**Katahdin, ME, 5,268 ft. –August 27, 2019, HP #21: A stout hike, with some upper 3rd class sections.**

August 26 after breakfast I picked up my rental car around 10 am and drove to Millinocket, ME about 300 miles to the north (slightly east) of Portland ME. Ten hours earlier I had concluded a three leg, thirteen hour flight from Salt Lake City, through Dallas, 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 ruralness remaining.

Once I got past Bangor on I-95 people disappeared. First I located my motel, The Baxter Inn, and I waited until 3 pm to check in, picking up a few groceries in the meantime. I had a late lunch/early dinner, in my hotel room then drove the 18 or so miles to Baxter State Park home of Maines tallest mountain Mt. Katahdin (5,267 ft.). My purpose was to know where I needed to go early the next morning.

At Baxter Park, I drove to the toll booth, and chatted with the employee, and found no reason to pay a fee to go in. On the way back to Millinocket I checked out the NEOC (New England Outdoor Center), and realized camping would have been an okay option, in spite of the annoying bugs. Back at the hotel, which was expensive ($140+ per night), old, broken down, and less then clean, I got everything ready for the next day’s hike. I had to be up at 4:30 am (2:30 am Utah time), and on my way to Baxter State Park before 5 am to arrive by 5:30 am. Park opens at 6:00 am and I wanted to be one of the first people in, plus my parking reservation could only be held till 7 am and I desired to arrive early so as not to risk being late. Not surprisingly I didn’t sleep at all that night and was up before the 4:30 am alarm.

I arrived at Baxter pretty much at 5:30am and was the third car in-line at the gate, others soon arrived after me. The 30 minute wait allowed me time for breakfast and to get my boots on. It took till pretty much 6:20 am to get through the gate and drive, at 20 mph, to the Roaring Brook trailhead parking area as I had to follow some “do-gooder” all the way in who wouldn’t speed. Since my rental car had a Maine license plate they must have thought I was a resident and didn’t charge me a park entrance fee.

I wasn’t 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 to reach the Knife Edge and followed that to the peak. The route is 4.3 miles from its departure from the Chimney pond trail, and climbs 3778 feet to the 5267 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 4902 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 summit on Katahdin.

Being the most renowned mountain in the east, and having a formidable reputation I had had a desire to experience it for myself for some time, as such the undertaking was even more than another high point for me.

I all but sprinted to ensure I’d stay ahead of other hikers, and I was in a hurry to break out of the trees so I could get views of the area. Around tree line, at about 3500 feet, I heard voices behind me, and once they broke out of the trees I caught glimpses now and then of a two man party, but they never caught up to me. Before reaching Pamola I crossed paths with a party of two hikers descending from watching the sunrise, and after Chimney Peak I encountered one other fellow coming down. Once above tree lines I was able to see just how many lakes cover Maine and there were heaps of them. Below tree line the environment reminded me of hiking in Virginia as well as the movie Last of the Mohicans. I love hiking in east coast forests as it is such a pleasant experience.

I reached the peak in 3 hours and 10 minutes arriving well before 10 am. More than four years had slipped by between the time I reached my previous US state highpoint and this my 21st state high point. I completed 62 mountain climbs, and several other adventures over those four years but I had not had much of a desire to travel and so my state high pointing objective had unintentionally slipped into hibernation.

Katahdin was a stout hike, with some upper 3rd class sections between Pamola and Chimney Peaks, and a very worthwhile and rewarding adventure. On the peak were several folks who had just completed the full Appalachian Trail (AT) and more of them continued to arrive during the 45 minutes or so I spent at the top of Maine. The AT comes up from the south west (heading north east) whereas the Knife Edge reaches the peak from the east (heading west). Another hiker, also not an AT hiker, pointed out to me how strange it is that the 2000 plus mile AT ends at the top of a mountain which requires hikers to then hike even more to get to ground transportation – valid point I thought. Why not end at a lodge, parking lot, or restaurant?

To descend Katahdin I decided to make a loop hike around the cirque formed by its South and Great basins so I dropped down to the north west reaching the saddle then proceed up to the 4765 ft. Hamlin Peak - a distance of 2 miles. From Hamlin I descended Hamlin Ridge and the North Basin Cut off trails to the Chimney Pond trail and back to the Roaring Brook Ranger Station, a distance of 4.9 miles (that is 6.9 miles from Baxter Peak).

The descent required 4 hours 20 mins which put me back to the car before 3pm having hiked over 4000 vertical feet and over 11 miles. Katahdin is an impressive mountain which lived up to the expectations I hoped it would. I appreciated the strictness of Baxter State Park, which prevents crowding helping to provide a 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 pm. 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 4pm 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 5pm 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 6pm 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 pm, 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: Heavy rain was in the forecast, and I hoped to beat that to the top.**

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 pm, 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 pm. 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 am; 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.