

Katahdin, ME, 5,267 ft. – August 27, 2019, HP #21: A Stout Hike

August 26th following breakfast, I picked up a rental car at the Portland ME International Jetport. By 10:00 a.m. I was traveling north on I-95 heading to Millinocket ME about 300 miles away. Ten hours earlier I had concluded a three leg, thirteen-hour, flight from Salt Lake City UT through Dallas TX to Washington DC and finally to Portland. That night as I walked the one-block from the airport to my hotel a fox darted across the street in front of me then paused to look at me. I clapped my hands, and he took off. I knew then Portland was my type of city - still having a tinge of ruralness.

After I drove past Bangor ME the population density noticeably reduced, and I rarely saw another car. Arriving in Millinocket I first located the motel where I had a reservation, however I was about 30 minutes too early for the 3:00 p.m. check in time. In the meantime, I located a grocery store and purchased a few provisions. Following a late lunch/early dinner in my motel room I drove eighteen miles to Baxter State Park, home of Maine's tallest mountain. My purpose was to take a test run so I would know exactly how to get there in the dark early the next morning.

On the way back from Baxter State Park to Millinocket, I stopped at the New England Outdoor Center curious to see if camping would have been a suitable option. The campground looked nice, but the mosquitos were thick, so I did not feel disappointed that I was staying in a motel. Stopping at a power-line cutline as I returned to the highway, a view of Katahdin's south side opened up. Impressed by its grandeur I took a picture.



Returning to my motel room, I got everything ready for the next day's hike before retiring to bed. My plan was to be up early the next morning as I wanted to be one of the first people into Baxter State Park. I had an alarm set for 4:30 a.m., which for the time zone I was used to was 2:30 a.m. Not surprisingly I had a restless sleep and was up before the alarm.

When I arrived at the still locked entrance to Baxter State Park at 5:30 a.m. there was already a couple of cars in line. Soon others lined up behind me. It is common to have early morning lines as the park restricts the number of car entries to available parking. Even reserved parking spots like I had purchased are only guaranteed until 7:00 a.m., so I was pleased to be near the front of the line.

The 30-minute wait until the gate opened allowed me time to eat breakfast and put my boots on. By 6:20 a.m. I was through the gate and on the way to the Roaring Brook trailhead eight miles distant. With the car in front of me keeping its speed under 20 mph, I arrived with only fifteen minutes to spare before risking a forfeit of my parking spot.

I was not the first one to sign in at the trailhead for the day, but I did seem to be the first one on the trail. I used the Helon Taylor route which would lead me to the Knife Edge. The Helon Taylor/Knife Edge route is just under four and a half miles long and climbs 3,778 feet to the summit. The Knife Edge alone is a narrow mile-long ridge with drop offs on each side.

Being the most renowned mountain in the East and having a formidable reputation I'd had a desire to experience it for myself for some time, as such I was very delighted to now be having my chance. As I

moved through the pleasant woods which reminded me of Virginia, I all but sprinted to ensure I would stay ahead of other hikers. Furthermore, although I always enjoy wandering through east coast forests, I was eager to break out of the trees for more expansive views.

Along Keep Ridge, at about 3,100 feet, as I was reaching tree line I heard voices behind me. A few moments later once the two-man party broke out of the trees I caught a glimpse of them, but they never caught up to me. Climbing above the tree line I was impressed by the sheer number of lakes covering this section of Maine.

Before reaching Pamola Peak I crossed paths with a party of two hikers descending who had been on the summit for the sunrise. A bit less than two hours into the hike, with 3.2 miles behind me, I reached 4,902-foot Pamola Peak. After taking in the views, I down climbed 100 feet on third class slopes to the Pamola-Chimney notch. After scrambling up to the equally tall Chimney Peak I found myself on the notorious Knife Edge. The Knife Edge took me up 365 vertical feet to where it crosses South Peak. Along the way I encountered just one other hiker and he was coming down. From the ridge the impressive basin below Pamola and Baxter Peaks containing Chimney Pond reminded me of landscape I would expect in the mountains of the Western United States but certainly not in the Northeast. As jagged as I discovered the ridge to be, I thought it might as fittingly be named the "Serrated" Knife Edge.

From South Peak it was only one third of a mile to Baxter Peak - the highest point on Katahdin. Overall, it took me three hours and ten minutes to reach Baxter Peak from the parking lot; arriving a few minutes shy of 10:00 a.m. It had been a stout hike, but perhaps a bit less so than its reputation. The third-class sections between Pamola and Chimney Peaks were tougher than I had estimated but nothing to be anxious about. On the other hand, the often-hyped Knife Edge seemed easier than I had anticipated possibly because the drop offs on each side were not sheer. Of course, shuffling up a ridge with expansive views in all directions is always a rewarding experience. I appreciated the strictness of Baxter State Park, which prevented over-crowding on the trails enabling a more genuine wilderness experience. It had been over four years since I had reached a US state highpoint, making Katahdin that much more special to me.

On the summit stood a large, brown-painted wooden sign labeled in white letters with "KATAHDIN" and "BAXTER PEAK, ELEVATION 5267 FT" while also stating the peak to be the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. Having experienced mostly solitude during the climb up, much to my surprise I found several hikers populated the summit, clearly having arrived using alternate routes. Listening, I soon realized the bulk of them had just completed the full Appalachian Trail; a 2,189-mile trek starting at Springer Mountain GA. Their route had approached the mountain from its southwest side meaning the hikers had traveled northeast. In comparison the route I used climbed from the east to the west.

Mounted on the face of a large lichen spotted rock was a metal plaque. The host rock was effectively camouflaged amongst a jumble of similar rocks, so it was only by luck that I happened upon it. Located a few yards south of the large brown sign the plaque likewise announced the point as Baxter Peak. The plaque also explained that Katahdin and the surrounding land was donated to the state of Maine in 1931 by former governor Percival P. Baxter. In donating the land Mr. Baxter stipulated, as stated on the plaque, that the land "*shall forever be used for public park and recreational purposes, shall forever be left in the natural wild state, shall forever be kept as a sanctuary for wild beasts and birds*", and "*that no roads or ways for motor vehicles shall hereafter ever be constructed therein or thereon.*"

Mr. Baxter is also well known for having stated *“Man is born to die, his works are short-lived. Buildings crumble, monuments decay, wealth vanishes. But Katahdin in all its glory, forever shall remain the mountain of the people of Maine.”*

I lingered on the summit for about 45-minutes mostly taking in the euphoria of the Appalachian Trail completers and marveled as more continued to arrive. As I munched on some snacks, another hiker, also not an Appalachian Trail hiker, pointed out to me how strange it is that a 2,000 plus mile hike ends at the top of a mountain – a valid point I thought.

To descend Katahdin, I decided to wander around the cirque formed by its South and Great Basins. Initially, I dropped down to the northwest reaching the saddle between Baxter and Hamlin Peaks. From there I proceeded up to Hamlin Peak. I descended Hamlin Peak via its eastern ridge for one and a third miles and then followed the North Basin Cut-Off trail. The North Basin Cut-Off trail after a while joined the Chimney Pond trail which led back to the Roaring Brook Ranger Station where my rental car was parked.

The descent required four hours and twenty minutes, covering just shy of seven miles. It was nearly 3:00 p.m. when I removed my backpack and unlocked the car. Overall, I climbed over 4,000 vertical feet while hiking a total of 11.2 miles. Katahdin is an impressive mountain which provided a memorable hike.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/aSewQtKn5EPPhB1z5>