

ELEVATION ISN'T EVERYTHING

Adventures of the Catskill 3500 Club

By Steve Hoare

Although Henry Hudson sailed by the Catskill Mountains on his 1609 voyage, Washington Irving introduced them to the world. In *Rip Van Winkle*, Irving referred to the Catskills as “fairy mountains,” a mysterious place where unexpected encounters could befall the unwary traveler. Nearly two centuries later, the Catskill Mountains still remain a place of discovery.

However, the Catskills are often dismissed as not really mountains at all. In fact, the area is an eroded plateau, which is why so many of the peaks have similar elevations. Although the Adirondack 46er Club’s members are known for summiting the 46 peaks over 4000 feet, they would have little to scale in the Catskills. The sister club would be the “Twoers,” as there are only two peaks in the Catskills at this elevation.

But to members of the Catskill 3500 Club, the Catskills are far more than just a plateau. Established in 1962, the club now has more than 1,700 members. To become a member, one must summit all 35 Catskill Mountain peaks over 3,500 feet in elevation. In addition, four of the peaks must be conquered in winter, and thirteen of them are trailless. A separate badge is awarded to those hardy individuals who summit all 35 peaks in winter. Anyone who thinks hiking the Catskills is a walk in the park should listen to the stories of the experts—club members themselves.

First, there are the Catskills’ notorious spruce traps—thick, nearly impenetrable stands of young spruce that cluster together, making getting out of them slow, difficult, and painful. Add to that the Catskills’ harsh, changeable weather. Catskill 3500 Club member Manuel A. Peraza, in his essay “Engulfed by Nature,” describes his experience with a spruce trap while on a solo winter bushwhack:

I think about what I’ll do after I finish my 3500 [foot] winter mountains, when all of a sudden—in a flash—I find myself buried in snow up to my neck. For a few seconds I’m in shock, paralyzed, my mind totally blank. Then my instincts for self-preservation propel me into action. I try to get out by using what resembles swimming strokes, but I cannot move my lower body. I am trapped. A spruce trap! ... I am in the middle of a blizzard. Spirals of twisted snow rise up as though dancing into the clouds, energized by the strong, howling winds rushing loudly through the trees. ... I have to start digging until I can reach the snowshoe and try to free it. As I dig into the powdery snow, it keeps falling back into the opening. Finally I reach the end tip of my right snowshoe and pull it hard, but I am not able to dislodge it. I keep digging, but the snowshoe is embedded in the branches. No way can I free myself...

Although Peraza eventually escaped, spruce traps pose a danger to even the most experienced hiker. Another issue of concern is the increasing bear population. Picture yourself in this scenario, described by Anthony Versandi in the essay “Bear Slide!”:

Suddenly, while resting at a small ledge, I heard some crashing from up above me. I turned to see what was happening. Rocks, logs, leaves and debris were falling toward me. I didn’t have time to even think of what could be causing this before I saw it: this huge black bear, probably 400 pounds, was rolling, sliding, tumbling and falling right toward me!

The challenges of hiking the Catskills—including the spruce traps and bears—merit respect, but so do the rewards. Joan Dean, in “Delaware Trails of the Catskill Mountains,” paints this enchanting scene:

The red fox trotted up the side trail by the beaver pond. His coat was shining and red-gold in the rays of the later afternoon sun. I noticed the pointed red and white face, the cowering stance. Not more than three feet away from my “blind”—I was seated on a rock between some bushes—a large raccoon washed its supper at the water’s edge. Out on the pond, two beavers sped back and forth, to and from a bank around a hidden corner of the pond. A small face would pop up from time to time, only to quickly disappear, showing me that there were beaver pups there. Frogs jumped at the edge of the pond and their croaking was constant. On the other side of the pond, four deer fed, two of them fawns. ... I sat enchanted as I drank in the wonder of this scene.

Although from the standpoint of sheer size, the Catskills will always suffer in comparison to the Adirondacks, they have their own unique strengths. Among their many distinctive features, the Catskills have cloves, those rocky mountain gorges stream-cut through the plateau. A few years ago I stood at the top of Kaaterskill Falls looking down into Kaaterskill Clove with a travel writer from Colorado. With perfect reverence and a touch of awe, he whispered, “This is what landscape should look like.”

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