

BAY-Hiking 8/7

HEADLINE: Whiteface Mountain: A journey of blueberries and building

1163 words

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What do they say about falling off a horse? That's right. You get right back on! After my last adventure to Mount Klem, I must admit I was a little apprehensive about going on another hike so soon. Then I told myself that my experience was beneficial in several ways. The first being that it made for a serious reminder that I was, indeed, out in nature and it could turn dangerous very quickly if I wasn't careful. All too often when I am out in the woods enjoying a trail and the pretty forest or water in front of me, it is easy to forget that I have to be very aware at all times in the woods. I could lose the trail when I am not watching closely enough, like I did hiking Klem, or hurt myself because I was distracted.

The second benefit is that a healthy respect for nature really sank in for me when I was wandering around the woods. Here was this vast expanse of wild space, and there I was so small and vulnerable. I decided that I was wiser for my experience, I hoped, and didn't let it deter me from going on to conquer my next mountain.

This hike, my goal this time was Whiteface Mountain. I was very glad that I wasn't going alone and that my company knows the Belknaps as well as anyone you could find in the region. They should know the trails,

because they help build and maintain those very paths I have trod these past few months.

Don Watson directed me to Hal Graham as someone who is very knowledgeable. Hal and his wife, Peg, lead a bunch of BRATTs all over the Belknap Mountains. As you can probably tell, the name has nothing to do with their attitudes, and instead has everything to do with the Belknap Range Trail Tenders. I had no idea what it takes to actually tend a trail and so I was very interested to hear what they would have to say.

I met up with Peg and Hal near Carriage Road, and we headed down to the end of Belknap Mountain Road to begin our ascent up Whiteface. The day was very clear and there was not one sign of rain as we started off along the trail. Hal pointed out where four-wheelers and motorbikes had gone before us and scratched up rocks along the trails, creating huge pits where water was collecting. Often we had to wander around these huge spots of water. Peg said that sometimes people come up here on purpose to get their trucks stuck in the mud and try to get them out again. That seemed a little odd to me, but to each their own, right? The trail we were on was wide enough for a road and is used to gain access to the top in the winter and summer by small vehicles like snowmobiles.

As we walked, we started talking about the group that the couple founded in the '90s to maintain the trails in the Belknaps. Hal said they saw the need for someone to take care of the trails when

they first started hiking around the Belknaps. Some of the trails were in terrible shape and not marked well at all. Plants had grown over the paths and deadfall was strewn in the way in some areas. Hal wrote to the state asking for money to start a small group, which he received. Today, the small group of Trail Tenders works on the trails to make sure they are safe and well marked.

As we climbed higher and higher into the mountains, Hal said that even a regular hiker could help out in tending trails by making sure no deadfall is on the trail as they are walking along. If someone sees a branch in the way or a major deposit of leaves, moving it off the trail keeps the way nicer for the next person to come along. The BRATTs also handle big projects like creating steps and diverting water run off to prevent trail erosion.

By this time, we had nearly reached the top of the trail and saw massive amounts of blueberries. I even got to try my first huckleberry. It was pretty good, but not as good as blueberries. I marveled again at how sweet and good these wild blueberries are. Sweetened by the sun, these little gems are truly worth a walk up a mountain. We could even see where birds and other animals had been enjoying them too. Not long after this, we were able to see the top.

"It's your summit. Go for it!" Peg said to me and I smiled.

My summit! How cool does that sound? Makes me sound like I'm climbing Mount Everest or Kilimanjaro instead of little old Whiteface Mountain.

The views from the top were absolutely amazing. We could see so many lakes, and Hal pointed out some of the mountains I had already done.

We stopped to sustain ourselves with snacks, and I admired the patches Peg had on her backpack from doing various club lists. Many mountain clubs have patches for doing certain mountains and motivated individuals collect them. Sometimes these feats are very difficult. Peg explained to me that many of the mountains for her Trail Riders patch don't have marked trails, so you have to bushwhack the whole way. I involuntarily shivered.

We marked sadly that someone had a major party up here recently and beer cans were piled in a fire pit, marring the summit of the mountain. What do they think? The trash fairy is going to come and take this all away? They obviously brought it up here. How much harder is it to take out empty beer cans than to bring in full ones? I sigh heavily. If I had a bag with me I probably would have tried to pick them up, but alas we had to leave them there. It's a shame how little respect people have sometimes for the world they live in.

We started back down, and we took a different trail this time. Hal showed me how erosion is one of the biggest dangers to trails. Water rushes along the trails and pushes debris and soil away from the trail. This exposes rocks and other things that makes the trail hard to walk. The BRATTs use stones and logs to try and save these trails. Even just a couple people can make a difference

in how long the trail can be enjoyed. I am happy to report that I made it back to my car having stayed on the trail and having learned about all the work that goes into maintaining a trail.

The Grahams are always looking for individuals to help maintain the trails. If you are interested in becoming a BRATT, contact Hal and Peg at 286-3506.

CUTLINE (hiking1) PEG GRAHAM'S backpack that displays some of the hiking patches she has earned. Maybe someday my pack will look like this? (Danielle DeLisle – Gilford Steamer)

CUTLINE (Hiking2) PEG GRAHAM and the amazing blueberry patch, I ate so many I thought I was going to turn into one! (Danielle DeLisle – Gilford Steamer)

CUTLINE (Hiking3) TAKEN FROM the summit! Mountain number nine! (Danielle DeLisle – Gilford Steamer)