

The “Last Four” Hike, July 7-12, 2009
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It was time to finish my Adirondack 46 High Peaks — only four to go! — so I drove away from the camp about 5:00 AM on Tuesday July 7, 2009, headed toward the Northway and Lake Placid, and signed into the South Meadow trail register about 7:30 AM. My Gregory Forester pack weighed about 43 pounds. Shortly after 9:00 I paused for a snack at the Klondike Leanto, enjoying the pleasant Klondike Notch Trail: relatively level, little mud, often softly padded with needles and duff. About an hour later I reached the intersection with the trail to Yard and Big Slide, which I hoped to be descending later in the afternoon, swung through Johns Brook Lodge about 11:00 AM, and depacked at the Orebed Brook Leanto a half-hour later. After pumping three liters of water and having lunch, I gratefully substituted the Jansport daypack for the backpack and, at about 12:30 PM, headed out for the afternoon hike over my #43, Big Slide Mountain.

The ascending trail began a bit north of Johns Brook Lodge, on the heavily used path to the Garden parking area on Route 73. I reached the intersection about 1:00 PM and took a left toward Big Slide. The ascent was generally to the right of the beautiful Slide Brook, which carried a high volume of water in a rocky narrow channel that often made its churning water fluffy white. Some broad slabs appeared, but they were nubby and generally easy to ascend — good Achilles tendon stretchers. I met several hikers, on their way down, who had made the typical ascent from The Garden over The Brothers peaks; I reached the intersection with that trail about 2:30 PM. A few minutes later I encountered two large boulders, perhaps eight feet high, arranged like an L with its long leg across the trail and short leg to my right. They were smooth — no toeholds — and there was no way around, but there was a narrow crevice between the L legs, so I got the toe of my right boot jammed into it and used my hands (one on the top of each boulder) to lift myself up. Pretty tough, I thought, for many hikers... but almost immediately I came upon blue trail markers and saw the backs of two hikers marching down through the trees to my left! That awkward move must have been off the trail. Vowing to pay more attention and to question awkward situations, I moved along and reached the summit of Big Slide shortly before 3:00 PM. (GPS 44° 10' 55.9", W073° 52' 15.4") It was my 43rd of the 46 “high peaks.”



Big Slide Mountain, my number 43

Blackflies and black clouds squelched my plan for a leisurely trail-snack half hour. I wolfed the snack, snapped three photos with no view in the overcast skies, and, with thunder in the west, began the 1.3 mile traverse to Yard Mountain. Almost immediately I found a nice view through trees, to the northwest, of a small lake, roads, and houses, but around 3:15 PM rain began, with booming thunder claps and flashes of lightning. I donned my Goretex jacket, and reached the trail signs at the unmarked summit of Yard at 3:45 PM. With no view and no summit sign, I took no photograph but headed down toward the Klondike Notch Trail, 1.25 miles away. About a quarter of four I added the Goretex pants, but half an hour later the sun was bright and steam was rising from wet rocks and vegetation so I stuffed the rain gear back into the pack. At 4:55 PM I reached the Klondike Notch Trail intersection I'd passed at 10:00 that morning, and began the 1.2 mile trek to Johns Brook Lodge. I swung through it about an hour later and was back at my leanto, looking forward to hot decaf and a freeze-dried dinner, at 6:20 PM. It had been a good day, exactly as planned, and I'd picked up another peak.



At the Orebed Brook Leanto

As I was eating, a party of about five arrived, but

they set up a tent upstream a bit, using the leanto for drying clothes and cooking. Well after dark, a young couple arrived using headlamps and we shared the leanto that night and the next. Their departure from Montreal had been delayed by business obligations, and they were delighted to find leanto space. It was their second wedding anniversary.

Wednesday morning, David and Valerie left before me, taking the same route: Up the Orebed Brook Trail to Saddleback, over the Range Trail to Basin and the Shorey Short Cut to the Phelps Trail. They were backpacking to the Slant Rock Leanto, while I would be passing it, daypacking to Johns Brook Lodge and back to the Orebed Brook Leanto. I left the leanto at 9:30 AM and walked up most of Orebed Brook’s steep, broad rock slabs, only once or twice taking to the adjacent woods on especially steep and wet rock. At 10:55 AM I took a snack break at the Gothics-Saddleback col. Tomorrow I’d be heading left, partway up Gothics, but today it was right, toward Saddleback. I met my French Canadian leanto-mates a few minutes later — I’m pretty slow, but they had their full backpacks and had fought their way through the woods instead of walking up the Orebed slabs — and arrived at Saddleback’s summit about 11:30 AM. It had been raining for ten minutes, and I quickly donned my full Goretex suit, then ate my modest lunch and investigated the start of the infamous rock descent down the west side of Saddleback. It looked feasible, so I decided to go ahead; others had done it, most of them probably no better hikers than me. I learned later that the couple had begun the descent too, but their packs would not fit through some narrow slots so they returned to the Orebed Brook Leanto. As for me, I began the climb down at 12:00 noon.

Lightly loaded with just a daypack, I enjoyed the descent and found it not nearly as fearsome as others’ comments had implied. The rocks were nubby, hand placements were not difficult to find, and level areas below the descents limited the consequences of any slips. In several places foot placements were quite a stretch, and I had to lower myself using my arms — one hand on top of rock on each side of a slot — like a junior version of the gymnasts’ “iron cross” until my boot reached a moderately level surface. On occasion my small daypack prevented me from leaning back as much as I would have preferred, forcing an uncomfortable lean forward toward a drop. About 12:18 PM I was back on a descending path through scrub firs, hoping the young fully-loaded couple would decide against that descent.

The trek to Basin passed through a pleasant little meadow but quickly began a steep ascent, with several difficult clammers up boulders that required hands, knees, and grappling at roots. I hoped, again, that the couple had not gone ahead with their plan. After a level muddy section and a final rock scramble, I reached Basin’s summit at 1:18 PM, surprising a young woman who was sitting near the point where the trail from the east emerged onto the summit



Descending Saddleback, toward Basin



Summit of Basin, 1:18 PM Wednesday

rock. She graciously took my photo, then headed off toward Saddleback; she had ascended from Panther Gorge, which would have begun with a climb over Haystack! There was also a group of about five young people, with an older man, at the summit.

I began the descent at 1:36 PM, meeting several hikers who were coming up; a couple of them seemed surprised that I would be going down the route they’d just come up. It was arduous, steep and strewn with boulders and wet roots, but it took only 45 minutes to reach the start of the Shorey Short Cut. That trail rose steadily, seemingly unendingly, but then began a seemingly unending rocky and rooty descent, but in about 1:10 (at 3:52 PM) its end appeared: the red-marked Phelps trail that I was taking north to Slant Rock, Bushnell Falls, and Johns Brook Lodge. I reached Slant Rock at 4:00 PM (again hoping my leanto-mates had chosen not to try their intended hike today), and — on the walk north — met a group, staying that night at the Lodge, that included a close friend of one of our Goodnow Flow neighbors and the daughter of a well-known Newcomb resident. At 5:05 PM I passed the Bushnell Falls Leanto where this group was pausing for a rest, and reached Johns Brook Lodge at 6:08 PM. At 6:50 PM I was back at the Orebed Brook Leanto, finding — to my delight and relief — Valerie and David; they had begun the Saddleback descent but found it not feasible with their full packs, so they had backed out, returning down the Orebed Brook Trail... just as I’d hoped.

The next morning, at 8:00 AM Thursday July 9, I headed up the trail — and its wet, steep, long, rock slabs — with the backpack, again only once or twice reverting to the woods on especially frightening sections. At 9:52 I was at the col; this ascent had taken 1:25 with the daypack yesterday and 1:52 with the backpack this morning... not bad! But I wasn’t sure where the trail to Pyramid and Sawteeth intersected the trail to Gothics. The map showed an intersection a little west of the Gothics summit... but how far west? I didn’t know, and had not chosen to bring the guidebook pages with a description of this trail. A bright sun was beginning to lift the light gray-blue haze from Gothics, as I headed up its western flank’s massive rock slabs. After walking up several rock faces I was confronted with the lower of Gothics’ two cables, and I was not happy! I had hoped the Sawteeth trail intersected to their west, so I would not have to ascend them. I ascended, hand over hand on the rubber garden hose someone had placed over the plastic-coated cables, buffeted by wind and carrying my forty-pound backpack. The rise was tough, but there was nothing else to do. The upper cable arrived, and I ascended it too, still wondering where in the hell that Sawteeth trail was! Had I overlooked it, way down near the col? Was I needlessly heading for the Gothics summit? I could see and hear two men on the summit, a bit above and to my left... but not very far above!

But I was delighted to encounter, at 10:56 AM (fifty minutes up from the col, toward Gothics), the blue-marked trail to Pyramid and Sawteeth. It was about half an hour before I reached the Pyramid summit, in which I took several spectacular photos of slides on the south faces of Saddleback and Basin. To the south was a view of Lake Colden and Flowed Lands, and to the east the Lower Ausable Lake’s boathouse, tiny in the distance, was visible. (I did not realize, at the time, that I’d be walking past it late that afternoon.) Pyramid’s height is about 4,500 feet, but it is either too close to Gothics or Sawteeth, or the drop between them is insufficient, for it to be considered a “46” peak. I snapped a couple of photos but did not bother to remove my backpack, remaining at the summit only from 11:33 to 11:38 AM before heading for Sawteeth.

The descending trail was typical for the High Peaks: rocky with small boulders, roots... at one point I’d placed my right boot in a narrow channel down to the right of a small boulder, and when I brought my left leg down barked my bare knee against the rough boulder, drawing blood. I figured I’d done this many times when I was a child, so I just moved along, stopping for lunch along the trail from 12:05 to 12:35 PM. Two men came up toward me, and one snapped my photo. At 1:07 a trail intersection appeared, the Weld Trail down to Lower Ausable Lake; it read “Sawteeth .5 mi” but the paint was in poor shape and I wondered of a units digit was missing! But I reached the summit of Sawteeth (my 44th of the 46 High Peaks) at 1:45 PM. Blackflies and black clouds (where have I heard *that* before?!) shortened my stay, and I left the summit about 2:00 PM. Almost immediately a sign appeared with a choice of trails: one the “Scenic Trail” to Lower Ausable Lake, the other a trail to the Upper Ausable Lake’s



Just passin' through Pyramid; no depacking

Wardens' Camp (warning "no outlet to Lower Lake").

I made a big mistake, choosing the "Scenic Trail." All I can reconstruct is that obviously the trail I wanted *did* have an "outlet" from Upper Ausable — the trail up over Colvin to Gill Brook — so the one with "no outlet" could not be the one I wanted. Obviously the sign meant "no outlet except by hiking several miles over one of the High Peaks." In any case, I marched on down the "Scenic Trail," wondering why it seemed so little like the trail described in the guidebook pages I had with me (the ones directing the hiker to the Upper Lake and Warden's Camp!). I snapped some spectacular mountain photos, including Nippletop to the southeast and a small lake to the east-southeast, and reached the Adirondack Mountain Reserve boundary at 3:21 PM. The descent was steep and seemingly never-ending; I could see the Ausable Lakes below and they never seemed to get any closer! I encountered several numbered "overlooks" and snapped photos at a couple of them.

Eventually I reached the level of the lake, but was discouraged to find that the trail wove north along its west shore, climbing over and around large boulders, with the head of the lake — where I had to go — far in the distance.

But at 5:35 PM I finally reached some trail intersections ("Rainbow Falls," for one) and a dam that I had never seen before. As I sought a convenient spot to pump water, a kind lady, who had been dayhiking with her husband, darted down to the boathouse and fetched me a bottle of Poland Springs; it was thoughtful, but she did not realize the backpacker's need for quantities of water. Finally I realized what I'd done: I'd emerged, shortly before 6:00 PM, at the north end of the **WRONG LAKE**. The trail I wanted, to the Blake-Colvin Col, was at the north end of Upper Ausable Lake, I was at the north end of Lower Ausable Lake, and there was no road or trail between them. I drank Poland Springs water, pumped more, and considered how to get out of this mess.

I had to reach State land before I could camp for the night, and recalled some campsites along the Gill Brook Trail, so at 6:12 PM I headed for the Lake Road (which terminates here) and soon encountered the trail up the Fish Hawk Cliffs. I climbed it, meeting two Ausable Club couples who were concerned about my finding a campsite before dark. At 7:01 PM I began the steep descent to the Gill Brook Trail, reaching it (almost right at the AMR/State boundary) at 7:36 PM. (In retrospect, I probably would have been better off to walk the Lake Road to the Gill Brook Bypass, rather than climb up and over Fish Hawk Cliff: more distance, but far less elevation change.) Only two minutes later I arrived at State land, and at 7:42 PM crossed Gill Brook to the first of the designated campsites along the trail, gratefully depacking after a long, hard, day of great hiking but with a major error. I erected my lightweight silicone tarp. Too tired to face a large freeze-dried dinner at 9:15 PM, I simply drank water and finished my day's trail snacks. Sitting on a log and writing in my trail notebook, I still thought it possible to hold to my itinerary, but it would require backpacking over Colvin, climbing Blake, then hiking to Feldspar Brook — or, at least, to Panther Gorge — tomorrow.

It was a pleasant night at a beautiful campsite, with nearby Gill Brook rushing downstream and neither bugs nor rain. I enjoyed my modest breakfast and decaf, packed up, and left the site Friday morning at 8:30 AM. I climbed steadily, along the Gill Brook Trail, enjoying several flat padded sections with a bright sun rising and the



Lunch between Pyramid and Sawteeth



Breakfast coffee along Gill Brook: July 10, 2009

brook farther and farther below and to my left. At 9:36 AM the trail intersection to Elk Pass and Nippletop arrived, with Colvin 1.1 miles to the right. (“Man, I’m slow this morning!,” reads my trail notebook.) After a very awkward climb up a rock, which required relying on right-boot friction against a knot in a small log wedged into a crevice between rock faces, I reached Colvin’s summit about 11:00 AM. The blackflies were terrible, but the views were great, and I snapped one of myself (probably my fourth time here, including one on snowshoes back in January) and of Lower Ausable Lake. After a GPS reading and snack, I heard voices that sounded like young boys; they were trying to deduce how to handle that log-assisted awkward step. I headed out, at 11:15 AM, toward Blake.

The descent from Colvin to the col between Blake and Colvin was quite difficult, with several awkward rock descents that required stepping down backwards, using hands and knees on roots and small ridges on the rock as hand or foot holds. At one point I was backing down a large boulder with my left hand gripping a small tree near the left edge of the boulder and trail and my right hand gripping a small ledge on the boulder. I couldn’t find a position, down below, for my right boot, and lost my right handhold. Gravity swung me around, pivoting around the tree my left hand was gripping, stopped by a log and tree branches at the left side of the trail. This was my first real slip of the hike, but no harm done: I moved over to the left side of the trail and descended with the help of the foliage there. A short time later a fast-moving young woman passed me, also headed down, and we exchanged pleasantries. I reached the col, gratefully, at 12:17 PM. and depacked for lunch and water.

Stashing the backpack, I loaded the Jansport daypack and — at 12:30 PM — headed for Blake. The ascent was not particularly difficult, and I met the young woman (Christine) coming down; a friend was waiting for her on Colvin. (It was probably they who I heard working on the log climb.) I reached Blake’s summit about 1:05 or 1:10 PM, just as a man arrived from the south (Pinnacle); that’s why I didn’t get the exact time. He pulled out a Stewart’s sub for lunch, snapped my photo, and we both fought off blackflies until I left at 1:27 PM, after a GPS reading.

Back at the col, I donned the backpack again and left at 2:45 PM, heading down the steep and arduous trail toward the Upper Ausable Lake. I knew there were feasible campsites along the trail, but saw none on the steep and rough slopes of State land, and met the Adirondack Mountain Reserve boundary — much to my discouragement, for I’d seen no campsites — at 3:42 PM. All I could do was backtrack along State land, but only five minutes later depacked at a tiny pocket of relatively level land on the north side of the trail, just a few feet from it. With a little extra time, I fiddled around with the Amazonas hammock, but trees were not spaced properly for a good



Mount Colvin: The Accidental Peak



Blake Peak (#45); signs read “Colvin” and “Ridge to Pinnacle”



A tiny site along the trail to the Blake-Colvin Col

hang. Still, it was nice to be able to get off my feet and to rest comfortably. I tried a few photos, but the area was so small it was difficult to achieve perspective. I was standing in the trail when I took this photograph.

Despite the two-dimensional slope to the most level spot I could find (downhill to my feet, and to my right), I slept well Friday night, awakening to see a bright full moon illuminating my little site around 2:00 AM. After breakfast I packed up — another rain-free night, after an entire rain-free day! — and headed down the steep, rocky and rooty, trail at about 8:00 AM, Saturday July 11, 2009, the fifth day of my hike. Barely more than half an hour later I was down, reaching the footbridge over the Ausable River and then the beautiful Carry Trail. I rested the pack on "Pete's Backpack Rest" at 8:42 AM, enjoying the wonderful Ausable River, its clear cold water rushing over rocks like the typical northern-forest river. The trail, beautifully maintained by the Ausable Club, was level and smooth, a true delight after that descent from the col. The AMR Warden's Camp came along shortly after 9:00 AM, and one of the three men there graciously agreed to take my photograph. This is where I should have been, Thursday evening about 6:00 PM and late Friday morning!

I left Warden's Camp at 9:07 AM, picked up the trail to Haystack at 9:15 AM, and enjoyed the beautifully maintained AMR trail, rising gently and smoothly with no awkward steps to negotiate. At 10:17 AM a trail intersection appeared, with "Range via Snowbird Trail" to the right and "Haystack via Bartlett Ridge" to the left; I took that one. About 10:30 AM the trail passed through a beautiful stand of tall old firs, with the trail level and padded with duff and needles; I photographed it, whimsically captioning it "What all Adirondack trails should be like!" Around 11:30 AM the trail leveled out, passing through an area of blowdowns; I wondered if this was Bartlett Ridge. At 11:42 AM the trail to Haystack intersected to the right, but I stuck to the left, to Panther Gorge.

At 12:27 PM I arrived at a rushing brook with a trail intersection of the Haystack/Upper Ausable Lake trail (yellow) and the Elk Lake/Marcy Trail (blue). This should be Panther Gorge, which the AMR Warden thought should take about three hours. I had planned to have lunch at the leanto... but this was completely unfamiliar, and there was no leanto in sight, nor the deep pool in which I'd soaked my sore feet back in 1999. Maybe this wasn't Panther Gorge after all. Probably somewhat dehydrated, and eager for lunch, I was puzzled. Where the devil was I, anyway? This certainly did not look like the Panther Gorge I remembered from ten years ago.

Adding to my confusion, the Elk Lake/Marcy trail sign showed blue markers back toward Elk Lake, but only a shiny aluminum disk, with no color shown, pointing across the brook toward Marcy. I wanted to go that way, to Four Corners (the way to Mount Marcy), but my map showed a yellow-marked trail from Four Corners down to Feldspar Brook, and I assumed the trail from Panther to Four Corners was yellow also... and I could find no yellow trail markers across the brook. I looked upstream — sometimes trails coincide with stream beds — but still found none. Finally, I crossed the brook (Panther Brook, I decided later) on large rocks and headed up the blue trail toward the west.

By my compass, though, it seemed somewhat southwest, and I began to fear I was heading toward Elk Lake, still thinking that the trail to Marcy should be marked yellow. After perhaps five minutes of climbing, I backtracked to the brook and trail signs, increasingly frustrated with the wasted energy and time. Looking again at the map and signs, I continued to be puzzled. I'd thought that a trail to Haystack rose directly from Panther Gorge,



Dinner at the tiny campsite



AMR Warden's Camp, only twenty hours late...

and there was no such trail shown on my map! There was only a trail that headed back toward Upper Ausable Lake and then branched off toward Haystack. Of course this was the trail by which I had just arrived, but for some reason I was convinced I had come in, instead, by the relatively level Elk Lake Trail. This was awful. I was reminded of the television advertisement for an Alzheimer's drug in which a small gray-haired woman is ushered back to her party at a bowling alley by a young man who explains, "She seems a little confused."

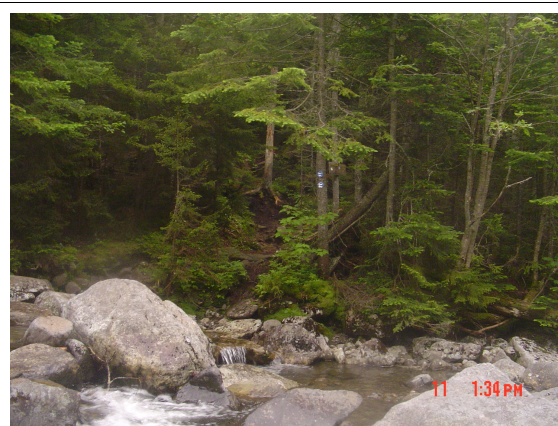
Still, there seemed only one way to go, so I headed across the brook again and ascended the blue-marked trail out of the gorge. I plugged along for a while, perhaps ten minutes, but then had doubts again; I didn't want to pull my all-too-frequent act of charging up or down the wrong trail for hours and winding up who-knows-where, especially since I'd already had an unfortunate experience around Elk Lake some years ago (culminating with my spending a night in a culvert under the Northway, I-87). Backtracking in frustration, I charged along without my usual care, and during one descent hooked my left foot on a root. The backpack's momentum swung me to the left. I was able to kick my left foot free, but had no way to offset the momentum and could think only to jump, with both feet together, onto whatever I was headed for anyway, down about a foot off to the left of the trail. Fortunately I landed, two-footed, in a cluster of branches and a small stump that was secure, so I did not even fall down. This was a real slip, worse than the swing on the Colvin rock, but I was lucky. Sobered a bit, I climbed back onto the trail and returned to the brook at a more sedate pace.

This time I wolfed my modest lunch and took a GPS reading. I had no coordinates for Panther Gorge, but had entered Mount Colden. It lay roughly in the direction I was headed, and the GPS unit's "Go To" [Colden] function pointed straight up the blue trail I had just descended! With rain threatening, I left the brook for the *third* time, at 1:36 PM, with new confidence. Before I had reached even the point at which I had last turned back, I met a man with his teenaged son, who told me they had come from Four Corners. Finally I knew I was on the right trail. In retrospect my confusion seems foolish. The Elk Lake/Marcy Trail goes from Elk Lake to ... what? ... The leanto, and probably the pool that I remember, are a little south of the trail intersection, a little way down the blue trail toward Elk Lake. And the sign identifying that yellow-marked trail headed up from the brook, that I was convinced I had not arrived on, pointed to Haystack and Upper Ausable Lake... and where was I, at the Warden's Camp, that morning and what trail did I intersect about 11:40 AM? As I say, "[He] seems a little confused."

After a lot of climbing, using several nicely constructed series of rock steps that I remember descending in 1999, I arrived at Four Corners at 2:47 PM and had a quick snack and drink. Rain was threatening, and began shortly after I passed Lake Tear of the Clouds and headed down the steep Feldspar Brook Trail. My Sony DSC-P52 camera was in my "portable office," a pouch mounted on the backpack's shoulder strap, but I'd taken it out of its Kodak black nylon pouch to save space in the "office." Rain began more earnestly partway down the Feldspar trail, but I was already wet in my T-shirt and did not bother with the Goretex. I reached the trail to Lake Arnold, remembered that the path to the leanto was a short distance in that direction, and depacked at the Feldspar Brook Leanto at 4:13 PM, in thunder and lightning.

A group of boys arrived about 6:00 PM. They were from a Christian camp, Deerfoot, near Speculator. Only two sleeping bags were in the leanto when I arrived. I think they had planned that all seven or eight of them would occupy it, but when I assured them I was staying, their leader set up a tent a short distance away. Deciding to look at my Panther Gorge photos, I discovered that water had damaged my camera. At first, photos could be viewed, but lines crossed the screen, the images faded in and out, and finally the LCD screen was simply white. No photos could be taken. Well, only one day left, and the Memory Stick photos were probably OK. The boys were a nice group, singing short religious songs and commenting briefly on scripture. Five of them shared the leanto with me that night of lightning and thunder booms that shook the structure. We were glad of a solid roof.

Sunday morning dawned bright and clear, to our great relief, and I left the leanto, headed for Lake Arnold with my backpack, at 8:30 AM. Negotiating a large bog was a bit tricky, but the boys' advice to test logs with my poles was helpful: Several solid-looking ones were simply floating. At 10:00 AM I reached the turn toward Lake



The Panther Gorge puzzle... one hour here...

Arnold and Mount Colden (1.4 miles), and took it. (I’d met several hikers already, that morning, along the Lake Arnold Trail.) It was nice to walk in bright sunshine! I tested the camera; the lens cover opened and start music played, for the first time: It’s getting better! About 11:00 AM I noted spectacular views of Marcy to the east, and a young man with a Syracuse University T-shirt passed me, also ascending. I had to retrieve my Leki poles’ rubber feet from mud, which had pulled them off, several times.

At 11:17 AM I emerged on a large rock knob to find the Syracuse man there also. We took a GPS reading, as his father-in-law and a young boy arrived to join him, and found the true summit 0.29 miles to the southwest. They headed down into a wooded col, along the trail, and I followed a few minutes later. At 11:35 AM I crawled under a large overhanging rock, and about 11:45 emerged on the large rock knob we’d seen a half-hour earlier. The party of three was having lunch on a rocky ridge overlooking the southwest, and I joined them, eager to have them photograph my arrival at my summit number 46. The father-in-law, a 46’er in 2001, pointed out a Hitch-up-Matilda footbridge along Avalanche Lake, tiny in the distance. I mentioned that I had not seen any USGS bronze marker, but he said we’d come up the one trail (Porter, from Lake Arnold) and had begun to descend the other (Lake Colden), so we had reached the summit. I took a GPS reading that beeped “Arriving at Mount Colden,” and the young man took two photos of me. My GPS showed that the summit was 288 feet northeast and 12 feet higher than our lunch stop, but we had begun to descend and the Lake Colden trail was toward the southwest so that seemed to make sense.

The party left, and I was alone on the summit in a stiff, cold wind blowing dark clouds in from the west. I’d read that the Lake Colden Trail was steep and difficult, so the threatening weather encouraged me to move along. I began my descent at 12:20 PM and was down off the bald rock in about half an hour, glad to be down among the scrub firs. A young man, ascending, warned me of steep and wet rock slabs near the bottom; I met perhaps ten other ascending hikers, some with European accents, and one shirtless young man with a gallon milk jug of water dangling from a strap, down near his knees. Many ascenders were taking to the woods, stressing the sparse vegetation and soil; I remained on the rock slabs, using my Leki poles, very carefully, for balance and sometimes to take a little weight. About 2:00 PM I descended a short ladder that — I believe — indicated the end of the steep slabs the bearded young man had warned me of, and at 2:27 PM Lake Colden came into view through the trees. At 2:32 PM I reached the lake and the intersection with the trail north along the east shore of the lake, and I took it... very glad not to have to detour to the Lake Colden campground and dam. This trail intersected, at 3:02 PM, with the main trail along the west side of Avalanche Lake. I signed the trail register there.

About a half-hour later I reached the first Hitch-Up-Matilda bridge, bemused to think that I’d seen it — looking so tiny — from the top of Colden just three hours earlier. The path along Avalanche Lake was difficult; I’d underrated it because I’d been on it so often, but it climbed over large tumbled boulders and up and down ladders. I finally reached the north end of Avalanche Lake about five minutes before four, and Avalanche Camp (and the intersection of the trail to Lake Arnold) at 4:41 PM. Another 45 minutes brought me to Marcy Dam. After a false start — to the Interior Post Ranger’s house — I found the dirt road that runs direct to South Meadow, and at 5:17 PM took it: 2.8 miles to South Meadow. It was a joy to walk, after those difficult trails, and I moved right along... but was passed by the bearded young man who’d warned me of steep slabs and by the shirtless young man (and his attractive and cordial girlfriend) who still had the dangling gallon milk jug. At 6:30 PM I was back at the truck, and drove away at 6:45 PM. After a brief jaunt to the High Peaks Information Center to call Helen, I left the Loj area at 7:03 PM. I stopped briefly at the Keene Stewart’s, then for dinner at the Noon Mark Diner, and arrived back at the Newcomb camp about 10:00 PM.

Relaxing after a shower, with a cold drink and clean clothes, I began to read some of my trail guides. McMartin’s description of the Colden summit, with a short ladder and near-360° views, did not sound like anything I saw. I began to realize that I had somehow taken a shortcut from a yellow blaze near the end of the Porter Trail to another shortly after the start of the Lake Colden Trail, bypassing a short jog to the east (northeast, from my lunch

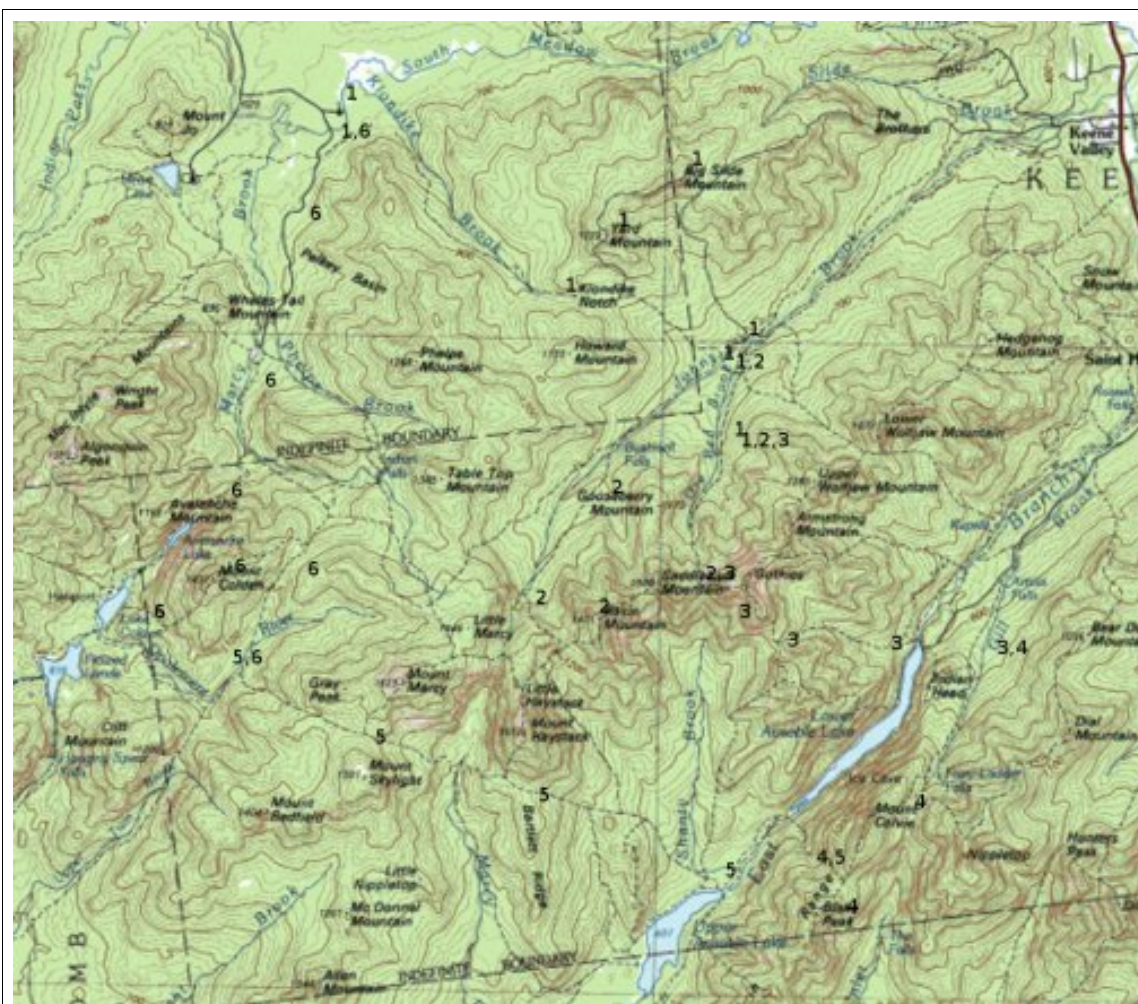


On Mount Colden, my #46... Noon, July 12, 2009

stop) that would have taken me to the real summit. I was devastated: All that work, time, effort... and I failed to reach the summit of my 46th peak. Later I saw a photograph of the Colden summit, and again it is clear that I was not there. Close... the summit was 12 vertical feet and 288 feet northeast from my lunch stop, and I'd descended and moved southwest from my highest point... but, as Maxwell Smart used to say, “Missed it by *that* much.” I'll return for a day hike.

Nonetheless, it had been an excellent six-day adventure. I covered many miles of Adirondack High Peaks trails, climbing and descending a great deal of elevation and enjoying myself immensely. Fatigue set in near the end of a couple of those ten or eleven hour days, but I generally felt strong and healthy, toting my forty-pound backpack for most of those miles and over several of the High Peaks. The brooks and rivers were spectacular, as were the views from the mountain peaks. This is the country that I love, and I'm looking forward to going back.

THE END



Area covered by this six-day hike; numbers show day's travel ("1,6" start/end at South Meadow parking area (upper left); "1,2" Johns Brook Lodge; "1,2,3" Orebed Brook Leanto; other pairs like "4,5" indicate night (day 4)/morning (day 5).