

From the Peak Along the Fringe

By Ira Orenstein

With beautiful peak Fall foliage in the Northeastern United States comes droves of visitors from all over the world. Tour buses make grand entries into otherwise quaint towns ferrying curious leaf-lovers. Hiking trails see a surge in the number of foot travelers at this time of year with temperatures moderated and mosquito activity curtailed. The deciduous forest is in full colorful splendor.

Soon the fringe or “in between” season arrives that maybe begins around Halloween in the Catskills. The crowds are gone and those quaint tour bus destinations are now “ghost” towns. As the leaves drop off and the trees lose their color the trails become far less trafficked if not empty. To me, this is a great time of year.

Today I set out to do a 6 mile loop hike of The Timp in New York’s Harriman State Park. Over the previous several weeks my camera accompanied me to capture images of the autumn leaves. On this day, however, I assume that the foliage is well past peak. It is a beautiful bright sunny day with the temperature in the 60s and, as expected, most of the remaining leaves are brown.

Leaf color is dependent upon the presence or lack, thereof, of several basic types of pigments. Chlorophyll is responsible for carbohydrate synthesis and gives leaves their green color. Anthocyanins and carotenoids generally impart red and yellow pigmentation, respectively. Tannins provide a brown coloration to some oak leaves.

After a little less than two hours of hiking, I summit The Timp to be greeted by a “carpet of gold.” The autumn mid-afternoon’s low, brilliant sun casts vibrancy to the landscape that is so vivid that each leaf appears to be individually visible and burnished with gold foil. Angular rock outcroppings and cobbles added rugged character to this vast panorama. The only time I had witnessed a scene of this nature was on a screen at a lecture that I attended at the Catskill 3500 Club Annual Dinner. The speaker was showing scenes created by the Hudson River School of artists in the 1800s and comparing them to recently taken photographs from the same vantage points. A beautiful painting completed in 1880 by Sanford Gifford entitled “October in the Catskills” caught my attention. My only criticism of this piece was that the scene appeared to be “unrealistically golden.” Today I am proven wrong in my critique. Unbeknownst to me, “November in Harriman” is “October in the Catskills,” a fleeting moment of perfection that I am fortunate to witness in person but have no way to archive as my camera is back at home. After savoring the view, I pick up my daypack and continue on my way.

Approximately one hour later I come to one of my favorite sections – a half-mile of flat open terrain. On this particular day I happen upon an arboreal gem. A pine tree stands with perfect triangular (Christmas tree-like) symmetry approximately 40-50 feet tall. I

am impressed by its brilliant lemon yellow “foliage” as the Tamarack is the only pine tree that is deciduous (loses its leaves in winter). So much for another “fleeting perfect” Kodak moment worth archiving. If only my camera weren’t back at home. As Andy Warhol said, “Everyone will be world famous for 15 minutes.” And so it is for this Tamarack in Harriman Park in the eyes of this hiker.

Late November sees very little in the way of human presence in the mountains. Skiers patiently await the upcoming snows. Foliage seekers had their day although some leaves stubbornly hang on. My wife Karen and I are hiking up Peekamoose Mountain in the Catskills from Peekamoose Road. Self-reliance on the trail is prudent at all times of year and the experience of solitude serves to reinforce that need. Knowing that cell phone service in the Catskills is spotty, I decide to carry my personal locator beacon today (see Catskill 3500 Club website Hiking Safety section “*Personal Locator Beacons*”). Our packs are a bit heavier now than they were just a few weeks prior, providing good gradual training for the even heavier packs to be toted in the winter months to come.

There is a thin layer of snow blanketing the forest. The terraced rocky landscape that so characterizes the Catskills is more vividly apparent owing to the white horizontal and black vertical faces that this sugar powder enhances. The Sun transmits light through the translucent tan beech leaves, some of which will remain intact for the entire winter. Soon these Japanese paper lanterns will look even more beautiful when they become rimmed with hoar frost. As the leaves on the trees thin out so the distant views are revealed.

This is a very active time of year in the forest. The silence is intermittently broken by a breeze and the scurrying of chipmunks rustling through the leaves making final preparations for winter in search of food to be consumed and sequestered. Empty acorn shells abound in the deciduous forest while piles of pine nut casings are spotted as we reach higher altitudes. It is amazing to me how the trees provide necessary fat intake for animals just in time for winter. Nature is in total balance. The mating season for the White Tailed Deer is winding down as they were busy courting mates, moving around and communicating silently through the release of chemical pheromones.

As I continue ascending I feel chilly and I wonder why this time of year often feels colder to me than a typical day in the dead of winter. Maybe my body is not yet adapted to the cold. Trudging through snow with a heavier day pack and snow shoes can certainly keep me toasty. Maybe snow serves to reflect solar radiation back up toward me, creating a thin layer of ambient warmth.

I ruminate over issues regarding the “tools of the trade” that I will need to hike during the challenges of winter. I will need to re-apply water repellent chemistry to my clothing and

boots. Remember to inspect those show shoes and to oil their hinges. Should I sharpen the points on my crampons? What else do I need to do? Most importantly, where will I go? A White Mountain hut in winter sounds nice (yes, some Appalachian Mountain Club huts do remain open throughout the year). Maybe another light mountaineering course is in order as I want my adventures to be safe. For today on the “fringe” my additional gear includes extra layers, Microspikes, and plenty of bright orange “stuff” including an orange hat, orange gloves, orange survey tape tied to the front of my pack and a bright orange rain cover enveloping the back of my pack (maybe I should purchase one of those synthetic safety vests)– it’s hunting season.

The definition of “fringe” season varies from year to year and from place to place. One might argue that this term could be applied to summer in New Hampshire’s Presidential Range above tree line. Likewise there are occasional years when snow is so sparse that the hiker can experience fringe conditions in mid-winter while skiers wait patiently. Karen, my younger son Jeremy and I are climbing Cannon Mountain in New Hampshire’s White Mountains. We prudently check the Higher Summits Forecast that The Mount Washington Observatory provides and although it is only late October but we will definitely be experiencing pre-winter conditions. We ascend the mountain in the midst of stiff breezes and sleet. Care is taken to avoid slipping on the wet leaves and ball bearing-like acorns that cover the trail. Conditions change more dramatically at this time of year as altitude is gained. As we reach 3500 foot elevation the wet rocks are intermittently covered with verglas (thin ice) and the roots are all covered with same. This calls for total focus and choice footing in order to avoid a slip. We are alert to the potential for “hidden surprises” as the leaves make cover ice or wet ground that is not readily apparent. We elect not to don our Microspikes as we are able to seek out dry rock. Even with this foot traction extreme care would be necessary as the thin ice would not provide much purchase. All the roots are very slippery. It’s nice to know that we brought along another piece of potentially useful equipment - 75 feet of light rope that we can use as a “hand rail” in a pinch on the way down.

Two days later Karen and I are climbing Mount Waumbek in the Northern White Mountains. It is a wet day and as we ascend we are hiking in the clouds. It is hard to call it “raining.” Rather, we are bathed by very fine water droplets so typical of this time of year at higher elevations. It is these droplets that in colder weather produce the hoar frost that commonly coats all solid objects in its presence. The clouds slowly and subtly soak and chill us. We are wearing waterproof/breathable gear that is apparently not breathable enough for our output as condensation forms inside against our layers. Hence the need to pack extra clothing when hiking on the “fringe.” With that said, I realize that I forgot to pack my puffy jacket, an error I rarely make. I loaded my pack the night before and intentionally left my puffy out to avoid unnecessary compression that reduces loft and lifespan. I planned on packing it in the morning, along with food that is

in the fridge and water. Maybe I will henceforth I will attach my checklist directly onto my pack. Fortunately I was fine without the jacket and Karen had extra layers if needed. As we descend I am reminded that today we got a late start and the days are getting shorter. Fortunately we replaced our old headlamp batteries with new lithiums that last longer than alkalines in the cold.

With proper preparation, transitioning from the “peak to the fringe” offers a great opportunity to actively enjoy the secrets and wonders of the mountains long after the crowds have dissipated. Happy trails.