Climbing the Northeast 770: All the Pain, Half the Elevation

Sure, Denver is the "Mile High City." But spruce trees and blowdown don't choke the sidewalks of this capital. Kick it down a notch and see what it's like to climb 770 3,000-foot peaks.

• In the United States bigger is always better, not only for McMansions, sport utility vehicles and presidential campaign budgets, but for mountains as well. Simply put, it's all about the elevation.

Most climbers the world over have heard of the West Coast's Mount Rainier, topping the 14,000-foot level, while east of Washington State the names Idaho and Montana conjure up images of monstrous snow-capped peaks. Utah, though having a reputation for being dry and desolate, is also rightfully regarded as a mountaineering destination, possessing nearly twenty 13,000-footers. Utah's name itself even describes the original mountaineers of this terra firma, the Utes: "people of the mountains."

Ice rides through summer at the 13,000-foot level in the Wind River Range of nearby Wyoming. Continuing eastward, Colorado is finally encountered, a state bigger and better than all others concerning elevation. More than fifty 14,000-foot mountains reside within the

Centennial State.

But once you travel east of the Rockies the elevation drops considerably. By the time you get to the Northeast you have what Westerners call mere hills. Only ten peaks break the 5,000-foot measurement. Just one of them – Mount Washington of New Hampshire – is daring enough to soar above 6,000 feet. As one Coloradoan boorishly summed up Northeast heights, "I'd have to drill a well to get to that elevation."

I've learned these very different mountain settings are both legitimately challenging. Western mountains are tough because of the snowstorms that envelop them from October to April, the enormous scree fields and cliffs that guard their flanks and, most noteworthy, the elevations they attain.

In the East, mountains are tough because of the lousy weather – be it rain, snow, freezing rain, or interminable sea of grey clouds – that can arrive in nearly any month, the antagonistic bugs that congregate in clouds of Biblical proportions and, most noteworthy (no, not elevation), the thick vegetation. Walls of impenetrable spruce trees, tangles of hobblebush, pitiless briars and blown-over trees guard each trailless peak's apex.

These thick forests led me to conclude that trailless Northeast peaks are often tougher to climb than many Western peaks, even down to the 3,000-foot level, an elevation those Colorado wells dare not sink to.

My molehill addition started in the mid-

1990's. I was on top of Mount Abraham, a 4,000-foot peak on Vermont's Long Trail, enjoying a gorgeous winter day. A dark blue sky stretched from horizon-to-horizon. Three state highpoints – Mount Marcy of New York, Mount Mansfield of Vermont, and Mount Washington of New Hampshire – could easily be seen to the west, north, and east, respectively. The sun reflected off the snow pack, baking my pale winter face red and brown.

The other resident of the summit was a man with an ice-encrusted beard whose well-worn gear spoke of his experience. He came over and politely inquired about the patches on my pack, which declared I had climbed the forty-six 4,000-foot mountains of the Adirondacks and the thirty-five 3,500-foot peaks of the Catskills. I told him that with the completion of my recent hiking goals I was on the prowl for a new list of mountains but wanted to stay in the East. He suggested I take up hiking on an accelerated level, a task best completed, he insisted, on mountains even lower than what I was used to climbing.

He suggested I contact a man who had the mother of all lists: a directory of every 3,000-foot peak in the entire northeast United States. He mentioned not to get too excited though, for only two people had successfully climbed all 770 of them: the guy who had the list and a friend of the guy who had the list. He said both of these gentlemen were "crazy."

© erik schlimmer

I wrote the list bearer in New Jersey, asking if he would mail me a copy of the list. Two weeks later I opened a New Jersey-postmarked manila envelope containing thirteen crisp, white pages listing every 3,000-footer in Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. I scanned page after page and realized that I had not hiked much in the Northeast, at least compared to the guy who mailed me the list.

To hike all 770 I would have to cover approximately 2,400 miles and ascend nearly 800,000 vertical feet, numbers exceeding what a thru-hike of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail demands. More than 420 peaks had no trails to their summits. Seventy had no official names. Many possessed reputations for being "slag hills," "heinous bushwhacks" and "miserable little peaks," along with many names unfit for print.

I told my friend about the list and the guy who mailed it to me. "This guy's insane. 770 peaks. He climbed them all. This guy needs a wife." My friend took the criticism a step further. "No Schlimmer, this guy needs a *life.*"

I decided not to climb all 770. It was too daunting a task to even think about. But most importantly, if I did climb every peak on the list I would have to regard myself as a guy who needed a life and didn't climb "real" mountains in his spare time.

But just for kicks I examined the list a bit closer, checking off peaks I had already been up. Without even getting up from my desk I learned I

had already climbed 160 of them, most of those being 4,000-footers. How hard could the remaining be? The little ones? Not a problem. Besides, there was no way I was going to hike them all. I just wanted to check a couple of these little guys out.

I bought some maps of northern Vermont, packed my day pack, filled my Subaru wagon with fuel, food and water, then drove to the Northeast Kingdom to spend five days bushwhacking pint-sized peaks.

The morning of day one I left my car at the end of a logging road and donned my day pack. My general attitude was that if I had hiked and biked out West a bunch, I was all set on these hills. The Western peaks surely had to be tougher than these Northeast hills, no? Hell, I had *slept* at elevations three times higher than 3,000 feet. However, by the end of my trip – complete with crashing through forests, tip toeing across moose bogs and following dozens of confusing compass bearings – the little ones showed me they were much tougher than I thought.

By the conclusion of day one, my bruised legs looked like they belonged to a Turkish prison inmate who had his lower appendages mercilessly beaten with a broom handle all day. My pants, by the afternoon of day two, looked like I had accidentally dropped them into a wood chipper.

When the sun set at the end of day three, my lacerated arms made me look like I just completed an internship at a veterinary clinic; specializing in handling cats strung out on a maddening blend of PCP, cat nip and crystal meth. By the fourth day of my trip I could see out of only one eye since a spruce branch scratched my eye's lens. To duplicate the pain you would

basically have to hold your eye open and run a cheese grater across it. My shins lost part of their feeling sometime during day five.

By the end of my trip I resembled one of the characters from Steven Kings' *The Long Walk* more than a glory-filled peakbagger. I departed the 3,000-footers a muddied, bloodied, bruised, one-eyed wreck of a man. I was hooked.

The reserved modesty of these lower mountains was a welcome change from the high-profile 4,000-footers, which were often covered with people who took hiking way too seriously. On the moose paths and briar fields of low ridges it wasn't about "summit bids," "base camps" and "topping out," along with all the other wannabe glory words. On the low lonely hills it was about real hiking while covered in real mud and real bruises, sometimes with a real sprained ankle. No glory words could be rightfully assigned to a 3,000-foot hill that had no name and no view, located in an unincorporated township in Maine that nobody actually lived in.

The very non-glorious times of hiking made me sometimes wish I was on a peak with a trail but the challenges these off-the-beaten-track peaks forced on me were welcome. The peaks demanded I be self sufficient and decisive, making competent decisions in navigation and risk management. If I made a bad decision on a mountain that was a four-hour bushwhack and three-hour drive from the nearest

hospital, I would be in deep, with no one to blame but myself; a refreshing level of responsibility!

Remaining hard charging and positive I somehow reached peak number 300 and figured, 'Ah, what the hell?' I decided to hike the remaining 470. This decision was made under the assumption I got the worst ones out of the way. But like how these modest peaks stomped my initial attitude in Vermont, the worst ones showed little mercy, too.

After peak 300 the blowdown seemed to be stacked higher and more precariously than before, the evergreens thicker. The wind stronger, the cold more biting. And each day the sun set behind scores of peaks I still hadn't even explored. I eventually grew tired of being beat down and became revengeful. I started hiking like I was "crazy."

Over the next year I climbed 180 3,000-footers to reach peak number 500. I felt like I had accomplished much, climbing more mountains in one year than I usually did in three, but the routine was getting old. The "ascend through second growth hardwood forest; bushwhack through heinous evergreen scrub; reach the top with no view; reverse course" script on an endless stage of slag hills and miserable little peaks was predictably painful. But for some perverse reason, it was *still* enjoyable.

A year later, with only 170 mountains left to fight, I realized for the first time I could really finish, especially after I heard a third person, this

time a woman, recently completed the 770.

Unfortunately, I must have subconsciously left the hardest peaks for last. The three toughest peaks on the list – Barren Mountain, Big Spencer Mountain and Lily Bay Mountain, all of Maine – put up quite a fight. But after those three horrendous hikes, the remaining twenty peaks actually took on a calm. The forests seemed more open, the weather clearer, and some of the summits even had views like all the ones out West do. I felt the improved setting was my reward for spending the last ten years visiting some of the lowest, thickest, most miserable recesses in the East.

When I reached peak number 770, a trailless 3,600-foot mountain deep within Plum Creek logging land in western Maine, during the fall of 2004, I was flushed with a feeling of accomplishment but exhaled a sigh of relief that it was finally over.

During the decade-long relationship I fostered with the Northeast's 3,000-footers I was like an addict controlled by a cruel, manipulative drug. I kept running back to these peaks like a Pavlovian dog, salivating for one more scar, one more bruise and one more bushwhack. Just one more stick in the eye on the "little" peaks of the Northeast.

Worst of the worst: a five-way tie for last

Barren Mountain, ME (3,696') The easiest way to this summit is by crashing off a nearby 3,700-foot peak where a pace of half-a-mile-an-hour is common. The south side of Barren is composed of cliffs and hurricane-damaged forests, with occasional beaver swamps thrown in for good measure.

McDonnel Mountain, NY (3,957') A 17-mile, 3,300-vertical-foot round trip hike, which includes a bushwhack off a 4,000-foot peak, will take you to McDonnel's viewless summit ridge that was destroyed by hurricane Floyd in 1999.

Bull Mountain, ME (3,136') This summit looks more like a spruce swamp than an apex. Thick moss, blowdown and stinging red and black spruces mercilessly tear at hikers. The start of the hike is on a logging road 31 miles from the nearest stretch of pavement.

Big Spencer Mountain, ME (3,194') Two qualifying peaks lay on either end of this long ridgeline. More than a mile of stunted spruce and fir, along with countless minor summit knobs, offer strong resistance.

Lily Bay Mountain, ME (3,234') Thick stands of red spruce and balsam fir cover the southern slopes while tree trunks and briars litter the summit. This peak is usually climbed in conjunction with Lily Bay's east peak to double your pleasure.

«« ES »»