

Appalachia

Volume 68
Number 1 *Winter/Spring 2017: Glaciers Melt,
Mountain Goats Cope*

Article 9

2017

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Recommended Citation

Fleck, Richard F. (2017) "In the High Country: Following the Trail of Burroughs and Thoreau, from the Catskills to Katahdin," *Appalachia*: Vol. 68 : No. 1 , Article 9.

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In the High Country

*Following the trail of Burroughs and Thoreau,
from the Catskills to Katahdin*

Richard F. Fleck



NOW THAT I HAVE DWELT SO FAR ACROSS THE WIDE MISSOURI FOR many years, I am drawn to recall my ascents of three unique peaks in the richly literary northeastern Appalachian Mountains: Slide Mountain, the highest of New York's Catskills above the Hudson River; Mount Monadnock, rising high above the wooded vales of southern New Hampshire; and rugged Katahdin, with views of distant Moosehead Lake in northern Maine. These three peaks certainly engendered in me a true sense of the wild.

I

The geologically ancient Catskill Mountains remain refreshingly wild, even though they are but a two-hour drive from New York City. Two summits, Slide and Hunter, rise above 4,000 feet, and scores of peaks crest at 3,500 feet and a bit higher. That's high enough to be fringed with a Canadian balsam zone above densely forested slopes of maple, oak, aspen, birch, and ash. October frosts tinge these woodlands with an array of colors, from purple to scarlets to yellows, and leave them looking like an artist's palette.

But perhaps springtime is an even better season than autumn in the Catskill Mountains. You would think it was October with all those swollen red buds, except that thoughts of cold days with layers of snow dissolve amid a chorus of peepers in the low-lying marshes. The lightness of air, the smells of earth, and the sound of ice-free waterfalls rejuvenate the spirit in ways no other season can. On just such a day, I made my first of three ascents of Slide Mountain.

In May, I read John Burroughs's *Riverby* (Houghton Mifflin, 1894), an exciting account of his climb of Slide Mountain, which at 4,203 feet is the highest in the Catskills. I had seen these mountains in the misty distance, and they always appeared as alluring as the landscapes in Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle*. By the end of the month, I was dashing along the Slide Mountain trail from Big Indian Valley, the Catskills rising around me like dreamy watercolors with the slightest tinge of green amid grayness.

Myriad blossoms of whitebeam (*Sorbus aria*) set aglow the dense undergrowth of the maple-beech forest with a silent but colorful aria. I crossed ancient riverbeds of faded maroon-colored stones and bounded upward into the ferny forest, where the dead leaves of autumn betrayed the delicate

Mount Monadnock's wide, bare ridge of composite rock resembles the shell of a sleeping turtle. JERRY AND MARCY MONKMAN

footfalls of chipmunks. Thrushes and vireos chirped in the hollow aisles of the forest.

After being somewhat spoiled by a level section of trail, I began a long and gradual ascent, following piles of those pale maroon boulders until I reached a 3,500-foot elevation marker in a more sensitive environmental zone. Here, the trees had only begun to bud; I had returned to April. Instead of lush fern fronds, I saw only fiddleheads, barely breaking through the ground. The *Sorbus aria's* veiny, heart-shaped leaves were much smaller, though rings of white blossoms had already come out. Yellow birches appeared stark and nude against the sky, as did all other species save balsam firs.

Echoes from a woodpecker rose up from the lower vales. Some 300 vertical feet higher, the trees began to show signs of dwarfing. A few wild cherry trees looked as gaunt as desert vegetation. Northern birds like longspurs chirped away in the treetops; perhaps they would remain here for another few weeks before their departure to arctic Canada. I caught my first glimpse of the hazy, almost milky, valleys below through the branches of a cool forest. At 3,900 feet, I entered a distinct Laurentian forest zone dominated by rich and fragrant balsam fir that reminded me of coastal trails on Monhegan Island, Maine.

At last I stood on the summit atop a rock slide, well over 4,000 feet above sea level. Panther, Wittenberg, Cornell, and Peekamoose mountains spread beyond in misty space. The lead-gray Ashokan Reservoir appeared more like sky than water. Was it the mystical entrance to some lower world? I was reminded of what Burroughs, a naturalist of the Catskills, wrote about Slide Mountain's summit: "All was mountain and forest on every hand. Civilization seemed to have done little more than to have scratched this rough, shaggy surface of the earth here and there. In any such view, the aboriginal, the geographical greatly predominate. The works of man dwindle, and the original features of the huge globe come out."

I sat back to enjoy the notes of the white-throated sparrows and hermit thrushes; those bird songs erased the years. *Ah tee tee tee tee* came from one perch, and from another, the whirling sound of a thrush: *a myrtle, a turtle, a shirtle, a myrtle*. Was I still a boy in the Maine woods? No wonder Rip Van Winkle lost twenty years up here in the Catskills! I, too, lingered, almost wishing to stay overnight, but slowly retracing my steps back down to the "civilized" valleys below where I would always dream just a bit about the cool and bracing summit of Slide Mountain.

II

New England never looked greener. White pines towered over Concord, Massachusetts, where I attended the annual Thoreau Society meeting in the intense heat of mid-July. The heat was so overwhelming that I had difficulty listening to the various lectures. One of the delightful escape options for attendees was a guided climb of Mount Monadnock, New Hampshire, including finding the spot where Henry David Thoreau spent several nights in August 1860.

Five of us set out for Keene, New Hampshire, on July 17 with our guide José García, a professional botanist and immigrant from Cuba who moved to the United States after the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. Hopping out of our van, we began our hike on the Spellman Trail through a dense mixed forest of paper birch, white pine, giant beech trees with heart-shaped leaves, and thick stands of hemlock. We walked along Thoreau's route of 1852, and in two short miles through fragrant forests, we gained 2,000 feet to arrive at Thoreau's favorite bog, piping with white-throated sparrows and eastern warblers. Thoreau wrote that these nice little bogs of Monadnock stayed perpetually moist by "retaining some of the clouds" that hovered above.

José pointed out a surrounding canopy of striped maple and golden-barked yellow birch with a forest floor of New York ferns. The valleys of New Hampshire spread far below, and we could begin to discern the high, rocky shell of Monadnock above us, looking like a sleeping turtle whose shell rose above treeline.

Gaining elevation, we passed through stands of red spruce that replaced the white pines of the lower slopes and valleys. I mentioned to José that western white pines, or limber pines, grow up to treeline in the Rockies. Not here in New England, he explained. They are less tolerant of higher elevations. He went on to explain that a fierce forest fire in the early part of the nineteenth century had created a false treeline; the trees had not yet come back because of the severity of New Hampshire's climate above 3,000 feet. Mount Washington, above 6,000 feet, has one of the most severe climates in North America, with winter winds clocking in at 225 miles per hour and temperatures dipping well beneath 40 degrees below zero, not counting the windchill factor.

Back in a chilly northern forest of yellow birch (whose bark makes an excellent tea), Canada mayflowers grew in profusion, and we stopped to listen to the notes of a black-throated green warbler: *twirl twirl twirl, zee zee zee*. Its notes blended with the distant notes of some other warbler, way up in the high canopy.

We arrived at Falcon Spring to get an icy cold drink while chickadees chattered around us. José pointed to a 200- to 300-year-old yellow birch, rising high into the forest canopy. We continued our climb up a steep trail past patches of hobblebush and mountain maples that served as perches for Tennessee warblers and hermit thrushes, their ethereal notes piping through the woods. We soon arrived at a dark-brown bog saddled between two lower summits beneath Monadnock's true peak. Here again, we stopped to listen to a symphony of white-throated sparrows and hermit thrushes, reminiscent of the foggy coast of Maine. Berries grew on the forest floor: bunchberries, mountain cranberries, and sandworts.

At last we arrived on top of Monadnock's rocky turtle shell, a geologic term for hills with bare rocky summits such as The Dome in southern Vermont. Monadnock's rock consists of folded layers of gray schists and quartzites that contain feldspathic granulites. We sprang up over the rocky summit to the very top, at 3,166 feet in cool and pleasant breezes. After enjoying sweeping views of eastern New Hampshire and the distant, rolling hills of hazy Vermont to the west, we followed José down a different route, to a seven-foot ledge overlooking five tall spruce trees: the exact location of Thoreau's campsite of early August 1860, where he feasted on cranberries and delighted in watching sunsets. Observing smoke-signal clouds from his camp, he wrote, "One evening, as I was watching these small clouds forming and dissolving about the summit of our mountain, the sun having set, I cast my eyes toward the dim bluish outline of the Green Mountains in the clear evening sky, and to my delight, I detected exactly over the summit of Saddleback Mountain, some 60 miles distant, its own little cloud, shaped like a parasol and answering to that which capped our mountain." We proceeded down a very steep and rocky slope into the rising heat and humidity of the valleys below, with occasional views of eastern New Hampshire lake country. It had become far too hazy to see another hill of Thoreau fame in the distance: Mount Wachusett, near Worcester, Massachusetts.

None too soon, we six returned to Falcon Spring for a cool drink of water to refresh us for our hike back down to the valley below. We wished we could have camped overnight up there, but just remembering that icy spring while in a steamy hot lecture hall the next day refreshed me.

III

The Maine Woods were and are a breeding ground for mysticism, as much so as the Himalaya, the Amazon, or the plains of the Serengeti. I think it must be the piercing note of the white-throated sparrow or the cry of the loon that makes the damp and mossy coniferous woods so conducive to reflection. Or perhaps it is the pagoda-like white pine reflected on the clear waters of unnamed ponds. Or then again, it might be the ghost of Thoreau seen faintly through the flickering flames of a campfire.

More than 50 years ago, I camped with some companions at Chimney Pond before our first ascent of Katahdin, the highest peak in Maine, rising 5,268 feet. It was late August, and the nighttime sky throbbled with colored threads of northern lights. We had difficulty closing our eyes to get some sleep, yet it seemed only moments later when, at 5 A.M., we rolled up our sleeping bags, covered with hoarfrost and, like French Jesuits of old, followed a trail through thick black spruces (*les épinettes noires*). The high-rising, exposed granite of Baxter Peak loomed above us; if our eyes were focusing correctly, we thought we saw a skein of fresh snow on the summit. The spruce and aspen around us seemed so utterly still and silent!

Before long we had worked our way through Katahdin's treeline of matted dwarf spruce; sometimes we'd sink up to our knees trying to get through it, and our boots got soaked in rivulets of spring water that trickled under the dense matting. With each ten or fifteen feet gained, we could see more and more of the boreal forests of northern Maine, which gave off an aroma like incense at some Buddhist temple in Kyoto or Nara.

And when our feet touched nothing but naked granite, we began to see distant Moosehead Lake and cow-moose-shaped Mount Kineo, mythologized by the Penobscot. We paused to take a few swallows of the icy spring water gushing out of a crevice; the sudden chill made our teeth hurt. Though the sky remained bright and sunny, a chill wind drilled through us up here, 4,000 feet above the relatively flat terrain around Katahdin's base.

Finally we stood on the rugged and spiny summit of Katahdin, more than 5,000 feet tall, and peered down sheer granite cliffs into the glacial cirque of Chimney Pond. We hadn't expected to see such sweeping alpine terrain east of the Mississippi, but wild and sweeping it was! As clouds gathered and poured over Katahdin's Knife Edge ridge to the east, the temperature dropped 20 degrees, helping preserve the tiny crests of fresh snow between the rocks. To the north, we could make out a sliver of silver: the Saint Lawrence River in Canada.

Within moments, dense clouds seemed to be born at our very feet. We elected to descend. Thoreau, 100 years earlier, had called this rocky perch an unfinished part of the globe that robbed him of his “divine faculties.” All of us standing there could have agreed with him: the flood of sensations was too quick, too vast, to be absorbed in a reasonable period. This one day’s climb entered our spirits’ cores in undecipherable ways. Thoreau’s posthumously published book, *The Maine Woods* (Houghton Mifflin, 1864), however, offers a key to the cryptic language of this very northern part of Maine, with its pagodas of pine, its eerie and plaintive bird calls, its mossy and damp fragrance, and its chilly alpine heights.

Even though I have ascended more than twenty 14,000-foot peaks in the West, I shall remember these three eastern peaks as though I had just climbed them yesterday.

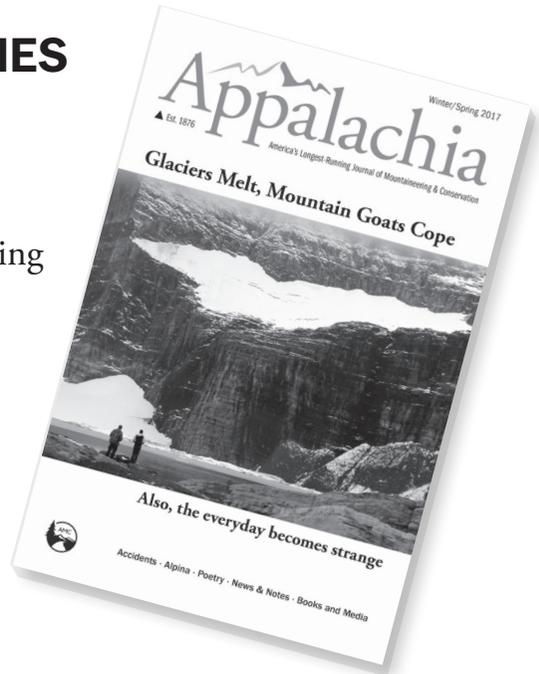
RICHARD F. FLECK is author of *Desert Rims to Mountains High* (West Winds Press, 2013), *Henry Thoreau and John Muir Among the Native Americans* (West Winds Press, 2015), and a forthcoming introduction to a new edition of John Muir’s *Steep Trails* (Thoreau Institute at Walden Woods, 2017).

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