**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.

A picture containing sky, outdoor, tree, grass

Description automatically generatedAfter 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 Maines 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 where 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.

A person standing next to a sign

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceOn 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 it 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>

**Mount Washington, NH, 6,288 ft. – August 28, 2019, HP #22: Heavy Rain in the Forecast**

Following a disappointing “complimentary” motel breakfast in Millinocket ME, I got on the road heading to New Hampshire’s Mount Washington 240 miles away. At Augusta ME I exited Interstate 95 heading west on rural Highway 219. The highway number changed several times as it twisted through the scenic countryside and passed through a handful of quaint towns. After 72 miles I passed through Gilead ME and three miles later I entered New Hampshire. Just ten miles into New Hampshire, at the town of Gorham, I turned south onto Highway 16 entering the White Mountain National Forest home to Mount Washington. As I made my way ten more miles to the Appalachian Mountain Club's Pinkham Notch Visitor Center, I passed the Mount Washington Auto Road as well as Wildcat Ski Resort.

The drive took four and a half hours, so I felt I needed to hurry if I hoped to climb Tuckerman Ravine and up to the summit of Mount Washington and then back down before nightfall. As quickly as I could get my boots on and my backpack ready, I found the trailhead sign for Tuckerman Ravine and started hiking - the time was 1:40 p.m. Except for a group of teenagers accompanied by chaperons I did not notice anyone else heading up this late in the day.

Mount Washington is one of the peaks in the Presidential Range of the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The notorious peaks of the range are named after American Presidents. Mount Washington is the most topographically prominent mountain east of the Mississippi River, and one of the 48 New Hampshire mountains that top out over 4,000 feet above sea-level. Tuckerman Ravine resides on the east side of Mount Washington and to the south of the summit.

A picture containing text, outdoor, tree, wooden

Description automatically generatedAt 4.1 miles it is only two tenth of a mile shorter to hike to the top of Mount Washington in comparison to the hike to Katahdin’s Baxter Peak I had done the day before. However, climbing Mount Washington involves more vertical gain.

With a late start time, and heavy rain in the forecast, I was hiking quickly, almost running, and I covered the nearly two and a half miles to the Tuckerman Ravine Shelter near Hermit Lake in one hour. At this point the old road, turned hiking trail, ends and the trail becomes a single track. From Hermit Lake to the summit is over 2,400 feet of vertical gain in just over one and a half miles; 1,400 feet of vertical gain per mile is steep. Keeping with my quick pace, I covered it in one and a half hours including a fifteen-minute break at the top of the ravine where the trail turns north to reach the summit.

A stone’s throw below the summit are two large car parking lots. The Tuckerman Ravine trail dropped me off at the lower of the two, from which point I walked up the paved road a few yards to a staircase leading to the summit. All said and done, scaling the 4,250 vertical feet from car to summit, required two and a half hours - an hour shorter than I had heard the one-way hike needed.

On the summit is the modern Sherman Adams Visitor Center, along with two historic buildings. The stairs ended at one of the historic buildings where I noticed a couple of white vans parked. Before entering any of the buildings I first found the wooden summit marker labeled with “Mount Washington A picture containing text, outdoor, rock, person

Description automatically generated6,288 ft.” and posed for a couple of photos next to it. Wandering around the summit I discovered the Appalachian Trail crosses it, and a sign noted Katahdin was 332.4 miles away. I also watched a Cog Railway train ascend the western slope of the mountain. Luckily, the summit was wind-free despite being notorious for its extreme gusts holding various records for the highest wind speeds ever recorded.

Back at the Appalachian Mountain Club's Pinkham Notch Visitor Center parking lot, as I was preparing for the hike, the fellow parked next to me mentioned he had just come back from hiking to the summit of Mount Washington, and also that he had used an Auto Road shuttle for the return. I had planned to hike both up and down but with rain now looking imminent, I decided to enquire if a shuttle was even possible on short notice and this late in the day. I also felt it would be nice to check out the Auto Road which has a long history.

Inside the historic wooden shingle clad building next to the vans, I was informed that a 5:00 p.m. shuttle, the last of day, was available but at a premium price. When I mentioned the lower price my neighbor from the parking lot had been charged, the driver said he would cut me that deal provided I tipped him. The building was originally the old stage office, but now seemed to be a gift shop. It was interesting to notice that it is anchored to the ground by three large chains slung over its roof – an indication of the extreme weather the mountain is known for.

With the shuttle arranged and some time to spare I wandered over to the Tip-Top house, as the other historic building is named. Constructed from native stone the Tip-Top house was originally built as an inn. Nowadays it is a museum containing artifacts from the mountain’s history. Apparently, the structure is the oldest existing, albeit former, mountaintop inn the world over. Inside the Visitors Center I noticed the Extreme Mount Washington museum sponsored by the mountains weather observatory, but I did not have time to visit it.

Following my visit to Mount Washington, I learned the weather observatory housed inside the visitor center was well-known for its mascot, a black cat named Marty who roamed the mountain top. During my visit I did not see Marty. Since then, I have heard he passed away in November 2020 having lived 12 years on the rooftop of New Hampshire.

The shuttle left the summit on schedule zigzagging its way down the east side of the mountain. I road shotgun, and two older gentlemen were the only other passengers. The driver used the vans low gear prompting me to think about how tough the frequent trips up and down the steep road must be on its transmission. We three passengers were returned to the Pinkham Notch Visitor Center before 6:00 p.m. just as the rain started. As agreed, I handed the drive a tip.

As I drove out of the parking lot, headed to Stowe VT, heavy rain began to fall.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/xUR3Z85UhtwVaXHD6>

**Mount Mansfield, VT, 4,393 ft. – August 29, 2019, HP #23: Steep and Steady**

I do not like to drive after dark, but I had not gotten away from the Appalachian Mountain Club's Pinkham Notch Visitor Center, after climbing Mount Washington NH, until after 6:00 p.m. as heavy rain fell. Since I needed to stop for both gas and dinner, darkness befell long before I was able to reach Stowe VT.

During the late evening drive it became apparent how close to Quebec I was as every time I retuned the radio, I would encounter French language stations. In fact, the US/Canada border crossing of West Berkshire VT/Frelighsburg QC is located only about 50 miles north of Stowe.

Between Morristown and Stowe, the rural highway was rutted, and pooled with water forcing me to drive slowly. It was almost 10:00 p.m. before I finally reached Stowe. Had my hope of driving out of the storm materialized I would have passed through the town and headed to Stowe Mountain Ski Resort where I had planned to camp the night at Smugglers Notch. Instead, I remained in town taking a motel room.

The next morning, I felt there was no need to hurry as my destination of Mount Mansfield is located not even eight miles from the town of Stowe. Also, the hike I had planned to its summit was under two and a half miles, so I anticipated it to be quick and easy. This route is known as the Long Trail and it climbs up the east side of the mountain from the Stowe Mountain Ski Resort. The classic Long Trail is the oldest long-distance trail in the United States. The full trail runs 273 miles through Vermont from the US/Canada Border to the VT/MA state line following the main ridge of the Green Mountains and crossing over Mount Mansfield.

The ridgeline of Mount Mansfield is said to resemble a human face. When viewing the ridgeline from the from the east looking to the west, its prominent features from right to left are named as follows: Adams Apple at 4,060 feet, Chin (aka highest point) at 4,393 feet, Lower Lip at 4,120 feet, Upper Lip at 3,963 feet, Nose at 4,062 feet, and Forehead at 3,940 feet. The Long Trail climbs up just to the left of the Adams Apple and then heads to the Chin. The last third of a mile is above the tree line and consists of third class scrambling to the summit. This zone above tree line is one of the few places in Vermont where alpine tundra can be found. The alpine tundra community of plants, considered remnants of the last ice age, only live in cold, windy, treeless environments, and are more typically found at elevations higher than the mountains of Vermont. With only 275 acres of alpine tundra remaining in Vermont these rare plants are endangered, and as such a top Mount Mansfield the alpine tundra is often roped off, and hikers are asked to stick to hard surfaces.

Following a leisurely “complimentary” motel breakfast that was both generous and tasty, I made my way to the Stowe Mountain Ski Resort. After initially driving past the Long Trail trailhead, I returned and parked across from the trailhead at an open parking lot located about a quarter mile north of the ski resorts gondola. By 9:30 a.m., I crossed the road from the 1,600 foot elevation parking lot and began hiking.

I guess I was tired after my bursts of speed on both Katahdin and Mount Washington the days before, as I found the Long Trail to be strenuous, and not the easy hike I had anticipated. It took me about one and a half hours to cover the very steep natural staircases 1.7 miles up to the Taft Lodge. The lodge is a simple log cabin able to sleep up to 24 hikers. There is nothing lavish about it. Indeed, hikers must provide their own sleeping bags and mats for the wooden bunk platforms, and there is no running water. Finding the cabin empty I decided to hang out there and rest.

A sign in the woods

Description automatically generated with low confidenceAfter a half hour rest, I was ready to climb the remaining 743 vertical feet from the Taft Lodge to Mount Mansfield’s Chin. I guess the rest had done me good, as this remaining the six tenths of a mile hike required only fifteen minutes to complete.

A person standing on a mountain

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceOverall, upon reaching the top of Vermont, two and a quarter hours had passed. The steep 2.3-mile hike on average had risen over 1,200 vertical feet per mile. Not being used to the humidity, I had perspired generously leaving my t-shirt thoroughly soaked. Despite the warm summit temperatures, I removed my wet t-shirt replacing it with my warmer long-sleeve fleece shirt.

The summit offered views westward over Lake Champlain to the Adirondacks, eastward over the Connecticut River valley to the White Mountains (home of Mount Washington NH), and northward into Canada. As I took in the views, I chatted with another hiker and confirmed what I hoped - the gondola only charged uphill riders but was free of charge to ride down the mountain.

When I was ready to descend, I hiked south about a third of a mile, still along the Long Trail, to a sign pointing east indicating the Cliff Trail. From there down to the gondola the trail consisted of a steep decline over large, jumbled boulders making it feel like a cliff. It was not technically difficult, but it contained some challenging third-class sections which were slow going. A few of the boulders even included iron handles. I found the aptly named Cliff Trail to be more challenging than the last third of a mile to the summit from Taft lodge. Overall, from the Chin to the gondola is less than a half mile. The gondola was running, with no lines, so I was able to walk right up and enjoy a restful ride down the mountain. I was back to the parking lot in just over four hours from the time I started hiking.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/jQCDhHAnAjHUokDh6>

**Mount Greylock, MA, 3,491 ft. – August 30, 2019, HP #24: Moby Dick**

It is about 190 miles from Stowe Mountain Ski Resort VT to Adams MA where Mount Greylock, the highpoint of Massachusetts, is located. Having made it back to my rental car at by 1:30 p.m., August 29, following a successful climb of Mount Mansfield, where Stowe Mountain Ski Resort resides, I immediately headed for Adams. The drive was mostly along narrow roads which weaved through small towns and ranged in speed limits from 35 mph to 55 mph. As such it took close to four hours to reach North Adams MA, a neighboring town six miles north of Adams. Along the way, one of the towns I drove through was named Mexico. I wanted to get a picture next to the sign that read “Welcome to Mexico” but the road was too narrow with no safe places to pull over.

Arriving in North Adams I stopped to picked-up some groceries before continuing. My hope was to find a campground between North Adams and Adams, and the next morning hike to the top of Mount Greylock.

Four days prior I had left home and flown across the country to Portland ME prepared to climb Katahdin ME, Mount Washington NH, and Mount Mansfield VT. My schedule generously allowed a full day for each mountain with travel days in between. As a “just-in-case-there-was-time”, I had printed information on Mount Greylock’s Thunderbolt Trail located near Adams, leaving the details to chance.

Not being fully prepared, I drove around North Adams trying to figure out which road led to Adams. In the process I happened upon an Appalachian Trail sign and stopped to check out the map it contained. As I did so a man walking his dog came along and I asked him for some help. Much to my surprise, he informed me I could drive to the top of Mount Greylock via Notch Road located just three mile from where we stood. With the road to the summit so close by I thought I might as well drive up and see what I discovered.

A picture containing text, tree, grass, sign

Description automatically generatedFollowing the man’s directions, I located Notch Road. I was delighted to see a sign listing a campground seven and a half miles further up the road and just a mile further along than the summit. Problem solved, as I figured I would get a campsite, and the next morning hike to the peak from there. As it turned out Notch Road reached a “Y” with the peak being a mile one way and the campground two miles the other way. As such the six and a half and seven and a half mile distances listed on the sign did not mean the campground and the peak were a mile apart as I had interpreted it.

Since my first concern was to find camping, I turned right at the “Y”. Soon I noticed the turn off to the campground only to discover the road was gated and locked shut. Turning the car around I drove to the summit. At the summit parking lot no one was around to ask about the campground nor collect the parking fee. As such, I was forced to make my way over to the Bascom Lodge, crossing my fingers that I would not get a parking ticket in the meantime.

The stroll from the parking lot took me over the summit and past its 93 foot tall Memorial Tower. At the Tower, likewise, I found no one to ask about the campground. Anyway, since I was there, I quickly ascended the tower via its internal spiral staircase. A bank of windows at the top allowed a 360-degree view.

Hurrying down from the tower, I quickly reached the Bascom Lodge. No one was present at the front desk, so I had to enter the restaurant in search of someone to ask about the campground. A waitress told me to drive past the campground road and I would find a parking lot. From there, she said, I could hike into the campground. I asked how to register and pay, and she said “they” would find me once I was there.

Having nothing else to go on, I trusted the waitress. Finding the parking lot, a sign there read it was for registered campers only. Unfortunately, my mobile phone was unable to get a signal so I could not call the phone number listed on the sign. My only remaining option was to hike into the campground to see if there was a camp host on duty. Planning to stay in the campground, I stuffed my tent and sleeping bag into my backpack. I was worried about leaving the car without a permit but since none of the other four cars in the lot had a visible permit displayed, I decided to chance it. If was fully dark by the time I started hiking toward the campground.

As I hurried along, with my headlamp turned off, I unintentionally snuck up on and disturbed an owl. Quickly turning on my light I was fortunate to catch a sighting of him as he hurried away. Never before had I been lucky enough to be that close to an owl.

The hike was just one and a half miles, and although likeable seemed much longer. At the campground I noticed just two groups of campers. Approaching the closest group, I explained my situation. One of the group had a cell phone with reception, so we tried to call the number I had copied down from the parking lot sign. No one answered but I was able to leave a message with my name and the car’s license plate number requesting that I not be towed. I thanked my helpers deciding I might as well return to the car and stay there. At least that way if anyone patrolled the area I might be able to explain my situation.

The hike back to the car seemed much shorter as it was mostly downhill. Strangely it had not seemed as uphill on the way in. Along the way I checked but the owl had not yet returned.

Arriving back at the car I pulled out my tent as I contemplated setting it up. Upon second thought, I realized that would look bad if a Park Ranger stopped by. In so doing, I discovered I mistakenly had left the tent poles in the trunk of the car – so I would have had to return to the car under any circumstances. The back seat of the car turned out to be fairly comfortable. At one point during the night a vehicle did arrive. However, I did not get up, choosing to not make myself known. Shortly the vehicle left leaving me unnoticed.

Upon waking up 4:30 a.m. I had the idea of heading up to the summit to catch the sunrise. With no reason not to, I drove up to the “Y” in the road where I had noticed a pull-out. From there I walked three quarters of a mile to the summit along a section of the Appalachian Trail. I topped out at 5:30 a.m. with just a hint of orange in the otherwise dark sky. The Memorial Tower was locked, so it was fortunate I had climbed it the evening before. I was not completely sure the summit was officially open to the public this early in the morning, so I positioned myself off to the east and south of the of the Tower, out of easy view. After a while a middle-aged couple arrived, having walked over from Bascom Lodge. I stayed silent, as such they never noticed me. They gave up on the sunrise before I did, walking back to the Lodge shortly after they arrived. I on the other hand decided to hang around until 6:00 a.m. figuring the ball of the sun would appear by then. However, it never arrived. On the return hike I photographed the sign next to the road listing the summit elevation and name of the mountain.

A picture containing text, tree, outdoor, sign

Description automatically generatedAt only 3,491 feet, Mount Greylock does not seem to be too remarkable. Nevertheless, I found it to be an intriguing place with an adventurous vibe to it. Signs around the campground and on the summit indicated many hiking trails, hidden completely within its tree covered surface. The two short hikes I took were very nice. Herman Melville found Mount Greylock so inspirational that legend has it the mountains long, saddle-like profile inspired him to write "Moby Dick". With such fondness for the mountain, Melville was even known to have a special observation deck at his home near Pittsfield MA allowing him to view it at will as the weather allowed.

Although I technically stood on the highpoint of Massachusetts the evening of August 29, I do not consider that as my official summit date. Afterall, it was completely by happenstance that my circumstances caused me to be there. August 30, I deliberately hiked to the peak, and spent a half an hour there making it my official date for the record.

I was back at the car before 6:30 a.m. with a 230-mile drive to Portland ME in front of me. Preferring to travel via back roads, I examined my road atlas and plotted a route via Highways 9 and 202 through Keene NH and Concord NH.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/sAXi3R4CZNgVwfuN8>

**Sassafras Mountain, SC, 3,553 ft. – October 3, 2019, HP #25: On the Border**

October 3, fifteen minutes after midnight I caught a red-eye flight from Salt Lake City UT to Greenville SC via Charlotte NC. I arrived at 9:30 a.m. eastern daylight time and picked up a rental car. Before leaving Greenville I stopped to pick up a few groceries. Then drove directly to the South Carolina highpoint.

Sassafras Mountain is located on the border of North and South Carolina and is shared by both states. The portion in South Carolina raises to the highest natural point of the state. From the Greenville Airport to Sassafras Mountain is about a 150-miles.

I arrived at the parking lot located just below the summit at noon. About a city block length walk uphill from the parking stood the then newly opened (as of April 2019) elevated observation deck. The observation deck resides half in South Carolina and half in North Carolina. A black painted line across the concrete floor of the deck represents the shared border. Even the staircase to the top of the platform is evenly divided between the two states with a handrail down the middle. To the southeast of the platform on the South Carolina side a stone marker with a plaque claims the state’s high point. I knelt behind the stone marker with the summit tower behind me, posing for a photograph.

This mountain is named after the tree of the same name. The name is also associated with tea. Moreover, the Aerosmith song “Love in an Elevator” mentions sassafras. Sassafras is one of the Blue Ridge Mountains which are part of the Appalachian Mountains. The eastern continental divide runs along the peak.

A picture containing ground, outdoor, concrete, cement

Description automatically generatedThere was just one other person on the top when I arrived. He seemed to be using field glasses to observe birds in the sky. I attempted to be friendly, but he did not seem to want to chat. In addition to the black line, the cement floor of the deck is also painted with a compass rose showing the border of the Carolinas to run from the northwest to the southeast. At top the platform Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia can all be viewed. When looking into South Carolina a radio tower sits to the left of the observation deck. Next to the observation deck, on the grounded, I located a survey marker. Nearby under some rocks I discovered a jar with a summit logbook inside. I signed the log indicating this to be the twenty fifth US state highpoint I had stood upon.

I had wandered up the main path from the parking lot, so for variety I opted to head down from the northwest, or opposite, side of the platform. This took me down a very short dirt path which turned south and dropped me off at the parking area.

I enjoy visiting South Carolina’s highest point, and the views it offered were wonderful. All the same this highpoint lacked a sense of achievement. Perhaps that can be attributed to the lack of physical effort needed to reach it, or maybe because not much adventure was involved in attaining it?

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/oMkjQfWqTyuCMjUv6>

**Brasstown Bald, GA, 4,784 ft. – October 3, 2019, HP #26: A Pleasant Surprise**

After spending about thirty minutes on the highest point of South Carolina I headed south and west via Highways 11 and 76 into Georgia. At Macedonia I turned left onto Highway 75 and found Owl Creek Road. At Jacks Gap I wound up and to the north to Brasstown Bald. From the parking lot six tenths of a mile, mostly north and continuing uphill, lies the highest point in Georgia at 4,784 feet above sea level. The parking fee included a shuttle bus to the summit, but I elected to walk. The paved walking path is heavily forested and wanders through ash, birch, maple, and oak trees -- with a few good sized waxy leafed rhododendrons and mountain laurel sprinkled in. The thick forest and humid climate give the area an almost tropical feel.

Brasstown Bald gets its name from a misheard Cherokee word. The natives called the area Itse’ yi meaning place of fresh green. This was misheard as Untsaiyi which means brass in the Cherokee tongue, and the area became known as Brasstown. In the Appalachian Mountains a bald refers to the summit of a hill or mountain even though typically they are covered in thick vegetation. The metal alloy of copper and zinc known as brass has no ties to the area. Like its distant neighbor Sassafras Mountain 98 driving-miles to the northeast, Brasstown Bald is part of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

A body of water with trees around it

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceWith the natural beauty of the area today one would not think it, but in the late 1800s destructive lumber companies stripped the land. As a result, native animals all but became extinct. Even deer had to be reintroduced to the area after the land was obtained by the Federal Government in the early 1900s. Fortunately, today the northern Georgia Mountains are again forest covered and wild animals including grouse, turkeys, white-tail deer, and even black bears roam the area.

The summit contains a large wooden structure consisting of an observation platform, fire lookout tower, and a small visitor center. The current structure was erected in 1965 however the Civilian Conservation Corps built the original observation deck in 1935. Without the platform only the forest itself would be viewed, but thanks to the extra elevation of the platform the views in all 360 degrees are amazing. Some claim the skyline of Atlanta, 100 miles to the south, can be viewed under the right conditions. What caught my eye the most was the patchy Chatuge Lake (a man-made reservoir) to the north.

I only had a few minutes to poke my head into the visitor center before it closed. When I started my hike down, just after 5:00 p.m., I was the last person on the summit.

Notwithstanding having a visitor center on the summit, I found the atmosphere at Brasstown Bald to be adventuresome. It is a remarkable mountain which actually surprised me – a welcomed and pleasant surprise at that. Perhaps I had expected a more developed setting. Some have even claimed this to be the among most enjoyable eastern US state highpoints. My description for the selfie taken in front of the dark brown metal sign at the top of the hiking trail states, “The surprisingly wonderful Brasstown Bald Mountain of GA.”

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/wzH43Vcj5gKSooLD8>

**Clingmans Dome, TN, 6,643 ft. – October 4, 2019, HP #27: On Another Border**

Wednesday, October 2, after having worked all day I caught a red-eye flight from Salt Lake City UT to Greenville SC that night. Without stopping to sleep I drove directly to Sassafras Mountain, visited the highpoint, then carried on to the highpoint of Georgia. From Brasstown Bald GA, I drove to Great Smokey Mountains National Park. It was dark when I arrived at my reserved camp spot in North Carolina’s Smokemont campground. By this point I had been traveling for 23 hours straight and I had been awake for over 38 hours. The neighboring campers were playing guitar and I worried they would keep me up all night, but they quieted down soon after I set up my camp. As exhausted as I was, sleep came quickly. It was close to 11:00 a.m. the following morning when I left the campground.

At noon, October 4, I arrived at the parking lot for Clingmans Dome having driven twenty miles from the Smokemont campground. I was disappointed to find the large parking area to be all but full. Perhaps I should have anticipated a crowd, after all it was a Friday in one of the most visited national parks in the country.

As I started up the half mile paved path, a steady stream of people was going up with as many returning from the summit. Even though I was here to reach the highest natural point in Tennessee the hike was almost exclusively in North Carolina.

Located on the summit of Clingmans Dome is a 45-foot-tall circular concrete observation tower. In reaching the tower via the paved trail, one momentarily enters Tennessee crossing over the 6,643-foot peak of Clingmans Dome. A few steps later, back in North Carolina, the sweeping 375-foot-long helical ramp to the observation platform is encountered.

Confusion lies around exactly which US state the observation tower actually resides in. Some sources claim it straddles the border between the North Carolina and Tennessee. Many sources, including the National Park Service avoid mentioning either state and instead utter that Clingmans Dome with its Observation Tower is the highest point in the Great Smokey Mountains National Park. However trusted maps show the tower to in fact be in North Carolina even if ever so slightly.

A picture containing tree, outdoor

Description automatically generatedEvidently, in 1789 North Carolina gave up claims to its western region which later became Tennessee. The border was pronounced as running along the extreme height of the mountains. As such, by the letter of the law - sticking strictly with that definition of the border - I must conclude it fortunate North Carolina has two peaks clearly within its borders which are taller than Clingmans Dome. If that were not the case then we would have a situation where two states shared their highpoint.

The circular observation platform is 28 feet in diameter, offering audiences a 360-degree view of the surrounding terrain. From the platform, under the right conditions, one can catch sight of seven states - Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Built in 1959, Wikipedia states the tower was one of several observation decks constructed as part of an effort by the National Park Service to upgrade its facilities to accommodate an influx of visitors to national parks during the post-World War II era. The urban space-craft-like design is oddly out of place in its wooded wilderness surroundings. Some have joked that the structure resembles a giant survey marker, marking the elevation of the highest point in Tennessee. Since the closest survey marker appears to be in the parking lot, conceivably that might even be accurate if only the tower were in Tennessee.

On the roofed observation platform at the top of the tower I asked a couple of people to snap a photograph of me. Again, as I returned to the trail, I had a park employee take my picture with the tower behind me as I stood in Tennessee.

Instead of descending entirely on the paved trail I headed over to the Appalachian Trail. I followed the Appalachian Trail down to the southwest for a bit before returning to the main trail. Maps show that section of the Appalachian Trail to be in Tennessee (not North Carolina), with it claiming a highpoint of 6,643 ft. along the Clingmans Dome summit.

With this being my first visit to Great Smoky Mountains National Park I had allowed time in my itinerary for another hike, as well as a second night in the park. The multiple day highpointing trip I was on is known in the highpointing community as the “Southern Six Pack.” The Six Pack is a single trip consisted of bagging the highest natural point in [South Carolina](http://www.jamessuitsphoto.com/blog/2015/2/26/sassafras-mountain-highpoint-of-south-carolina), Georgia , Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and North Carolina – completed in whatever order the highpointer decides. My next Six Pack highpoint would be Kentucky, but not until tomorrow afternoon as I had some more Great Smoky Mountains National Park hiking and camping to do.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/tjuUFF7WHf6DVU2NA>

**Black Mountain, KY, 4,139 ft. – October 5, 2019, HP #28: Hollowed-out Coal Veins**

The morning of October 5, I pulled out of Abram’s Creek Campground located on the Tennessee side of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. My destination was the highpoint of Kentucky – my fourth highpoint of the Southern Six Pack.

The 130 miles to Harlan KY took three hours as the way often twisted and turned through mountain passes. Harlan is a railroad shipping town, servicing the coal mining industry. Its history includes many violent labor disputes between miners and miner owners, and it seemed economically depressed.

From Harlan the directions I had put me on Highway 38 heading east toward Virginia. I was looking for an "Old Hwy 38" branching off from Highway 38, but I never found it. Instead, I ended up in Keokee VA. Along the way Highway 38 passed through several dilapidated coal mining communities, which further unmistakably revealed the poverty of the area.

At Keokee I asked for directions to Black Mountain and was sent southwest to Highway 421. Before reaching the intersect of Highways 606 and 421, I realized I had been sent in the wrong direction. To solve the problem, I turned to my Road Atlas and plotted a course to Big Stone Gap, and on to Inman. It was a fun seven-mile drive from Inman up the east side of Black Mountain. Highway 160 known as the “Trail of the Lonesome Pine” zigzagged its way through numerous tight bends to where Virginia meets Kentucky. A green reflective highway sign at the state line announced the “Highest Point in KY” and incorrectly labeled Black Mountain’s elevation as 4,145 feet. Actually, the crest of the highway at the intersection of the two states is well under 4,000 feet.

Across the highway from the incorrect sign was a parking area. Leading south out of the parking area was the eastern terminus of Black Mountain Ridge Road. With care I able to drive the low-clearance Toyota Corolla south and then west along Black Mountain Ridge Road gaining elevation toward the summit.

****Arriving at the Radar Tower I discovered a man and a woman eating a late lunch, the time was after 2:00 p.m. The man was kind enough to take a photo of me in front of the Radar Tower.

The Corolla made it up the hill behind the Radar Tower, where the road deteriorated to more than it could handle. I walked the remaining 200 yards to an abandoned tower on the peak of the mountain. Unfortunately, the derelict tower was missing it its lower ladder, meaning there was no feasible means to climb it to get above the trees for a long-range view. Not far from the tower I located a summit plaque on a rock, as well as a survey monument, confirming I was at Kentucky’s highest point. Scattered between my parking spot and the deserted tower were a few other dilapidated structures.

Perhaps it was a good thing no spur roads off Highway 38 were labeled “Old Hwy 38.” Because, as I walked back to the Corolla, I noticed a locked and shut gate on Black Mountain Ridge Road preventing the mountain from being traversed. Had the Corolla been able make it up from the Highway 38 side, backtracking would have been the only way down. Returning to the mountain’s southside would not have been ideal for my plans.

The chronicle of Black Mountain is strongly tied to coaling mining. In fact, at the crest of Highway 160 the view to the southeast is of a large open pit mine. Furthermore, inside Black Mountain lie many hollowed-out coal veins which conspiracists claim may one day cause the summit to cave in. Perhaps the color of coal is what gives “Black” Mountain its name?

Being private property, and possibly spurred by the cave in conspiracy, at the time I visited Black Mountain visitors were asked to mail in a signed waiver prior to their outing. I have since heard the Commonwealth of Kentucky has obtained ownership of the summit and they do not require a waiver.

As I backtracked down the weed infested and intermittently washed-out Black Mountain Ridge Road, I encountered a pick-up truck coming up. With care, the vehicles managed to pass each other without the low clearance Corolla scraping. It was just after 3:00 p.m. when I joined back with Highway 160 and enjoyed the twisty descent back to Inman. From there I headed to Mount Rogers VA, 110 miles to the east.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/5kTQ44qyDZgTioMM7>

**Mount Rogers, VA, 5,729 ft. – October 6, 2019, HP #29: Wild Ponies**

After crossing White Top Road and going through a gate I came to a fork in the trail. One sign indicated the Appalachian Trail while another pointed to a horse trail. I took the Appalachian Trail heading northeast. Initially it led me up a barren hill sprinkled with white blazed fence posts. Soon after, it entered the forest. Two miles further along the trail forked once again. This time one branch led toward a spring whereas the other remained the Appalachian Trail. Once again, I stuck with the Appalachian Trail. A few times I passed by campers. Now and then I encountered hikers coming down presumably from my destination of Mount Rogers VA. However, I seemed to be alone going up.

About three miles into the hike, I encountered an open meadow to my right. The west side of the meadow at the edge of the trees where I stood was fenced. Across the fence I noticed evidence of ponies but through the thick fog I could not see any. Literally, over one hundred ponies roam free on the slopes of The Old Dominion States tallest mountain, and I was hoping to see a few of them. Around mile four, to reach the summit of Mount Rogers the route left the Appalachian Trail and headed west following a blue blazed trail.

In thick fog the evening before, I arrived at the Elk Garden trailhead along White Top Road. Heavy rain was falling, and the air was cold. The parking lot was full. I had driven at this spot in Virginia from the Tennessee side of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Along the way I had visited Black Mountain, the highest point in Kentucky.

From Chilhowie VA, the Elk Garden trailhead is located 17 miles south of I-81. Reaching it from I-81 offered views of the picturesque countryside, provided the fog was not blocking them. Luckily as I briefly chatted with a man retrieving something from the trunk of his car a parking spot opened up, and I hurried to it. Due to the rain, I remained inside the car as I organized my pack for the next day’s hike. My plan had been to camp in the trees south of the parking lot, but due to the weather I opted to sleep in the car.

Mount Rogers is contained within the 183 square miles of the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area part of the Jefferson National Forest. The mountains of this area are known as the Iron Mountains and are a subset of the Appalachian Mountains. Grayson Highlands State Park neighbors Mount Rogers National Recreation Area. The mountain is named after William Rogers, Virginia’s first Commonwealth Geologist and the founder of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

October 6, I was hiking by 7:15 a.m. following a quick breakfast. In spite of all the cars, no one else was about as I left the parking lot. It was still foggy and wet, but the rain had stopped.

A picture containing tree, outdoor, forest, plant

Description automatically generatedGaining the westbound blue blazed trail form the Appalachian Trail the landscape was initially somewhat open, but soon entered a thick spruce-fir forest. The trees of this subalpine forest were all moss covered, which added a nice ambiance to the final half mile of the four-and-a-half-mile hike.

I made it up to the 5,729-foot top of Virginia in under two hours, having gained 1,295 feet. A friendly young man was the only other person there. He informed he had come up via Massie Gap from Grayson Highlands State Park. He also told me he was from Oregon and worked for Benchmark maps. I informed him of my fondness of maps letting him know I own three Benchmark map books. I spent about 30 minutes on the summit. Due to the denseness of the forest no view was available from the peak. Two large rocks where the only open places besides the trail itself.

On the return trip, by the time I reached the high meadow the fog had lifted and this time the wild ponies were in sight. I watched as some fellow hikers approached them. Soon after I followed suit allowing me to get some closer photographs.

Prompted by a sign pointing to the Highlands Horse Trail, I decided to use that trail to add some variety to my hike. I assumed it to be the same horse trail I had noticed after passing through the gate at White Top Road. Moving down I soon overtook a family ahead of me. Not long after, two guys packing up a tent confirmed the trail lead back to Elk Garden.

From Mount Rogers I traveled to Mount Mitchell NC, where I had reserved a camp spot. The following morning, October 7, I was up before the sun eager to reach the 6,684-foot summit of Mount Mitchel and complete the Southern Six Pack which I had begun four days prior. The hike to the top of North Carolina from the campground was only six tenth of a mile. I arrive before the sun was fully risen. This was my second visit to Mount Mitchell having been there more than seven years earlier, which began my US State highpointing journey.

Photo Album: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/gDNjdNi7Y6LymKgJ8>

**Mount Sunflower, KS, 4,039 ft. – December 23, 2019, HP #30: The personality of the owner, which was both appealing and amusing, revealed itself enthusiastically through the highpoint.**

It is interesting to realize that the highest natural point in horizontal Kansas is near the lowest natural point in mountainous Colorado. However to be fair, the eastern part of Colorado is just as flat as Kansas. To be even fairer Kansas isn’t really as flat as it gets credit for even if the satirical Annals of Improbable Research compared Kansas to an actual pancake finding the former to be flatter. Kansas actually ranks seventh in flatness, according to the Geographical Review, being less flat, in the order mentioned, than number six Delaware, Minnesota, Louisiana, North Dakota, Illinois, and flattest of all Florida.

Two-thirds of Kansas is actually hilly, with the remaining third, the High Plains, being sincerely flat. Kansas can even brag about its unspoiled Flint Hills along with the rolling Smoky Hills, Chautauqua Hills, and the Red Hills.

It is true, nevertheless, as The Wizard of Oz made Kansas known for, that it experiences an abundance of tornados each year. In fact it ranks second among the US States when it comes to tornados having on average of 96 per year; with Texas coming in first averaging 155 per year.

When it comes to US State highpoint Kansas more than holds its own coming in almost in the middle at 28 of 50 – meaning 22 states are lower.

After visiting the Royal Gorge Bridge in Colorado on December 23, 2019 Ana and I drove 212 miles to the highest point in Kansas, Mount Sunflower at 4,039 feet. We arrived around 2p.m. with temperature in the mid-sixties, in spite of the rare patches of snow we notice in the ditches along I-70. Located within a half mile of the Colorado and Sunflower State line and about 22 miles from I-70 the views from Mount Sunflower, which isn’t a mountain at all, are practically indistinguishable from the surrounding barren terrain. This is ranching and farmland, although at this time of year nothing was growing so I can’t say from my own experience what crops this region favors, but Kansas is known for wheat, corn, soybeans, and hay. Kansas even boasts having produced enough wheat in one season to make over 32 billion loaves of bread – that is enough wheat for every US resident to acquire around one hundred loaves.

At the highpoint we discovered a sort of art shrine presumably created by the rancher to whom the land belongs. Within the fenced off shrine the main attraction is an east facing gate which is labeled across its top with the words “Mount Sunflower”. Across its face is a metal sunflower - a reminder of the wild sunflowers that grow in abundance across the state and which give the state its nickname. In the lower right hand corner is a metal rectangle with the words “Highest Point in Kansas” cut out of it. Behind the gate is a large rock, and another, taller, metal sunflower welded out of railroad spikes. To the left of the gate is a U.S Mail box labeled “Mount Sunflower Registration” – we opened it to find variety of papers and pamphlets, along with a pink polka-dotted registry book which we signed. To the collection I added the paper Mount Sunflower sign I had made. In the southwest corner stood a dead tree trunk cut off about 10 feet tall, attached to it were signs pointing to various places such as Stockholm Sweden and Weskan Kansas. Sporting a Santa Claus cap, I climbed the dead tree trunk to pose for a photograph.

South of the shrine, sits a covered picnic table which even included a little library. Around 3p.m. I took advantage of the picnic area to make us an early dinner. As we were readying to leave Ed Harold, the owner of Mount Sunflower, arrived. He was sociable and we had the privilege of chatting with him for a short time. He drove a two door Jeep, and I could further tell by the sticker on his Jeep door that he has a sense of humor. The sticker read “Kansas Mountain Rescue”, and contained an outline of a mountain with a first aid cross inside it. I’d have to say the personality of the owner, which was both appealing and amusing, revealed itself enthusiastically through the highpoint.