

Spring Hiking *Tom Rankin*

One of the maddening things about life in the Hudson Valley and the Catskill Mountains is that the snow melts, and everyone rushes outside to enjoy the warmer weather. Then it gets cold and snows again! Repeat until April? May? June?!

While spring hiking can be fun, there are some things to keep in mind. The snow can still be piled up in the Catskills even if it has melted in the valleys. It's not uncommon for there to be no snow at the lower trail heads and 3-4 feet of snow on the summits! Also, hard snow in the morning can become soft snow in the afternoon, making travel slippery, wet and sloppy. This means snowshoes should still be standard hiking gear for a good part of spring. Even if the Sun is shining, it can feel pretty chilly in the shade with all that snow and a little wind. It's best to pack warm clothes. In March 2010, there was a blizzard in the Catskills that resulted in 8 feet of snow. It took a long time to melt.

April is sometimes called 'Mud Season' and many people avoid hiking during that time because the trails are soft and water is running down off the mountains. This does not mean you should not go. For instance, the south side of a mountain usually melts off first, while the north side takes the longest to do so. You can monitor the conditions to know when the trails are in better shape. Also remember that during Mud Season the trails are more subject to erosion not only from running water – where we step can play a significant role to minimize damage. There is a natural tendency to want to avoid stepping in the center of a muddy trail where it is more likely to puddle. The conscientious hiker will avoid the temptation of walking off to the side which accelerates erosion by widening the trails. Walking on the edges of the trail also predisposes the hiker to slipping as the surface tends to be at an angle (we've all seen those long Vibram scrapes). So make sure you have good waterproof boots and try to stay centered as reasonably as possible while keeping your feet dry.

Another 'gotcha' for Spring hiking is that it can be very warm but there is no shade yet, since the trees take longer to leaf out up high, so bring sun block.

If you encounter a 'lost' fawn, it's probably just hiding, not lost, and the mother will return, as soon as you leave!