

WORTH EVERY STEP

—conquering the high peaks

By Lt. Tom Caifa

photos by author, except where noted

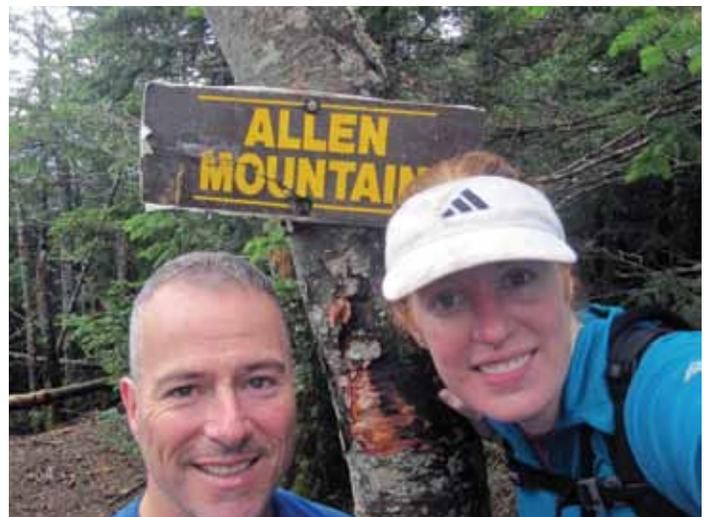
I'm going to admit something that most hardcore hikers won't: on my first serious overnight hike, I couldn't wait to get back to the car. And my girlfriend wanted to brain me with a rock. Anything that could go wrong, did; think rain, lightning, rolled ankles and massive blood donations to insects. The day was bad enough, but the night was miserable. It was pouring rain. A small stream started forming in our tent. Lightning lit up the night every few minutes. As the storm approached, I heard a tree fall. Needless to say, we didn't sleep a wink until the rain stopped at about 4 a.m.

To give you an idea of how bad it was, when we pitched our tent at dusk I could see at least five other tents nearby. In the morning they were all gone except one, and the couple that owned that tent was preparing to leave in a hurry. I could hear the girl screaming at the guy as he packed everything up. He only spoke once, and I'll bet you he wished he didn't, because one millisecond after he uttered the words "It's all part of the camping experience," his soon to be ex-girlfriend went from bad to ballistic.

That memorable event was about 20 years ago and I didn't hike again for a long time. Why would I? If I want to stay in shape, I can go to a nice, climate-controlled gym. I can run or bike on clean, firm roads right outside my door. I can stay warm or cool depending on the time of year. I can stay dry. I don't have

to swat bugs. I don't have to wash mud out of everything. Sounds antiseptic, doesn't it? I'm sure some of you think I'm bordering on blasphemy right now. Well, before you nail an ADK brochure to my front door in protest, please read on.

Two years ago, I went for a run and pulled a muscle in my calf...for the fifth time. Same muscle, same calf. Doctors were no help. They sent me to physical therapy, which helped me heal



The author with DEC Wildlife Biologist Melissa Neely on the trail to Allen Mountain.

each time but obviously wasn't addressing the underlying cause of my problem. I tried everything. Finally I got sick of waiting around for my next injury and swore off running for the foreseeable future. Naturally, I had to find a substitute to plug into my workout regimen. I was already biking about as much as I wanted to, so that was out. Then I got the idea to try hiking again. Of course, me being me, I had to go "whole hog" and decided to tackle a high peak. At 42 years old, I was no dummy (compared to 20 years ago, anyway) so I bought a good pair of hiking boots, a decent daypack and a three-season shell jacket. I also chose a hike that I could handle. It was tough, but I thoroughly enjoyed myself and couldn't wait to do the next one. Then I thought, maybe I could do all the high peaks. Why not? After that, I never looked back. Two years and three months later, I had hiked them all.

"I bet you can't do just one."

Now, I know what a few of you hardcore hiking enthusiasts are thinking: "Big deal, I've done the 46 high peaks eight times over with nothing but a bent knife, an apple, and a two-pound tent that cost a whole paycheck." Good for you. For the rest of us, read on.

The Adirondack Mountains are pretty cool. The views from the top are incredible; that goes without saying. But you will also see great stuff along the way. I've seen waterfalls that look like they are straight off a postcard. I've seen a fisher scoop up a vole and take off in the blink of an eye. I've seen an osprey grab a fish out of the water. I've seen double rainbows over Mount Marcy.

Hiking the 46 Adirondack peaks above 4,000' is a thinking person's activity. Let me say that again: you need to think about what you are doing. Keeping fit amidst civilization is like checkers. Jump, jump, jump, king me. Getting your fitness on in the woods is more like chess. You need to study the board, know what all your pieces can do and then make a plan. Think back to the disaster I mentioned in the beginning. As bad as it was, we made it infinitely worse by not being prepared. And if we had just paid a little more attention to the weather forecast, we probably wouldn't have been there at all.

I don't know about you, but I like to exercise my brain. In today's world, it's all too easy to put in the earplugs and tune out. Learning to use a map and compass is not that hard. Besides, a certain satisfaction comes from knowing that once you've mastered them, you'll never be truly lost. Even packing the right gear requires some thought. You want to bring the essentials (and different hikes can have different essentials) but you can't bring the kitchen sink. You have to think about food, water and shelter.



Beaver Meadow Falls



Base camp near Allen Mountain



Damage from Hurricane Irene can be seen along a stream near Johns Brook Lodge.

You have to think about where to start, when to start, and when to head back. You need to pay attention to trail markers, keep an eye on the weather, and plan for the unexpected. Remember, your cell phone may not work in the back country, and there's no support van to give you a ride and some apple juice if you have problems. There is also that satisfying feeling you get by giving another hiker something he needs, but forgot to bring. It makes you feel self-reliant and that, my friends, is a feeling that's not easily topped.

For a novice hiker, it can be a lot to absorb. Is it really worth it? Absolutely! And it's really not as hard as you might think. You just need to get started and ditch the excuses.

Common excuses for not hiking:

Excuse #1: *It's too hard.* Actually, some of the 46 Adirondack high peaks aren't that bad. If you start with the easier mountains, you can build your confidence and ease into the journey. You can learn from your mistakes on popular, nearby routes where it won't matter as much, and tweak your routines.

Excuse #2: *I don't have the time.* Many of the 46 can be done as day hikes.

Excuse #3: *It's too hard to prepare.* The internet is your friend. You can find information online about individual mountains, proper gear, how to pack correctly, etc. Buying the right boots and gear is as easy as going to a reputable outdoor store. And of course, finding an experienced hiker and bending his or her ear goes a long way.

Excuse #4: *Rain, mud and bugs suck.* True, black flies and mosquitoes do suck (literally), but their presence can be minimized with repellent or just by avoiding certain places and times of year. Minding local weather forecasts can greatly reduce your risk of getting caught in bad weather. In doing the 46, I only got caught in the rain three times. Always bring along a light rain jacket for those unpredictable moments. And hey, a little mud never hurt anybody. In fact, mud was your best friend when you were five years old.



Santanoni lean-to



Relaxing at Johns Brook Lodge



Inside Johns Brook Lodge



Carl Heilman II

Excuse #5: They're too far away. Turn the trip into an adventure. If you live more than three hours away, you can always stay overnight. There are hotels and motels galore. Towns like Keene and Lake Placid can make great getaway locations. Or you can camp. You can even stay in one of the many lean-tos in the high peaks, available on a first-come, first-served basis. Other great options would be either the ADK Loj at Heart Lake or the Johns Brook Lodge, both operated by the Adirondack Mountain Club.

Excuse #6: I do marathons, triathlons, secret missions, etc. The high peaks would get in the way. I once went hiking with a female triathlete. When we got to the top, she said, "Wow, this is cool." Enough said.

Excuse #7: It would take too long. Nobody says you have to do them all. But I bet you can't do just one. And what better way to exercise? Five years from now, you won't get any satisfaction from having worn out that treadmill.

So don't do what I did. Instead of starting with a rain-soaked, bug-infested disaster, plan ahead. Pick a bluebird day, get an early start, and go climb a peak. You'll be glad you did. And your treadmill will forgive you in time.

ECO Lieutenant **Tom Caifa** has contributed to the *Conservationist's On Patrol* page since 2008.

What to Pack

#1



top to bottom, left to right:
Hiking poles, rain shell, daypack, first aid kit, GPS, map, Adirondack Mountain Club guidebook, 100 oz. hydration bladder (fits in my pack), toilet paper, water filter, rope, sunglasses, bandana, camera.

#2



(small gear bag inside my pack)
Emergency blanket, plastic rain poncho, moleskin and athletic/medical tape (work great for preventing blisters), headlamp, compass, knife, whistle, extra batteries, waterproof matches in waterproof orange container, lighter, string, garbage bag.

Get Started



Based on the time commitment required, terrain, and ease of staying on the trail, here are the author's picks of the easiest high peaks:

- 1. Cascade and Porter (done together, they are still probably the easiest)
- 2. Big Slide
- 3. Phelps
- 4. Esther (done alone without doing Whiteface)
- 5. Tabletop