

BAY-Hiking 5/1

HEADLINE: A journey of 12 mountains begins with a single step

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The idea of conquering the great outdoors is not new to the human race. Take the cliché about the climber who was asked why he climbed the mountain. “Because it was there,” was the caustic reply, which pretty sums up how I found myself wanting to climb 12 mountains while receiving only a patch for the effort.

To say that you did something difficult and have people admire your accomplishment is a powerful and attractive motivator, especially for a slightly overweight journalist who hasn’t hiked in 15 years. Though I could just go on these hikes and enjoy the woods, I wanted to learn as much as I could in the process. So I decided to enlist companions to teach me about the Belknap Mountains and the Lakes Region in general. For my first hike I took along Don Watson and his wife Rebecca, the couple who started the Belknap Hiker’s Patch program. Their amazing “trail” dog Denny joined us.

The Belknap Hiker’s Patch was started by Don Watson two years ago in an effort to get families and kids out into the woods and hiking. Since that time 78 people have completed the patch, which requires the hiker to get to the summit of 12 mountains in the Belknap range. There is no time limit for completing

the hikes; participants can take as long as they like. The record for finishing the hikes is a local young man who ran to all 12 summits in four hours and 20 minutes. I decide I am not going to be as ambitious and am content to simply complete one hike at a time.

The 12 mountains in question are Rowe, Gunstock, Belknap, Piper, Whiteface, Mack, Klem, Rand, Anna, Quarry West, Straightback and Major. I let Watson lead me to where he thinks we should go for my first trek into the mountains, and, having donned my brand-new hiking boots for the occasion but forgetting to fill my water bottle, I figure I am as ready as I will ever be.

When I arrive at the meeting area, Watson says he wants us to hike the White Trail up Belknap and then perhaps hike over to Gunstock and slide (did he say slide?) down the mountain to where our cars are parked. He certainly did say slide – as we are grabbing our packs for the journey he pulls out sleds and straps them to his pack.

We head off up the White Trail, and when we arrive at a junction he tells me that we have some choices. If I don’t want to hike Belknap, we could go to Mt. Piper instead. When he describes it as the easiest and shortest of the hikes, it’s all the incentive I need to veer off onto the Orange Trail.

Watson takes the time to explain trail markings to me as we walk along. A stripe of color will usually be painted on a tree or rock to indicate where the trail continues. This is where the trail gets its name most of the time. I

learn it is very important to pay attention because some of the trails in the Belknaps are not very well marked and even experienced hikers can get lost if they are not paying attention. I am immediately glad I went to the library and photocopied some maps of the area.

Insisting that I learn to find trails myself, the Watsons let me lead, and I highly enjoy the beautiful weather while searching for the trail markers that will guide us to the top. I find that when the trail turns, the painted markers will be painted in a bend to indicate in which direction the trail continues. In the absence of obvious markers, Watson tells me that a hiker can look at the trees and see if a saw, or other tool, has cut them, indicating the trail was created through that area. Or, in the absence of trees and to make sure the trail is seen, hikers will make “cairns” in open areas. A cairn is a pile of stones and was sometimes used by ancient peoples as burial mounds.

When we finally reach the top, there are gorgeous views of the lakes and surrounding mountains. Turkey vultures circle in the sky, and we settle down for a small snack. The top of Mount Piper is very rocky and relatively flat. There are stone chairs that were made by hikers for relaxation, and a small square built of stones can provide shelter from cold winds.

Watson shows me the things he always carries with him and I try to take notes for future hikes, as this is really a Hiking 101 course for me and I plan to take at least one hike on my own. He digs out a parka, maps, several

compasses, an extra shirt and toilet paper, and I curse my lack of preparation for this hike, short of hiking boots and an empty water bottle.

“Don’t eat all your snacks at once,” says Watson. “If something happens and you break your leg, it may be a couple hours before you get help, so you will want something to eat.”

I chuckle at the thought, picturing rescue workers reaching me on some hidden trail happily munching an energy bar while nursing a broken leg.

“Seriously,” he says, cutting off my chuckle. “Always save some of your snacks.”

We decide to forego the way we came up the mountain and hike down the green and blue trails through conservation land. Watson points out some rare trees for the area, and we stop by a small waterfall as we near the end of the hike.

In the end, we hiked three miles, and I crossed off Mount Piper from my list. For anyone thinking about tackling the Belknap Range, or just hiking one mountain, this is a good start. The summit of Mount Piper stands at 2,044 feet, and the trail is very well marked. Kids would really enjoy the hike; near the summit there are large blueberry patches, a tasty treat to compliment a nice family hike.

*Danielle plans to chronicle her 12-mountain goal throughout the spring and summer. Next up will be a hike up Mount Major with a local geologist.*

CUTLINE: I CONQUER Mt. Piper, the first of 12

mountains I need to climb to earn a “Belknap Range Hiker” patch. Just hum the “Rocky” theme as background music to this picture. (Danielle DeLisle)