

EXPLORER

Bushwhacking Up Maine's Baker Mountain

By Gustave Axelson

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Baker Mountain in Maine doesn't crack the top 100 list of New England peaks. But it certainly has stage presence. A full third taller than the two mountains on either side of it, and twice as wide, Baker looms large on its home turf.

Last summer, as I sipped a mug of morning coffee at the edge of a wooden dock on Little Lyford Pond in the heart of the Maine North Woods, I admired this mountain's girth. It ate up the view across the glassy pond, a dark evergreen-covered mass that disappeared into a low ceiling of rain clouds. Wisps of those clouds swirled and rolled around the mountain's edges, as if a Greek god were up there stirring the soup. This mountain had mystique.

Admittedly I was a bit giddy because my plan that day was to summit the mountain. But I am not alone in my first impressions. "People get superexcited once they see it from the pond. And they immediately want to go to the top," said my guide, Casey Mealey, back at the dining hall for the Appalachian Mountain Club's Little Lyford Lodge. "The adventurous ones, they want to go all the more once they find out there's no trails up it."

Last year, the Appalachian Mountain Club purchased Baker Mountain and its surrounding 4,300 acres of former timberlands, filling in a doughnut hole of private ownership in the conservation group's more than 70,000-acre Maine Woods Initiative to preserve the 100-Mile Wilderness region (so called because it encompasses what's considered the 100 wildest miles of the Appalachian Trail).

Amenities like marked hiking trails are in the works but a couple of years off. So for now, Baker is only for experts at backcountry trekking. It's a 10-mile hike from the Little Lyford Lodge just to get to the base, then a bushwhacking climb to the top, all with only a GPS unit and/or map and compass for guidance.

I had a day set aside in a family vacation to do this, so I had hired Mr. Mealey to show me the way. As I finished a breakfast of baked eggs and cheese at the Little Lyford dining hall, Mr. Mealey slapped a handful of bacon slices between two pieces of toast and announced he was ready to go. Outside we were met by Steve Tatko, the mountain club's land manager, who was joining us. Turns out Mr. Mealey had never been up on Baker, so he asked Mr. Tatko, who had spent time on the mountain when surveying it for the purchase, to come along. In effect, my guide needed a guide.



Casey Mealey, a guide, makes his way through the forest. The Appalachian Mountain Club purchased the mountain and 4,300 acres last year. Stacey Cramp for The New York Times

Mr. Tatko was a slight fellow with circle wire-rim glasses, quite the contrast to Mr. Mealey with his dark beard and shoulder-length hair. But as I jumped into a pickup truck with them, it was clear the two native Mainers shared a deep love of these woods. “You’re going to have a great time today,” Mr. Tatko told me during the bumpy ride along a logging road. “We had some world-class adventure racers go up there, and they told us it was some of the toughest conditions they’d ever encountered.”

Mr. Tatko had plotted a shortcut, driving to within a mile of the top then hiking a 1,000-foot ascent up Baker’s spine of three lesser ridges. We pulled into a cutover clearing on the side of the mountain (the Appalachian Mountain Club has a sustainable logging plan to guide the forest back toward its native state), and loaded up our daypacks. White-throated sparrows were flitting about the curtain of spruce and fir trees at the edge of the cut, whistling their song of boreal wilderness — “Oh sweet Can-a-da, Can-a-da!” I was giddy again as I looked up at the big hump of Baker, now just visible among the clouds.

“I bet there are probably two or three parties that do this every year, tops,” Mr. Mealey said as we set off.

We weren’t far into stomping through the bush when we got our feet wet stepping across rivulets of icy clear water. “People don’t think of a mountain as being crucial to trout, but this one is,” Mr. Tatko told me. The water flowing off Baker forms the headwaters for the West Branch of the Pleasant River, an important spawning area for wild Maine brook trout. Suddenly, more water entered the scene, this time from above. The sullen gray clouds had opened up, and the two guides and I hurriedly donned and cinched up our rain gear.

We slogged on, pushing through tree branches. Mr. Mealey spiced up the bushwhacking by pointing out moose droppings and bear scat. Mr. Tatko, who stopped every few minutes to consult his GPS unit, pointed out a small heart-shaped tree leaf and announced that we had entered the Heartleaved Birch Subalpine Forest zone, a rare type of forest found only above 2,700-foot elevations in Maine. A girdled scar in the bark around a birch trunk, he said, was made by a chain from the last logging harvest in these woods in 1949.

Then things got really thick. Our pace slowed to a crawl as we gingerly high-stepped among trees downed by wind and strewn about like scattered matchsticks. Each wet, slippery log offered another chance for a wrenched ankle. The bushwhacking got bushier, and Mr. Mealey showed me a freestyle swimming-like technique that involved putting my head down and digging with my hands into the spruce branches to pull myself through. Somehow this day hike had become full-body exercise.

We stopped for a snack of trail mix and apples, and I checked on a bloody spot where a jagged branch had punctured my sock. Mr. Mealey offered me a few wood sorrels, tiny clover-looking plants of the forest floor that deliver a bright citrus flash on the tongue, then we punched back into the thicket, this time stepping softly on a lush bed of pillowy moss that glowed bright green. "The loggers never made it up here," Mr. Tatko said. "This is virgin forest."

Twenty minutes later we arrived at another patch of fallen trees, where Mr. Tatko announced — with a stream of rainwater pouring off the peak of his jacket hood — that on a clear day we'd have a spectacular view of Mount Katahdin. He brightened up when we found a moose-stomped trail that looked as if it led to the top. Indeed we soon arrived in a grove of stunted spruce trees no taller than the tops of our heads, and there was no more uphill to be had. The GPS read 3,521 feet. "We're here!" Mr. Mealey cheered.

Mr. Tatko explained that this spot offered a stunning panorama of Moosehead Lake, but again the view was hidden behind a bank of leaden clouds. As a consolation prize, I looked down on the lesser summits along the ridgeline at wisps of breakaway clouds swirling and eddying against protruding rock walls. Again I enjoyed the ethereal cloud play along the flanks of Baker Mountain, this time from above.

There was no center stage for this summit, no signpost to pose beside for pictures. So the guides and I snapped a couple of selfies huddled among the dwarf spruces, exposing our iPhones to the downpour for a few moments. The day was becoming a washout. Mr. Mealey was a bit disappointed as he had hoped to find a makeshift trail register in an old coffee can that he had heard rumors about. But there was no evidence anybody had ever been here.

Summit achieved, we'd started down, when something orange flashed through the brush. Pushing through the branches, we found a twin cluster of spruce trees festooned with orange, blue and yellow surveyor's flagging, the brightly colored plastic strips whipping in the breeze like Tibetan prayer flags. Expert hikers often use these strips in the backcountry to find their way back out, but here they had made a makeshift shrine. Cradled in the nook of the double spruce was a white plastic PVC container. "The coffee can!" Mr. Mealey exclaimed.

Sure enough, it held a notebook and a pen. "Gatorade bottle leaked so we had to start a new book" read one entry. Another spoke in a true Mainer's verse: "Coulda been worse." The dates listed in the entries were for about two to three parties a year. Mr. Tatko's guess was spot on.



Two types of wild mushroom. Stacy Cramp for The New York Times

Mr. Mealey was jotting our names in the book when a sound in the spruces made us all stand straight up. “Hello?” the call rang out. The voice was not mine, nor the guides’. We called back. “Are you at the summit?” said the voice. We shouted back yes. “Thank God. I’ve been circling around this son-of-a-bitch for the past hour!”

Out wandered an older gentleman in a waterlogged fleece shirt and bluejeans. He huffed and sat down at the base of the flagging tree. “I’m into that prominence stuff,” he told us. “I go after 2,000-foot prominent peaks. Done several hundred of them over the past 20 years.”

The man, 63-year-old Andy Martin of Tucson, was a peakbagger — a member of a cult of enthusiasts who collect prominent peaks the way birders build a life list. He had read about Baker Mountain on peakbagger.com, a storehouse for people looking to summit prominent mountains. Another peakbagging website defines “prominent peaks” as “the highest free-standing mountains that have a noticeable separation between them and nearby higher peaks.”

Looking through the notebook, Mr. Martin recognized a friend and fellow peakbagger who beat him here by a few years. Then he took a plastic baggie of gray dust from his backpack and sprinkled a pinch on a spruce.

“This is Jack Longacre, founder of the Highpointers Club,” Mr. Martin said. Mr. Longacre had asked his friends to spread his ashes on mountain summits. Now he resides atop the high point in every state and several other peaks across the continent.

We chatted a bit longer. Mr. Martin explained that his GPS unit had a low battery so he shut it off and tried walking in a straight line, only to get the unnerving feeling that was walking in circles. “I am actually not a bad navigator out West, when the sun is shining and I’m not wrestling Christmas trees,” Mr. Martin said. I lent him an extra compass from my daypack so he could get back down to his truck on the opposite side of the mountain. We shook hands and parted. My guides were still shaking their heads in gobsmacking disbelief as we restarted our descent.



Mr. Mealey, by plastic strips left by previous hikers, looks through the summit notebook, with just two or three annual entries since 2007. Stacey Cramp for The New York Times

“Un ... buh ... lievable,” Mr. Mealey said, smiling.

“I wasn’t sure what was in that baggie, somebody’s ashes or cocaine,” said Mr. Tatko.

I had a fresh spring in my step as we dove back into a wall of spruces. Sure, I had been rained out of knockout vistas of Katahdin and Moosehead Lake.

But I was coming back down Baker having bagged my first prominent peak.

IF YOU GO

Getting There

The Appalachian Mountain Club’s 100-Mile Wilderness region is about a three-hour drive inland from Portland. The trip involves driving on a forest road with potholes and protruding rocks.

Lodging

The mountain club offers two places to stay in the 100-Mile Wilderness: the Little Lyford and Gorman Chairback lodges.

Accommodations at **Little Lyford** are rustic cabins with running water, gas lights and a wood stove; bring your own linens. Canoes and kayaks for paddling and portaging to explore nearby lakes are free for guests.

Gorman Chairback offers linen service and some cabins with private bath. Showers, composting toilets and a sauna are centrally located in the camps. Rates are \$142 a night for adults, with discounts for

children and Appalachian Mountain Clubmembers. The daily rate includes breakfast and dinner, served family style in the lodge, and sandwich lunches, handed out to hikers.

Backcountry campsites are also available. For more information, see outdoors.org/lyford and outdoors.org/gorman.

Summiting Baker Mountain

Only experienced backcountry hikers with excellent orienteering skills should set out from Little Lyford Lodge. For \$450, guests can hire a mountain club guide to drive them closer to the summit and escort them to the top. Baker Mountain has no trails, so hiking requires extensive bushwhacking. Information at peakbagger.com.

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