

New York's 3,500-foot Summits in Winter: Rekindling Challenge in the High Peaks

By Erik Schlimmer

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During a ten degree day, high in the North River Mountains of New York State's Adirondack Mountains, I encountered the edge of a ten-foot cliff. My friend, Pete, the only hiker foolish enough to accompany me on a traverse of this rugged five-mile trailless ridgeline, circumnavigated the obstacle but I chose to take the straight line down. I held onto a stout branch with my gloved hands and I, as a quote from La Vida says, "let myself go very, very gradually, letting my arms take the strain."

It was the perfect quote for my smooth descent. Gentle and descriptive as my outstretched arms steadily lowered my dangling body. But La Vida was interrupted by Pete screaming, "Yo! That's all ice. Don't go – " Before Pete could finish his raspy shriek, he was rudely interrupted by a "SNAP," which was my branch breaking. I rocketed down the wall of pale blue ice, doubling acceleration with each foot lost, landing ass-first in a thicket of spruce trees that stood above ice-covered rocks and rib-breaking blowdown. Then all was silent.

Holding his breath, Pete stared at me. Bruised and snow-covered, in a disheveled pile of snowshoes, ski poles, and green Gore-Tex fabric, I still clutched the broken branch in one hand. Deep groans poured out but were slowly replaced by a spring of laughter as I remembered the asinine reason I was in the North River Mountains in the middle of January: to climb every peak above 3,500 feet in New York State, during winter.

Though not often regarded as a mountainous state, New York is king of the North Country concerning when it comes to sizeable peaks. From the southern limit of the Catskill Mountains to the northern tip of the Adirondack Mountains, the Empire State possesses an impressive 131 mountains that exceed 3,500 feet: 35 in the Catskills, 96 in the Adirondacks. By comparison, if you were to list every 3,500-foot summit in Vermont and New Hampshire, their dualistic total would exceed New York's singular tally by just one peak. The breadth of climbing New York's 3,500-foot peaks in winter tries all the skills an adventurer can muster, and then some.

Such was the challenge of New York's 4,000-foot peaks back in the day when the entrepreneur of winter peakbagging, Edgar B. Bean, became the first person to climb the forty-six 4,000-footers of the Adirondacks during winter, in 1962. During the decade following Bean's accomplishment a mere eleven mountaineers repeated his feat – barely one a year – proving that venturing above 4,000 feet in winter forty years ago was arduous. Today the story is different.

Since 1980 an average greater than eleven people have completed "the winter forty-six" every single winter. With more than 240 hikers completing the winter list since 1990, climbing the 4,000-footers of the Adirondacks can be a literal walk in the park, especially for "cruisers": people who search the Internet to find what trails up what peaks are broken. But even when playing by the rules, the ease of climbing peaks above 4,000 feet in winter is raised by the extensive maintenance and cutting of trails. These replace the epic bushwhacks and obliterated routes Bean and company had to deal with. The challenges mountaineers found in the hills during the 60s and 70s are difficult to find today. And, I was part of the problem.

During the 1990s I climbed the forty-six 4,000-footers of the Adirondacks in winter as well as the thirty-five 3,500-foot peaks of the Catskills. Both lists offered challenges, surely, but the challenges were hardly of Bean proportions. Upon completing these eighty-one peaks and reading about peakbagging days gone by, I desired something more. Not just more peaks but more challenge. I wanted a list of peaks to climb that wasn't sanctioned by hiking clubs. I wanted to be off the beaten path, breaking trail until I cried, bushwhacking until I got lost, and skiing long approaches on unplowed roads.

Instead of climbing peaks everyone else climbed and snowshoeing trails that were already packed down, I followed the advice a peakbagger gave me near the turn of the millennium, in regard to rekindling wild experiences. He wrote, "Though the original goal of climbing the 4,000-footers was to take throngs of hikers away from popular ranges, these goals are now nearly unobtainable and work in reverse. Everything's now a popular range, even in winter. To meet the original peakbaggers' setting you'll need to go out on your own into more far-flung land, being conscious this cycle will not be repeated."

He hinted I kick the challenge up a notch by kicking it down a notch. I realized his oration could be the cure-all for predictable peakbagging because the Adirondack peaks between 3,500 feet and 4,000 feet – the peaks remaining to complete a goal of hiking every 3,500-foot peak in the state in winter – saw little traffic. And though I already had more than eighty of the 131 surmounted before I made the 3,500-foot goal official, I was confident I possessed an objective a hardened winter peakbagger from forty years ago would approve of.

The beauty of climbing the unpopular peaks in winter lied in the uniqueness of the idea coupled with the challenge. While everyone flowed like lemmings up Algonquin Peak, Mount Colden, and Giant Mountain, I was the resurrected entrepreneur summiting Little Moose Mountain, Blue Ridge, and Sawtooth Mountains Number Five, among a long roll call of other unheard of summits.

However, though the challenge may sound easy in print, the difficulties cannot be understated. The sub-4,000-foot high peaks possess the ability to reduce the strongest trail-breaker into a sniveling boy. He'll wish he was back home watching tough guy American Chopper, snuggled under his blankie, eating a warm bowl of Spaghetti-O's, rather than snowshoeing up Kilburn Mountain in a raging snowstorm, for example. Equally, the most outgoing female winter mountaineer will plead for a life similar to that of Holly Hobby: inside a warm home in the suburbs, apron-clad, chained to the stove, and loving every minute of it, rather than wincing as her feet turn into blocks of ice on Wallface Mountain on a 0 degree day, for instance. Simply put, these Napoleon-complex peaks are uninviting.

In January 2003 it took me three hours to cover the last mile to the top of Avalanche Mountain through knee-deep snow though I was wearing thirty-inch snowshoes. On Cheney Cobble in February 2002, my partner mistakenly dislodged a fifty-pound, three-foot-wide boulder of snow and ice on top of me, nearly hurling me off a cliff. Above treeline on Wright Peak and Cascade Mountain during January 1998, the winds were so strong I had to literally crawl to their tops.

After breaking trail through deep snow up the 2,000-vertical-foot north side of Green Mountain in March 2002, I was so worked that upon reaching the summit I fell down on my knees and cried (however, that means I broke trail until I cried, reaching one

of my goals above). Sleeping out in the Great Range at minus 36 degrees in January 1995 was memorable.

Though I survived, I have no right to lie: during some of these episodes I wished I had never bought a pair of snowshoes or backcountry skis, never took on the 3,500-footers, and never admired Mr. Bean. I often wished I was back in bed under that gray L.L. Bean wool blanket my mother bought me years ago, peach-colored skin warm. But I shivered more at the thought of quitting a pursuit than getting lost in dream-like whiteouts. The thrill of choosing routes, breaking trail, and finding my way up and down was something I couldn't shake. The self reliance, however, brought battles between mind and body since it was up to me to find enough motivation to summit unnamed, viewless, trailless peaks that saw fewer than ten visitors annually. I often wished for one more break, one more cup of cocoa, and one more minute in my heated car. But what your mind seeks, your body takes you to.

So in mid-March 2005, three years after deciding to climb every 3,500-footer, I found myself on top of the last peak: Little Santanoni Mountain. Little Santanoni's domed summit – which holds distinction as the lowest 3,500-foot peak in the state – stood beautifully above its flanks covered by a solid five-foot-deep snow pack. As I stood by myself inside a winter amphitheater, the initial question of, "Can the challenge of Bean's era still be found in the High Peaks?" came to mind. As I looked out to the blue horizon, with a foreground of trailless 3,500-footers that possessed not a single track on their summits, the answer was a hard-won and satisfying "yes." «**E.S.**»