

Fastpacking the High Peaks: Where being Called a Lightweight is a Compliment

By Erik Schlimmer

Published in the July 2008 issue of *Metro Sports New York*

In September 1994 I was participating on a Wilderness Education Association (WEA) leadership course: a 33-day trip through the Adirondack High Peaks. Designed to mold average citizenry into hardened outdoor leaders, the WEA's credo concerning packing lists was: "It is better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it."

When I laced up my boots on day one of that trip, all the things I "needed" totaled a base load of approximately forty pounds. When three quarts of water, group gear, and ten days' worth of food topped off my 5,500-cubic-inch pack, I carried 98-pound load.

Due to my pack's ridiculous dimensions and weight – standing more than three feet tall and pushing scales nearly into the triple digits – my peers dubbed it "The Patriot." But, despite its unwieldy size, none of my colleagues could argue one thing: toting a 98-pound pack made me look like I was on my way up Mount Everest. Wearing a pack that was bigger than life itself was just plain cool. Or was it?

In the 1990s there were only a few lightweight backpackers roaming the forests. One of them was Ray Jardine. A former rocket scientist, Jardine retired and went "the Ray Way." Going fast and light, comfortable and progressive, he turned the traditional packing list on its head: "If I need it and I don't have it, then I don't need it."

Though a handful of Northeast hikers have gone the Ray Way or found their own enlightening change over the past decade, overall we are still the tortoises of the hiking world. While it seems everyone out West is cooking on homemade alcohol stoves and sleeping under one-pound tarps, we're cooking on stoves that put out enough BTU's to melt steel girders and hunkering in tents designed to survive a year pitched on K2. It may be high time we all take a lesson from our brothers and sisters out West. For in this fastpacking fairy tale the hare always wins.

High Peaks traverse, take two

There I stood in a trailhead parking lot in September 2007, thirteen years after my Wilderness Education Association adventure. The Elk Lake trailhead located at the end

of a five-mile-long dead end dirt road marked the start point of my Adirondack fastpacking trip. It was a lonely morning. The trailhead was empty. The sky was azure from horizon-to-horizon while nearby leaves painted with pale reds hinted of an approaching fall.

Over the past decade I had learned a lot about going light. Not from Jardine but from hiking and bringing less equipment each time. Through trial and error I eventually trimmed my gear list to what it is today: 11.0 pounds of equipment, dropping to less than nine pounds when the bear-resistant food canister is not needed.

My plan was to hike an enormous figure eight-shaped circuit around the 192,000-acre High Peaks Wilderness Area, the largest wilderness in the Northeast. It was a formidable challenge: 110 miles and 19,000 vertical feet of climbing. But it was also an enticing route, including the highest peak and rock face in the state; a section of the Northville Placid Trail; twelve bodies of water; a slide climb; and hikes of two 4,000-foot summits. If I was successful in my High Peaks hike, I'd reenter the trailhead less than five days later.

After lacing up my sneakers, donning my streamlined pack, and grabbing my trekking poles, I headed west. Soon enough I started a 2,400-vertical-foot grind up Elk Lake-Marcy Trail to the shoulder of Mount Marcy, the highest peak in New York. But, what goes up must come down. After reaching a height of land on the shoulder of this massive peak, I descended, cruising past Lake Colden and Flowed Lands, later following Calamity Brook Trail to the southern mouth of Indian Pass.

By this point I had covered more than twenty miles and my destination, Duck Hole, still stood five miles away. I carried the most food of the trip, which slowed me down hour after hour. But, good things come to those who hike fast: just as I started to climb towards Duck Hole a brand new lean-to not shown on my map greeted me 22.0 miles from my start point. Though I like to hike until dusk, this spot was too good to pass up.

Lesson #1: Think big and go big. In the early 90s it would have taken me two days to hike Mount Marcy. Now I was past this peak by lunchtime. As the writer Arthur Clarke

said, "The only way to discover the limits of the possible is to go beyond them into the impossible."

With a handful of miles behind me by 8:00 AM, day two seemed perfect. Hardwoods and evergreens again framed a blue sky. In the 45-degree air I worked my way past Preston Ponds to Duck Hole, a small body of water nestled among silent forests. The area only got better when I turned onto the Northville-Placid Trail, New York's first long-distance path, and headed south along the Cold River, following it downstream. By the end of day two I again covered 22.0 miles, this time in a very remote region – I saw only two people during ten hours of hiking.

Lesson #2: Question use of the word "need." One of the reasons I couldn't average more than twenty miles per day a decade earlier was because I was carrying all the items other hikers told me I "needed." But there I was, many years and many miles later with Jardine's "I don't need it" quote stuck in my head.

Since I don't cook breakfast and start early, I covered Calkins Brook, Mud Pond, and Raquette Falls Trails by 10:00 AM and T-boned Coreys Road, a dirt pathway that wound east toward the Seward Mountains. After completing this three-mile road walk in one hour I reached the Seward trailhead. I continued east on Blueberry Trail and Ward Brook Trail back to Duck Hole, revisiting this quaint pond by mid-afternoon. Thus I had completed the western half of my figure eight loop in only two and a half days.

From Duck Hole east I backtracked under building storm clouds. I raised my pace to more than three miles an hour just in time to dive into the Wallface lean-to as the rain came down. After hiking 28.6 miles and climbing 3,200 vertical feet, dinner went down faster than normal.

Lesson #3: Dissolve traditional thought. I wore sneakers though most claimed I'd sprain my ankles. I did not treat my water though most believe water sources are infested with Giardia. I threw other traditional approaches to the wind realizing that just because something has been in place forever doesn't mean it's correct.

With some good hiking legs under me by day three, I set out through cold rain into Indian Pass, its western flank being 900-foot-tall Wallface Cliff. Indian Pass was a massive jumble of wet, geologic obstacles. "Unpleasant" is the word that describes my sloppy, slippery experience through this area, craggy enough to have ladders bolted to bare rock. The descent down the north side of the pass was equally challenging; at times I was hiking in a trail-turned-streambed.

With Indian Pass behind me, at 1:00 PM the day accelerated in excitement when I took a "shortcut" on the Mr. Van Ski Trail. It turned out to be an overgrown deer trail blocked by beaver dams instead of the thoroughfare I hoped for. At times a bushwhack, I eventually managed to navigate to the South Meadow trailhead.

Next was Klondike Notch Trail to Johns Brook Valley, then Woodsfall Trail into the Great Range where judgment beat machismo. I decided to cut my day short due to the chance of cold rain turning to bitter snow. I ate dinner and was sound asleep by 5:00 PM after hiking 17.1 miles and climbing 3,500 vertical feet.

Lesson #4: Pack for the near-worst. Though my base load was only eleven pounds, I managed to stay warm through forty-degree rain. The key is light, yet safe.

First thing in the morning I completed a climb to the summit of Lower Wolf Jaw Mountain, one of two 4,000-footers I would climb. With thick clouds blocking any view I started the 3,000-vertical-foot descent on W.A. White Trail to the East Branch of the Ausable River. At 1,300 feet, the river marked the lowest point of the route.

I traversed Old Dix Trail between Noonmark and Round Mountains to reach the North Fork of the Bouquet River and started the biggest climb of the trip: a 2,500-foot push up Dix Mountain. I followed Dix Trail to the bottom of a massive rockslide and veered from the trail, taking the more wild option. Walking and friction climbing up the rockslide to a point below the summit, I then bushwhacked up and west, to regain the trail. From there it was only a short walk to the top.

The view was amazing; one of the best I have enjoyed since it was so hard-earned. I gazed west from the highest point on my route and could see where I was just two days earlier: to the west of the Seward Mountains. It seemed ridiculously far. At 26

airline miles away, I had trouble believing I wound a course double that length through undulating terrain.

After enjoying the view to its maximum, I started the second biggest descent of the route, down-climbing nasty eroded sections of trail and butt sliding steeply-angled bedrock. Only three hours later I reached the Elk Lake trailhead where it all started. The trailhead was lonely still. Only a few cars had been added since I stood there four days, eight hours earlier. My last day totaled 19.0 miles but included a thigh-burning 6,000 vertical feet of climbing. Overall, I averaged 25.6 miles and 4,400 vertical feet of climbing each day.

Lesson #5: Concentrate on the experience, not the gear. It's not about speed – it's about seeing more each day. It's not about cutting-edge gear – it's about simplicity and comfort. It's not about ounce counting – it's about common sense.

When I recall the traditional backpacking philosophy I was taught thirteen years ago I remember pain and complexity. When I think of today's fastpacking curriculum I produce a welcoming hand. The time is now for us Northeasterners to find our own level of enlightenment. But to be fair, old-school backpacking's blown knees, slipped disks, and crushed shoulders are still being discussed by those out West; chances are they're in stories that describe a distant past. «« **E.S.** »»