



EIGHT DAYS

—thru-hiking the Northville-Placid Trail

By Peter Nye & John Privitera
Photos by authors unless noted

A bit unsteady due to the load on my back, I step onto the bathroom scale to assess the situation. Even before looking, I knew I was in trouble, and my fears are confirmed when the digital readout settles on 64 pounds more than I weigh. Egads. I can see some serious reduction is in order.

Avid hikers for years, my friend John and I are finally tackling the 122-mile long Northville-Lake Placid Trail (NPT). The trail winds through the heart of the Adirondacks and traverses five distinct wilderness areas, including some very remote sections. Although lean-tos are scattered along the length of the trail, our motto is “Don’t count on anything; be

prepared.” But for the planned 7-day trek to be successful, we need to pack carefully. My 64-pound pack isn’t going to cut it.

In preparation for the hike, John and I had been poring over guidebooks, maps and gear for months. For the sake of efficiency and redundancy, we decided to each pack as if we were going solo. It being the second week of October, we needed

to be ready for changeable weather. Extra socks, rain gear, sleeping bag and pad, tent, water filtration system, cook stove and fuel, first-aid supplies, and 20 pounds of food were all stuffed into my pack.

After removing as many non-essentials as I felt I could, the pack is only four pounds lighter. I wonder if I am deluding myself that we can hike our planned 16-21 miles a day carrying a load like this. The Adirondack Mountain Club's *Guide to Adirondack Trails 4: Northville-Placid Trail* suggests a pace of 1.5 miles per hour to complete the NPT in 10 days. But John and I are veteran hikers, marathoners, men of fitness and mojo; surely we can walk 2-3 mph and complete this route in a week.

A week later, hoisting my pack onto my back in the Upper Benson Trailhead parking area, I turn to John and hesitantly ask what his pack weighs. To my relief he says 60 pounds. But while the concept of "misery loves company" brings a smile to my face, I know we are both in for a challenging walk. I figure that the sooner I consume all my food, the lighter my load will be. So when John offers me some walnuts, I say that if I am going to eat anything, it will be from my own pack.

DAY One

We begin hiking later than intended because John has to adjust the contents of his pack. Although the temperature is 34 degrees, it climbs rapidly, requiring a quick change of clothing.

Just before Canary Ponds, we spot a screech owl only 20 feet away, but then don't see another creature—animal or human—thereafter. By 5 p.m., we've covered 16.2 miles and are so exhausted that we can't continue. We had planned to go further and stay at the Hamilton Stream lean-to, but 9½ hours of hiking is enough for our first day. Besides, that nice, grassy area next to the Sacandaga River looks so inviting. Boy, are we glad we brought tents and didn't count on reaching a lean-to every night for the sake of a lighter pack. After dinner, we quickly fall asleep, lulled by the babbling river.

DAY Two

Regardless of our good intentions, we get off to another late start. It's cloudy and cool, and most of the fall foliage is underfoot rather than overhead. We spy two young red-bellied snakes, one eastern garter snake and several large flocks of Canada geese.

Despite some easy terrain, including roadways, we cover only 15.8 miles in 10 hours—less than the previous day and four miles shy of our target: Third Spruce Lake lean-to. Again, we break out our tents at a nice site on the north side of Jessup River.

The first day's fatigue has faded, but our dinner conversation about the remaining 90 miles is influenced by unspoken concerns about our timetable, fitness and resolve. So far, effort has outweighed fun.

John ponders crossing the river at Sampson Bog Falls.



DAY Three

Up early, we have plenty of time to brew coffee and apply moleskin to our feet. We hit the trail and reach the lean-to at Third Spruce Lake in two hours, lingering in the peace and beauty of the West Canada Lakes Wilderness Area before hiking another three miles to Sampson Bog outlet. Although the bridge is gone, previous hikers placed deadfalls across the outlet, enabling us to cross.

Already 3:30 p.m., we press past several lakes and lean-tos as we've only covered nine miles. We sign the trail register at West Lake, which shows two other parties are thru-hiking a day or two ahead of us.

As we approach Cedar Lakes after 10 hours of hiking, we find the first lean-to occupied, so we drag our tired bodies an additional half mile to the next lean-to, also occupied. However, the young end-to-enders invite us to share it with them, and their company and conversation are a welcome diversion. We're grateful for the ready-made shelter from the wind and drizzle that has developed.

John strips off his socks to attend to the large blister he's developed on his foot, while I discover blood on my sock. Apparently two layers of socks plus moleskin have compressed my toes, causing a toenail to cut into the nearby toe. Oh well, at least it doesn't hurt.



DAY Four

Today's section includes seven miles of private property along Cedar River Road. Rain begins, and the nearly 10 miles to Wakely Dam is a slow, wet slog. Along the way we see a large doe and numerous fresh moose tracks, but no moose. The rain stops, so we take a break to remove rain gear and change socks. It's 2 p.m. as we begin hiking Cedar River Road—too early to quit for the day, but we won't make it to the next camping area until 8 p.m. Although we're tired, John suggests getting some more mileage under our belts.

Tirrell Pond lean-to





After another five miles or so, we look for a place to camp. Finding a picturesque setting along the bank of the Cedar River, we pitch our tents, prepare a quick dinner and turn in to the sound of the river and returning rain.

DAY *Five*

Decision Day. We awaken to clear skies, 30 degrees and ice-coated tents. Today we'll reach Lake Durant with the option of "bailing" and being picked up in Blue Mountain Lake. Otherwise, we'll need at least one extra day for our trip.

After hiking the remaining distance along Cedar River Road, we initially have trouble finding the route back to state land. A sign on private property says, "Through NPT hikers may pass," so off we go.

The area at Stephens Pond outlet is flooded, but an alternate route brings us to a deep stream which we must cross on a log. Avoiding getting dunked, we hike 3.5 miles to Lake Durant Campground. John's feet are better, but one of mine is hurting, the result of excess compression from too many layers. So I shed everything but a single pair of socks and slip into my sneakers, generally reserved for evenings. Relief is instantaneous. We use the payphone to call home about our decision to spend an eighth day completing the trail.

Several more miles take us to the lean-to at the north end of Tirrell Pond, where we settle for the night. We've covered only 12 miles, but with an extra day, we're confident we can complete the remaining 47 miles in three days. While having dinner, we marvel at the grandeur of Tirrell Mountain.

DAY *Six*

It's only 26 degrees, and we welcome the warmth of the fire during breakfast. Fortified, we climb the roughly 1,000 feet over a saddle around Blue Mountain. After a strenuous hike up Tarbell Road, we enter the woods and head north on the east side of Long Lake. The day has been cool and clear, but by late afternoon, it's cloudy and very windy.

Five miles up the lake, we meet four guys camping at the Kelly Point lean-to. They have a roaring fire and insist we join them for a beer. After six days on the trail, it tastes mighty fine. Unfortunately, it begins raining, and we still need to reach Rodney Point, more than a mile away. So we don our rain gear, gratefully accept more beer to drink later, and then take off.

Our lean-to has a nice view of the lake, but we're bushed and it's still raining, so we go to bed early. It's cold during the night, which makes me wish I hadn't had those beers as I have to leave my warm sleeping bag several times...



Our campsite along the Cedar River.



Although some are in rough shape, man-made bridges like this one aid hikers in crossing streams and other wet areas.



DAY Seven

Morning greets us with drizzle and temperatures in the 30s. Wearing fleece pants and coats, we begin our 17-mile trek. Within a half hour, though, we shed some layers.

The trail at the north end of Long Lake is pretty rugged. When it begins sleeting, we pull out rain gear, but because the ground and vegetation are so wet, we soon get soaked anyway. Precipitation continues throughout the day.

This is the wildest and most scenic section of trail, much of it following Cold River, and we enjoy it despite our discomfort. We're squarely within the High Peaks Wilderness, and snow-capped mountains sparkle in the distance on both sides of the trail. There are lean-tos along this stretch, and we long to take side trips to challenging peaks like MacNaughton, Street and Nye. Of course, we stop at Noah John Rondeau's hermitage on Cold River, where he lived for more than a decade in the early 1900s (see "Secret Scratchings" in the February 2011 *Conservationist*).

Eventually, after 10.5 hours on the trail, we arrive at the well-used, Cold River #2 lean-to. We're dripping wet, so I start a fire, and we dry our clothing and footwear. Our tired limbs absorb the soothing heat, renewing us for tomorrow's final push. We quickly fall asleep to the fire's flickering glow on the ceiling of the lean-to.

DAY Eight

It's our final morning, the stove's going, coffee's brewing and our toes are all re-wrapped and ready for the last 13 miles. One mile in, we arrive at Duck Hole as the mist is rising. Beyond, the forest is dark, and the ground is muddy and slippery from the previous day's rain. Roots and rocks are plentiful, requiring careful travel.

As we ford pools created by beaver dams, John slips into a deep one but manages to keep his pack upright and dry. Our trail guide says this stretch is "very rough, and the hiker should not plan to make good time here." No kidding. After a little more than five miles, we pass the lean-to at Moose Pond and soon reach beautiful Wanika Falls.

The remaining seven miles are uneventful, and we finally emerge into the afternoon sunshine at the trailhead on Averyville Road. Proud of our accomplishment, we wait eagerly for someone to come along and snap our picture. Later, we remove our packs and head into Lake Placid for a fine "civilized" lunch.

Reflecting on the trip, we tally figures and discover that we hiked 75 hours in 8 days, and averaged 15.2 mi./day at a speed of 1.6 mi./hr.—almost exactly what the guidebook said. We agree this pace is not for everyone, especially those who want to really enjoy the beauty and serenity of the trail, but revel in the fact that we did it.

That night's three-hour trip back to Northville went quickly—Led Zeppelin in our ears, the Northville-Placid Trail in our hearts, and our mojo intact.

Editor's Note: In the wake of Hurricane Irene, be sure to check for current trail conditions before venturing out. Visit www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7865.html

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We made it!