facing a long climb to the plateau. But something wasn't right. "It was one of those days where you say, 'Man, are my brakes on? Do I have a flat tire? What's going on?'" And I just took it as one of those days," he says, "until I got to the point where I couldn't even push my bike."

In the world according to Schlimmer, adventure is everywhere. So it's reasonable to conclude that danger is everywhere too, just waiting to throw a wrench into the works. In this case, the spoiler was his hosts' four-year-old daughter who passed a nasty stomach bug on to him the night before. Thirty-three miles outside of Provo, Schlimmer collapsed on the side of the road and threw up. He eventually hitched a ride back into town and spent the night in the same guest bedroom, plagued by fever dreams of being lost and alone on the Wasatch Plateau.

As it turns out, the Wasatch Plateau was nothing like the nightmares. Once he recovered, Schlimmer spent four days rumbling along dirt trails that rose above verdant meadows worked by Central and South American shepherders. From there, it was on to Arizona and some of the most challenging terrain of the entire route; the sizzling heat of the Sonoran Desert; rock-strewn streambeds where riding wasn't an option. "I thought I was going to ride the whole thing border to border," Schlimmer says. "I would ride and it got rougher and rougher and rough enough to where I was carrying my bike." (Schlimmer named this hike-and-bike technique "warrior style.") He stayed off-road to the very end, riding beneath power lines and alongside gas pipelines to the border settlement of Lochiel, Arizona. "One day, you put on the brakes and it's over," he says. "A lot was running through my mind. 'The route is done, the adventure is over. What am I going to do after this?' I made the decision to share the tale."

A lot has changed in the five months after Schlimmer wandered out of the desert. When I talked to him a few weeks after his ride, he seemed to be suffering from some post-trip malaise. He had no speaking engagements lined up and expressed frustration at the prospect of returning to seasonal employment. It was starting to dawn on him what

the “professional” part of professional adventurer entailed. “To make a living, you have to be a hustler and you have to deal with people to get what you want accomplished,” says DeFilippo. “It’s really been an eye opener for him.”

But that was then. It’s a sunny late-March afternoon in Stowe, Vermont, stop No. 4 on Schlimmer’s fourteen-date speaking tour of universities, libraries, and outing clubs in the Northeast. Despite the summer-like weather, I find him inside a local coffee shop hovering over his laptop. He looks fit and well rested, and, for the first time since we met last summer, content. “A lot has changed and I’ve changed a lot,” he tells me. “I made the decision that I want this to be my lifestyle. I now think of myself as a professional adventurer.”

Schlimmer received a modest amount of media attention following his Western States ride from which he spun this current public speaking tour. But his moment of self-realization came after seeing his name prefaced with the words ‘professional adventurer’ in newspapers. “Sometimes it can be hard to examine yourself and figure out who you are. So I guess I’m a professional adventurer and a writer. I can live with that.”

But can he live *on* it? Schlimmer’s rates are still on the low end, ranging anywhere from a few hundred dollars to \$700 per appearance depending on the venue, a far cry from the four- and five-figure fees more established speakers command. “This summer I may go back to a seasonal job, but I am hoping this is the last one I have,” he says, and then adds, “In one night of speaking I will make more than I would in one week of trail building.”

Andrew Skurka is as close as they come to a professional hiker, with big-name outdoors sponsors and a 92-stop speaking tour underwritten by gear manufacturer Go-Lite. But even he’s not convinced it’s possible to make a living on the trail. “There are very few athletes in a non-competitive sport that have been able to make it work,” says Skurka, who was the first to hike the 7,778-mile transcontinental Sea-to-Sea Trail in 2005. “I haven’t even proven I can do it yet.”

Along with sponsorship stipends, Skurka generates income through freelance writing, public speaking, and the marketing and business development work he performs for outdoor companies. He estimates it takes \$15,000 to hike approximately eleven months out of the year. “From my experience, the most important thing is that you’re a

great ambassador for the hiking community, exposing people to the outdoors, educating them how to do it,” says the 24-year-old Seekonk, Massachusetts native. “If you’re good at that, the other things will fall into place.”

And what if they don’t? What if Schlimmer fails to find an audience? Skurka, for one, doesn’t think that will happen, suggesting that Schlimmer’s message of attainable adventure strikes just the right chord with people searching for a vicarious outdoor experience. “If you’re so far out there that people can’t comprehend what you’re doing, then that becomes an issue,” says Skurka. “But I also think it’s important to establish your credibility, to do things that make people say, ‘Wow, that’s cool.’”

Nick Gully says his friend’s greatest contribution may not be what he does on the trail but what others might do as a result. “All of this, when it’s added up, what does it amount to? Are we creating a better world? No is the quick answer, but if you’re inspired by hearing someone like Schlimmer speak, you go out and maybe that is making the world a slightly better place because you found something that makes you happy.”

And for now at least, Schlimmer is happy. He’s already started scheming his next adventure. On his short list is a traverse, by foot and by boat, of the 611-mile Maine-Canada boundary and a sea-to-summit hike up Mexico’s 18,500-foot Pico de Orizaba. Neither has been done before, and probably for good reason. But so what? “When you look at adventure as defined by Schlimmer,” adds Gully, “it’s unlimited.”