

BAY-Hiking 5/8

HEADLINE: Mt. Major: A journey 360 million years in the making

1022 words

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Okay, so I borrowed a bit from “Jurassic Park” for the headline. I hope Spielberg forgives me for using his apt tagline to describe my hike to Mount Major in Alton.

I was really looking forward to my second hike in my quest for the Belknap Range Hiker patch, so I was disappointed to hear that the weather was going to be less than stellar. Nonetheless, I bravely strode out my door last Sunday with a full water bottle, brand new daypack and snacks safely tucked away. I also included a raincoat and an umbrella.

I met Dan Tinkham, a local hydrogeologist with Emery and Garret Groundwater Inc., at the beginning of the trail to Mount Major. The trail can be found just off Route 11 in Alton. There is a sign leading hikers to the parking lot at the beginning of the trail.

Dan specializes in glacial geology, which is perfect for hiking in the Belknaps, because the area was partially formed by glaciers. Dan brought his teenage son Jake along for the hike. Jake has already received his patch and is currently working on climbing 4,000-foot-elevation mountains for a Boy Scout patch.

Dan and I don our packs and I put on my raincoat, because the weather is very misty and cool even in the afternoon. By the time we are ready to start on what is

named the “Boulder Trail,” Jake is already almost out of sight on the trail.

“He’s kind of like a dog,” grins Dan. “He’ll hike 10 miles while we’ll do four.”

As we start walking, it is evident how the trail got its name. Huge boulders can be seen in the woods and on the trail itself, sometimes to the point of the ground being completely covered with them, making the trail look like a giant’s cobble stone walkway.

Dan tells me that these rocks are what geologists call “glacial erratics” which are stones picked up by glaciers and then dropped as the glacier moved or they are shaved off of mountains. One of the most interesting facts about New Hampshire, geology wise, is that there are so many different kinds of stone in one area. The Belknaps were at one point over four kilometers high, which is about as high as the Himalayas are now.

What would become the Belknap Mountains were first formed by volcanic eruptions when two tectonic plates in the earth crashed together millions of years ago and then glaciers came through and helped shape the mountains we know now. Looking at the cool, quiet misty scene around me it is hard to believe that this was once red-hot lava and volcanic stone.

It becomes a little bit easier to believe later on because I find myself staring at the rock by mere inches. There are a couple points in our hike where getting through requires scrambling over huge rocks like a mountain goat. The trail is very well marked with bright orange

blazes, though, and I figure if Boy Scouts can do it then I can too.

Several of the rocks are slippery because of the rain and I am thankful that the clerk steered me in the right direction when I bought my hiking boots.

Here’s a free tip: Invest in a good pair of hiking boots if you are going to do any hiking at all. Trust me, your feet will thank you.

I also had some hiking poles that Don Watson loaned me after my first hike, and I found them really helpful in feeling more steady on the trail, especially since there were lots of roots and rocks. This is a good investment for anyone who is an incredible klutz, like me, or just wants some extra sturdiness.

The views are supposed to be fantastic from the top of Mount Major, but when we get up to the summit, it is shrouded in mist and fog. There is a small three-sided “fortress” with no roof that marks the summit of the mountain, and when Dan and I arrive Jake is already there placing rocks back on the walls of the building that have apparently fallen off. We take a moment to refresh ourselves, and I make sure to leave one of my snacks in my pack. This is what I am now calling my “Broken Leg Contingency Plan,” and I hope Don would be proud of me.

Dan and I take a stroll around the summit where he shows me some of the oldest rock in the area. It is over 360 million years old. Some of it is even embedded or has chunks of younger rock embedded in it.

“This is only 140 million years old,” says Dan.

Yeah. Only. I begin to realize that geologists have a different perception of time than others do.

After a small break we pack our things and begin our descent. Dan and I take the “Brooke Trail” which he tells has gentler slopes than the “Boulder Trail.” Jake decides he wants to take the steeper and shorter main trail to meet us at the bottom.

Again, the name of the trail becomes clear as we head back down the mountain because there is a rather pleasant looking brook that runs along the trail. Dan says that the brook becomes dry in the summer so we are lucky it is running and we can enjoy it. The trail is wide and clean and not too steep and I am highly enjoying myself when all too soon we find ourselves back in the parking lot. The skies have cleared and I am slightly sad that this journey has ended.

Still, I check off Mount Major happily from my list of mountains and am excitedly planning my next journey.

The hike Dan and I completed was about 3.8 miles, and the summit of Mount Major is 1,786 feet. That’s for anyone who wishes to follow in our footsteps.

Danielle plans to chronicle her 12-mountain goal throughout the spring and summer. To get your own check-off list, maps, and other info, visit www.belknapsportsmensclub.com or email dwatsonmusic@hotmail.com.

CUTLINE: (Hiking1) THE BEGINNING of the “Boulder Trail” as seen from the parking lot; as you can see Jake Tinkham is already on his way! (Danielle DeLisle)

CUTLINE (Hiking2) THERE WERE A LOT OF CHARRED TREES and grass all the way up to the summit, evidence of the fires that crawled over this mountain last week. (Danielle DeLisle)