

The Burroughs Range

By Skip Doyle

In his insightful style, naturalist and Esopus native, John Burroughs, writes, "One has only to sit down in the woods or fields, or by the shore of the river or lake, and nearly everything of interest will come round to him..." It has taken me decades, but I am thankful that I finally became aware of these mountain trails in my backyard. This past Independence Day, I chose to celebrate my self-reliance with a trek across the Burroughs Range in the Slide Mountain Wilderness Area of the Catskills.



Author, Skip Doyle, at the Burroughs memorial on Slide Mountain

Whether you begin this trek by driving or taking the bus to Phoenicia, NY, or pitching your tent the night before at nearby Woodland Valley Campgrounds, Catskill Outback offers an economical shuttle to the Slide Mountain trailhead on Mountain Road (Route 47). From the trailhead it is a moderate hike to the Slide Mountain summit. So mild a hike, in fact, that I recommend adding on the side trail to the Curtis-Ormsbee monument, a tribute to two Appalachian Mountain Club members who succumbed to a snowstorm on Mount Washington on June 30, 1900. While Slide Mountain, at 4,180 feet, is the highest in the Catskills, it was hard to imagine a snowstorm on this 90 degree day – testimony that the Burroughs Range, while challenging, is not the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

The summit of Slide Mountain is marked by nothing more than a concrete slab, the remnants of some long ago fire tower. The true treat on the summit is the commemoration to John Burroughs: a plaque with the inscription, "In memoriam, John Burroughs, who in his early writings introduced Slide Mountain to the world. He made many visits to this peak and slept several nights beneath this rock. This region is the scene of many of his essays. 'Here the works of man dwindle' in the hearts of the southern Catskills." I paused for lunch within the cramped grotto where John Burroughs slept – it felt like sacred ground.

Descending the col to Cornell Mountain, the trail is surprisingly steep, and rocky in spots – a salient rock ledge juts out from the hillside with prominent views of Cornell, Wittenberg, and the Ashokan Reservoir below. I remember as a child playing in the meadows and pine forests of the Ashokan Reservoir watershed; at the time, I frolicked unaware that rugged trails and scenic vistas were atop these surrounding mountains. John Muir, contemporary of John Burroughs wittily writes, "We all travel the Milky Way together, trees and men; but it never occurred to me until this storm-day, while swinging in the wind, that trees are travelers, in the ordinary sense. They make many journeys, not extensive ones, it is true; but our own little journeys, away and back again,

are only little more than tree-wavings – many of them not so much.” On this day at least, John Muir could not accuse me of not venturing into the woods beyond the distance of a tree wave.

On the ascent to Cornell one rock outcropping affords a view back at the northern “slide” of Slide Mountain. The summit of Cornell Mountain is found via a short, yellow-blazed side trail from which the severe eastern face of Wittenberg Mountain is visible. From here, the ascent to Wittenberg looks formidable. But the col – called Bruin’s Causeway – remains above 3,500 feet, so the ascent to Wittenberg is barely noticeable.

What is noticeable is that as you break out of the conifers onto the Wittenberg summit, an entire panorama opens up. To me, this is the most beautiful viewpoint in all the Catskills. Here I encountered members of the Catskill 4000 Club amidst their Independence Day ritual of handing out free Klondike bars – what a welcome treat! And having just climbed Slide, I learned I was halfway to qualifying for membership!

The trek down Wittenberg Mountain to Woodland Valley is a relentless 4 miles. After summiting the three major peaks of the Burroughs Range with their awe-inspiring views, it seems mundane to find yourself under tree cover for hours. The descent is not particularly arduous, but it is psychologically long.

The Burroughs Range lies on the fabled Long Path. Having hiked all those aqua blazes from Fort Lee, NJ, this past year, the Burroughs Range is my favorite segment of the Long Path – for here there are big mountains, history, vistas, but not too difficult terrain – 10 miles, 2,300 feet elevation gain, 8 hours. *The Long Path Guide* cautions the hiker not to get lost on side trails, but the Burroughs Range route is well-blazed, well-maintained, and well-traveled. And with the NY-NJ Trail Conference map #43, the path is easy to follow.

Woodland Valley campgrounds – a sight to be grateful for! At the end of my trek, I indulged in a reserved campsite. The site (#19), right on Woodland Creek, had a feeling of remoteness while still being near a bathroom and shower. It was wonderful to sleep with the countless stars of a black night overhead, and waken to songbird soloists with a chorus of chirping birds. In the words of John Burroughs’ senior contemporary, Walt Whitman: “Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons, it is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.”



Catskill 4000 members sharing Klondike Bars atop Wittenberg Mountain – Devil’s Path on the horizon.