New York 3,500-footers in Winter: Rekindling Challenge

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During a 10 degree day high in the North River Mountains of New York State's Adirondack Mountains, I encountered the edge of a ten-foot cliff. My friend, Pete, the only hiker foolish enough to accompany me on a traverse of this five-mile trailless ridgeline, circumnavigated the obstacle, but I chose a straight line down. I held onto a branch with my gloved hands and I, as a quote from La Vida goes, "let myself go very, very gradually, letting my arms take the strain." It was the perfect quote for my smooth descent. It was gentle and descriptive, and my outstretched arms steadily lowered my dangling body. But La Vida was interrupted by Pete screaming, "Yo! That's all ice. Don't go – " Before he could finish, he was rudely interrupted by a "SNAP," which was my branch breaking. I rocketed down the wall of blue ice, doubling acceleration with each foot lost, landing ass-first in a thicket of spruce trees that stood above ice-covered rocks and blowdown. Then all was silent.

Holding his breath, Pete stared at me. Bruised and snow-covered, in a disheveled pile of snowshoes, ski poles, and green Gore-Tex fabric, I clutched the broken branch in one hand. Deep groans poured out but were slowly replaced by a spring of laughter as I remembered the asinine reason I was in the North River Mountains in the middle of January. That was to climb every peak above 3,500 feet in New York State during winter.

Though not often regarded as a mountainous state, New York is king of the North Country concerning when it comes to sizeable peaks. From the southern limit of the Catskill Mountains to the northern tip of the Adirondack Mountains, the Empire State possesses 131 summits that exceed 3,500 feet. That's 35 in the Catskills, 96 in the Adirondacks. By comparison, if you were to total every 3,500-foot summit in Vermont and New Hampshire, that total would exceed New York's total by just one peak. The breadth of climbing New York's 3,500-foot peaks in winter tests all the skills an adventurer can muster.

Such was the challenge of New York's 4,000-foot peaks back in 1962 when the entrepreneur of Adirondack winter peakbagging, Edgar Bean, became first to climb the forty-six 4,000-footers of this range during winter. During the decade following Bean's accomplishment,

a mere eleven mountaineers repeated his feat, proving that venturing above 4,000 feet in winter forty years ago was arduous. Today the story is different.

Since 1980, an average of more than eleven people have completed "the winter forty-six" every single winter. With more than 240 hikers completing this winter list since 1990, climbing the 4,000-footers of the Adirondacks seem a walk in the park, especially for what who dub "cruisers," people who search the Internet to find what trails up what peaks are broken. Even when pulling your own weight, the ease of climbing peaks above 4,000 feet in winter is increased by the extensive maintenance and cutting of trails. A growing trail system replaces the bushwhacks and obliterated routes Bean and company had to deal with forty years ago. The challenges mountaineers found in the hills during the 1960s and 1970s are difficult to find today. And I was part of the problem.

During the 1990s, I climbed the Adirondacks' 46 High Peaks and the Catskills' 35 3,500-foot peaks during winter. Both lists offered challenges, surely, but the challenges were not of Bean proportions. Upon completing these 81 peaks, and reading about peakbagging days gone by, I wanted something more. Not just more peaks but more challenge. I wanted a list of peaks that wasn't sanctioned by hiking clubs. I wanted to be off the beaten path, breaking trail until I was exhausted, bushwhacking until I got lost, and skiing long approaches on unplowed roads. I followed the advice a peakbagger gave me near the turn of the millennium in regard to rekindling wild experiences. He wrote, "Though the original goal of climbing the 4,000-footers was to take throngs of hikers away from popular ranges, these goals are now nearly unobtainable and work in reverse. Everything's now a popular range, even in winter. To meet the original peakbaggers' setting you'll need to go out on your own into more far-flung land, being conscious this cycle will not be repeated."

He hinted I kick the challenge up a notch by kicking it down a notch. I realized his oration could be the cure-all for predictable peakbagging because the Adirondack peaks between 3,500 feet and 4,000 feet see little traffic. Though I already had more than 80 of these 131 peaks surmounted before I made the 3,500-footer goal official, I was confident I possessed an objective a winter peakbagger from forty years ago would approve of. Though such a challenge may sound easy in print, the difficulties in the field cannot be understated. The sub-4,000-foot peaks possess the ability to reduce the strongest trail-breaking man into a mere boy. He'll wish he was back home watching tough guy American Chopper, snuggled under his blankie, eating a warm

bowl of Spaghetti-O's, rather than snowshoeing up Kilburn Mountain in a raging snowstorm, for example. Equally, the most outgoing female winter mountaineer will plead for the life of Holly Hobby, inside a warm home, apron-clad, chained to the stove, and loving every minute of it, rather than wincing as her feet turn to blocks of ice on Wallface Mountain on a 0 degree day, for instance.

During January 2003, it took me three hours to cover the last mile to the top of Avalanche Mountain through knee-deep snow, though I was wearing thirty-inch snowshoes. On Cheney Cobble during February 2002, my partner mistakenly dislodged a fifty-pound, three-foot-wide boulder of snow and ice on top of me, nearly hurling me off a cliff. Above treeline on Wright Peak and Cascade Mountain during January 1998, the winds were so strong I had to crawl to their tops. After breaking trail through deep snow up the 2,000-vertical-foot north side of Green Mountain during March 2002, I was so spent that upon reaching the summit I fell down on my knees. Sleeping out in the Great Range at minus 36 degrees during January 1995 was memorable.

Though I survived, I have no right to lie. During some of these adventures, I wished I had never bought a pair of snowshoes, never took on the 3,500-footers, and never admired Mr. Bean. I sometimes wished I was back in bed under that gray L.L. Bean wool blanket my mother bought me years ago, peach-colored skin warm. But I shivered more at the thought of quitting my pursuit than getting lost in whiteouts. The thrill of choosing routes, breaking trail, and finding my way up and down each mountain was something I couldn't shake. Self-reliance brought battles between mind and body since it was up to me to find enough motivation to summit unnamed, viewless, trailless peaks that saw fewer than ten visitors annually. I often wished for one more break, one more cup of cocoa, one more minute in my heated car. But what your mind seeks, your body takes you to.

So, during March 2005, three years after deciding to climb every 3,500-footer, I found myself on top of my final peak, Little Santanoni Mountain. Its domed summit stood beautifully above its gentle flanks covered by a solid four-foot-deep snow pack. As I stood inside that winter amphitheater, the question of, "Can the challenge of Bean's era still be found in the High Peaks?" came to mind. I looked to the horizon and to piles of trailless 3,500-footers that possessed not a single track on their summits. The answer was a hard-won and satisfying "yes."