

Maintaining Homeostasis – a Kaaterskill Marathon *By Ira Orenstein and Karen Bloom*

In late December of 2010 we set out to climb Kaaterskill High Peak from the Platt Clove Road parking area in the Catskills. Our rationale for picking this peak (one of seven winter peaks remaining for us) was that a very heavy snow had fallen two days prior and this snowmobile trail might be broken in. To our delight we saw snowmobile tracks at the trailhead. Also, a party of two signed in at the register the day before with the same goal of climbing Kaaterskill (with a question mark). We followed snowmobile tracks and snowshoe prints to the Huckleberry Point trail junction. The snowmobiles made U-turns there and we were now left with snowshoe tracks from the prior day's hikers that ended about one mile beyond Huckleberry point, where they made the decision to turn around. From this point we were on our own, laboriously breaking trail through the Pine Plains section and up into the also unbroken inner snowmobile loop.

Having climbed Kaaterskill a few years earlier, we thought it would be easy to find the blue-blazed herd path on the north side of the mountain (left turn off the Long Path to inner loop, then a right on inner loop for maybe 1/10 mile, blue-blazed herd path on the left). The trees trunks were plastered with snow and as a result we could not find the blazes. We knew that we had to be within 100 yards of the herd path. After 15 minutes of searching we decided to take a bearing and head up (with the help of our GPS). The going was rough with increasing snow depths and steepness, in addition to blow down and cliffs to work around. This was the first time we ever recalled experiencing the taking of a step, followed by a sudden thumping sound with a crack appearing in the snow as much as 20 feet in front of us extending as much as 10 yards perpendicular to the fall line. None of these cracks ever released, probably because the snow was stabilized by the abundance of forest growth. It was interesting to see on a miniature scale how humans can trigger avalanches. After approximately one and one-half hours of extremely slow progress and hard work, we came to a halt within 0.12 linear miles of the summit, according to my GPS. The ground we were standing on was so steep and the snow so deep that it was virtually impossible to advance. Now an alcove of cliffs towered before us, guarding the summit. We knew that although the Catskills are notorious for having terraced cliffy terrain, these obstacles are usually surmountable by moving laterally until an opening that permits passage appears. Karen and I realized, however that despite our best efforts, it was time to turn around considering the slow progress and time of day.

While descending back to the loop trail we agreed to check on the remote possibility that another party may have found the herd path and ascended to the summit. Sure enough, a trail was clearly broken in at a rock cairn on the east side of a tiny stream. It was approximately 2 pm and after a brief discussion of our options (including returning the following day) we decided to go for it. While ascending, we were amazed at the scouting skills of the party that was breaking trail as locating the blue blazes required extreme diligence. To make matters more difficult, the tree trunks were covered with a fine blue-green moss that in addition to the snow further masked the blue color of the blazes. After approximately 15 minutes of ascending, the trail was clearly not as well broken in. It appeared that a part of the party must have turned back while some continued on. The snow was also getting deeper. Five minutes later we encountered our two heroes on their descent. Apparently one additional member of their party did turn around earlier. Upon relating how impressed we were with their navigational skills the woman explained that she has a house at the base of the mountain (we speculated that they came in via the Long Path near Skylight Park) and that she "knows this mountain like the back of her hand, every log, every cliff." She informed us that she indeed did uncover the snow from the rock cairn that we previously missed, as well as several of the "mini-cairns" and blazes that mark the path. We expressed our gratitude and at 2:20pm continued on our separate ways. It was approximately ½ hour before we emerged from the evergreens out onto the summit clearing. Who would have thought we would have summited on this day given the obstacles?

A quick photo, a small bite and some sips of water and we were headed back down knowing the time was late and we still had a long way to go in the deep snow. Somewhere in the Pine Plains section (close to three miles from the car) the effects of the day's efforts and heavy winter daypacks began to take hold. Incredibly, we both started to bonk at the very same moment in the way that marathon runners "hit the wall." In our case, however, there was no support crew on hand. We realized that we spent seven

hours trudging through snow, the last several hours being particularly unrelenting. We had hardly stopped to rest, refuel and rehydrate and that error had taken its toll on us. Daunting thoughts of having to spend the night in our 35 degree rated emergency sleeping bags and Mylar blankets began to enter our minds as fatigue continued to consume us. We collected ourselves, stopped and slowly sipped water at a rate that our nausea permitted. We broke off small pieces of a sandwich, but found it nearly impossible to eat. The bread felt like cardboard in our dry mouths. It was much easier to munch on tiny rations of raisins and chocolate. Helped along by a few minutes of sitting on a fallen log, we slowly recovered and, little by little were able to nourish ourselves back to some level of strength. We made a resolution that in fifteen minutes we would stop again and repeat the process, which we did. Much improved at that next stop, the sandwiches became palatable again. Remarkably, by the time we were nearing the Huckleberry Point Trail, we had regained our energy. From there it was clear sailing back to the car and off to Brio's in Phoenicia for a well-deserved dinner.

Lessons learned:

- 1) In the winter there is a tendency to not want to stop. With many years of hiking experience we still fell into that trap. We have done hikes that have lasted over sixteen hours without succumbing to the fatigue we experienced on Kaaterskill. Working through deep snow can at times be extremely arduous. You can deplete your glycogen stores and fluids, and you can hit the wall with virtually no warning. This had never happened to us on the trail before and is not the same as "just feeling very tired". The solution is preventive in nature and is very simple – set appropriate goals, while eating and drinking at regular intervals (and don't forget to replace the electrolytes that can be depleted through perspiration, even in winter). Within a few minutes we felt completely normal again and could have hiked for miles. Fortunately, in this case the problem was reversible and the recovery dramatic. On another day we might not have been so lucky.
- 2) In addition to your favorite trail foods, carry something easily digestible like an energy gel packet in your emergency kit. We found a simple peanut butter and jelly sandwich, our typical trail standard, very difficult to consume under the circumstances we were facing. Raisins were easier to tolerate. A more liquidly, quick energy easy to digest gel would have been much more appealing under the circumstances. Ironically, a gel seems quite unappealing under normal circumstances.
- 3) Kaaterskill is known to have cliffs guarding its summit. We knew that and therefore should have spent more time searching for the herd path that artfully works its way through the path of least resistance.
- 4) Trudging through deep snow is hard work. Adjust your goals accordingly. The following day we purchased tails for my MSR Evo Ascent snowshoes (great product that we have used for several years) to achieve greater flotation in soft, deep snowy conditions.