The best hikes are those with little rewards that motivate you to keep going when you’ve set out into unfamiliar territory. Most times when I hike, that reward is a seemingly infinite view of Adirondack mountain peaks whose weathered crags, bare slides, and treed slopes dissolve into the horizon. In the Catskills, however, the summits of the highest peaks do not often offer panoramas like their northern cousins. Instead, one must climb to the top of one of the five towers that remain in the forest preserve to see many of the grand views of this rugged region.
Before we set out on our adventure, I reviewed a trail map of the area and looked at some hiking websites, something I do before most of my hikes in the Catskills. There are several routes we could have taken to the summit with varying degrees of difficulty. Amanda was hoping for a trail with water, like a cool stream or waterfall we could dip our feet into, and lucky for her, we found one.

We chose an 8.16-mile loop up the Spruceton trail, located near West Kill. Marked by blue DEC trail markers, this trail starts at a DEC parking area off Spruceton Road, and is also an equine trail for anyone wishing to ride horses to the peak. After signing in at the register, we crossed over Hunter Brook on a wooden bridge and steadily ascended a wide, well-treed, dirt-and-gravel access road through the forest.

Just before the mile and a half mark, we arrived at a grassy, open, three-way junction. We stopped for a snack and watched a dozen or so swallowtail butterflies flit around ferns and tiny white flowers. From here we took a right where the trail became steeper and a bit more overgrown. About a half mile beyond the junction, there is a cold spring that flows out of a pipe into a half barrel, which, after the steep climb, was just what the two of us needed to cool down.

A little farther up from the spring, the trail opened, there was more sky above us, and the trees seemed to look a little shorter. To the right of a large flat boulder.

Since moving to the Hudson Valley nearly twelve years ago, after spending a lifetime of summers exploring the Adirondacks, I’ve only recently discovered hiking the Catskills. With deep cloves and valleys splitting the higher peaks, the Catskills have a mysterious charm the Hudson River School artists like Thomas Cole and Frederic Church immortalized in their paintings. I started my hikes with an easy, popular trek up Overlook Mountain in Woodstock three years ago and worked my way to hiking (most of) the aptly named Devil’s Path.

A few weeks ago, as the Catskills Fire Tower Five Challenge (see page 5) was being announced, I took off into the Catskills with my daughter Amanda to hike Hunter Mountain, the second highest peak in the preserve and topped with one of the five remaining fire towers in the park. This hike would check off one more 3,500 peak (a local hiking club term noting the 35 Catskill peaks above 3,500 ft.) and also add another tower to my challenge.

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was the John Robb Lean-to, which I think is one of the most beautiful sites to camp I have seen in all my years hiking. To get to the lean-to we walked through a labyrinth of boulders that wound down to a shady clearing with a spectacular lookout over Spruceton Valley and the West Kill Mountain Wilderness. This was another perfect excuse to stop, have a another snack, and take pictures.

One more mile of mostly moderate hiking and we made it to the 60-foot, 112-year-old metal tower, soaring upward in a wide-open clearing against a bright blue sky. We were now at an elevation of 4,040 feet. Neither of us hesitated to shed our day packs and head up to the top. Although the observation room wasn’t open because it was a weekday, we still got some amazing pictures of the 360-degree views of the Blackhead Range, Twin, Sugar Loaf, and Plateau Mountains that make up a portion of the Devil’s Path, and the ski trails on Hunter Mountain below us.

Leaving, we found the yellow blazed trail that would lead to the Devil’s Acre Lean-to on the adjoining red trail, which is also part of the Devil’s Path. The narrow, muddy trails through fragrant conifers didn’t seem to bother us much as we were still feeling pretty good about our accomplishment so far. After maneuvering our way through the trees and mud over a few strategically placed logs, it finally dried up and we exchanged the wet trail for one that became quite steep. We were so focused on getting to Diamond Notch Falls to soak our sore feet that we completely missed the Devil’s Acre Lean-to and the views at the next overlook just below that.

We could hear the brook to our left and knew we were getting closer to the waterfall. The closer we got, however, the darker the sky was becoming. When we reached the falls, we crossed a great wooden bridge over it. The water-eroded stone below us resembled a topographic map, and I wondered how many thousands of years it took to get that way. No sooner had we taken off our boots when the thunder began to roll in and we saw the first bolt of lightning. One quick foot soak and we were back on the trail, rushing to Spruceton Road and making it to the car just as the rains came down.

As we made our way home, we reflected on what a great day we had and how lucky we are to live so close to the Catskills. We’re already making plans to hike to the remaining four fire towers.

Avid hiker Mary Elizabeth is a Graphic Designer in DEC’s office in Albany.
Take the Catskills Fire Tower Five Challenge

As part of New York State’s new “See the Catskills Like Never Before” campaign—a multi-faceted effort to highlight the world-class tourism destinations and recreational opportunities in the Mid-Hudson region—Governor Cuomo announced the Catskills Fire Tower Five Challenge, inviting hikers to visit all five towers in the region: Balsam Lake Mountain (Hardenburgh), Hunter Mountain (Hunter), Overlook Mountain (Woodstock), Red Hill (Denning), and Tremper Mountain (Shandaken).

After hiking to all five towers, visitors are encouraged to send a selfie, including hiking partners, from each tower, along with the date and any story from that hike, to CatskillsChallenge@dec.ny.gov. The first 500 people who complete the Challenge will receive a variety of prizes, including a free NYS Parks pass* for the season, a certificate, and a one-year subscription to Conservationist magazine*.

This competition runs through December 31, 2019. More information is available at firetowerchallengeny.com.

*Limit one per household.