**Into the Hills: What it's Like to Climb 2,000 Mountains**



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Everybody remembers their first. At the time I was only 12 years old, which may seem young, but I've seen people younger than that climb mountains. I recall my very first mountain, yet I barely remember how I got there, why I was there, or who led me to the summit during that summer of 1985.

That first peak was the Adirondack Mountains' Crane Mountain, a 3,240-foot-high pile of rock and forest in the southeastern part of this range. Crane Mountain is a gem. After climbing either of the two steep trails that ascend its precipitous southwest flanks, you break out onto a jut of summit bedrock. This perch offers an expansive view that includes the Vermont skyline to the east, a spread of foothills to the south, a pile of trailless peaks to the west, and the highest peaks in the state to the north. If you didn't find the ground-level view good enough, you could climb the forty-foot-tall fire tower, which stood on the summit until 1987. From this tower, it seemed as though you could see forever. One guidebook author rightfully dubbed Crane Mountain "The Super Mountain."

Why I was even on that mountain 35 years ago? Those memories are fleeting. I was either attending a whitewater paddling camp located near Crane Mountain and the day's activities there got rained out and we went hiking instead, or my parents enrolled me in a local 4-H chapter that did fun stuff with kids who couldn't determine what to do with their summers. Either way, after navigating a series of county roads, we followed a single-lane dirt road that led to a lonely trailhead tucked into a northern hardwood forest. We were probably the only ones there. One, or two, or three leaders coaxed me and my five, six, or seven adolescent colleagues out of the warm, dry van and into the cold, wet woods. From there, I remember scrambling up a flooded trail for a few hours and then standing on a slab of bedrock, which must have been the top. I don't remember seeing the fire tower, and there was to be no triumphant view anyway. All I saw were clouds. One of our leaders murmured, "This is it," and then we headed down another flooded trail back to the van. I could not understand the point of it all.

A hike like that is why kids go hiking once, not twice. Yet that day on Crane Mountain, for all its follies, piqued my interest in the out-of-doors. My parents and big sister were never the

outdoorsy types, so I started going into the woods by myself. Since we lived in a rural area, I just went out our backdoor. A year or two after my Crane Mountain hike, a forest ranger who lived down the road taught me how to use a map and compass, and, as they say, the rest is history. And here I am, 35 years and 1,999 mountains later, writing an article about what I've learned among the hills. What a journey it's been. My last peak was quite different from the first. I finished on an 11,000-foot trailless peak in Colorado's Rocky Mountains, bivouacking on top in the middle of winter.

Perhaps my insight is valuable for beginners and seasoned hikers alike. After all, it's estimated that only forty Americans have reached the "2,000 peaks climbed" milestone, one I am very thankful to have been able to reach. So, without further ado, here are the ten important things I gleaned during this splendid journey.

*1. Hiking is safe* Across a total of 15,000 miles of hiking, I have suffered three ankle sprains and no further mishaps. Injury and death are rare in the backcountry. Consider that during 2015 there were 179 searches, 149 rescues, and 13 body recoveries completed in the Adirondack Park. Perhaps that sounds like a lot, but it's not. Just one peak in this six-million-acre range, Cascade Mountain, saw 33,000 hikers that same year. The most dangerous part of mountain climbing is driving to the trailhead.

*2. There is more to it than just the mountain* There is the primary objective, the summit, yet there is so much more. I've taken the time to learn the flora, fauna, history, and geology of the mountains I love, and this has made the journey more interesting and meaningful.

*3. Carrying less is best* When I started backpacking, I didn't know what to bring. So I played it safe and brought everything. Now I can go into the mountains for weeks at a time during spring, summer, and fall with a complete pack weight (that's everything but food and water) of ten pounds. I move quickly and comfortably, which makes for a fine experience.

*4. Sharing in a deep manner is meaningful* Sure, there's social media, but that's a "Been there, done that" style of sharing. A higher goal is to write. I've written dozens of articles and seven

books about the out-of-doors, and this literary journey has been as special as my mountain journey. Writing is therapeutic, challenging, and rewarding – just like hiking.

*5. The road less traveled is often best* If a peak has a trail up the south side, I'll consider heading up the trailless north side. That way, solitude is nearly guaranteed, and the hike feels timeless and unique.

*6. Humility is strength* Sure, I climbed 2,000 mountains, but that doesn't make me better than any other hiker. If I had to define the "best hiker," it would be one who finds hiking most fulfilling and leaves as little effect on the natural environment as possible. Chest-pounding is rarely defensible.

*7. To disconnect is to connect* When I was an outdoor education professor, I mandated that no phones were allowed on field courses. Sooner than later, students in the wilderness would go through what I deemed "technology withdrawal." They fidgeted and fussed, not knowing what to do. They were unable to *just be*. Silence is an awfully good healer, and mountains offer lots of it, so give it a chance.

*8. Conscientiousness is key* I never wing a hike. During winter, the consequences of forgetting a fuel canister range from eating a cold dinner to facing severe dehydration. When traveling deep into trailless areas, the consequences of not remembering how to adjust for declination range from an unplanned bivouac to becoming hopelessly lost. Successful hikers plan well.

*9. Mountains are sometimes best shared* The mountain landscape is naturally challenging yet calming, and you may know someone who will benefit from being in such a setting. Next time you climb a mountain, bring a friend. If you offer a hike that matches their ability and desires, chances are good they'll ask to go again or even strike out on their own.

*10. There is plenty of wild land* Some have lamented that untrammeled land is difficult to find, yet this is not supported by evidence. Take just one list of peaks I completed, the 2,000-foot summits of the Catskill Mountains, which are less than three hours from New York City. Of these

387 mountains, 328 have no trails to their tops. That's wild, easily-accessible land. Nationally, the U.S. Forest Service oversees nearly 200 million acres, and the National Wilderness Preservation System totals more than 110 million acres.

The ten above points are important, surely, yet I could have easily listed twenty or even fifty more. When one spends so much time among the hills, he learns more about himself than he does about mountains. Who would have even guessed that I would one day climb 2,000 mountains? Not me. Especially during that cold and wet day on Crane Mountain 35 years ago.