

## **One Big Push: Six Days across the Catskill High Peaks**

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Being little sisters to the grander 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 of 2008 I planned my route: 140 miles of hiking and 42,000 vertical feet of climbing across the 35 peaks. I would travel off-trail for twenty miles, camp out each night, carry my own gear, not accept outside help, and enjoy just one food resupply. The biggest sign of civilization would be Pine Hill’s 300 residents.

When my friend deposited me at the Peekamoose trailhead on May 10 at 9:30 AM I could hardly contain my excitement. In hindsight, I had done minimal physical preparation. But, I did follow the golden rule of long-distance hiking: 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.” But, reality ended my entry: “We’ll see how fast I’m moving at 8:00 PM.”

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.” Five hours later I thankfully 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 abbreviated 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 its lonesome. After backtracking for five miles I hit the second off-trail section, a hell-whack 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 each winter, I followed an old path off the summit and took a foot trail up Balsam Lake Mountain.

From the fire tower of Balsam Lake Mountain I couldn't discern my end point among a jumble of peaks still 100 miles away. 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.

Day three is generally the turning point. Confidence builds but so do blisters. Your pack gets lighter but your legs get tired. It's a give-and-take that marks life on the trail and tests your ability to adapt. I covered Eagle and Balsam Mountains, sped through 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 root canals, bee stings, and bikini waxes, for instance, you'll similarly like the painful business of bushwhacking. The route to my next stop, Halcott Mountain, was bushwhacker's 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 polypropylene shirts around them as makeshift mountain man chaps. I simply 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." Later I dragged myself up three more peaks: Mount Sherrill, North Dome, and West Kill Mountain. Arriving at the Spruceton trailhead I gave thanks my food cache was still intact. Twenty-three down, twelve to go.

Day four dawned crisp and clear as I awoke 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 evil, painful, and foul, the Devils Path climbs a very challenging grade out of Stony Clove Notch. In a matter of hours I'd climb 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 High Peak I comfortably realized the past five days made me look at life simply: get up, hike, eat, drink, don't stop, stop, sleep. It may have seemed monotonous but what I saw – fresh bear scat, brilliant wildflowers, budding leaves, clear water, and brilliant stars – made it so rewarding. Until it started to rain.

After 110 miles, the smile I had at the Peekamoose 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 prunes. I was not a happy camper. But the high peaks are quirky, unpredictable, and able to turn bad times into good times in less than a half hour sometimes.

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, the 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 in front of me, standing only twenty feet away. We watched each other for five minutes; me sipping my beer, he browsing the springtime buds of a birch tree. 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 originally planned on taking seven days to complete the 35 peaks but each day an even six built its possibilities. I awoke at 4:30 AM to grind up Black Dome and Thomas Cole Mountain. Then I descended into Black Dome Valley as the sun rose over the Hudson Valley, dying the horizon purple and pink.

The adrenaline kicked in. Without breaking stride, I flew up #35, Windham High Peak, covering three miles and 1,500 vertical feet in one hour. Reaching the top was a turning point but not the true end. The real end of my trek – following the mountaineer’s credo of what goes up must come down – 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 AM, six days after my first step.

With my hike ending so fast – averaging 23.3 miles and 7,000 vertical feet of climbing per day – I realized this trek actually 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 impenetrable forests. But I learned the Catskills can be kind as well, offering stunning views, true wilderness, and an occasional free can of beer. «« **E.S.** »»