

Safety in Numbers: Planning and Walking

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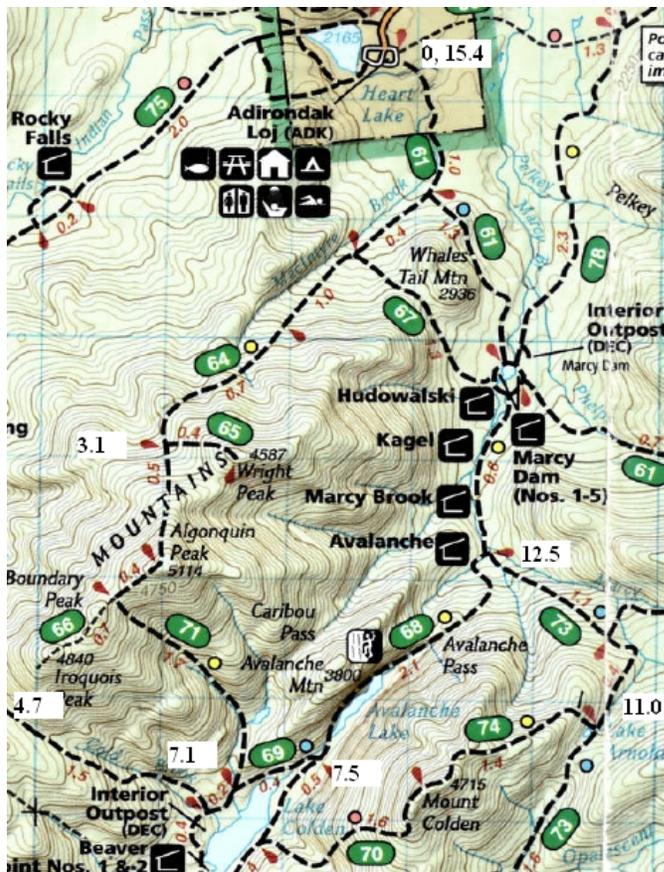
The essay “How Fast and How Far?” talks about trip planning in general terms, and illustrates the process with sketches of two of my walks. This essay drills down into the gory details of one walk in the woods: how I planned it in advance and how I made some decisions along the way.

The Plan

The first step in formulating any plan is to define clear goals. My three primary goals are always the same on every trip I take:

1. Be safe.
2. Have fun.
3. Learn something.

My particular additional goal for this trip was to stand on top of two Adirondack summits, Iroquois Peak and Mount Colden, to work on some sort of silly list. I considered coming in from the south (Upper Works) and from the north (Adirondak Loj), and doing the two summits as two separate day trips, or one (combined) overnight trip.



My planning process consists of staring at maps, looking at photos of my old trips (and studying the time stamps of the photos), considering what views I might prize the most that day, and lots of staring into space. A couple days of stewing and staring gave me a

plan. I would start from the Adirondak Loj, head southwest over the Macintyre Range to Iroquois, then drop down to Lake Colden and camp somewhere near there. The second day I would head over Mount Colden, then down to Lake Arnold, then back to Marcy Dam and out to the Loj. I added up the miles on the map, and found that it came out to about 15.4; I put the cumulative miles on the small map that I took on my walk in about the same form as they are on the map above. I estimated the elevation gain of the trip at about 5600 vertical feet. Using my baseline estimates of three miles per hour and 1000 vertical feet per hour, the starting “book value” of this trip was just under 11 hours.

But then I had to add in all sorts of extras. This was going to be an overnight trip, so my ten-pound day pack would be increased to a fifteen-pound overnight pack. (Both of those weights include food and a liter of water. The main additions in the overnight version are a 2-pound hammock for sleeping comfortably, a 2-pound bear canister to meet DEC regulations, and an extra pound of food.) I would have access to streams and lakes down low, but I would have to carry an extra 2.5 liters (about 5 pounds) of water across Algonquin and later across Colden. A 20-pound pack for half the trip added a couple of hours. There would be lots of views to soak up, some of those trails are nasty, and I would be tuckered out by the end, so I added a few more hours. I thought that I was looking at about fifteen hours of walking.

6:12 AM, Adirondak Loj (0.0 miles, 0 vertical feet)

The sun rose at 5:26 AM on July 15, 2013, with no help from me. I pounded down a pint of water, a cup of yogurt and a breakfast bar before I started my walk from the Adirondak Loj at 6:12. I know the time because I took this photograph when I started:



I was able to determine all of the rest of the times in this essay by looking at the timestamps of my photographs and adjusting them by the drift of my camera’s clock. I had a liter of water in my pack as I headed up the trail towards Algonquin. If all went perfectly, I had a very long walk in front of me. If anything went wrong, I had several places where I could easily turn back. And if everything went absolutely swimmingly, there was a teeny chance that I could finish this long walk in a day.

At 7:31, I came to the falls of the MacIntyre Brook at about 3500 feet. I knew that this was the last guaranteed water for a few miles, so I filled up both my 1-liter bottle and my 2.5-liter reservoir for a total of just under eight pounds of water on my back. I wouldn’t see running water again for about 4½ hours.

8:24 AM, Turnoff for Wright Peak (3.1 miles, 1700 vertical feet so far)

This was my first big choice of the day. I was only 0.4 miles from the summit of Wright Peak, which is always a beauty. I had, however, been up both Wright and Algonquin just a few months earlier. I knew that although the horizontal distance was only 0.4 miles, the elevation gain was about 700 feet. By my formula, this hour-long excursion would provide great views at the cost of fatigue later. Had I been committed to an overnight, I probably would have taken it. But I chose to walk past it, and still keep alive my tiny chance of doing the whole walk in a day.

9:22 AM, Algonquin Peak (3.6 miles, 3000 vertical feet)

I was hoping to have this beautiful summit all to myself, but I was greeted, as usual, by a cheerful and knowledgeable Summit Steward. She reminded me about some ways to preserve the alpine vegetation, and pointed out a few views that I might have missed. I dropped my pack, hydrated thoroughly, and ate just a bit more than I felt like, to keep my energy up. The last time I had been here, in March, I had hoped to get over to Iroquois, too. But the cold wind was brutal on that trip, and it was safe neither to proceed forward nor to linger on top, so I had turned back. This time, though, I lounged and soaked in the view for over an hour before I continued on at 10:38.

11:20 AM, Iroquois Peak (4.7 miles, 3200 vertical feet)

I came down the southwest side of Algonquin, took the herd path up and over Boundary, and stood on top of Iroquois about 42 minutes after I had left Algonquin. I had superlative views of both Algonquin, where I had been, and Colden, where I hoped to go:



After my brief rest on Iroquois, I continued on toward Colden.

When I got back from the herd path to the state trail, I faced my next big choice of the day. I had stood atop Iroquois. Had I been pooped out or drenched in cold rain, I could have bailed on the trip by heading out up 400 vertical feet over Algonquin, and then back down a familiar trail for 3.6 miles. But it was shortly before noon, the day was glorious, and I was feeling strong, so I headed down to Lake Colden. A few minutes later, I came to a beautiful stream and refilled my water supply.

That state trail is only 1.7 miles long, but it drops almost 2000 precipitous vertical feet. According to my formula, it should have taken me just over half an hour. But the trail involves dozens of stream crossings, and ran the gamut all the way from nasty to much more so. I took more than a few wrong turns looking for markings, and ended up backtracking hundreds of yards. I was alone, so I walked very carefully. I took one fifteen minute break to rest, eat and purify water. Altogether, it took me about 2 hours to move down that beautiful yet snarky trail.

2:27 PM, Lake Colden (7.1 miles, 3300 vertical feet)

I finally got to the lake, and walked about 0.4 miles to its northeastern point, another bail-out point. Had I been tired, I could have headed out for the day through Avalanche Pass (one of the real treats of the northeastern United States). But I was still feeling good, so I headed down the lake shore 0.5 miles to the trail up to Colden. It was a few minutes after 3:00, and I faced another big decision.

I was certainly going to continue my trip, but was I going to camp on this side of Mount Colden, or head over it and sleep on the other side? I planned to use my hammock, so I could string it almost anywhere it was both legal (below 3500 feet) and prudent (near water) to camp. I chose to head up Colden; the sign said it was 1.6 miles, and an elevation gain of 1950 feet. My formula called for about 2.5 hours, but I added a lot of time for the difficult trail, my exhaustion, and the views. I started up at 3:11PM.

5:31 PM, Mount Colden (9.6 miles, 5300 vertical feet)

Holy Moly! The formula was dead on, even after I had loaded up with 3.5 liters of water to get over the top. Especially when I am tired, I find it easier to go up nasty trails than to go down them. That day, the view of the Macintyre Range from the top of Colden was a little more special than I had ever seen it before (from left to right you see Iroquois, Boundary, Algonquin, and then diminutive Wright Peak):



I made it down to Lake Arnold by 6:49, and here I faced a continuous choice all the way out. Should I keep on walking, to get back to my car and a store-bought hot meal, or pitch my hammock and crash in the woods? I chose to go on at Lake Arnold, and at Avalanche Lean-To (7:52), and at Marcy Dam (8:17). When the sun set at 8:40, I walked in the gloaming for about 15 minutes, and turned my on headlamp around 9:00.

9:22 PM, Adirondack Loj (15.4 miles, 5600 vertical feet)

I got back to my car 15 hours and 10 minutes after I left. My three primary goals were well met: I was safe, I had had fun, and I had learned a lot. I emphatically had not made a plan for one brutal day, and then stuck to it religiously. Rather, I had a range of plans in my back pocket, and I continuously reevaluated my options to see what choice to make. I wimped out and chose to miss the spectacular views from Wright Peak to conserve my energy. Throughout the day, I always kept safe exits, including heading out early or sleeping comfortably in the woods. But everything clicked, and I walked out exhausted but delighted at the end of a long but safe day.

Oh, and I stood on top of the two peaks that I was trying for, too.

Details of an Interesting Trip

My inspiration for detailing this straightforward day of hiking is my friend and colleague John Meiners, who has carefully documented two of his bicycle rides across the US. His second ride was 4635 miles from Washington to Maine in 64 days. The details, along with charming text, wonderful pictures, and a pointer to his first trip, can be found at www.crazyguyonabike.com/doc/goingback

He gives both the day-by-day story, and at the end gives “more numbers than you want to know”. Read about his ride, and then think about whether you want to journal your hikes.

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