

The Trail-less Peaks

By Ira Orenstein

People who enjoy a walk in the woods may be described as taking the road less travelled. Taken to a greater extreme, what would motivate an individual to climb mountains that have no trail (often termed *bushwhacking* in the eastern United States and *cross country* out west)? George Mallory's 'because it's there' response to the question of why he wanted to climb Mount Everest would appropriately apply to the Catskills' trail-less peaks.

The Catskill 3500 Club was founded in 1962 and promotes interest in hiking in the Catskills. Other focuses include education, trail maintenance and responsible use and preservation of the area's natural resources. Club members must have climbed all thirty-five Catskill peaks above 3500 feet in elevation. In addition, four of those peaks must be re-climbed during the winter months. Of the thirty-five peaks, fourteen are without trails. Thirteen of the trail-less peaks have a canister at the summit where the climber records his/her accomplishment and has the opportunity to make comments and read those of previous climbers while enjoying lunch. It is with this goal of membership that many people are exposed to the virtues of climbing the trail-less peaks. Similarly, the Adirondack Forty-Sixers, established in 1948, is an organization of members who have climbed the 46 major peaks in New York's Adirondack Mountains. In 2001, all canisters were removed from the 20 trail-less Adirondack peaks as the Department of Environmental Conservation deemed them as non-conforming structures in a natural environment. Today, all trail-less peaks in the Adirondacks have an unmaintained trail or developed herd path leading to the summit. The Catskills, therefore, provide a better venue for truly trail-less navigation (unless, of course one is hiking in winter on virgin snow where many of the Adirondack trail-less peaks can become extremely long, arduous, endeavors that demand a high level of fitness, winter climbing and navigational experience).

There are some individuals who after completing the Catskill 3500 Club list come back for more. What would drive a person to repeat climbs of the trail-less peaks? Consider the following scenario. You introduce an acquaintance to the beauty of the Catskill Mountains. Maybe it is a hike up Slide Mountain. Things go well and your acquaintance asks to join you on another hike or two or three. Soon he/she is hooked and the subject of the Catskill 3500 Club comes up. This individual might greatly enjoy your company. After all, you have at this point acquired a solid navigational foundation and familiarity with the terrain that makes you a potential asset to the prospective Catskill 3500 Club aspirant. Your skill set fills a quite narrow niche as your acquaintance may not know anyone else who does this sort of thing. There have been several instances when I signed a canister only to learn that nobody had been to that summit in over a month.

You reveal to your acquaintance that the Catskill 3500 Club sponsors group hikes. It is just a matter of time, however before you come to the realization that you are hooked on bushwhacking and before you know it, you may even offer to lead hikes for the Club. For me the trail-less peaks are very special. They offer unique opportunities to meld exploration and discovery in beautiful terrain that at the same time challenges my physical ability and cognitive skills. The feeling of accomplishment the first time I found a canister without the help of

companions is memorable. I find most importantly that the trail-less peaks create for me a oneness with Nature that is better experienced than described. And yes, for those who want to continue to work on lists, the Catskill 3500 Club also offers a patch for those who summit all of the peaks in winter.

There exists some controversy as to whether the trail-less peaks should remain as such. Most agree that with the increased popularity of peakbagging comes greater threat to the natural environment. Most trail-less peaks have herd paths that wind their way up the mountainsides, sometimes intersecting each other. It is often quite enticing for the climber to follow one of these herd paths only to learn that he/she has come to a dead end. If one is lucky enough to find the "right" path he/she is rewarded with a quicker, less obstructive way to the summit. It is usually near the top where the acreage is reduced that herd paths start to join and criss-cross.

Many people today eschew navigation with map and compass and favor the use of GPS devices. GPS tracks can be saved and posted on line for other prospective climbers to download and utilize with potentially negative results as people follow the same tracks and inadvertently create well defined herd paths. At first, this may seem environmentally advantageous as it keeps impact more concentrated rather than to have people traipsing all over the mountain, creating a network of paths. Unfortunately, many of these GPS/internet generated herd paths are subject to severe erosion as they were not designed by trail masters who have expertise in constructing routes that are created on durable surfaces with good drainage. The future of the management of trail-less peaks remains at this time uncertain. Efforts are being made to limit impact. As an example, the Department of Environmental Conservation limits hiking group size in the Adirondacks and Catskills to 12 when off trail or in designated wilderness areas and to 20 on all other trails. Cooperation among environmental organizations, trail crews and hiking clubs will hopefully serve to sustain these special places well into the future. Catskill 3500 Club group hikes are all limited to twelve participants.

In recent years the use of GPS devices has in many ways facilitated navigation. Of course there are those purists who shun their usage while others embrace the technology fully. Navigation with GPS when combined with electronic mapping software permits easy pre-trip planning and can provide a solid understanding of mapping details (i.e.; latitude and longitude). Waypoint coordinates of special features like a great viewpoint or a cave can be marked so that the hiker can easily find that same spot in the future and provide that information to others. Routes can be saved for future hikes when you need to guide that Catskill 3500 Club aspirant friend of yours up the same mountain. In an emergency a hiker that needs to be found can have their coordinates delivered to prospective rescuers or find a known route to safety. On the other hand, GPS devices provide a potentially false sense of security. An electronic device that is vulnerable to malfunction, breakage or loss of battery power can leave the unprepared dependent hiker stranded (especially when all navigational aids are incorporated into that one multifunctional device).

GPS is not a substitute for knowledge of traditional navigational skills and a paper map, compass and associated skills are mandatory. In recent years I found myself enjoying the use of mapping software and a very simple GPS device to be a nice addition to my navigational armamentarium. I found myself able to locate summit canisters with greater precision and

getting down the mountain and back to my car was facilitated (remember that going down is much more challenging than going up – there is only one summit high point, but the base spreads out in all directions). On the other hand I found that with GPS navigation I would tend to preoccupy myself with checking the distance to my next waypoint. I spent less time enjoying the beauty of my surroundings and more time staring at a screen that represents the antithesis of why I am in the mountains in the first place. I felt less connected to my environment and less of a sense of accomplishment upon summiting. Regardless, I always carried more than one map and more than one compass on all trail-less peaks (map and compass are always with me in the woods, even when on trails – you never know when you may lose a trail). Today my GPS device usually remains in the “off” position inside my pack as an additional navigational aid and map and compass remains my go-to preference.

Another electronic device that I carry in remote areas where cell phone service is unreliable is the personal locator beacon (PLB) that can reliably signal a need for help in an emergency. Please refer to the essay “*Personal Locator Beacons*” on the Catskill 3500 Club Hiking Safety web page for further information.

When climbing trail-less peaks it is probably best to wear clothing that you don't mind getting beat up and that covers your arms and legs for protection. Good eye protection (goggles, for example) is also essential. I learned this the hard way on Fir Mountain when a twig made its way alongside prescription glasses and produced a corneal abrasion (unpleasant to say the least) that fortunately fully healed. The result could have been much worse!

One summer day a group of us (myself, my two children and another father and son) set out to climb Lone Mountain, one of the more remote trail-less Catskill peaks that hosts dense vegetation making for very slow going. We patiently made our way to the summit on this very hot and sticky day. Upon returning it became clear that we were not retracing our footsteps. We came upon a very large boggy area that hosted a field of stinging nettles. The stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) is a perennial plant that grows to a height of 1-2m and is usually found in low lying boggy areas as it requires moist soil. The leaves, 3-15 cm long with serrated edges, are arranged oppositely along the stem. The stem and leaves have stinging and non-stinging hairs. The stinging hairs of this plant break off and can inject chemicals including histamine, serotonin, acetylcholine, 5-HT, and formalin. The resulting intense itching can last from a few minutes to as long as one week. The larvae of some species of butterflies and moths depend on nettles as their exclusive food source and on this day we found ourselves in the company of an abundance of White Admiral butterflies. Nettle extract has been used to treat arthritis, prostate disease and is found in shampoos to make hair glossier and to control dandruff. Decision time... work our way around this vast field through thick foliage or plow straight through. The other father in our group had on long pants making his vote count for less. The rest of us were wearing shorts (not the best decision on trail-less peaks). We decided to take the direct route which resulted in a choir of laughs followed by screams. Even long pants were no match for the nettles' potent effects. Once in the middle of this torture chamber there was no turning back. I often wondered why people who contract poison ivy often need to go on steroid medication to quell their symptoms. Why can't they just “tough it out?” This eye-opening

experience created an itching sensation that, if prolonged, would be unbearable. Fortunately, the effects wore off over the next 15-30 minutes and all was fine, or at the least, memorable.

Maybe the most potentially dangerous health threat to hiking the trail-less peaks (or anywhere in the woods for that matter) comes from a source that can at times be as small as the size of a pin head. In the northeastern United States the most well known tick-borne illness is Lyme Disease. For information on prevention please refer to the Center for Disease Control site at http://www.cdc.gov/ticks/avoid/on_people.html. Don't let your guard down as winter approaches – I once removed a tick from myself on a warm late December day.

In winter the trail-less peaks present their own unique challenges. The hiker is often plodding through unbroken snow. On the way down you may accidentally end up following someone else's footprints that lead you astray. On a windy day those footprints you left going up may be erased, but most often your steps create a "trail" that swiftly gets you back down the mountain. "Spruce traps" are formed when very deep snows bury the tops of short trees usually found at higher elevations (like spruce and balsam fir). The unsuspecting hiker can fall through the treetops and get entangled in the web of branches that now surrounds him/her. In the most extreme cases, extrication can be quite enervating. Spruce trap encounters in the Catskills are quite rare in recent years due to the decreased amount of snow accumulation.

Winter snows tend to even out the terrain which translates into less tripping over rocks and undergrowth. I once recall my family climbing Lone and Rocky, two of the most arduous peaks in the Catskills, under optimal conditions. We moved very swiftly as the surface of the snow was crusted by the strong sunlight and supported our weight without us breaking through. We contemplated continuing on to Balsam Cap and Friday given the conditions. Ultimately, however prudence prevailed when we did the math.

When equipped with appropriate knowledge and preparation, the trail-less peaks offer great opportunities discover, explore and truly experience and understand the Catskills. If you would like to learn more about hiking the trail-less peaks, consider signing up for one of the Catskill 3500 Club sponsored group hikes listed in the *Catskill Canister*.