

The Long (Aqua) Path: an End-to-End Hike

by Skip Doyle



When we walk, we make the Earth our own. With this end-to-end hike of the Long Path – extending from New York City to Albany – I have made the Hudson River Valley my own. In this day-after-day trek of 10-plus miles per day, and in Walt Whitman’s words, *breathing great draughts of space, that the north and the south are mine, the east and the west are mine.*

Most memorable was July 4. All of nature applauded this Independence Day: the gentle warmth of summer; bright, blue cloudless sky; nary a breeze; pine-scented, fresh air; and a gentle ascent as I began my trek of the Burroughs Range – the most historic, most notable, and most scenic viewpoint in all the Long Path. To this point, in 15 days, I had hiked half the 350 mile Long Path and had in aggregate ascended 30,000 feet – equal to Mount Everest from sea level.

The first of the three mountains in the range is Slide Mountain – at 4,180 feet, it is the highest peak in the Catskills and the highest peak along the entire Long Path. Halfway up Slide Mountain is the Curtis & Ormsbee monument marking those less fortunate: a pair of Appalachian Mountain Club hikers this very week in 1900 succumbed to impartial nature in a Mount Washington blizzard in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. This sacred stone is pox-marked by bullets and defaced by graffiti. While those delinquent minds would not think of using a crucifix for target practice nor etching their name into a temple door, the sanctity of creation has yet to be fully realized.



Fittingly, at the Slide Mountain summit is a John Burroughs plaque which memorializes the days when conservation was less about turning off the light switch and more about experiencing our protected wilderness firsthand. This plaque to the naturalist and writer from Esopus, New York is inscribed: *“In memory of 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. The region is the scene of many of his essays. ‘Here the works of man dwindle’ in the hearts of the southern*

Catskills.” Having lunch and in Rip Van Winkle fashion myself napping within the cramped grotto where John Burroughs slept felt like sacred ground.

Descending the col to Cornell Mountain was surprisingly steep, and rocky in spots – and especially scenic from one rock ledge which juts out from the hillside. Ascending Cornell provides a look back from one rock outcropping which affords a view of 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. Below is the Ashokan Reservoir where I remember as a child playing in the grass, meadows, and pine forests of that watershed whose basins are fed by the streams of the Burroughs Range and other Catskill Mountains. At the time, I frolicked unaware that rugged trails and scenic vistas were atop these surrounding mountains. John Burroughs writes, *“One has only to sit down in the woods or the fields, or by the shore of the river or lake, and nearly everything of interest will come round to him.”* It has taken me years, but I am thankful for becoming aware of these mountain trails in my very own Ulster County backyard.



From here, the ascent to Wittenberg looks formidable. But the col – called Bruin’s Causeway – remains above 3,500 feet, so that the ascent to Wittenberg is barely noticeable. What is noticeable is that as you break out of the conifers at the Wittenberg summit, an entire panorama opens up – including the complete ridgeline of Devil’s Path to the north, and the Ashokan Reservoir below. To me, this viewpoint is the most beautiful in all the Catskills. In some type of Independence Day ritual, here I encountered members of the Catskill 4000 Club handing out free Klondike bars. What a welcome afternoon treat! And having just climbed Slide, I learned I was halfway to qualifying for membership!

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

Woodland Valley campgrounds – a sight to be grateful for. 10 miles, 2,300 foot elevation gain, over 8 hours was a full day’s hike. Site #19 right on the Woodland Creek gave the feeling of remoteness while still having a bathroom and shower nearby. It was wonderful going to sleep with the countless stars of a black night, and awaking to songbird soloists with chirping birds chorus. Here I witness the words of Walt Whitman: “*Now I see the secret of making the best of persons, it is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.*” Of all the segments on the Long Path, the Burroughs Range is the most satisfying.

The 30-day Long Path endeavor was also an educational experience: as a college sabbatical project, I forged a program with the fourth graders of the Robert Graves School in the town of Esopus, New York. Since they were studying New York State history, culture, and natural science, it was an excellent opportunity for us to collaborate through an Internet blog: for me to daily share photographs and observations of my journey, and for the students to daily ask me questions and to offer commentary (<http://TheLongAquaPath.blogspot.com>). That has become the basis for my book, *The Long Path Journal* – published by the Adirondack Mountain Club with maps by the NY-NJ Trail Conference – which is both a topographical guide to the Long Path and a travelogue.

When undertaking a major adventure, people ask why. Having paddled the entire tidal Hudson River from Troy to Manhattan, and having bicycled the connection of rail trails from Manhattan to Buffalo, I felt this Long Path was the missing segment of completing what I deem the New York State triathlon tour. For those contemplating an end-to-end hike of the Long Path, I have compiled a motivational top ten list:

1. At 350 miles and 66,000’ of elevation gain, the Long Path typically is about a 30 day trek, which is a doable investment of time whether undertaken as a through hike or completed over series of weekends.
2. It is a way to see the grand sights and trails of our Hudson River Valley: the Burroughs Range, the Devil’s Path, the Helderberg Escarpment, waterfalls, parks and preserves, archeological sites, and wildlife in its native environments.
3. Wonderful about the Long Path is that each daily segment is uniquely different so that there is never the sense of drudgery.

4. The Long Path patch is a cool blue which is accompanied by an end-to-end rocker from the NY-NJ Trail Conference when you hike the entire trail.
5. Only 120 people have hiked the entire Long Path which makes for quite a select group compared to the 12,000 hikers who have completed the Appalachian Trail.
6. Whether suburban, upstate counties, or backcountry, the Long Path provides the most rustic and rugged route in each area through which it passes.
7. The Long Path passes through many villages so that food and supplies are usually near at hand.
8. A mix of camping and motels provides a rustic yet refined journey.
9. It is never more than a day's walk between road crossings, so that it is possible to do the Long Path as a series of day hikes.
10. It is an opportunity for you to write your own legacy Long Path journal.



Whatever your hiking style, the Long Path offers something for everyone – including day hikers. For those dabbling in the Long Path, below is my ranking. Though I assure you that once you begin the Long Path trek – even if over an extended time as a section hiker – that as the introduction to the Boy Scout Fieldbook prophesizes: “*The more you go, the more you will want to go – in fact, the more you go, the more you will need to go.*”

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Segment</u>	<u>Day</u>	<u>Miles</u>	<u>Elevation</u>
1	West Conesville (Pangman Road) to Blenheim (Creamery Road) The walk along Schoharie Creek with the variety of places along the way is unsurpassed.	25	15	1,500
2	Slide-Cornell-Wittenberg mountains Slide the tallest peak; Wittenberg the best vista in the Catskills.	16	10	2,300
3	Devil's Path The most notable ridgeline in the Hudson Valley – four high peaks.	20	12	4,200
4	Route 443 to Altamont Helderberg escarpment; vista of upper Hudson Valley and Mohawk Valley.	30	15	2,400
5	North Point (North-South Lake) to Windham (Route 23) Most high peak outlooks.	23	17	4,200
6	Fort Lee to Tallman State Park A historic walk of spectacular geology overlooking Hudson River, New York City and suburbs.	1	15	1,100
7	Sam's Point to Minnewaska A full day of scenic ridgeline walking and spectacular Verkeerder Kill Falls.	11	14	1,800
8	Woodbury (Schunemunk Mountain) An earned ridgeline walk with views of the Catskills.	7	7	1,800
9	Hook Mountain to Mount Ivy High Tor, Little Tor, and views of the Hudson River throughout the day.	3	11	2,300
10	Vroman Nose / Route 30 to Treadlemire Road (Middleburg) Schoharie Valley vista atop Vroman's Nose and Middleburg cliffs.	27	9	2,700
11	Palenville (Route 23A) to North Point North-South Lake, escarpment, and overlook from North Point.	22	8	2,600
12	Bradt Hollow Road (Berne) to Route 443 Woods walking interspersed with pastoral farms.	29	18	1,600
13	Bull Run (Peekamoose Mountain) A tall climb with treetop summit.	14	8	2,800
14	Shawangunk Ridge Trail	10	15	4,100

	A ridge walk with grand finale ascent.			
15	Route 211 to Shawangunk Ridge Trail A remote park followed by quiet road walk.	9	18	2,000
16	Salisbury Mills to Route 211 A pleasant country road walk.	8	19	1,100
17	Denning Road (Slide Mountain) The historic start of the Burroughs' Range.	15	8	2,000
18	Treadlemire Road (Middleburg) to Bradt Hollow Road (Berne) A mellow forest walk.	28	9	2,000
19	Mount Ivy to Lake Skannatati A rocky entry into Harriman State Park.	4	9	1,600
20	Route 6 - Harriman State Park to Woodbury A pleasant walk leaving Harriman State Park followed by road walk.	6	11	1,900
21	Platte Clove to Palenville (Route 23A) A quiet connecting trail skirting Kaaterskill High Peak.	21	10	1,200
22	Palentown (Riggsville) to Peekamoose Mountain A remote woods walk.	13	10	1,300
23	Mount Tremper An arduous climb with firetower reward.	18	7	1,800
24	Minnewaska (Jenny Lane) to Palentown A dry stream bed start followed by road walk. [now re-routes through the woods of Sam's Point and a country road walk.]	12	14	1,300
25	Woodland Valley Uneventful, quiet road walk. [now re-routed to stay in the mountains]	17	8	-
26	Windham (Route 23) to West Conesville (Pangman Road) First half a manicured path; second half: where did the trail go?!	24	21	4,000
27	Lake Skannatati to Route 6 A featureless hike through Harriman State Park.	5	11	2,500
28	Blenheim (Creamery Road) to Vroman Nose / Route 30 (Middleburg) A long slog through muck and poorly blazed backcountry.	26	22	3,600
29	Tallman State Park to Hook Mountain The scenic start degrades into a day-long, featureless hike with redeeming Hook Mountain finish.	2	16	2,600
30	Warner Creek Scree, stinging nettle, and briers.	19	4	1,700

To get started on the Long Path, I am offering a hike on the Minnewaska State Park section on June 15. For a description and map of this section see <http://nynjtc.org/map/long-path-northern-minnewaska-trail-map>, and the ADK mid-Hudson Chapter schedule for the meeting time and place (midHudsonADK.org).