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## Light Snow in the Whites: A Close Call

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# Light Snow in the Whites

*A close call*

**Rob and Bill Powers**



*The narrator in this piece—determined by a flip of an Old Man of the Mountain New Hampshire state quarter—is Rob Powers.*

*Dedicated to Aunt Abbie Fenn, who heard this story at a Thanksgiving family gathering and insisted we write it.*

ON FEBRUARY 14, 1998, MY FATHER AND I ATTEMPTED OUR FIRST-EVER winter hike in the White Mountains with high hopes of reaching the summit of New Hampshire's Mount Washington via the Lion Head Winter Route. Dad and I arrived at the Eastern Mountain Sports North Conway Climbing School for our reserved 8 A.M. guided hiking program. Two large groups were gearing up ahead of us. Our start was delayed by more than an hour because some members in those groups had not yet arrived or did not have all of the required equipment. The delayed start would later come back to haunt us. The sky was clear and the air was cold—very cold. Before starting out, Chaz, our guide, checked that we had brought the gear and winter attire Eastern Mountain Sports required. We somehow managed to lift onto our backs our stuffed, oversized packs holding the vast array of recently purchased and rented equipment and accessories.

Near the beginning of the Tuckerman Ravine Trail, Chaz explained briefly how to use crampons and ice axes so we would be prepared for an unexpected slip or fall. We practiced for fifteen minutes how to hold the axe and position our body weight over the axe's head. This would exert optimal force to drive it deep into the snowpack, maximizing the effect of self-arrest. We practiced this technique three times, lying on our backs and turning onto our stomachs with our heads toward the top of a mildly pitched, snow-covered slope. The self-arrest training may have been adequate for conditions on that particular day. The two of us, though, had not come anywhere close to mastering self-arrest techniques. When the brief training was over, we headed upward toward the summit of Mount Washington.

We crested the upper Lion Head outcropping at the edge of the Alpine Garden, from which we could see the summit. It was completely clear. We stood just a mile by the trail from the top. Chaz told us we were quickly approaching the turnaround time and had no realistic chance to summit that

*The summit of Mount Washington, New Hampshire.* ASHLEY DANA O

day. He wanted to be sure we were able to get down safely before dark. At that time the temperature on the summit was  $-11$  degrees Fahrenheit with sustained northwest winds blowing at 62 MPH. The windchill factor (based on the calculation method used at the time) was a bone-chilling  $-72$  degrees F. The combination of time and brutally cold windchill temperature conspired to thwart our attempt. We were extremely disappointed but vowed to return soon. (The prospect of enjoying a post-hike turkey dinner special at Wilfred's Restaurant in Gorham before heading home made the descent from our failed summit attempt not so bad after all.)

Just one month later, at 8 A.M. on March 14, 1998, we signed in at Pinkham Notch Visitor Center to try again for the summit. We were on our own, without the benefit of an experienced guide. Since we were members of the Mount Washington Observatory—located at the summit—we had notified the observatory staff of our hiking plans and of our intention to stop by and say hello once we reached the summit. Optimistic, our spirits were buoyed by the nonthreatening local forecast calling for “light snow and moderate winds.”

We started out on the Tuckerman Ravine Trail headed for the Lion Head Winter Route. Snowflakes sifted from the sky. We quickly got into a steady hiking rhythm with a slight breeze at our backs. We cruised up the initial wooded and sheltered sections of the trail.

We reached the steep, ice-covered L-shaped chute that is the crux of the Lion Head Winter Route. With ice axes at the ready, we dug our crampons into the icy surface and made our way up the chute without incident.

As we continued to climb, the snow became steadier and heavier, while the wind gradually ramped up. By the time we reached treeline, visibility was a problem compounded by the unanticipated difficulty of our goggles intermittently fogging and icing up.

We stopped for a brief moment on the trail at the base of the summit cone—not far from the upper edge of the Alpine Garden. There was a rock formation containing a short, narrow trail passage between two vertical walls of stone. We stopped and turned around to look down for a minute. My dad suggested that we identify a marker that could help us find our way back through here, on our descent. The only visible marker was a little blue ribbon tied atop one of the many small bushes dotting the Alpine Garden landscape. We took our bearings. Dad said, “Looking straight out from this narrow passageway, that blue ribbon is slightly off to the left,” extending his arm like a needle on a compass. I concurred and replied, “That’s gonna be tricky to find on the way down.”

We pressed on through what was becoming near whiteout conditions with swirling snow all around us. At times, we struggled to find signs of the trail, but we always managed. We wondered if this heavy snow falling was a passing snow squall. We decided to continue toward the summit.

By the time we reached the summit proper, the air temperature was 9 degrees F with a wind speed of 50 MPH, resulting in a windchill factor of -40 degrees F. In the flying snow, visibility had dwindled to a few feet. The summit area seemed completely foreign even though we had explored it during two hikes the previous summer. Eventually we stumbled upon a small building with dimly lit windows and began pounding on a heavy wooden door. After a few long minutes, we were elated to see someone opening the door. The man looked astonished that we were standing there in such abominable conditions. He told us that the main summit building—the Sherman Adams Visitor Center—was just ahead, even though it was not visible. We had been pounding at the door of the TV broadcast building.

We came upon the correct summit building. Although the observatory staff knew that we had planned to come, they seemed shocked to see us standing there, snow- and ice-encrusted. The public area of the building, which includes a cafeteria and souvenir shop, was dark, deserted, and bitterly cold in the midst of its off-season hibernation. Here we removed outer layers, crampons, and plastic boot shells before proceeding into the cozy confines of the observatory section of the building. The staff immediately implored us to rest briefly and quickly head back down the mountain. They explained that the weather was deteriorating rapidly as a result of an intensifying storm. We did not talk with the staff about waiting out the storm in the observatory. We gobbled down our lunch, used the facilities, and prepared for a quick departure.

Returning to the unheated, bitterly cold public area of the building, we geared up. Our hands went numb during the brief moment we took off our gloves to attach our crampons. We stepped out into the furious and unrelenting storm.

FOR MOST OF OUR ASCENT, THE WIND HAD BEEN AT OUR BACKS. NOW, AS WE readied ourselves for the descent from the summit, we were facing directly into a whiteout. The wind was ferocious and intensely cold.

As best we could, we retraced our quickly vanishing footprints down the snow-covered wooden stairs from the summit proper toward the large Tuckerman Ravine Trail sign. We started our slow descent. Our goggles were now

even more problematic than during the ascent. They frequently fogged up and iced over, blinding us. We had to stop repeatedly to remove and clear our goggles. We would then take a few more steps. Each time we paused to fix the goggles, areas of our faces were being exposed to wind-blown snow, which was painfully stinging and battering our skin. To counteract the elements, we alternately shielded each other from the wind to clear our goggles—which offered only temporary improvement.



*Bill Powers, left, and Rob Powers pause during their first winter attempt on Mount Washington, on February 14, 1998.* COURTESY OF THE POWERS FAMILY

As the wind roared, I holler to Dad, “We have to find the trail sign for Lion Head. It should be somewhere up ahead on our left, if we haven’t already passed it.” It was imperative we find this trail junction—a 90-degree, left turn off of the Tuckerman Ravine Trail. A short time later my dad turned around and yelled, “I think we found it—there it is!”

Now we remembered to implement our navigational strategy to locate that little blue ribbon we’d seen on the way up. It seemed like searching for a needle in a haystack. No longer could cairns be distinguished from rocks as we walked among them. A lot of falling and blowing snow had accumulated here since we had last passed by. We made our way along what we believed to be the trail. There was the familiar rock formation and its narrow passage! Dad positioned his arm as he had before, in the direction of where the little blue ribbon ought to be, and said, “I think it’s that way.” We could not see the Alpine Garden or the trail.

We blindly started down, heading slightly to the left in search of the blue ribbon. Shortly after, Dad yelled above the gale, “I think we’re going too far left. Should we go more to the right?” I answered, “Yes, but we need to be careful—if we go too far right we’ll end up falling into Tuckerman Ravine.” We went ahead and modified our course, heading slightly to the right until my growing concern about that potential fall made me say, “Hey Dad, let’s start moving more to the left,” which we did. The dilemma, forcing our meandering path through the snow, had become the awareness and proximity of the invisible, steep drop into Tuckerman Ravine not far from us, versus heading too far the other way and aimlessly wandering through the Alpine Garden in search of the trail and blue ribbon.

Now the grade started to level off. This must be the leading edge of the Alpine Garden. We were standing precisely at that little blue ribbon tied atop that small, scraggly bush. Dad exclaimed, “I can’t believe this! We found it!”

I said, “I don’t know how we did it. Must be beginner’s luck.”

We were grateful and relieved to once again be on the trail. Even with heavy snow continuing to fall, we easily traversed the gentle slope of the Alpine Garden toward the rocky outcroppings of Lion Head. With each step we increasingly separated ourselves from the inhospitable summit. We made steady progress in the diminishing winds toward the relative shelter of the still distant treeline.

As we came to the far edge of the Alpine Garden, we were startled to see a ghostly, fast-moving figure approaching. The time was nearing mid-afternoon, and we had certainly not been expecting to see any other hikers

out in these conditions. It was a young man. He was lightly dressed, carrying a small pack, and hiking without crampons, an ice axe, or any companions. He asked, "How much farther away is the summit? What are the conditions like up there?" I told him, "The conditions are not good and getting worse." I asked, "Have you ever been up there before?" He replied, "No." He explained he had initially been hiking with a group of friends, but they had decided to turn back earlier. He opted to press on alone. He asked, "If you run into my friends on the way down or at the bottom, let them know you saw me. And tell them I was still heading to the summit." My dad reiterated, "The conditions get worse the higher up you go." He thanked us. We wished him luck. We parted ways and continued on in our respective directions.

Now we reached the top of the L-shaped chute we had easily gotten up a few hours earlier. The icy surface our crampons had bitten into before was now hidden beneath several inches of newly fallen snow. Upon the very first step into the chute, each of us slipped unexpectedly and quickly flew down the icy channel. The thick added snow layer prevented the points of the crampons from ever reaching through to the ice—providing us no traction at all. Our instinctive reaction to the sudden acceleration was that our arms flew up and our hands flew open, thus releasing our grip on the ice axes that were meant to arrest our slides.

The previous month's training session on self-arrest techniques seemed to have slipped away as well. Clearly, we were not prepared to handle this type of situation—lacking adequate practice and preparation to master techniques for a slide such as this. Fortunately, we both managed to slow our rapid descent by frantically reaching for and grabbing hold of branches flanking the chute. Neither of us suffered any significant injuries during the unnerving, heart-racing slide.

Soon after leaving the chute, and hiking a short distance across easy grades, we rejoined the wooded section of the Tuckerman Ravine Trail for the final—and thankfully uneventful—conclusion to our adventure. Here we took a short break among the trees, protected from the harsh elements we had left behind. Only the whispering flutter of steadily falling snowflakes broke the silence, as we watched them tumble from the sky. It was a welcomed, precious, and rewarding experience after a challenging and remarkable journey. We then walked the last mile-and-a-half back down to the visitor center.

We emerged from the woods into the parking lot to discover 14 inches of snow had fallen that day and wondered aloud, "Is this what they mean when the forecast calls for 'light snow' in the Whites?"



WE FAILED TO RECOGNIZE THE SEVERITY OF THE CHANGING WEATHER conditions. We had placed all our faith in that morning's forecast calling for "light snow." We now know that our limited winter hiking experience in the White Mountains and our lack of sufficient training failed to prepare us for winter conditions in the Presidential Range. Our basic introductory training had consisted of a single guided winter hike partway up the flanks of Mount Washington. We were naïve. We had a misguided sense of bravado. Mistakenly, even foolishly, we thought we could handle whatever the mountain held in store for us. We learned firsthand the extent to which weather in the Whites can be unpredictable, brutal, and potentially life-threatening. It is a sobering thought that during the hike neither of us truly appreciated the actual danger we were in.

We are thankful to whoever tied that blue ribbon on top of that bush. And that we thought to take notice of our surroundings at that spot. Doing that helped to guide our way through a storm. We got off the mountain safely that day. Simply put, we were extraordinarily lucky.

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BILL POWERS and his son, ROB POWERS, have hiked frequently in the U.S. Northeast, South, and West. Rob lives in Southington, Connecticut. In March 2019 he completed the Appalachian Mountain Club's New Hampshire Winter 4,000-Footers. Bill lives in Windham, Connecticut, and now spends more time in kayaks than on mountains. The authors thank Peter Crane and Tom Padham of the Mount Washington Observatory for providing weather records.

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*"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."*—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

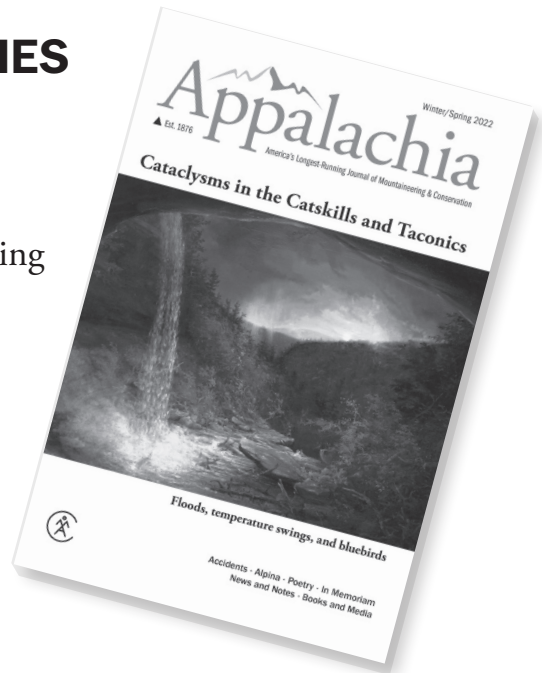
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