

A Week on Katahdin

by Dan Styer

On July 16, 1978, I made my first ascent of Katahdin. This was no everyday climb for me ... I had just spent twenty-seven days walking 300 miles clear across Maine to reach this mountain. For weeks, southbound hikers on the Appalachian Trail had extolled the view from its summit, and for days I could myself see the majestic mountain drawing nearer as I traveled north. The night before my climb I slept at Katahdin Stream Campground, and excitement got me out of my sleeping bag and onto the trail before anyone else in the campground stirred. I climbed steadily through the maple and birch woods, beyond a waterfall, into the spruce, past timberline, over boulders and finally to Baxter Peak itself, the highest point in Maine and only thirteen feet under a mile in elevation. It is also supposed to have the best views in Maine, but the mountain was completely enveloped in cloud — I couldn't see more than ten yards in any direction. I wasn't disappointed, because I know that climbing a mountain means climbing it on its own terms, and I know that climbing a mountain wrapped in clouds is just as special an experience as climbing a mountain bright in sunlight. I *was* disappointed, however, in what I saw when I went back down the mountain: People. Hundreds of people! More people than I seen in all of the previous twenty-seven days! People wearing garish clothing, people smoking cigarettes and — can you believe it? — people listening to *radios*! I had been in the woods long enough that I found such normal behavior a shock. So as my feet walked my mind planned. Someday I would return to Katahdin and Baxter Park. I would stay for at least a week, long enough to know the mountain in many moods, both sunny and cloudy. And this visit would take place after Labor Day, when the leaves color, the crowds thin, and quiet returns to the woods.

For a decade, I carried this dream around, taking it with me to graduate school at Cornell, through a postdoctoral fellowship in New Jersey, on trips to Europe and to California. The dream and I finally came to rest in Oberlin, Ohio, where fortune dictated that I would have free time in the September of 1988. The year before I was already planning. My brother Bill, who had several times vacationed in Baxter Park, agreed to accompany me. On the eighth of September I flew to Bangor, Maine, met Bill, and together we drove to the southernmost gateway of Baxter Park.

Where we were turned away. Sorry, the ranger said, but you have to check in by 9 PM. He directed us to a clearing beside the road outside the park, and there we dragged out sleeping bags for an impromptu camp. The night was starry and brilliant, and the Milky Way made a dramatic splash across the sky. I saw three meteors before I slept.

Up early the next morning. We drove to Roaring Brook campground, parked the car, pulled on our packs and started up the trail. After walking a mile we paused at the shore of Sandy Stream Pond, which is famous for attracting moose. There were no moose, but

there was a fine view of the mountain. Katahdin is an extraordinary mountain, and once seen it is never forgotten. I still remember my thrill when I first saw it on my 1978 trip, rising over the waters of Pemadumcook Lake like a castle in the sky, floating above and apart from the commonplaces of the surrounding lowlands. The view from Sandy Stream Pond was just as exhilarating, but so different in detail that I could hardly believe it was the same mountain. Katahdin — the Abenaki Indian name means “greatest mountain” — is narrow when viewed from the south, but long, ten miles long, when viewed from the east. From Sandy Stream Pond we saw its long east face, which is cut by three enormous cirques. The first cirque, Great Basin, holds Chimney Pond on its floor and is ringed by the highest of Katahdin's several summits: Pamola, South Peak, Baxter Peak. The second, North Basin, is so elevated that the valley floor is actually above timberline. Its walls support the steepest technical rock climbs in the eastern United States. The last cirque, Little North Basin, smaller and lower than the other two, is entirely wooded. Our plan was not to climb the mountain directly through one of these east-facing basins. Instead we would walk clear north of this long mountain to Russell Pond and its isolated walk-in campground, spend a day there exploring the central park, and then hike back south through the valley just west of Katahdin. We would then approach the mountain through its single west-facing cirque, the Northwest Basin, and climb over it a few miles north of its highest peaks. Our trip would end with three nights on the floor of the Great Basin at Chimney Pond Campground, which would be our base for excursions to the high summits. All this and more went through my mind that sunny morning at Sandy Stream Pond as we waited for moose and watched the sun glint off the silver granite of the North Basin. This was the trip I had waited ten years for. I was finally here!

The walk from Roaring Brook to Russell Pond is a pleasant day's stroll. The view of Katahdin from Whidden Pond was even better than the view from Sandy Stream Pond, and it sported a pair of Black Ducks and a pair of Goldeneyes as well. The only signs of impending autumn were occasional scarlet branches of maple and a touch of yellow in the white birch leaves. We forded the swiftly flowing, bitter cold Wassataquoik Stream, and then just minutes later arrived at the small campground on the shores of Russell Pond. The pond itself is of moderate size (twenty acres), and surrounded by wooded hills. It is a haven for wildlife: that afternoon we saw a beaver gnawing on a branch, and a bit later a cow moose feeding at the edges and swimming through the middle of the pond. Once she got within five yards of me! We would see her again several times during our stay. The campground is small (eight sites) and pleasantly dispersed. The park keeps four aluminum canoes there for rent on the honor system.

We were tired and went to bed early but, as often happens on the first nights of a backpacking trip, we slept fitfully. At one or two in the morning Bill took a trip to the outhouse, and when he returned he exclaimed about the sky. I walked to the edge of the pond to see for myself. The sky was spangled with so many stars that familiar constellations were lost among the host of dimmer, usually invisible, stars. The planets were so bright that they were reflected from the pond in long trails. A meteor flashed by. In the sky a glimmering grey whirling fluid appeared: the northern lights. After that, we slept well. In the morning we were rewarded with a bright sunrise over Russell Pond.

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Ah! The lazy days of September! We had no goal for the new day, because we were sleeping at Russell Pond for two nights in a row. So today we could walk in whatever direction and at whatever speed we wanted, with neither a goal nor a plan. We hiked out to Inscription Rock on Wassataquoik Stream, where we read the message chiseled by a long-dead lumberman: *Tracy & Love Commenced Operations on Wassataquoik Oct. 16th, 1883* (Bill wondered why they began just before the winter set in) and took a quick bath in the cold rushing water. Then we walked on to Grand Falls and, via a mile-long off-trail hike, to the “Old City” — a thriving lumber town in 1880, a few empty fields today. On our return we stopped for a second quick dip in the Wassataquoik at Ledge Falls. As we dried ourselves on the flat sun-baked rocks we chatted about past and future hikes, about the interpretation of quantum mechanics, about anything that came to mind. What a change from yesterday's conversation, which had centered on Bill's tense business situation! It was true: the woods were wearing away our worries.

In the afternoon we parted company, Bill hiking north to a lookout point and I hiking west to Wassataquoik Lake. As I walked, I was infused with serenity and peace. I certainly enjoyed hiking with Bill, but I just as certainly enjoyed walking alone, gliding silently through the woods with my senses closely tuned to the world about me. I glimpsed birds that two of us would have scared away, I noticed flowers that we would have overlooked, I felt silence that we would have broken. The clouds filled into a threatening solid cover, but somehow this only increased my comfort and sense of security in the deep woods. When I reached the lake I found a stiff wind kicking up two-foot high waves. The lake is surrounded by big mountains and steep cliffs more reminiscent of Montana than of Maine, and under that dark sky it gleamed like a jewel. An Osprey flew overhead. I walked the shoreline to the moss-covered Green Falls, then returned to Russell Pond, my brother, some dinner, and bed.

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Our third morning dawned cloudy and distinctly cool. Our first two days had been sunny and so warm that usually I hiked wearing only hiking boots and running shorts. This morning I put on my long pants and woolen shirt and wondered whether I would be prepared for the harsh weather above timberline. Soon we started our walk back south toward the high summits of Katahdin. Our trail started out in a pleasant wooded valley, graced with a gently flowing stream. By degrees the valley grew narrower and steeper, the chill deepened, and the stream turned into a rushing torrent. In a few hours our trail left the stream and turned up a particularly rugged tributary canyon. Magnificent ramparts rose about us. As the trail pitched still steeper, the silence grew deeper and sweeter. We met a hiker coming down out of the canyon, and he expressed our feelings better than we could ourselves: “Fellows,” he said, “you're walking into paradise.”

Paradise, in this case, was the Northwest Basin. It is hard for me to describe how we felt there. Park policy virtually assured us of solitude because in reserving the Northwest Basin's single lean-to we had reserved the only campsite for miles in any direction.

Protected by remoteness and three rock walls, we felt as secure and as private as if we had been in a room. But what a magnificent room it was! The cirque floor holds four ponds, several knolls, and the densest blueberry bushes I had ever seen. The walls were thousand-foot cliffs of warm pink granite, decorated with a waterfall. The basin is almost one square mile in area, and it was all ours!

Rejoicing in our freedom, we explored the ponds, climbed the knolls and ate the blueberries. We scanned the surrounding cliffs and wondered how any trail could possibly lead over them out of the basin and up to the summits beyond. We never did figure it out. But we were perfectly content to leave such problems for tomorrow. For today, we just wanted to saunter in paradise. I noticed a faint trail and followed it up the talus, high over the ponds to the base of the waterfall. There, in complete violation of every park rule ever promulgated, I picked up a small flake of pink granite and put it in my pocket. This small piece of Katahdin is on my desk even now, and even now it makes me happy.

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Our fourth day...or was it the fifth? Such matters were growing unimportant. What *was* important was our plan for the day. We were to climb up out of our basin, over the main body of Katahdin, and down into the Great Basin on the east side of the mountain. We would be crossing Katahdin some two miles north of its highest summit, but even so we would ascent 1,500 feet then descent an equal amount. The day would be short on distance (just over four miles) but long on scenery (two of those miles would be above timberline). And to top it all off we were thinking about an off-trail side trip to Klondike Pond, which would added less than two miles to the day's travels but more that 1000 feet of ascent and 1000 feet of descent.

But first, a diversion. Bill and I climbed together to the base of the waterfall over the trail that I had discovered the previous day, and he used his camera's self-timer to take a photo of us together there. From the talus we saw that the cloud bank, which had been solid yesterday, was lifting up and thinning out a bit...auspicious news for travel above timberline, where the wind can drill and the sky can spit sleet even while the weather below is gorgeous. We returned to the lean-to and headed up the trail.

Which was as steep as yesterday's reconnaissance had suggested. We slowed down and dug in, and watched as the spruce trees grew small and stunted, and as the birch leaves turned from green to gold. The trees vanished away to nothing, and we clambered over boulders above timberline. Yet even here above the trees there was plenty of life: tiny forbs and sedges, one or two mountain sandwort (still blooming in September!), and vast fields of blueberry, with bright red leaves and plump blue fruits, but with the entire plant only two inches tall. The trail leveled when we reached the summit plateau and we walked effortlessly, hopping from rock to rock between the blue sky and the red blueberries, surrounded on all sides with expansive views.

Our immediate goal was the Klondike Pond Trail. My guidebook described it as “an obscure (unmaintained) trail leading south down to the head of an old rockslide. The slide can be used to descend into a deep ravine which holds Klondike Pond, elevation 3,400 feet, one of the highest in the State. There is no trail from the bottom of the slide to the pond.” We found the trail and followed it, just a few hundred yards, to the lip of the ravine and the head of the landslide. There we paused for lunch, basking in the high altitude sunshine and worrying about the steep slide plummeting to the pond below. Did we really want to head down that dizzying slope into that yawning thousand-foot deep chasm? We did.

We gingerly tested the slope. Although the slide was steep, it was stable. And it was definitely the only way down — the spruce growth on either side was impenetrable. The slide was a stream bed as well as a path for the occasional trumper, so the rock was usually wet, but it was rarely slippery. (Hurray for granite!) I used my hands as much as my feet. At one point I froze: a particularly long, steep, wet rock frightened me, and I wasn't sure that I'd be able to scramble back up it. I reminded myself that others had climbed up this very same rock slide, and then let myself down cautiously. Inch by inch, the pond crept closer. Our excitement grew. Not many people have ever been to the shores of Klondike Pond, and we would soon be among them! Abruptly, our rock slide ended and we walked the level floor of the ravine. The air was still and warm, and we dropped hats and jackets to mark our way back to the base of the slide. Over a small stream, across a little meadow, through a bit of spruce, and there we were at the shore! I was ecstatic, and I know that Bill was too. The rock walls glistened and the serpentine pond smiled at us. Water Pipits perched on pondside rocks and wagged their tails. Bill used his self-timer to take the day's second congratulatory photo (it didn't turn out), and then we quickly started back out of the ravine. It had taken us two hours to descend to Klondike Pond, and we needed to hurry to make sure that we would arrive at Chimney Pond Campground before dark.

Our climb out of the ravine took just one hour (the rock that had so worried me was not exceptionally difficult), and then we walked the alpine plateau in the magical late-afternoon light which makes everything stand out so clearly and distinctly. Cumulus clouds gathered in the previously pure blue sky, and sunlight tunneled beneath them to spangle off the westward ponds. The sedges covering the ground glowed a rich honey-brown. A raven swooped and glided at the edge of the plateau. Bill's binoculars revealed two dozen people standing around Baxter Peak, but here, just two miles away, the entire mountain was our own.

All magical hours must pass, and eventually we walked down through the timberline, past the gnarled birch and the stunted spruce, down into the forested floor of the Great Basin. Our narrow path intersected the wide main trail to Chimney Pond Campground. Visions of dinner filled our minds as we hurried through the darkening woods and then — we stopped dead. In front of us were a cow moose and her calf, calmly chewing up leaves and twigs. They moved on, but we saw more of them in the days ahead. (At times these moose walked right into the campground and chomped on leaves among the lean-tos. I am amazed that such large animals can live on nothing but leaves, but then they

seem to spend sixteen hours of each day eating.) What a day it had been! Scenery and adventure, botany and solitude. I assure you that we both slept very well.

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A slow, steady drizzle. Or was it just that the cloud bank had lowered and engulfed the campground, the pond and indeed the entire Great Basin? It was hard to say. In any case our fifth day was not a good day even for walking in the woods, much less for exploring the high peaks. We spent the morning huddled within our sleeping bags inside out lean-to, but even so the cold penetrated deep into my bones. I had made a serious mistake: In packing for this trip, I had thought of summer in Ohio, not of early autumn, not of Maine, and not of her windswept highest mountain. I brought two pairs of running shorts but no woolen pants. I did bring a warm wool shirt, but no windbreaker. I had indeed thought of bringing a hat and mittens, but by the time I was actually packing this thought had escaped. Fortunately Bill, an experienced winter backpacker, had brought along enough clothing to permit a climb of Mount Washington in mid-January. He generously shared his horde, and we both managed to stay reasonably comfortable.

In the early afternoon the rain lessened, so we went out to explore. We slogged our way to Blueberry Knoll, in the North Basin, then followed cairns to a pond at the basin's center. This is the cirque, you'll remember, with the impressive technical rock climbing routes. All we could see was cloud. As we walked back the rain began to fall in earnest. We retired to our sleeping bags and spent the rest of the day talking about rain gear, moose, and quantum mechanics.

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We woke up early. Bill had planned for three nights at Chimney Pond Campground. This is a grand amount of time, but the departure of our return flight would force us to leave Chimney Pond very early on our last day, and our first day had already been lost to bad weather. If we were to climb to the high summits at all, it would have to be today. From our sleeping bags we could see that it was no longer raining, but a quick trip outside revealed a solid cloud bank 500 feet above our camp. This was still well below the summits, but so much better than yesterday that neither of us hesitated. We were going up.

Our plan was to climb up the steep Cathedral Trail to Baxter Peak, to scramble along a narrow ridge — the “Knife Edge” — to South Peak and then to Pamola, the last of Katahdin's many summits. Finally we would return to Chimney Pond via the Dudley Trail on Pamola's shoulder. Our route would be almost entirely above timberline. If the weather grew dangerous, we would retreat to Chimney Pond by the quickest feasible route.

I put on all of my cloths and many of Bill's as well. I used his neck gaiter as a hat, and my extra wool socks as mittens. Bill kept his warm pile jacket but I wore his effective windbreaker. We set off up Cathedral Trail, passed the crystal-clear Cleftrock Pool, and

soon left the forest behind at the base of a rough rock buttress — the First Cathedral. The trail led directly over the formation, and we climbed hand and foot to follow. Already we were enveloped in cloud. Visibility: ten feet. As we ascended the wind picked up speed and the temperature, none to high to begin with, plummeted. Bill noticed tiny feathers of ice on the rock. This was rime ice, deposited directly from supercooled water droplets in the clouds. We took out our cameras and snapped away at this new and beautiful phenomenon, little knowing that we would soon find rime feathers an inch long coating every windward surface. We climbed steadily. Suddenly, a huge hole opened in the cloud and revealed a piece of Baxter's north face: a sheer cliff of fractured grey granite, the rock accented with rime. I confess that I thought of Grieg's "Hall of the Mountain King," but in truth no music could match the power of that thrusting rock. After a few heartbeats, the cloud swallowed up the wall again and we continued our climb.

We were nearly at the summit now. Bill remarked that we would have the best of both worlds: One beautiful clear day on Katahdin, solitary because we were north of Baxter Peak, and one day at Baxter Peak itself, solitary because of the cloudy weather. But he was wrong, because soon we heard voices, and a minute later the hikers connected with those voices emerged from the cloud. The trail leveled off, and we leapt from rock to rock in a fantasy world of swirling cloud and of rock ornamented with rime whiskers. Then, all at once, a sign reared out of the milky air: *Baxter Peak, Highest Summit of Katahdin. Northern Terminus of the Appalachian Trail, a Footpath Stretching 2000 Miles to Springer Mountain, Georgia.*

Why were we so deliriously happy? It was not as if we had never been there before: I had been at the end of my 300 miles walk across Maine, Bill had been at the end of his 2000 mile walk across the Appalachians. And the view was restricted to those same dozen rocks that I had seen at my last ascent. Yet we were both so glad that we were goofy. Bill unpacked a peanut butter and jelly sandwich which he had carried around for the entire week, and, before eating it, took its portrait. I noticed that two of the seven hikers standing around the summit were speaking in German, so I tried out my aging language skills and asked them if they'd like me to take their photo. They replied with a polite "Excuse me?" and I repeated my offer in English. We retreated to a small nook protected from the wind where we ate lunch and peered into the opaque expanse that we knew to be the Great Basin.

As we ate, a miracle occurred. First came a fleeting glimpse of blue sky. Then a patch of clear air rushed through the Great Basin. Now a quick view to the south. Then, for fifteen glorious minutes, the clouds were gone and we could see ridges and ponds, rocks and forests, sky and mountains. Much of Maine was set out before us, and we rejoiced.

When the clouds returned we started over the Knife Edge. The wind rushing through the Great Basin hurled chips of rime ice at us. We passed over the peak of Pamola, and on her shoulder we fought winds of 60 or more miles per hour. Back at Chimney Pond we ate and slept, and the next morning we saw our last of the Chimney Pond moose. The hike out of the Great Basin was uneventful, as was our drive back to Bangor.

At the airport we managed to get window seats on the right side of the airplane, and once in the air we used that window constantly. Because there beyond the wingtip was a magnificent mountain: a mountain which, once seen, would never be forgotten. There was Katahdin.

Itinerary

- Sept. 9 Start at Roaring Brook Campground. Sandy Stream Pond Trail, Russell Pond Trail, Tracy Horse Trail to Russell Pond Campground.
- Sept. 10 Morning: Grand Falls Trail to Grand Falls and Old City. Return to Russell Pond via Ledge Falls Trail.
Afternoon, Bill: Lookout Trail.
Afternoon, Dan: Wassataquoik Lake Trail to Green Falls.
Sleep at Russell Pond Campground.
- Sept. 11 Northwest Basin Trail to Davis Pond Lean-to.
- Sept. 12 Northwest Basin Trail, Hamlin Ridge Trail, North Basin Trail to Chimney Pond Campground.
- Sept. 13 North Basin Trail to terminus and return to Chimney Pond Campground.
- Sept. 14 Cathedral Trail, Knife Edge, Dudley Trail. Sleep at Chimney Pond Campground.
- Sept. 15 Chimney Pond Trail to Roaring Brook Campground.