

Cascade Mountain

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Climbing an Adirondack high peak is an inspiring experience. The 46 highest mountains in the Adirondack Park have a certain cachet in the hiking community as being the most desirable of the mountains to climb or as is stated in the vernacular to "peak bag". Regardless of whether one is an aspiring 46er or not, the joy and pleasure of just climbing one high peak is certainly an experience that should not be missed. If it is only one high peak you aspire to, you should certainly put Cascade Mountain on your short list.



Summit view from Cascade Mountain looking towards the High Peaks

Cascade Mountain, with its trailhead conveniently located just off Route 73 between Keene and Lake Placid is a wonderful introductory climb to the high peaks. It is considered the easiest of them to climb and for the effort put forth the hiker is rewarded with outstanding views and a wonderful sense of what the magical attraction of the high peaks area is to those that find it so irresistible. In light of this I borrow a line



Rocky staircase at the beginning of the Cascade Mountain trail.

from James Burnside's book, "Exploring The 46 Adirondack High Peaks" where he lovingly describes Cascade's popularity, "A major reason for Cascade's popularity is that, while rated a runt (among high peaks) it shares most of the genes of its big brothers and sisters."

If Cascade Mountain is to be your first high peak take notice as you hike the trail of the careful design and thoughtful use of natural materials to enhance the hiking experience. The trail you will hike is a relatively recent one of 1974 vintage, replacing a pre-existing steeper heavily eroded trail to the summit. While hiking, notice how well preserved the trail is despite it

being one of the most heavily used summit trails in the Adirondack Park. There are deliberately placed stone staircases and water bars. The stone staircases allow the hiker to climb on stone instead of digging his/her hiking boots into the soil. Without the stone stairs, footsteps would continually erode and destroy the trail. The water bars direct rainwater and snowmelt away from the trail proper, keeping the trail drier. In so doing, hikers need not bushwhack around wet mucky stretches, which cause degradation of off-trail areas.

The trail itself is very easy to follow and very well marked. The grades are moderate throughout and the woods and surroundings make the trail an enjoyable woods walk. The climb is steady but not uncomfortable. If one has not climbed in the high peaks region at all and has only done local Lake George hikes you will notice a distinct difference in the hiking terrain. The high peaks trails are full of many different sized boulders, stones and massive roots of mature trees. In the jargon of hiking these terrain modifiers are called "ankle busters". It is always a good idea to keep an eye on where each foot is going and just as importantly to wear ankle supporting hiking boots with well cushioned socks. Wearing sneakers or tennis shoes on a high peaks trail is an open invitation for a badly sprained ankle or worse. High peaks trails eat up and spit out sneakers. They are just not made for the beating they take on these trails.

After climbing steadily for 1.8 miles (depending on your speed anywhere from 45 minutes to 2 hours) you achieve your first view at an open ledge and it is an eye opener. Algonquin, Colden and Marcy appear in front of you in their majesty. This is a great spot to catch a breather, get a snack and get ready for the push to the summit. The trail then ducks into the woods and although one is walking in the woods, there is a sense of seeing clear sky above, which means that the summit is rather close. The intersection with the Porter Mountain trail appears with a sign saying the Cascade Mountain summit is .3 miles away. Just past this intersection, the trail opens up and the bald, rocky summit dome of Cascade appears. From here on in the climb becomes very exciting, as it is on bare



View of Marcy, Colden, and Algonquin from the first lookout at 1.8 miles.

rock, very exposed and has 360 degree views. It is at this point in the hike where one feels the uniqueness of climbing on open rock at the 4,000 foot level in the Adirondacks. Cascade's summit is bald but the baldness is not from actually being a true alpine summit above tree line. Devastating fires in 1903 burnt off the trees and soil on the now rocky dome of Cascade and neighboring and visible Pitchhoff Mountain to the northwest just on the other side of Route 73. The trail is now marked by yellow paint blazes and cairns (pyramidal rock piles). You continue up and onto the actual summit where there is an embedded circular summit marker. At this point in the hike expect a sudden drop in air temperature and an enormous increase in wind gusts. The wind chill factor could easily drop 20 degrees or more on the exposed summit. Always have a fleece jacket, a wool hat and gloves in your pack if you want to be comfortable on the summit. In late June 2004, I

climbed Cascade, arriving at the trailhead on a moderately cool day. However, on the summit with the winds howling and the temperature at 50 F it felt absolutely freezing. Once acclimated to being on the summit, you will be in absolute awe of the inspiring views. The most outstanding one is the view made famous by Adirondack photographer Nathan Farb and appears in his book published by Rizzoli, "The Adirondacks". This is the southeast view looking over the approach taken to the summit. Big Slide Mountain predominates in the foreground and behind it the high peaks of the great range appear in their singular glory. The view on a clear day is absolutely magnificent. Looking east, patches of Lake Champlain can be seen. Looking north, Whiteface Mt. is clearly visible. Looking directly northeast Pitchoff Mountain is seen, as is Route 73 snaking 2,000 feet below. The green slopes of Porter Mountain are just southwest of the summit. According to the guidebooks 30 of the 46 High Peaks are visible from the Cascade summit. On a nice day I can think of no better spot to enjoy a well-deserved summit lunch. Bring a map of the high peaks region with you and you could play "Name That High Peak" with your hiking companions as you try to identify the 30 high peaks (as well as lesser peaks) visible from your summit perch.



Snow-flecked *Usnea barbata* near the Cascade Mountain summit.

and soul- inspiring uniqueness.

The hike down to your car should not be much more than an hour. If interested you can extend your hike by visiting the Porter Mountain summit by taking its trail at the intersection just below the Cascade summit. It is a fairly gentle .7 mile walk with a 90 foot descent and 330 foot ascent to the Porter summit. A nice perspective of Cascade's rocky dome is enjoyed from the Porter summit vantage point. If going onto Porter or not, on your descent take note of the dwarf conifers just below the Cascade/Porter intersection. Notice long flowing, green, hairy beard-like growths emanating out of the branches. The unusual formation is a lichen called "*usnea barbata*" commonly known as "Old Man's Beard". *Usnea barbata* thrives only in certain specific conditions and seeing it on the Cascade trail is just another highlight to your hike.

On your drive home, you will reflect on the past few hours hiking which transported you to another place on our planet. Cascade Mountain is a very ancient place of beauty

HOW TO GET THERE

Cascade Mountain tops out at 4098 feet and is rated the 36th highest of the 46 high peaks. The trail to the summit is 2.4 miles and the ascent over this distance is 1940 feet. The trailhead is very easily located. There is a prominent trail sign on the Keene-bound (southbound) lane of Route 73, 8.5 miles out of Lake Placid. If approaching from the Queensbury area, enjoy the scenery on the Northway, get off Exit 30 and turn left onto Route 73 and stay on it following it through Keene Valley and Keene. About 7 miles out of Keene just as you have driven past the scenic Cascade Lakes look for the trailhead on the oncoming lane. One must be careful, there is not a lot of room to maneuver on Route 73. In fact it is actually advisable if at all possible to back into your spot. If you park nose in when your hike is over you face the daunting challenge of backing out directly onto Route 73 with no visibility due to cars being parked next you. Make sure to sign in at the trail register and fill out any DEC day hiking forms. Certain high peak trails require an honor system day pass, however on my latest hike up Cascade I did not notice these forms at the Cascade register.

If planning on doing this hike please keep a few things in mind. Climbing almost 2,000 feet in a little over 2 miles is a serious physical activity that should only be undertaken if one is in good aerobic condition. Nothing ruins the joy of a climb more than being so uncomfortable that each step upwards is unpleasant. If necessary, prepare yourself with less strenuous hikes working up to the level required. A local hike with similar demands to Cascade Mountain is the hike up Buck Mountain from Pilot Knob . If you desire solitude on your summit stay on Cascade Mountain, make special plans to get a very early start. Weekdays are also less crowded than weekends and holidays. Have a carefully prepared pack with liquids, hiking food and any other supplies that you always hike with. Oh yes, also bring a camera. On a nice day this should be a most memorable day for you in our special part of the world.



"Dr. Stuart Delman practices dentistry in Chestertown and resides in Queensbury with his wife, Suzanne. He enjoys hiking the Adirondack trails with his 12 pound red poodle, Lily. In addition, he loves taking pictures of the natural beauty he encounters during his hikes so that he can share them with others."