**Katahdin, ME, 5,268 ft. –August 27, 2019, HP #21: A Stout Hike**

August 26 following breakfast I picked up my rental car at the Portland ME airport. By 10:00 a.m. I was on the road 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 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 then took off. I knew then Portland was my type of city still having a tinge of ruralness remaining.

As I drove north on I-95 once I got past Bangor ME the population density noticeably reduced as I rarely saw another car. Arriving in Millinocket I first located the Baxter Inn where I had a reservation. Check time was not until 3:00 p.m. so in the meantime I purchased a few groceries. 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.

~~Arriving at the toll both of Baxter State Park I chatted with the employee but found no reason to enter especially since a fee was required.~~ On the way back to Millinocket I stopped at the New England Outdoor Center just 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. Back at the Baxter Inn, I got everything ready for the next day’s hike. I would be getting 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 did not sleep well and was up before the alarm. When I arrived at the still locked entrance to Baxter State Park at 5:30 a.m. I was not the first car in-line. It is common to have early morning lines as the park only allows in as many car as there is parking for. Even reserved parking spots like I had purchased would only be held until 7:00 a.m. and a big line could easily put that at risk.

The 30-minute wait allowed me time to eat breakfast as I 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 my keeping its speed under 20 mph I arrived with only fifteen minutes to spare before I risked forfeiting 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 so-called Knife Edge. The route is close to four and a half miles long and climbs 3,778 feet to the 5,267-foot summit. The Knife Edge alone is a narrow mile-long ridge with steep drop offs on each side. En route, after 3.2 miles, the trail crosses Pamola Peak at 4,902 feet, then down climbs 100 feet on third class slopes to the Pamola-Chimney notch. After scrambling up to the equally tall Chimney Peak the route becomes the Knife Edge which crosses South Peak as it climbs 365 vertical feet before reaching Baxter Peak - the highest point on Katahdin.

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 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, I was in a hurry to break out of the trees being eager for more expansive views. Once above the tree line I was able to see just how many lakes cover Maine and there were heaps of them.

Just prior to breaking out of the trees and on to Keep Ridge, at about 3,200 feet, I heard voices behind me. Shortly thereafter, as the two-man party broke out of the trees I caught a couple of glimpses of them, but they never caught up to me. Before reaching Pamola Peak I crossed paths with a party of two hikers descending who had climbed the mountain to watching the sunrise. After Chimney Peak I encountered just one other hiker and he was coming down.

I reached the peak in 3 hours and 10 minutes arriving before 10:00 a.m. Katahdin was 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. With that said, shuffling up a ridge of loose rocks with expansive views all around is always a worthwhile and rewarding experience. As jagged as the ridge was it could more fittingly be named the “Serrated” Knife Edge. The impressive basin below Pamola and Baxter Peaks containing Chimney Pond reminded me of landscape one expects in the mountains of the Western United States but certainly not in the Northeast.

 On the summit a large brown sign labels Baxter Peak while stating it is the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. Much to my surprise several people populated the summit having arrived using various other routes. The bulk of them had just completed the full Appalachian Trail; a 2,189-mile trek starting at Springer Mountain GA. The Appalachian Trail approaches Katahdin from the south west (heading north east) whereas the Knife Edge reaches the peak from the east (heading west). Another hiker, also not an Appalachian Trail hiker, pointed out to me how strange it is that a 2000 plus mile hike ends at the top of a mountain only to require the hikers to then hike even more to get to ground transportation – valid point I thought.

I lingered on the summit for about 45-minutes mostly taking in the euphoria of the Appalachian Trail completers even as more continued to arrive. It had been over four years since I had reached a US state highpoint mostly because I had lacked the desire to travel. Yet here I now stood full of joy on my twenty first US State highpoint. And over the next few days I planned to reach three more state highpoints before flying back home.

To descend Katahdin, I decided to wander around the cirque formed by its South and Great Basins. Initially, I dropped down to the north west reaching the saddle between Baxter and Hamlin Peaks. From there I proceed up to Hamlin Peak. I descended Hamlin Peak via its eastern ridge for one and a third miles where I next 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. I covered just shy of seven miles during the return hike.

The descent required four hours and twenty minutes which put me back to the car before 3:00 p.m. Overall I climbed over 4,000 vertical feet while hiking a total of 11.2 miles. Katahdin is a majestic mountain which provided a memorable hike. I appreciated the strictness of Baxter State Park, which prevented over-crowding on the trails enabling a more genuine wilderness experience.

**Mount Washington, NH, 6,288 ft. –August 28, 2019, HP #22: Heavy rain was in the forecast, and I hoped to beat it to the top.**

After an awful motel supplied breakfast I got on the road this time heading to Mt. Washington in New Hampshire. It took over 4.5 hours to drive the 240 miles to the AMC Pinkham Notch Visitor Center in the White Mountains from Millinocket, ME. I located the Tuckerman Ravine trail and began hiking at 1:40 p.m. The Ravine resides 150 degrees south and east of the summit. With the exception of a group of teenagers and their guides heading up to what I assumed was the camping shelters at Hermit Lakes (2.4 miles up the old road section of Tuckerman Ravine) there was no one else heading up this late in the day. However there were a few people coming down the trail.

With my late start time I was hiking quickly, almost running, as there was a very likely potential of having to hike down in darkness. Additionally heavy rain was in the forecast, and I hoped to beat it to the top. I crossed my fingers the wind would not pick up as the mountain is notorious for its extreme gusts holding various records for the highest wind speeds ever recorded.

When I was at the car preparing for the hike, the fellow parked next to me arrived, and he told me it took him 3.5 hours to hike up and that he had arrange a shuttle, via the Auto Road, to return him for a cost of $31. I wasn’t counting on it, but I kept that possibility in my mind thinking it would be nice to check out the Auto Road, and to not have to hike down in the dark in predicted rain.

Mt. Washington is one of the peaks in the Presidential Range which is part of the White Mountains of New Hampshire. The more notorious peaks of the range are named after American Presidents. Mt. Washington is also one of the forty eight mountains in the state that top out at 4000 feet or more above sea-level – often referred to as four thousand footer (or 4Ks). Washington at well over 4000 feet is also the most topographically prominent mountain east of the Mississippi River.

It’s only two tenth of a mile shorter to hike to the top of Mt. Washington, via the Tuckerman Ravine, then the hike to Katahdin’s Baxter Peak I had done the day before -- in other words it is 4.1 miles from the Pinkham Visitor Center to the summit. However Mount Washington involves more vertical gain then Katahdin as the trailhead sits at 2050 feet and the summit at 6288 ft.

I covered the 2.4 miles to the Hermit Lake area at 3875 ft. in one hour. At this point the old road ends and the trail becomes a single track. From Hermit Lake to the summit is over 2400 feet of vertical gain in just over one and a half miles. 1400 plus vertical gain per mile is steep and I covered it in one and a half hours including a 10-15 minute break at the top of the ravine. From car to summit charged me two and a half hours.

Arriving on top I immediately noticed the white shuttle van, I had heard about, but before enquiring I first took a few summit photos and checked out the visitor centers. On the summit I learned that one can hike from the top of Mount Washington to Mt. Katahdin as a sign on the top points the way along the Appalachian Trail and says it is 332.4 miles. I also watched a Cog Railway train ascend the western slope of the mountain.

Enquiring about the shuttle I was informed that after 4 p.m. it was $50, but when I mentioned I had been told it was $31 the driver said he’d cut me that deal if I tipped him. The shuttle left the summit just before 5p.m. and made its way down the east side of the mountain. I road shotgun, and two older gentlemen were the only other passengers. I must have been back to my car before 6p.m. as the rain started. I tipped the driver $5.

~~It’s about 120 miles from Mt. Washington to Stowe VT, and I thought perhaps, if I’m was lucky, I could drive away from the incoming storm and find a place to camp at Smugglers Notch near the ski resort as I had my sights on Mount Mansfield for the next day. As I drove, the rain came and went but close to Stowe it became steady and hard. The road was rutted and pooled with water, slowing me down, and as such I arrive in the town of Stowe close to 10 p.m., where I opted for a motel room. Another full day, with another high point achieved~~.

**Mount Mansfield, VT, 4,393 ft. –August 29, 2019, HP #23: I found the Long trail to be very steep, and very steady.**

I don’t like to drive after dark as I feel like I miss out on the seeing the area. Nevertheless I had not gotten away from New Hampshire, after climbing Mt. Washington, until after 6 p.m., and with stopping for gas and dinner, the darkness caught up to me before I reached Stowe.

On the drive I realized I was very close to Quebec as I encountered French radio stations. In fact on the highway from Morristown VT to Swanton VT a look at a map showed the US/Canada border crossing of Highgate to be only 56.6 miles out of my way.

As I drove, the rain came and went but close to Stowe it became steady and hard. The road was rutted and pooled with water, slowing me down, and as such I did not arrive in the town of Stowe until almost 10 p.m. I had hoped to drive out of the storm as I wished to camp at Smugglers Notch near the ski resort, but that hope didn’t materialize so I decided on a motel room instead.

There was no need to be in a hurry the next morning, August 29, as my destination Mt. Mansfield (the highpoint of Vermont) is located less than 8 miles north and west of the town of Stowe. After a leisurely breakfast, provided by the motel, I made my way to the Stowe Mountain ski resort located on Mt. Mansfield in the Green Mountains of Vermont part of the Appalachian Mountain system. There are several routes to the top of Vermont, including a privately owned auto-road which ends about a mile and 600 vertical feet shy of the peak. To reach the summit I choose to hike a 2.3 miles section of the classic Long Trail which is the oldest long-distance trail in the USA. My hike from the first parking lot just past the Stowe Mountain Lodge started at roughly 1600 ft.

The mountain when viewed from the east, which was the view I had of it, resembles the profile of a human face. As such its prominent features are named Adams Apple (4,060'), Chin (4,393', highest point), Nose (4,062') and Forehead (3,940'). The Long trail passes just to the left of the Adams apple and then heads straight to the chin. The trail is comprised largely of natural staircases with very limited flat sections in between. The last third of a mile is above the tree line and consists of easy 3rd class scrambling to the summit.

The zone above tree line is one of the few places in Vermont where alpine tundra can still be found. This community of plants, considered remnants of the last ice age, only live in cold, windy, treeless environments, and are more typically found at high elevations. With only 275 acres of alpine tundra remaining in Vermont these rare plants are endangered, and as such a top Mt. Mansfield the alpine tundra is often roped off, and hikers are asked to stick to hard surfaces.

I anticipated a quick and easy hike, but I guess I was tired after my bursts of speed on both Katahdin and Mt. Washington the days before, and I found the Long trail to be very steep, and very steady. It took me about 1.5 hours to cover the 1.7 miles to the Taft Lodge, which I found empty and as a result I rested at for at least 30 minutes. Located at 3,650 feet, under 750 vertical feet from the summit, the small, meek Taft Lodge provides overnight shelter for hikers.

From the Taft Lodge to the 4393 ft. summit (aka Chin) took me about fifteen minutes to cover the six tenths of a mile. I arrived on top at 11:45 a.m.; 2.3 miles in 2 hours 15 minutes of hiking time, rising on average over 1200 vertical feet per mile for a total of 2793 vertical feet of gain. Not being used to the humidity my T-shirt was completely soaked in sweat. I removed my wet shirt and put on my fleece shirt even though the temperature was warm on the summit.

The summit offered views westward over Lake Champlain to the Adirondacks, eastward over the Connecticut River valley to the White Mountains (home of Mt. Washington, NH), and northward into Canada.

While on the peak, I chatted with another hiker and confirmed what I hoped, that like Snowbird ski resort in Utah, one can ride the Gondola down the mountain for free. As such to descend from the Chin I hiked south about a third of a mile, along the Long Trail, to a sign that pointed east. Down to the gondola is aptly named the Cliff Trail consisting of a steep decline over large, jumbled boulders. Nothing here is technically very hard, but it contains some challenging upper third class sections, and it is slow going; a few of the boulders even include iron handles. I found the Cliff trail to be more challenging then the last third of a mile to the summit from Taft lodge. From the summit 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 arrived.

**Mount Greylock, MA, 3,491 ft. –August 30, 2019, HP #24: Legend has it Mount Greylock's long, saddle-like profile inspired Herman Melville to write Moby Dick.**

It’s about 170 miles from Stowe to the town of N. Adams, MA where Mt. Greylock, the highpoint of Massachusetts, is located. The drive is mostly on smaller roads that go through small towns and range in speed limits from 35 mph to 55 mph, so it took close to 4 hours to get to N. Adams after my hike of Mount Mansfield earlier that day. One of the town I drove through was named Mexico, and I wanted to get a photo next to the town sign that read “Welcome to Mexico” but the road was too narrow and had no place to stop at.

Arriving in N. Adams, my hope was to find camping in the area, and then to hike to the top of the 3491 foot mountain the next day. I did almost no prior reading about Greylock because I really didn’t think I’d have time to do it on this trip. As a “just in case” I had printed driving directions to the mountain and some information on the Thunderbolt ski route.

Not being fully prepared for Greylock I had to drive around a bit in trying to figure out how to get to the neighboring town of Adams where my beta said the Thunderbolt trailhead was located. While driving around I noticed an Appalachian Trail map and stopped to check it out. In the process a man walking his dog came along and I asked him about hiking Greylock – he informed me that I could drive to the top via Notch road, and told me how to get there. I thought I might as well drive up as it was only about 6:30 p.m.

Following his directions I located Notch road and was delighted to see a sign informing me of a campground 7.5 miles further up the road and just a mile further along than the summit. I figured I would get a camp spot, and the next morning I could hike to the peak from there. As it turned out Notch road reached a Y with the peak being 1 mile one way and the campground 2 miles the other way hence the 6.5 and 7.5 distances, but not meaning the campground and peak were a mile apart as I had interpreted it.

Nevertheless since I first wanted to find camping, I turned right at the Y and headed toward the campground only to find it gated and locked. As such, I then drove to the summit, hoping to discover what was up with the campground. On the summit, there was no one around to collect the $10 parking fee. As such I was forced to take the risk of a ticket as I hurriedly checked out the Memorial Tower. After climbing the tower stairs to the top, I walked over to the Bascom Lodge, and had to enter the restaurant to find someone to ask about the campground. The waitress told me to drive past the campground entrance to find parking and that from there 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 and found the parking lot she had mentioned. Signs at the parking lot said it was for registered campers only, and provided a phone number. My phone couldn’t get a signal to make a call, so I decided to pack up and hike in the 1.5 miles to the campground and see if there was a camp host. It was fully dark by the time I was ready to go, and I was worried about leaving the car there without a permit but since none of the other 3 or 4 cars in the lot had a visible permit displayed I decided it would be okay.

The hike into the campground seemed much longer than it should have. At one point I disturbed an owl which was awesome to encounter. I hiked in the dark and for no reason was in a big hurry leaving me all sweaty. There seemed to be only two groups of campers at the campground so I approached the closest group and explained my situation. One of the campers had a phone that worked, so we tried to call the number I had copied down and 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, and decided I might as well return to the car and just stay there to see if anyone patrolled the area which I might then get permission from them to use the campground.

Hiking back to the car seemed much shorter and turned out to be mostly downhill, which I found strange as I hadn’t realized the hike in was uphill. The owl was gone. Back at the car I thought about setting up my tent next to the car, but decided that would look bad if a Park Ranger stopped by. In so doing, I realized that I had not packed in the poles for the tent when I had hike into the campground – so I would have had to return to the car under any circumstances. I did lay the tent on the ground and rested on it for a while until I realized I would be better off trying to sleep in the car. I check out the front verse the back seat options and found the back seat to be more comfortable. I slept okay, and at one point a vehicle did arrive, and left, but no one bothered or seemed to notice me.

I woke up at 4:30 a.m., August 27, and I got the good idea to head up to the peak to see the sunrise. At 3,491 feet, Greylock doesn’t seem to be too remarkable, but this is actually an intriguing mountain, which I really enjoyed. It seems to be covered with many hiking trails, hidden completely within its tree covered surface, and it has an adventurous vibe to it. It is so inspirational that legend has it Mount Greylock's long, saddle-like profile inspired Herman Melville to write "Moby Dick". He was known to have great fondness for the mountain, even setting up a special observation deck at his home (near Pittsfield) so he could view Greylock whenever he desired.

So before sunrise, I parked ¾ of a mile from the summit, and hiked up the Appalachian Trail to the summit arriving at 5:30 a.m. to just a slight orange glow. The Memorial Tower was locked at this early hour. So, I positioned myself off to the east and south of the Memorial Tower, out of easy view, just because I wasn’t sure the summit was actually open at that time of day. After a while a middle aged couple, no doubt stay at the Bascom lodge arrive, and I’m sure they never even noticed me. They left before I did as I tried to stay until 6:00 a.m. hoping the ball of the sun would appear. However at 5:56 a.m. I felt that wasn’t going to happen, so I headed down. On the return I photographed the sign on the road that lists the peak elevation and name of the mountain. 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.

**Sassafras Mountain, SC, 3,553 ft. – October 3, 2019, HP #25: Sassafras Mountain is located on the border of North and South Carolina and is shared by both states.**

Oct 3, 2019 at 12:15 a.m. I caught a red-eye flight from Salt Lake City to Greenville, South Carolina via Charlotte, North Carolina. I arrived around 9:30 a.m. eastern daylight time and picked up a rental car. On the drive from Greenville to Sassafras Mountain I first stopped to pick up a few groceries as I would be traveling for the next six days.

Sassafras Mountain is located on the border of North and South Carolina and is shared by both states. The portion in South Carolina contains said states highest point. From the Greenville Airport to Sassafras Mountain is about a 150 mile drive, and I arrived at the parking lot located just below the summit at noon. About a city block length walk uphill from the parking stands a then newly opened (as of April 2019) elevated observation deck. The observation deck resides half in SC and half in NC, and is painted with a black line indicating 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 south east of the platform on the South Carolina side a stone marker with a plaque claims that states 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.

There was just one other person on the top when I arrived, and he seemed to be using field glasses to observe birds in the sky, and was not friendly. The cement floor of the deck is painted with a compass rose showing the border of the Carolinas to run from the NW to the SE. From 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 and near that under some rocks was a jar with a registry book inside which I signed indicating this to be my twenty fifth US state highpoint.

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 nice. All the same this highpoint lacked a sense of accomplishment perhaps because it require so little physical effort to reach, or maybe because it is not much of an adventure to attain.

**Brasstown Bald, GA, 4,784 ft. – October 3, 2019, HP #26: A remarkable mountain which actually took me by surprise.**

After spending about thirty minutes on Sassafras Mountain and 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. I had to pay five dollars to park. 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 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 gives 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 miles to the north and east Brasstown Bald is part of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

I did not notice now but in the late 1800s destructive lumber companies stripped the land and 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. However 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. The patchy Chatuge Lake (a man-made reservoir) to the north is clearly visible.

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 p.m., I was the last person on the summit.

In spite of the short hike, and having a visitor center on the summit the atmosphere at Brasstown Bald is adventuresome. It is a remarkable mountain which actually took me by surprise – a welcomed and pleasant surprise at that. Some have even claimed this to be the most enjoyable eastern US state highpoint. My description for the selfie taken in front of the brown colored sign at the exit of the hiking trail states “The surprisingly wonderful Brasstown Bald Mountain of GA”.

**Clingmans Dome, TN, 6,643 ft. – October 4, 2019, HP #27: Clingmans Dome is the highpoint of Tennessee, in spite of the state border running along the extreme height of the mountains.**

Wednesday I had worked all day, and that night I had caught a red-eye flight from Salt Lake City to Greenville, South Carolina. Without stopping to sleep I had driven directly to Sassafras Mountain South Carolina, visited that highpoint, then carried on to the highpoint of Georgia. Moving right along I continued on to the Smokemont campground in the Great Smokey Mountains National Park. It was dark when I arrived at my reserved camp spot in North Carolina, having been traveling for 23 hours straight. The fellows next door where playing guitar and I worried they would keep me up all night, but they quieted down by 10 p.m. and I slept very well. I had the spot till noon the next day, and it was close to 11 a.m. when I finally left.

Oct 4, 2019, I made it to the parking lot for Clingmans Dome before noon having driven twenty miles from Smokemont. I was disappointed that the large parking area for Clingmans Dome was all but full, but then again it was a Friday in one of the most visited national parks in the country. A steady stream of people, many seeming to be on the biggest adventure of their life, where going up and down the half mile paved path to and from the summit. Even though I was here to reach the highest natural point in Tennessee my rental car was parked in North Carolina as is the trail to the summit.

Found on the summit of Clingmans Dome is a 45-foot tall circular concrete observation tower. In reaching the tower via the paved trail, one enters Tennessee crossing over the 6,643 peak of Clingmans Dome very near to but before climbing the sweeping 375 foot long helical ramp to the observation platform.

Confusion lies around exactly which US state the observation tower actually resides in with some sources claiming it straddles the border between the two states sharing the mountain. 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 Smoky National Park. However trusted maps show the tower to in fact be in North Carolina if even just ever so slight.

Evidently, 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 is fortunate North Carolina has two peaks, both 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 a high point. Bottom line, most everyone seems to concur that Clingmans Dome is the highpoint of Tennessee, in spite of the state border running along the extreme height of the mountains.

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, namely 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, almost space craft like, design is oddly out of place in its wooded wilderness surroundings. Some have joked that the structure resembles a giant USGS marker. Since the closest USGS marker appears to be in the parking lot, conceivably that might even be accurate if only the tower were in Tennessee.

I got a few people to snap photos of me on the tower and leaving it. Instead of descending entirely on the paved trail I headed over to the Appalachian Trail to walk a bit of it. Maps show the Appalachian Trail to be in Tennessee, and it claims a high point of 6,643 ft. along Clingmans Dome.

**Black Mountain, KY, 4,139 ft. – October 5, 2019, HP #28: Inside Black Mountain lie many hollowed-out coal veins which conspiracists claim could cause the summit to cave in.**

Have just climbed Clingmans Dome, and with this being my first visit to Great Smoky Mountains National Park I wanted to discover more of what it has to offer. My next US state highpoint stop would be Kentucky but my itinerary allowed time for me to stop at Newfound Gap, then headed north into Tennessee on Hwy 441, and hike the Chimney Tops trail. Following the under 2-mile hike I drove 50 plus miles on scenic winding roads to the west end of the National Park to the Abram's Creek Campground where I had spot A10 reserved. The west end of the Smoky Mountain NP, I had read, is not popular but the campground was small, crowded, noisy, and all but full. Thankfully the spot next to mine stayed empty.

The next morning, October 5,2019, I was eager to leave Abram’s Creek Campground as such I got up with the sun, and was on the road around 8 a.m., headed to the high point of Kentucky via the town of Harlan (as featured on the TV series Justified). I made good time to Harlan covering the 120 miles in under 3 hours via some winding slower roads.

I ended up on Hwy 38 from Harlan toward Virginia because a map I had printed from the Internet shows an "old Hwy 38" that connects to HWY 38 (a left turn from 38 to old 38 - 28.1 miles from Harlan). The print out shows that "old Hwy 38" becomes Black Mountain Ridge Road as it switches back and forth to the north and north east and goes over the private property of Black Mountain, Kentucky to within 200 yards of it's true summit (unlike HWY 160 - the actual way to go - which gets you to within 1.5 miles from the true summit, and truly connects to Black Mountain Ridge Road).

Well, Old Hwy 38 isn't labeled, and I couldn't find it. Plus, I can tell you this, now that I have visited the summit of Black Mountain, Black Mountain Ridge Road is gated closed 200 yards from the summit for those trying to continue west. In other words, even if I had found old Hwy 38, and even if it did connect to Black Mountain Ridge Road, I still couldn't drive to the summit from Hwy 38.

I ended up in Keokee VA - about 3.4 miles from where the non-existing old Hwy 38 was marked on my map. At Keokee I asked for directions to Black Mountain, and was sent southwest to Hwy 421, 13 miles in the wrong direction. At this point I took highways 421 to 58, and 58 to Big Stone Gap, then 23 to Inman to get on the winding 160 and up to the VA/KY line to Black Mountain Ridge Road. From Keokee, VA to Inman is only 10.6 miles - so asking for directions cost me 27 miles which is about an hour on those curvy roads. All the same, I made it to the summit of Black Mountain by 2:30 p.m. about an hour and a half later than what I expected. The highpoint of Hwy 160 is the border of KY/VA, and has a sign which incorrectly lists Black Mountains elevation as 4,145 ft. when really it is 4,139 ft. and a mile and half further up the mountain on the over grown, no longer maintained, Black Mountain Ridge road.

With care I able to drive up Black Mountain Ridge Road in my low clearance rented Toyota Corolla. Arriving first at the Radar Tower, there was a local man and his girlfriend parked and eating McDonalds. Before continuing up the road I asked him to take a photo of me. I was only able to drive up the hill past the Radar Tower from where I walk 200 yards to the seemingly abandoned lookout tower which wasn’t climbable as it lower ladder was missing. Without a functioning lookout tower there wasn’t much of a view from the top of Kentucky. Not far from the old tower I located a summit plaque on a rock, as well as a USGS benchmark, confirming I was at Kentucky’s highest point. Scattered between my parking spot and the deserted tower were a few other dilapidated structures.

The chronicle of Black Mountain is strongly tied to coaling mining many signs of which I encounter on the drive to the highpoint from Harlan. It fact at the crest of Hwy 160 where Virginia meets Kentucky the view to the south east is of a large open pit mine. Gratefully Black Mountain itself has not fallen prey to mountaintop removal mining. Since the late 1990’s the Commonwealth of Kentucky has obtained the mineral and timber rights of the summit so far keeping the summit protected. Bear in mind inside Black Mountain lie many hollowed-out coal veins which conspiracists claim could cause the summit to cave in.

Being private property, and perhaps spurred by the cave in conspiracy, visitors were asked to sign a waiver prior to their outing. I signed one, and mailed it to the Penn Virginia Resource Partners mining company prior to my visit, although while there I felt it was not needed. Although I could find nothing on-line to corroborate it August 4, 2020, one of the Facebook Administrators of the 50 States Highpointing Group announced that the Commonwealth of Kentucky now owns the summit and does not require waivers.

As I drove down the weeded infested and often washed out Black Mountain Ridge road a pickup truck was coming up. Fortunately he pulled over for me and I got my low clearance rented car past him without scraping anything. It was just after 3p.m. when I headed down the mountain via the fun to drive twisty highway 160 headed to Mt. Rogers Virginia 110 miles to the east.

**Mount Rogers, VA, 5,729 ft. – October 6, 2019, HP #29: When I reached the high meadow, on the return trip, the fog lifted and wild ponies were in sight.**

After crossing White Top Road, and going through a gate I came to a fork in the trail; a sign indicated the Appalachian Trail and another pointed to a horse trail. I took the Appalachian Trail up a barren hill with white blazed fence posts as markers and soon entered the forest. After two miles (which seemed way less) the trail forked again this time toward a spring, and I stayed on the Appalachian Trail. Occasionally there were camps set up, and a few people where hiking down. I seemed to be alone going up. Maybe three miles in I came to an open spot to the east of a fence and there I saw signs of ponies but no ponies were seen through the thick fog, so I continued on the Appalachian Trail up. Around mile four, to reach the summit of Mt Rogers, the route leaves the Appalachian Trail and heads west on a blue blazed trail.

The evening before, not long after sunset, I arrived at a place called Elk Garden and the Appalachian Trail along White Top Road, in thick fog. Heavy rain was falling and the air was cold. The parking area was full, but as I briefly chatted with a fellow getting some things out of his car, a spot opened up and I took it.

From inside the car I organized my pack for the next day’s hike. I had planned to camp behind the trees south of the parking lot but with the weather I decided to sleep in the back seat of the car.

Oct 6, 2019, I was on the Appalachian Trail by 7:15 a.m., after a quick breakfast. It was still foggy and wet but the rain had stopped. No one else was heading up when I started up. A car did arrive as I left the parking lot but they didn’t follow me up the Appalachian Trail. I made it up to the 5729 ft. summit in under 2 hours, having gained 1295 feet.

On the summit was another lone hiker. Being a friendly fellow he informed he had come up from via Massie Gap in Grayson Highlands State Park. I also learned he was from Oregon and worked for Benchmark maps. I informed him of my fondness of maps and also that I own three of their map books. He took a photo of me for me.

Gaining the westbound blue blazed trail form the Appalachian Trail the landscape is initially somewhat open, but soon enters a thick spruce-fir forest. The trees of this thick subalpine red spruce-Fraser fir forest covering the summit are all moss covered, which adds a nice ambiance to the final mile. This forest is one of the few remaining habitats of the Fraser fir which have suffered declines due to the balsam woolly adelgid an invasive species from Europe.

Mt 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 which opened in 1865 following the American Civil War.

I spent about 30 minutes on the summit and was back to the car by 11:10 a.m.

When I reached the high meadow, on the return trip, the fog lifted and wild ponies were in sight. Over one hundred ponies roam free on the slopes of The Old Dominion States tallest mountain. Fellow hikers told me they had approached them so I walked down to them to get a closer photo, leaving the Appalachian Trail. In the meadow was a sign pointing out the horse trail route back to Elk Garden. The Highlands Horse Trail more or less paralleled the eastside of the Appalachian Trail and arrives back at Elk Garden. For a little variety I followed it making my hike sort of a loop rather than a full back track. On the Highlands Horse Trail, I passed two girls going up, then I overtook a family (one-child with parents). Two guys taking down their tent confirmed my trail lead back to Elk Garden.

From Mt. Rogers I traveled to Boone, NC, and then to the campground on Mt. Mitchell. The Blue Ridge parkway was all fogged in, and light rain was falling, so I denied the nice views into the valleys below. It wasn’t raining when I set up my camp but shortly after the rain came in. The next morning I was up before the sun, and I went down to the car to eat breakfast. I hadn’t slept that well, but I had had enough of being in the tent. I didn’t need my head lamp as I started the 6/10 of a mile hike from the campground up to the 6684 ft. summit of Mt. Mitchel – the highest peak east of the Mississippi. This would be my second time on the summit of Mt. Mitchell. There was only one person on the summit, and the sunrise was still in progress when I arrived. By 9:30 a.m. I was back on the parkway headed toward Ashville, NC, and from there Greenville, SC where I had a hotel reservation. Oct 8, six days after leaving, and six US State Highpoints later (five of which were new to me), I returned to Salt Lake City.

**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 “Mt. 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 “Mt. 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 Mt. 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.