

## ALGONQUIN PEAK SECOND TO NONE

*Dr. Stuart N. Delman*

Just above the timberline where the trail was particularly steep and the earth looked as if it had been spilled beneath us, we passed two couples making the ascent. We urged them on, and they panted their thanks and continued on their way, except for one young man. "This is incredible," he exclaimed, a look of rapture on his face. "To think we can do something like this --in a lifetime!" His dramatic words would have embarrassed me, except that they were absolutely true. This is how Lisa Fugard of the New York Times in her September 2, 2001 piece "A Long Way To The Top" describes the almost ineffable feeling of being above timberline on Algonquin Peak. Read on and see if you too will want to experience this awe-inspiring hike. Barbara McMartin in her book "Fifty Hikes In The Adirondacks"



places the Algonquin Peak hike in the ultimate chapter, in other words, she saves the best for last. Her opening paragraph is succinct. "Algonquin Peak...is at 5,114 feet, the second highest mountain New York State. But in all other respects, Algonquin is second to none. Standing in the midst of the noblest group of mountains in the Adirondacks, it offers an exciting climb and the best view from within the High Peaks."

### The Trailhead



The trailhead to Algonquin Peak is accessed via the Adirondack Loj and the High Peaks Information Center at Heart Lake. The turnoff to Adirondack Loj Road is on Route 73 four miles south of the village of Lake Placid. The first mile of this road is open and Algonquin Peak in its full and imposing glory looms above as you drive towards Heart Lake.

Stay on the road for 4.8 miles until you reach an entrance booth where a modest

parking fee is charged. The parking lot for cars is enormous, indicating how popular the Loj area is for hiking and camping. Look for the large trailhead and register for the Van Hoevenberg trail to Marcy and Algonquin. The Hike Begins Sign yourself in at the trail register and start your Algonquin Peak adventure. At the one mile point of a relatively smooth walk there is a junction, bearing left will take you to Marcy Dam and the continuation of the Van Hoevenberg trail to Phelps Mt., Tabletop Mt. and Mt. Marcy. You will continue straight ahead and follow the trail signs to Wright Peak and to Algonquin Peak. From this intersection it is a little over 3 miles to the summit with almost all of the 2936 feet of ascent yet to come. The trail to the Algonquin summit has been described as a rocky staircase, and that is in most part an apt description. There has been considerable trail work done on the trail to lessen the effects of constant hiker use. There are many sections where there are stairs and stonework that bring the hiker higher and higher. In some areas where the stone stairs are not present the trail has the feel of hiking in an ascending trench, a trail that is a trough created out of thousands of hikers ascending the path. A good friend of mine has given an apropos name to hiking in this type of trail as "trench warfare". Keeping your pace and taking rests along the way you will pass a waterfall beside the trail at 2.6 miles.



Think of this as a halfway point to the 4.3 mile climb. The waterfall area is a great place to catch a breather and rest and get some energy food into your body for more climbing, some of it which is quite steep. In almost another mile of climbing you will reach a junction for the trail to Wright Peak. Wright Peak is a very noble destination and wonderful high peak to climb, a bit easier to ascend because it is 536 feet lower than the imposing Algonquin. You are welcome to scamper up the trail to Wright and then down again to continue on to Algonquin. The views from Wright are extraordinary in their own right. Just below the summit on Wright Peak is a plaque memorializing the four crewmen from a crashed U.S Air Force B-47 bomber from a training flight accident in 1962. Continuing on the Algonquin trail, the climbing enters an exciting phase as the trees get



smaller, the views start opening up and the excitement of nearing the summit builds. Soon you are looking down on Wright Peak as it appears to be a small bump.

You will soon reach a sign indicating you are entering "above timberline". The sign states, "You are entering an Artic Alpine plant zone. The plants are rare, fragile and very much endangered. Walking and sitting on them will kill them. Please walk only on the trail or solid rock surfaces".



Yellow paint blazes on the bare rock will now direct you for the remaining .4 miles of exciting above timberline hiking to the summit. It is very important that you respect the trail and the fragile vegetation. There have been extensive efforts to restore and maintain the unique ecosystem on the highest of the High Peaks, mainly spearheaded by Prof. Ed Ketchledge of the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. Once on the summit, a summit steward will gently remind you to respect the precious areas as a hiker's boot can destroy

the fragile plants on the summit. On a late summer day in August I was able to see Deer's Hair Sedge and Bottle Gentian in their full glory on the summit.

Once you have arrived at the summit, look around at the inspirational views. You have a close up look at Mount Colden and its scarred slides.

Wallface is visible as it outlines Indian Pass.

The magnificent views extend in all directions. You can pull out a map and play "name that peak". On a nice summer day it is just a most wondrous spot. A word of caution, because of the elevation, the weather can change in a hurry. Always bring fleece and a hat. It can be twenty to thirty degrees cooler on the exposed summit and winds there can lower the wind chill significantly. Do not wear cotton as the cotton will



stay soaked with perspiration and cause chilling and discomfort. Wicking attire is recommended so that it dries on you and does not let you become chilled in your own sweat. I can readily attest to the vicissitudes of being above 5000 feet in the High Peaks. I was atop Algonquin a few years ago when a front came through with high

winds and it was quite unsettling. I had to scurry off the summit quickly and safely, it is fairly steep coming down, and get to a more sheltered location. On a clear day in summer in or early fall, the experience of climbing the second highest mountain New York is truly an experience which is incomparable. It is relatively accessible as a 8.6 mile round trip hike, yet it brings you to another world. It will be a visit that you will never forget. For more information on this hike I recommend the following: "*Fifty Hikes In The Adirondacks*" by Barbara McMartin

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