

The
Long Path
Journal



Skip Doyle

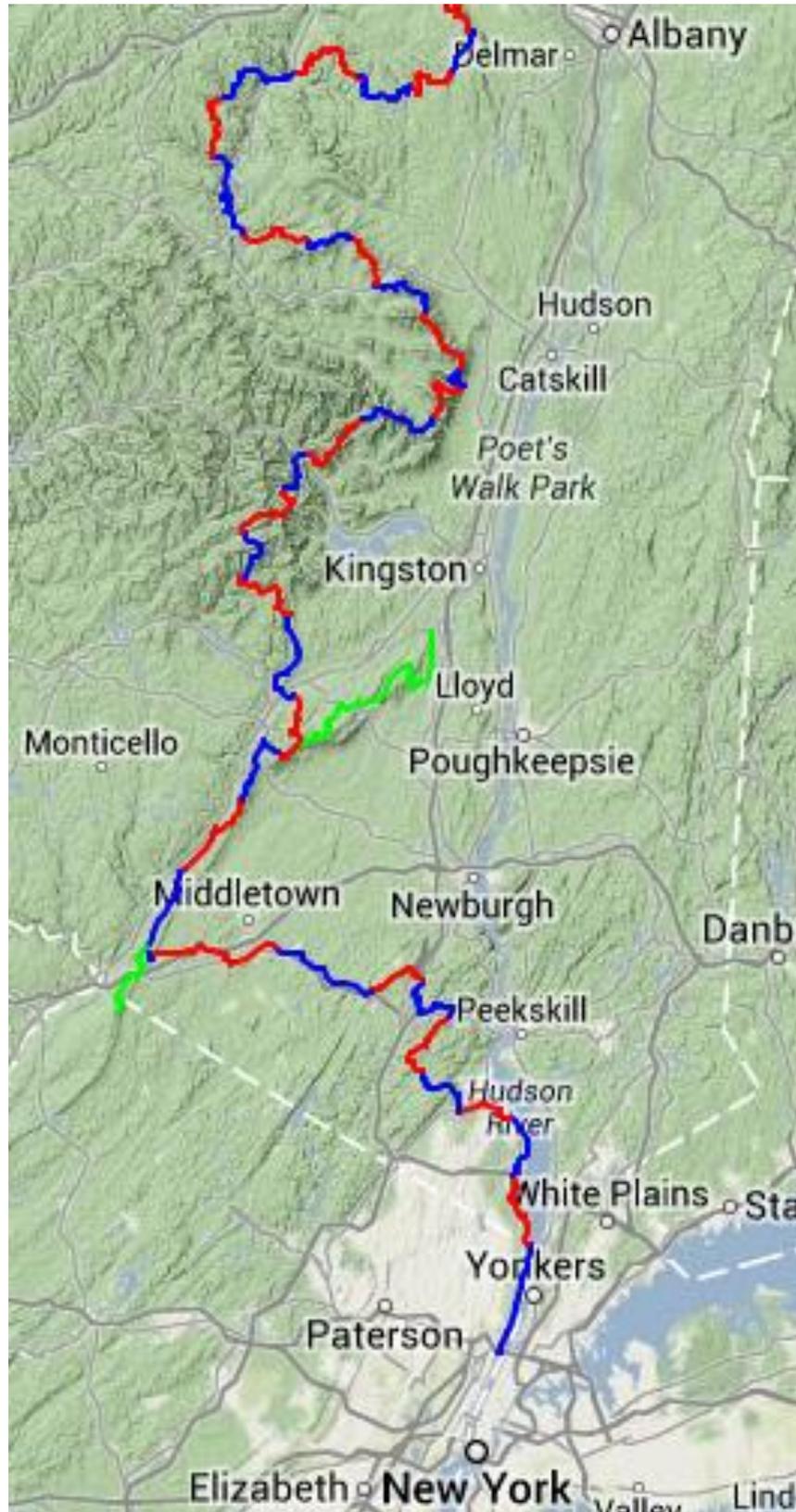
Dedicated to you,
who sees beauty,
preserves nature,
and walks in creation.



*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

—T.S. Eliot

The Long Path



Prologue: The Long (Aqua) Path



When we walk, we make the Earth our own. With this walk, I have made the Hudson River Valley my own. Why in the opening years of this 21st century have I cultivated a yearning to hike this nascent Long Path rather than the fabled Appalachian Trail? Perhaps with only 120 people having hiked the LP to date compared to the 12,000 end-to-enders of the AT, it too is new. Perhaps at 350 miles in length rather than the 2,000-plus mile Appalachian Trail, the Long Path is more doable. Mostly though, the Long Path is the trail of New York and is of the Hudson River Valley – as am I.

When undertaking a major adventure – whether a state’s highest peak or a through-hike – people ask *why*? In the past, I have had the good fortune of having taken day hikes in many of the 179 New York state parks and 39 Scenic Hudson preserves, I have bicycled from Manhattan to Saratoga, and have motorcycled many of the roads that parallel the Long Path. But it is only 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.*

Another motivator: if truth be told, you earn a nice blue Long Path patch and get your name published in *The Long Path Guide* published by the New York – New Jersey Trail Conference, the maintainer of the Long Path. Another reason: given I am a Hudson River lover, that the trail terminals are New York harbor (Fort Lee, NJ) and the port of Albany (Altamont, Albany County), I had idealized fantasies of hiking up along the scenic Hudson River – which was true for all of day one. The terrain, too, is appealing: manageable mountains with ample nature and history while being close enough to populated areas for their amenities – like food! In a sense, too, this is my grand *triathlon tour* of New York State. As an Olympic distance triathlete, I enjoy a challenging swim, bike, and run. I have already swum across the Hudson River at Newburgh-Beacon (and kayaked from Albany to Manhattan); I have bicycled the entire Erie Canalway from Albany to Buffalo; this is my opportunity to hike from New York City to Albany.

An unpaid endorsement: I heartily recommend procuring *The Long Path Guide* (a free electronic version is available at NYNJTC.org) before commencing this trip, also JIMAPCO county maps (Bergen, Rockland, Orange, Ulster, Greene, Schoharie, Albany), as well as all available New York - New Jersey Trail Conference maps – even that won’t be enough.

Being on sabbatical for five months after a ten year tenure at Bank Street College allowed me to allocate the entire month of October for this venture. And as a sabbatical project, it allowed me to forge a program with the fourth graders of the Robert Graves School in the town of Esopus, NY. Since they were studying New York State history, culture, and natural science, it was an excellent opportunity for us to collaborate. With the district librarian and fourth grade teachers, we set up an Internet blog for me to share photographs and observations of my journey, and for the students to ask me questions and offer commentary. Each teacher entered the posts for their students, both to maintain the pupils’ privacy and to keep me from being inundated with dozens of questions each day. In this journal, I begin each chapter with that day’s blog – one apropos photograph, a statistical summary, hot links, and a description of the day for the students – and then follow with my reminiscences of the day.

In nature – in creation – we see God face-to-face. We experience Him with all our senses. We see truth; we see Beauty. In his book, “Words that Shook the World” Richard Greene selected a series of unforgettable speeches and events based upon the criteria he termed “life-affirming peak experiences that touch the soul.” Contained herein are 30 eventful days of life-affirming peak experiences that touched my soul.



Day 1: Fort Lee to Tallman State Park

Distance:	15 miles
Duration:	8 hours
Elevation gain:	1,100 feet
Maps:	NY-NJ Trail Conf. #108, #109
Parks:	Palisades State Park

The rains of today fortunately sandwiched between commencing the Long Path trek in Fort Lee, and my pitching camp at the Kearney House at night. As I walked in the rain, I thought about what is comfortable to me – like the shelter of home and the warmth of a fireplace. Yet, still, on this rainy day trekking through nature, there is no way I would choose a day stuck indoors. This is where I want to be. Midday, when sun poked through the thick clouds, I spontaneously raised my arms to heaven in delight: while I prefer an inclement day in the woods to an indoor cell, and do appreciate the mood of the rain, still I prefer a long trek without such precipitation.

Choosing one image of today was a challenge: there is so much history and nature along the Palisades – Fort Lee, the George Washington Bridge, the Palisades Interstate Park Commission which maintains these parklands, the New York - New Jersey Trail Conference which built the Long Path. So after much deliberation, I decided on this as my motif of the day: the Women's Monument to those people instrumental in preserving the Palisades in its nature state. The monument bears the following inscription:

“This Federation Memorial Park and this Structure are dedicated to the successful efforts of the New Jersey State Federation of Women’s Clubs and of those men and women who aided in the opening years of the Twentieth Century in preserving these palisades cliffs from destruction for the glory of God who created them and the ennobling of the generations which may henceforth enjoy them.”

Saturday, October 3, 2009

Taking that first step felt so good: to be on the trail after months of planning, to presently be actually hiking the famed Long Path, to welcome all the adventures and challenges yet to unfold. And most importantly, taking that first step with Valerie who I knew not only would be reliable every step of the way, but too, good company to share, and someone who is so capable and gives me confidence just by being there. In Ed Viestur’s book, *K2*, he writes how the arduous efforts of months of preparation made him and his partner Scott Fischer all the more committed to summitting K2. I very much felt that same commitment and confidence starting with this very first leg of the Long Path.

When planning an all-day, 24 miles hike of the Suffern-to-Bear Mountain trail with my hiking buddy, David Slevin, we made a pact: that if the hardships of the day had us griping at each other, that we would forget that day ever happened. But if we enjoyed the trek, we would always celebrate our feat. Similarly with Valerie, before we began, our only agreement was to enjoy some untold number of days hiking with each other, and if that happened to conclude in Altamont, that would merely be coincidence. Being now on the trail thru-hike fever was taking hold.

Taking that first step on day one took more time that morning than I anticipated. There is no overnight parking at the start of the Long Path. So between the time to get to the trailhead and to find municipal parking, it was nearly a noontime start, and along with that came the stressful feeling of being “behind schedule” even before I started. Also, the prior three days Valerie had suffered from a stomach virus, so she was concerned both about her energy level and also whether she was truly on the mend or if her illness would relapse with a vengeance.

I always say that photographs are a convenient memento, that artwork conveys mood, but it is only by experiencing a place with our own eyes – in fact with all our senses – that we truly appreciate a place. We are blessed to see in three dimensions, to cast a wide field of vision, to scan that which draws our eye, and at the same time hear, smell, taste, and feel. This first 15 mile segment of the Long Path which is routed atop the sheer Palisades has a remarkable number of lookouts and points of interest beginning with Fort Lee itself – a challenge to the hiker is not to become totally absorbed in this mini-museum. Wandering over to the lookout at Fort Lee which overlooks the George Washington Bridge and into Manhattan before starting the Long Path is irresistible. On the Long Path, the distractions continue: Allison Park, St. Peter’s College, Rockefeller Lookout, Alpine Lookout, the beautiful stone Palisades Interstate Park administrative building with bathrooms, Women’s Federation Monument, Lookout Inn including a restaurant and souvenir shop, the New Jersey – New York state border monument, and Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory. Of particular good fortune was the Palisades Interstate Park Commission giving us permission to pitch our tent on the grounds of the Kearney House to promote the history component of this trek, which not only afforded us a riverside campsite, but also provided nearby access to the bathroom.

Very satisfying about this Long Path segment, is with full view of the east side of the Hudson River, it is fun to gauge your progress by watching Manhattan, the Bronx, Yonkers, and towns in Westchester go by as you rack up the miles. On the first day finishing a complete Trail Conference map and half of another also provides a sense of accomplishment.

Less satisfying is that much of the trail parallels the 55 mph Palisades Parkway. Being a rainy and windy Monday in October, the only people I encountered this day were a group of Boy Scouts from nearby Camp Alpine. “Where are you headed?” one of the leaders asked. “Altamont,” I proudly boasted. And with that one word I had for the first time committed myself to a thru-hike.

One other person I encountered that day. Mid-afternoon, a few yards from me I heard the pop, crack, and explosion of what sounded like a lightning strike followed by the crash of a car. A speeding auto was struck by a falling tree. Curious, I inspected the remaining tree stump to determine the cause – tree rot – which I then related to the uninjured, but distraught driver still stunned by his misfortunate timing.

I rued my near noontime start when walking the last mile from the 9W New Jersey – New York road sign to the Tallman Mountain State Park entrance in the dark through

what is more a stony minefield than a trail. But as perhaps the salvation of every day: a good dinner, and tonight, a particularly quiet and scenic tent site – camping on the grounds of the Kearney House at the Alpine Boat Basin. So on this first day, I remain true to my trail name of “Sweet Pea” of Popeye cartoons. Sweet Pea is the little, oblivious innocent who is forever inadvertently getting into trouble, but somehow everything always works out. Valerie is “Chickadee”: a hardy, northeastern bird for all seasons, forever bustling with energy and enduring all weather and hardships with a song – as she did today.

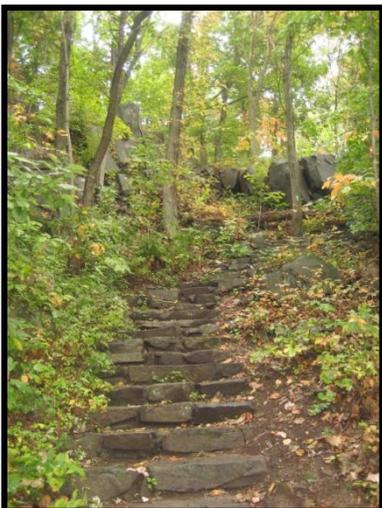
Photos of the Day



Kearny House



Alpine Boat Basin

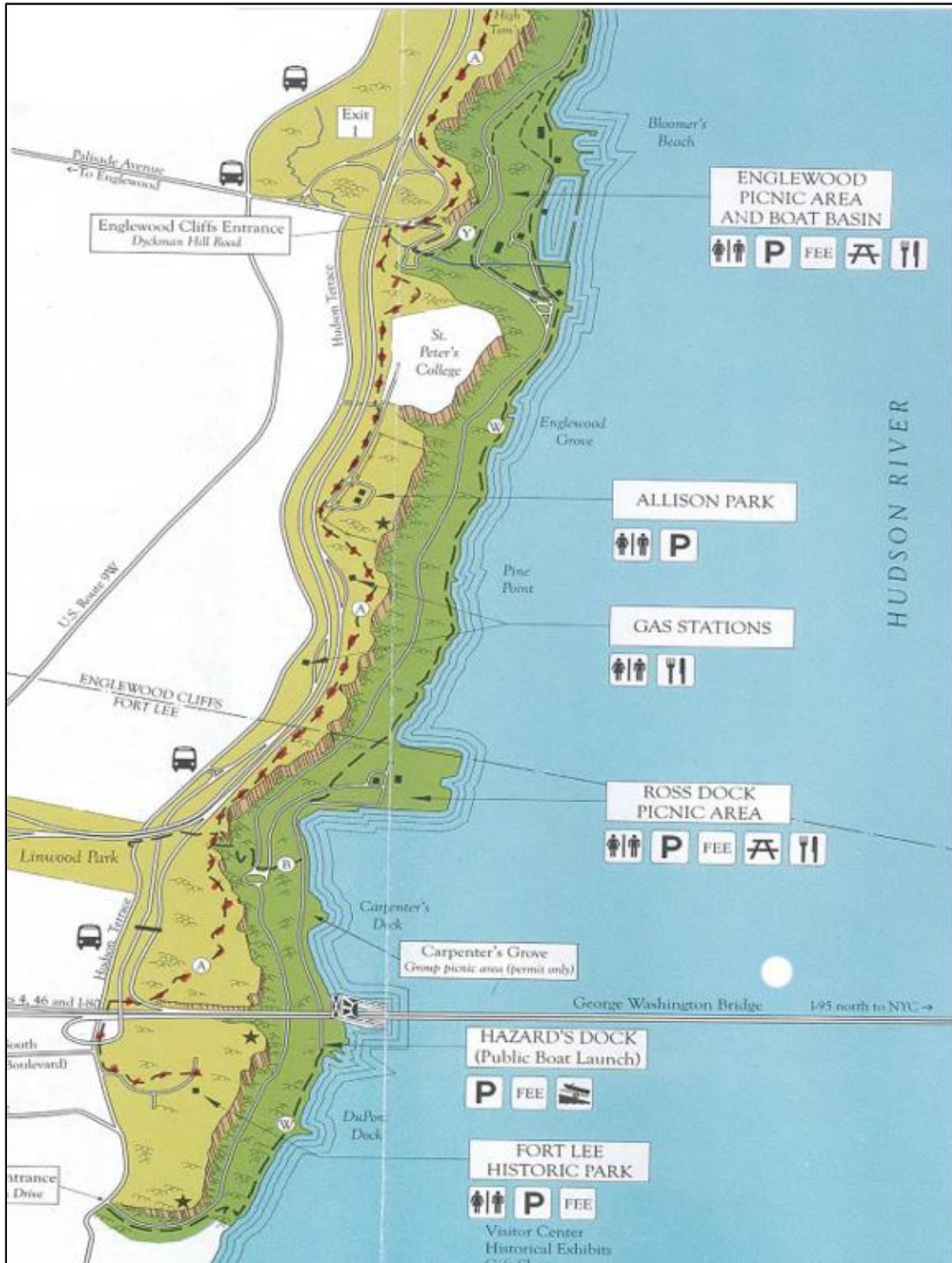


Lasting gratitude to the trail builders

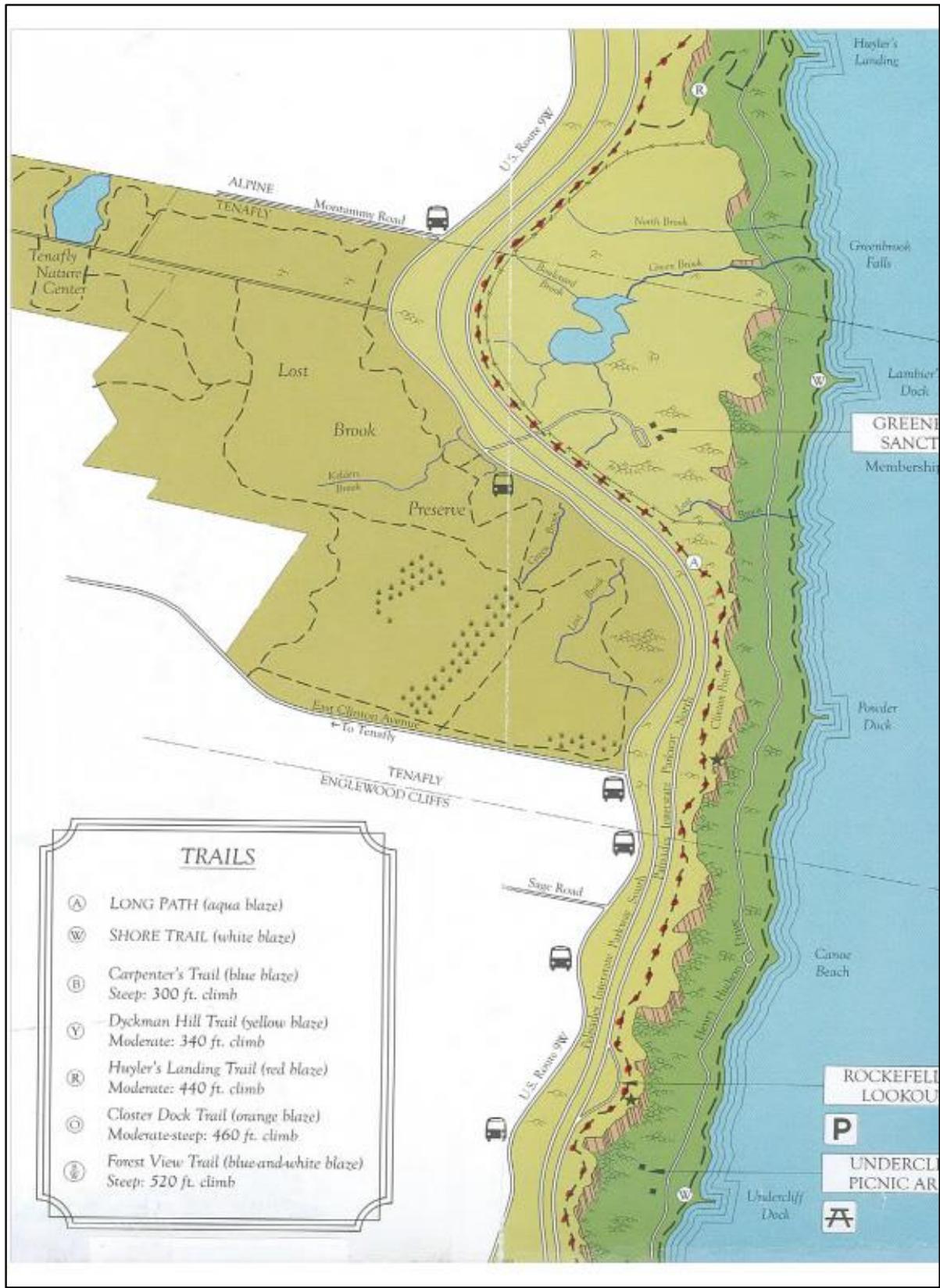


New Jersey – New York border (9W)

Palisades State Park Section One



Palisades State Park Section Two



Palisades State Park Section Three



Palisades State Park Section Four







Day 2: Tallman State Park to Hook Mountain

Distance: 16 miles

Duration: 9 hours

Elevation gain: 2,600 feet

Maps: NY-NJ Trail Conf. #109, #110

Parks: Tallman Mountain State Park
Clausland Mountain County Park
Tackamack Park
Blauvelt State Park
Hook Mountain State Park

This is a view of Hook Mountain from Tallman State Park, which overlooks the village of Piermont. I always say that the adventure begins when plans go awry. Planning to conclude my day at the start of Hook Mountain, I was unable to find the orange exit trail in the fading light and found myself atop Hook Mountain. I have never hiked at night before. But there was a flashlight in my emergency kit, warm clothes in my pack, and ample food and drink. So after donning my warm gear, I sat down, ate my sandwich, and enjoyed the shimmering reflection of the Tappan Zee Bridge lights while a full moon crested the horizon bringing its illumination. The sandwich tasted particularly good – and lifted my spirits: I always say that "a full tummy is a happy disposition." I then hiked onward into the night across Hook Mountain having my most enjoyable walk of the trek so far.

Questions for Skip... Plants and Animals

Dear Skip, We would like to know some of the animals that you have seen so far. Have you seen any unusual plants yet?

Posted by Mrs. Osborne

Hello Skip, We were wondering if you have seen any cool wildlife on your journey yet?

Posted by Mrs. Delehant

Response from Skip

Each day is filled with cool wildlife: deer that prance alongside me, birds that sing to me and eagles that soar my spirit as they cruise the updrafts of the Palisades. Flowers brighten my day; varieties of trees abound; and unusual, intricate mushrooms catch my eye.

Posting for Skip... Thank you for Visiting our School

Dear Skip, thank you for visiting our school and telling us about your hike up Mount Marcy, what the Long Path is like, and the preparations and supplies needed for your long trek. Here are the answers to your questions. Hope we are right!

1. How much does a gallon of water weigh?

A gallon of water weighs about 8 pounds.

2. What percentage of the human body is water?

The human body is about 60% water.

3. Why do I not drink soda on a hike?

Soda is just colored water with a lot of sugar. It has no nutritional value.

4. The Long Path is 360 miles long and I expect the hike to be 30 days.

On average, how many miles will I walk each day?

The average number is 12 miles.

5. Why is it cooler at the top of a mountain?

It is cooler at the top of a mountain because there is less air the higher you go.

Posted by Mrs. Osborne

Sunday, October 4, 2009

I thank Valerie for keeping me on the trail as I almost pulled a “Sweet Pea.” From previously bike riding through Tallman Mountain State Park, I knew the wide, packed-dirt trail led directly to Piermont, whereas I did not realize the Long Path veers at a right angle into the woods. Chickadee’s watchful eye kept us on route. This day began promising enough: sunshine, a scenic and mild walk through Tallman Park. From atop the lookout at the park’s northern most overlook – where besides enjoying the view we appreciated the restrooms – we gazed at our final destination for this day: Hook Mountain, just a few miles in the distance – easily a pleasant afternoon stroll. Pleasant especially because the trail would take us into Piermont for a gourmet deli lunch. Alas, from there, our route and our luck changed. *The Long Path Guide* calls the Piermont-to-Nyack rail trail – which is wide, flat, direct, and scenic with views of the Hudson River the entire way – “an official side-trail to the Long Path and an interesting alternative path.” And had the rail trail been blazed with the aqua markers, I would have taken it. It was not. The blazed route disheartenly went up a paved road, actually turned south, and then entered the featureless parks of Clausland, Tackamack, and Blauvelt which actually turn west away from the Hudson River before returning east to Nyack. The result is lots of elevation and miles, and nothing but drudgery to show for it. In Nyack, the trail skirted condominiums, though it faithfully stayed off-road wherever possible. After hours of griping to myself (and Chickadee) how I would reroute the Long Path along the scenic and easy rail trail and Nyack Beach State Park, I realized that the Long Path is not a Hudson River express-path from New York to Albany, but it provides the most rustic and mountainous experience available between those two regions – even through the populous suburbs of Nyack.

In Nyack, walking 9W and about to conclude our day in the fading light, we made a fateful decision. Rather than staying on the highway for a half-mile to the endpoint, we opted for a mile-long woods walk. In the pending darkness, we missed the trail turn-off and ascended Hook Mountain – which Chickadee calls “Tahtonka” because the mountain profile resembles a buffalo.

Hiking in the dark was not the plan; I never have before. But as we crested the peak of Hook Mountain, we were greeted by a full moon rising. As we each got out our map to decide our next move, the lights of the Tappan Zee Bridge twinkled for us nearby. Getting our bearings was easy: Rockland Lake prominently below us to the north and the double humped Hook Mountain trail we had hiked before and knew it has an easy woods road to lead us out the final mile; the only concern was the stony descent at the very end. So we donned our warm clothes, sat down to relish our gourmet deli sandwiches for dinner, and easily walked out the remaining miles with our flashlights blazing – a real confidence builder. It was our longest day, but we knew, too, we would have a cushy sleep on the grounds of Saint John the Baptist church whose pastor so generously allowed us to pitch our tent next to the gazebo on the shore of the Hudson River.

Photos of the Day



Tappan Zee Bridge from St. John's



"Campsite" at St. John's Church

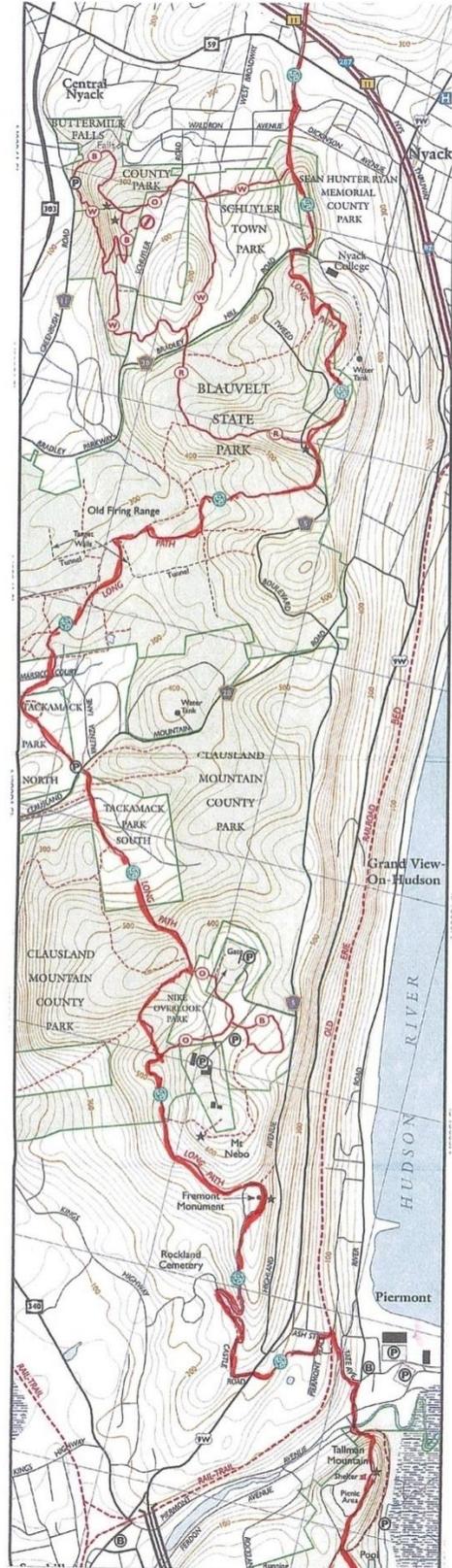
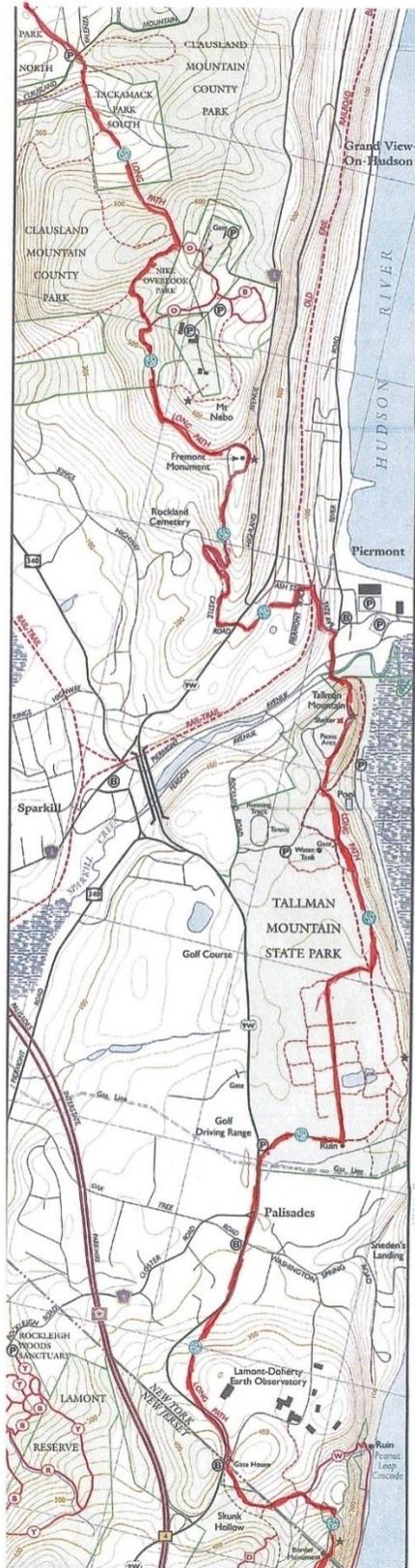


View of Piermont Pier from Tallman Mountain State Park

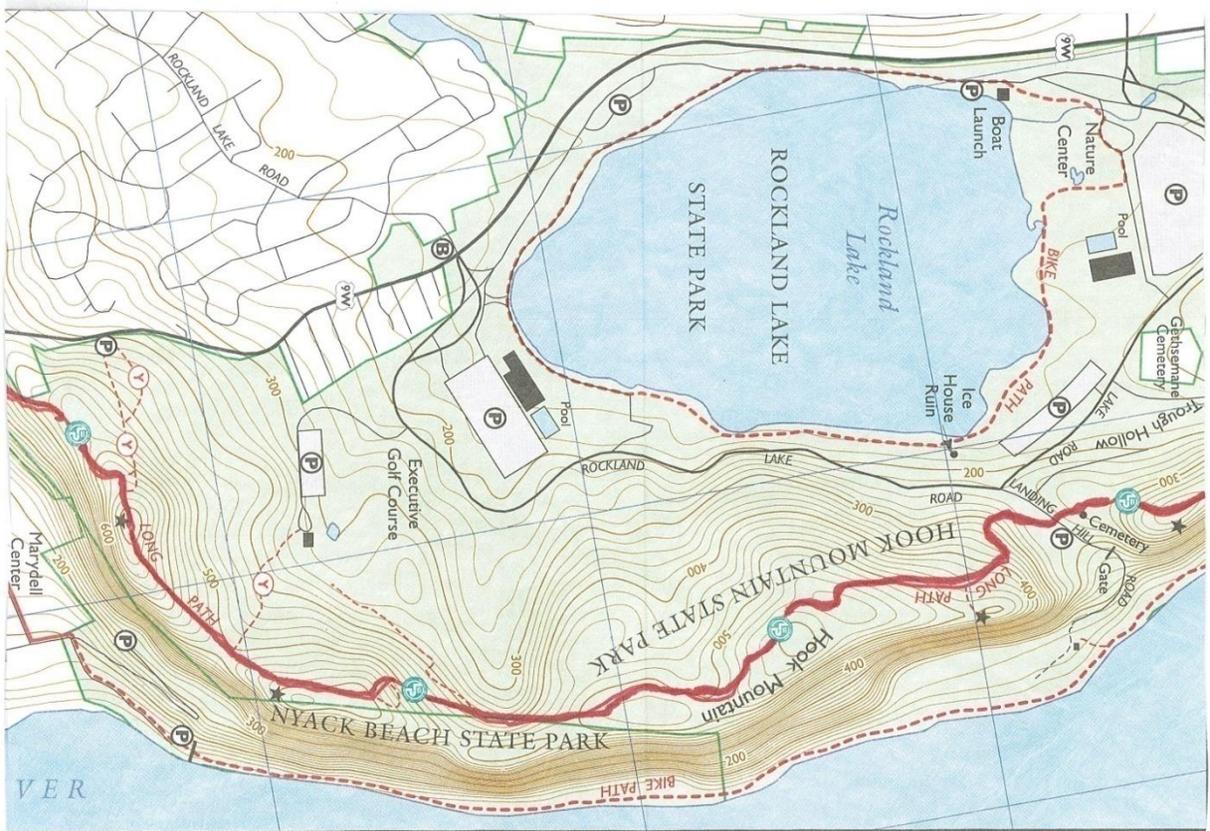


Tappan Zee Bridge from Hook Mountain

Tallman State Park to Hook Mountain State Park



Hook Mountain State Park







Day 3: Hook Mountain to Mount Ivy

Distance:	11 miles
Duration:	8 hours
Elevation gain:	2,300 feet
Maps:	NY-NJ Trail Conf.
Parks:	#111,#112 Hook Mount State Park Rockland Lake State Park High Tor State Park South Mountain County Park Gurney County Park

As I awoke at sunrise, from inside my tent, I spied 5 geese swimming down the Hudson River. Have you ever seen the Hudson look so placid, so golden? I have the good fortune of staying at St. John the Baptist Church in Piermont where I attended Mass at 7:45. My mom would say that you are granted a wish every time you enter a new church for the first time; I wished that my entire Long Path trek would be as beautiful as this morning.

This day of my journey has been my favorite so far. I suppose because this segment has so many views of the Hudson Valley. And too, I think, because as I look across the river, I see my hometown – Mount Pleasant.

Thank you for answering those five questions. Actually, I did not know the percentage of the human body that is water. And though I know the answer to #5 – why it is cooler on top of a mountain – I do not understand why thinner air makes a difference. (Perhaps a science teacher can explain that to me the next time I am at Robert Graves School.)

Questions for Skip... Plants and Animals

What a beautiful picture! Your hike sounds exciting so far.
Have you made any new friends along the way?
We were wondering if you have seen any snakes?
Stay safe!!!

Posted by Mrs. Delehant

Response from Skip

New friends – kind of. As I stay at various places I meet people who are kind to me. Snakes – none yet. I wonder if it is getting too cold for them and they have started their hibernation.

Monday, October 5, 2009

Though the graciousness of the pastor of St. John the Baptist, my first glimpse of the day began with a golden Hudson River sunrise, and the luxury of washing up in the social hall. Breakfast was a warm feast with an omelet and quiche from nearby Piermont. Each day I begin with the psalm “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Truly, this was already a day of delight. The morning continued with Mass in the church, and then writing the blog to the students at the Grave’s School. All necessary, I believed, but once again it was a late start on the trail.

Starting at Landing Road, the initial ascent warms the body, and immediately presents a beautiful view of the Hudson atop the first hill. Like the first day along the Palisades, the trek across Hook Mountain State Park bestows Hudson River views its entire length, and clear evidence of progress measured against the Westchester County towns on the eastern shore. Gazing at the familiar shoreline sites of my hometown in Westchester, I felt a special affinity to this segment of the journey. And too, the satisfaction of finally hiking these miles-long, Palisades ridge which I have looked at longingly from the eastern shore countless times. Hook Mountain – Tatanka – when viewed from Croton in Westchester, very much looks like a buffalo resting at the water’s edge of Mahicantuck – *the river that flows two ways*.

Between the first segment of today’s hike – Hook Mountain State Park – and the second segment of today’s hike – High Tor State Park – is an active rock quarry which dates back to the 1920’s. It is interesting how attitudes overshadow our perceptions. When I first spied this long, exposed rock face gouged into half the mountain, I thought it was a natural formation, and was impressed by the textured rock rising as a palisade – oddly on the western flank of Rockland Lake State Park. When I realized it was a quarry which over the years has removed half a mountain, my attitude soured. Then, I discovered where the conveyor belts brought this quarried rock: to the docks along the Hudson River. My father, a tugboat engineer, earned his livelihood on the Red Star Towing Company riverboat *Rockland County* transporting stone to the grand metropolis New York City. It is here, in a very real way, I faced the tension of land preservation versus economic development. In the Appalachian Mountain Club, for which I have been the Conservation chairman for several years, we talk about “wise use” of our resources. Sometimes that means wilderness – a place untouched by anything other than footprints; sometimes that means building cabins in the backcountry to make it more accessible; sometimes that means partnering with commerce.

It is a rocky ascent to High Tor, the highest peak on the Palisades, which offers a 360 degree outlook and vast views up and down the Hudson River Valley. Despite a strong, chilling wind, it was an irresistible place for lunch. Making good time on a path that is mostly a woods road, Little Tor was a worthwhile side trail and outlook – though things changed drastically entering the final two miles of today’s trek

South Mountain County Park. Rather than use the wide, flat, well-groomed woods road, the Long Path parallels it just a few feet away across a hilly, rocky, ill-maintained path. Just as the sun was setting, and we needed to walk our fastest, the terrain became the most difficult, and Valerie was especially fatigued. Upon entering South Mountain County Park and sizing up the situation, I offered to carry Valerie’s pack; she declined. A half-mile into South Mountain County Park, she was barely putting one foot in front of the other, so I insisted strongly that I take her pack; she countered that she would be uncomfortable without the contents of her pack. I found that unfathomable since from this point there was only one marked trail leading out; and I promised to stay with her. But when she refused, without another word, I set out at my

own pace thinking that if she were not going to help us getting out together, that she could hike out at her own pace. I hike well in residual light and was confident I could be out of the woods before nightfall; she could use her flashlight for whatever number of hours it would take her.

In the next half-hour I had hiked over a mile, with great guilt. Essentially, I had abandoned my partner, but righteously felt that if she was not going to help us as a team by letting me carry her pack, then I was not going to stay on the mountain any longer than necessary. Having hiked many high peaks together, we had never left the other, and could always rely upon each other. There was enough ambient light for me to see, but I knew Valerie would be using her flashlight at this point. Still, I forged ahead, partly with indignation that she would not adhere to my better judgment that would have spared us this predicament, and partly because of the inefficiency of backtracking and having to re-walk those same miles. As I strutted on, I heard a yell in the dark emptiness of the woods, "Skip!" There was no other call, but none was needed. I dropped my pack and ran back along the trail, continually surprised that I had not seen her, as I trotted more than a quarter mile. As I ran, I regretted leaving my cell phone in my backpack – how far would I retrace? All the way to the park entrance? Finally I found Valerie sitting on the path. With exasperation she lamented, "I could not make out the blazes with the flashlight and wandered off the trail several times." That shocked me. I could have backtracked all the way to the trailhead and still not have found her – then what? I turned on my flashlight and in an unequivocal voice uttered, "Give me your backpack." I was stunned when she said, "No, I'll carry it." Sternly I stated the ultimatum, "Give me your backpack or I'm leaving." With tears in her eyes she cried, "You left me to punish me?" "No," I shot back, "I'm just not walking out here at night, but if you want to by yourself, you can." Valerie gave me her backpack, and stepped ahead of me so that I could illuminate the trail in front of her with my flashlight. Without a word we started down the trail, though I felt my trail name was suddenly truncated to "Pea."

As we walked, I shined my flashlight ahead of her steps so that she would have the double illumination of both our flashlights. "It's a good thing you called out to me." I commented.

I didn't call out to you." She responded.

"I distinctly heard someone yell 'Skip!'" I countered.

"I didn't yell anything." she reiterated.

"Well, that's why I came back." I explained.

The sailor and adventurer, Joshua Slocum, in his attempt to circumnavigate the world solo, lay stricken with food poisoning amidst a furious storm. Unable to man the helm, his forty-foot sailboat *Spray* was in danger of sinking. In his hours of desperation – lying dazed and nearly unconscious – an apparition took the wheel, and assured him saying, "I have come to aid you. Lie quiet... I will guide your ship tonight." When Slocum recovered the next morning, his vessel was on course and had covered 90 miles during the stormy night. In John Geiger's book, *The Third Man Factor*, he recounts the records of many famous explorers who were aided in their time of distress by a "presence". The author noted how many of these people had spiritual beliefs. Being a spiritual person myself, reading his book, I felt "left out" that I had never experienced an apparition. But that night, that voice crying out that audible "Skip", saved Valerie from a night in the woods, saved our Long Path journey, and probably saved our friendship.

When we reached my backpack, I apologized, which Valerie accepted in an unemotional but sincere tone. That final descent, which is Gurney County Park, is

marked on the Trail Conference map as a scenic outlook. The silhouette of the distant western mountains seemed to attest to that, but all we saw that night were the illuminated blazes leading us down the trail. This was our third consecutive night exiting after dark – none of which we planned. But this did vouch for how well marked the Long Path is.

Over dinner we made a pact with each other: that when either of us feels strongly about something, that we use the phrase “This is important,” and that we go with the “this is important” alternative unless the other person strenuously feels otherwise.

We concluded the day with mixed feelings: still reeling from how today’s segment ended, but feeling very good about our Long Path trek overall, particularly since we had accomplished in the past three days what *The Long Path Guide* prescribes as 4 hiking segment days.

Photos of the Day



Church of St. John the Baptist



Croton Point, Westchester County, NY

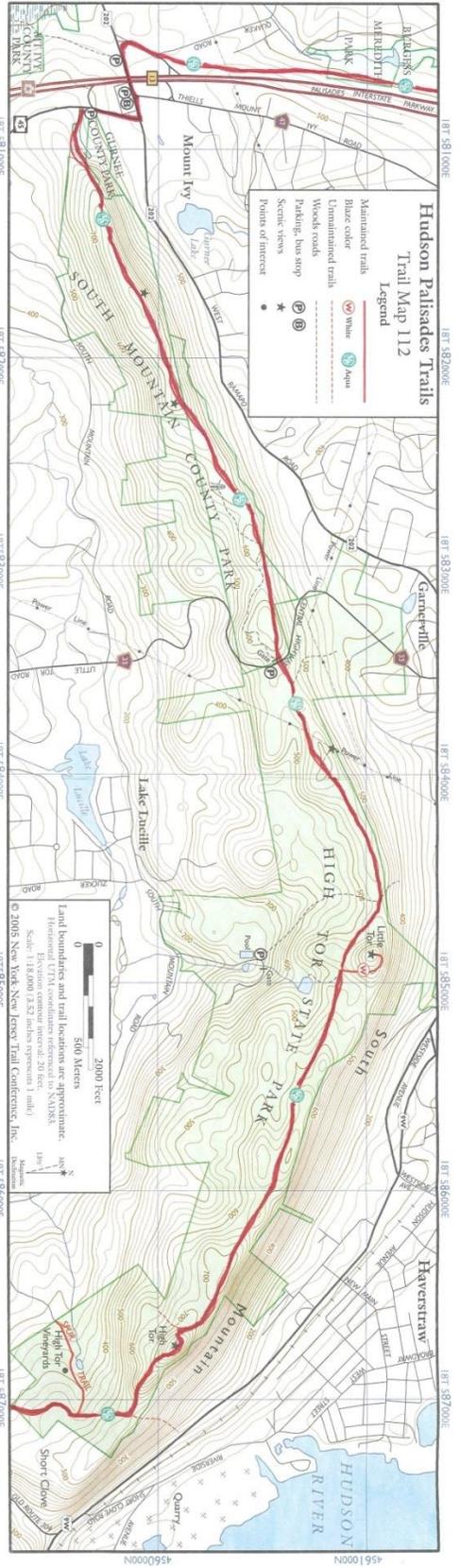


Tilcon stone quarry in Haverstraw, NY



High Tor peak above Haverstraw, NY

Hook Mountain State Park to Mount Ivy







Day 4: Mount Ivy to Lake Shannatati

Distance:	9 miles
Duration:	6 hours
Elevation gain:	1,600 feet
Maps:	NY-NJ Trail Conference #3
Parks:	Cheesecote Town Park Harriman State Park

Today has been my easiest hike day. I wish I could have hiked further, but the next segment veers into the woods for many miles – so it was either finish this day early or do another night hike!

I had the good fortune of staying overnight at Tiorati Workshop which is a nature science center run by the Bank Street School where I work. This picture shows the interior which has several workbench areas and even a cedar tree in the middle of the floor!

An autumnal ritual, which I have empirically proven to be true, is that if you can catch a falling leaf with one hand – not merely trap it next to your body – you are granted one wish. Today I caught this year's leaf. Realizing I had wasted yesterday's church wish – everyday is truly beautiful whether we see it as such or not – today I wished that my feet would not get sore the entire journey.

Comments to Skip... Mushrooms

We looked into the varieties of mushrooms...wow there are pages and pages of them! We think that must be a wood mushroom or a fungus in the photo you sent.

Posted by Mrs. Delehant

Hi Mrs. Delehant's class,
One of the things we can do in the lab on Tuesday is look at a mushroom site I found and see - I also have *some* names of mushroom experts at Cornell. We can send them Skip's photo....via the Internet. Good work!!!

Posted by Mrs. Adamis

Tuesday, October 6, 2009

Today's hike crescendoed to thrilling adventure with wild creatures in the remoteness of the woods. It began mundanely enough: the first mile – much like the first day – parallels the Palisades Parkway, except this stretch is a hazardous minefield of stones and muck. Though as the trail veers westward from the parkway, the departing sight is the picturesquely tranquil Minisceongo Creek.

Cheesecote Pond was a delightful site for lunch. There, an earthen brown oak leaf circled down to where I sat and I caught it with one hand in mid-flight. There is nothing in particular I had done fitness-wise to prepare for this trek. But being in good shape generally, I knew my weak link was the soles of my feet. So as my annual leaf catching tradition, I made a wish: that my feet would not get sore or blistered with the miles of walking day after day. At the Robert Grave's School when I expressed to the librarian who is an avid Catskill Mountains hiker that I estimated the likelihood of my completing the Long Path was only 80%, she expressed surprise that it was not 100%. When she asked me why, I could not think of any reason other than to say "a lot of things could happen." I was now hoping sore feet would not be one of them. I felt if my feet held up for one week, then they would for the entire journey.

Next down the path is the Letchworth Village Cemetery – the oddest graveyard I have even seen. It seems newly abandoned with no gravestones of recent date, yet few stones of antique charm. It is mostly a collection of numbered gravesites, whose owners shall repose when literally their "number is up."

Subsequently on the path, the log-walled Big Hill Shelter was a familiar landmark for me. Here the Long Path intersects with the 24 mile Suffern-to-Bear-Mountain Trail which I had hiked on a pleasant April day the previous year. It was comforting to be in familiar territory.

When hiking with Valerie, often I'll hike ahead, and when I stop for a water break, within two minutes she comes upon me. Here at Big Hill Shelter, I had finished the hill up to it ahead of her, out of sight, though after I stopped at the shelter for a snack, within two minutes she strode into the campsite. While I lingered, she continue on the trail, this time a few minutes ahead of me. At times, I caught glimpses of her a hundred yards ahead, but for most of that next half-hour I enjoyed a sense of solitude in the woods.

That calm was interrupted with Valerie racing back down the trail towards me exclaiming, "Bears! Bears!" In an excited tempo she related how she had come upon a mother bear and two adolescent cubs directly on the trail a mere 20 yards in front of her. The mother bear caught sight of Valerie just moments after Valerie spotted the bears; both ran off in opposite directions! But Valerie noticed that the adolescent cubs were a bit more quizzical: the cubs "hid" their large bodies behind a tree, but poked their heads out curious to see what was this strange, two-legged animal that had surprised them in the woods. This was Valerie's first bear sighting ever, and she had seen quite enough. Despite the thick underbrush she exclaimed, "We have to find another trail to get around them." She had barely uttered those words when I had my camera out and was bounding up the trail towards her bear-sighting: not only was the alternate trail miles out of our way, but I also had not seen bears in the wild before and I was not going to miss my chance! But miss my chance I did. They were nowhere to be seen. In fact, there was no evidence of them whatsoever. So I began to tease her... Valerie and I are hike leaders for the Appalachian Mountain Club. Another hike leader we are friends with, I'll call him Art Almeida, every few months posts a claim on the club's website that he has spotted bears in Harriman State Park. Now "Art" is always alone or with members of his cult when he "sees" his bears, has never taken a photograph of any of them, and cannot even get his cult members to attest to these bears' existence. So I asked Valerie, "Were these black bears or Almeida bears?" Valerie gave me the eye. But I persisted, "One was a momma bear, right?" "Yes!" she enthusiastically confirmed. "And one was a baby bear... might the third have been the poppa bear?" Her glaring eyes shot back a silent, icy stare.

As part of this day's hike, I had much wanted to stop at St. John's-In-the-Wilderness Church which was only a few hundred yards off the trail. But since we were still in bear territory, we made a bee-line to the terminus – Lake Skannatati – still two miles away. Shadows were long, and we were looking to avoid another segment of night hiking.

Finishing just at sunset, it was particularly stunning to see the sun in its final moments over Lake Skannatati, its glow slowly drifting down though the leafless deciduous trees on the western shore, lighting the silvery clouds above which casted a magical reflection on the serene waters below.

That night, for the first time in our journey, we slept with a roof over our heads at Bank Street College's Tiorati Workshop – a camp auditorium building converted to a nature science learning center. As I wrote my blog to Robert Graves students, Valerie posted a message of her bear encounter to the AMC website beginning her posting with "As part of my through-hike of the Long Path..." She was now committed in writing.

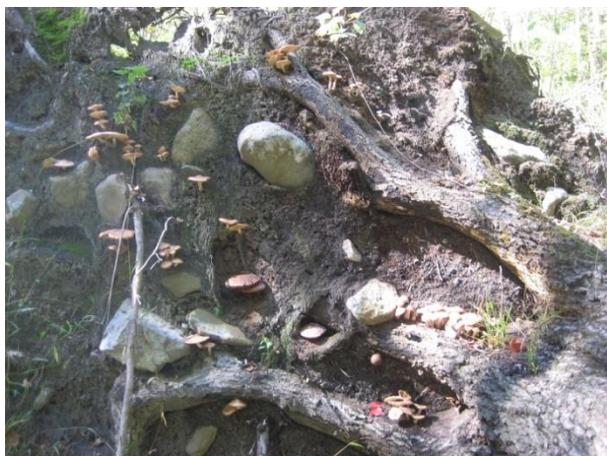
Photos of the Day



Minisceongo Creek



Lake Skannatati

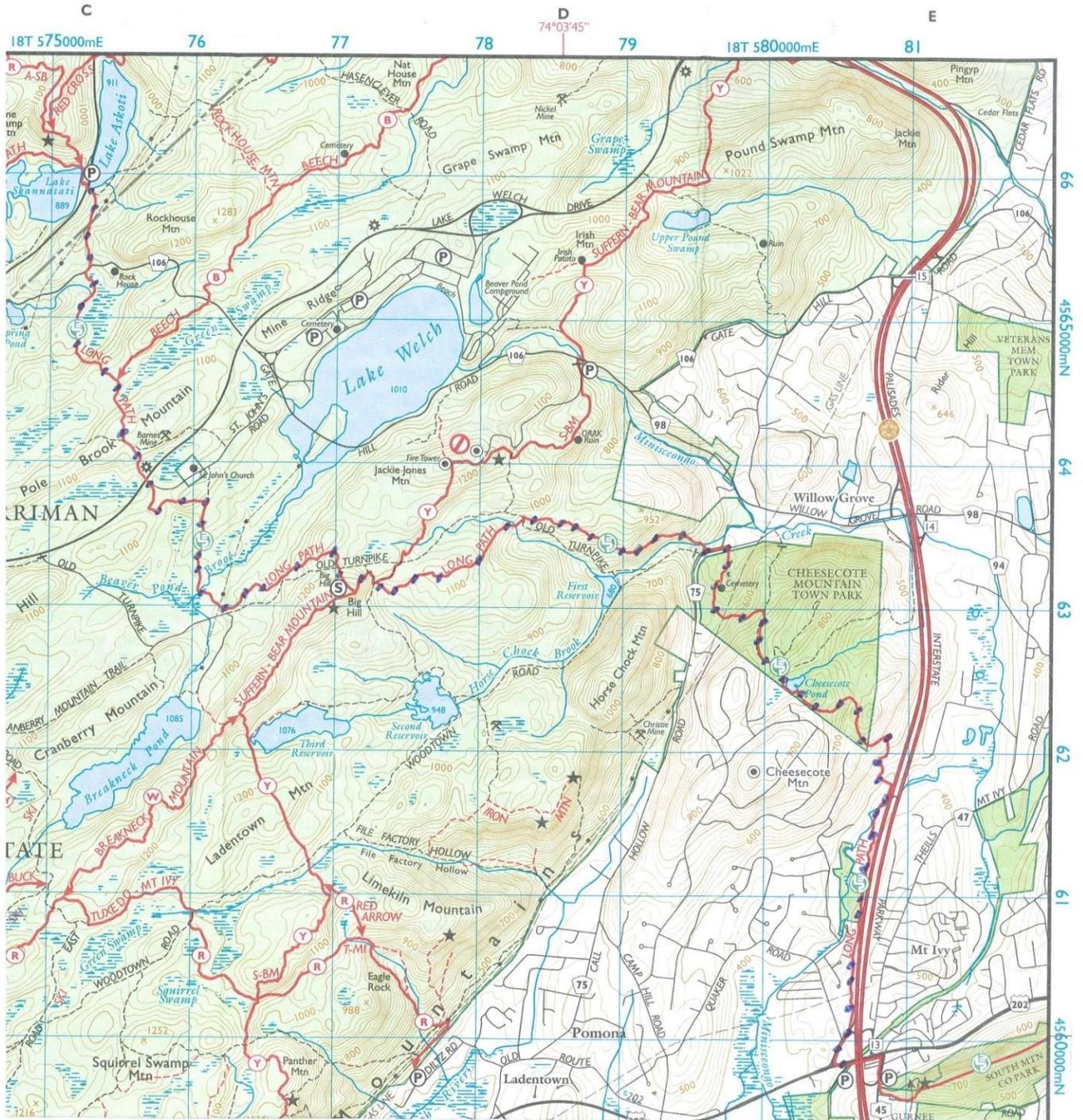


The mushroom tree



Golden mushrooms

Mount Ivy To Lake Skannatati





Day 5: Lake Shannatati to Long Mountain Parkway (Route 6)

- Harriman State Park

Distance:	11 miles
Duration:	7 hours
Elevation gain:	2,500 feet
Maps:	NY-NJ Trail Conf. #119
Parks:	Harriman State Park

At this junction, the Appalachian Trail which goes from Georgia to Maine intersects with the Long Path which goes from New York City to Albany (Altamont). Reading the sign, you can see I have gone over 50 miles and have 290 left to go!

Questions for Skip... Wind Storm

We had a terrible wind storm. Did you?

If you did, how did it affect your hike?

Have you seen any snakes?

We were wondering if you are enjoying your hike so far?

Posted by Mrs. Osborne

Response from Skip

The wind here was ferocious, too! A wise saying I heard a number of years ago: "There is no bad weather, only bad clothing." So I put on my windbreaker, and a bandana around my neck – a part of our body so important to keep warm, but so often we overlook.

No snakes so far... I wonder if they are hibernating already.

I am enjoying the trip immensely: eating well, sleeping well, fair weather, healthy, free... the world before me...

Wednesday, October 7, 2009

I always say that temperature doesn't matter, just wind speed does. Nothing is more pleasant than a calm, sunny, wintry day. Nothing is more arduous than a stormy, cloudy, windy day. Today began pleasant enough, but throughout the day, it grew into a ferocious wind storm. I not only donned my windbreaker, but also tried to seal every exposure of skin with my gloves, gaiters and bandana.

Harriman State Park has many scenic trails; this is not one of them. This was simply a day of trudging through the woods. Though perhaps that was best for today, since a day of walking through the featureless hollows kept us out of the howling winds of the scenic peaks.

Midmorning presented the highlight of the day: the Long Path – Appalachian Trail junction signpost. We had traveled already 52 miles from the start of this trek at the

George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee, N.J. And Altamont, in Albany County, lay 292 miles to the north. While a sizeable distance lay ahead, it was a paltry measure compared to 793 miles to Mount Katahdin – the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. And the southern terminus, Springer Mountain in Georgia, was to me unfathomable – 1,365 miles! While the Long Path is an epic journey, it pales next to the Appalachian Trail.



Stockbridge Shelter presented the low point of the day, and the low point of the entire trek. As Valerie stopped at the midway point for lunch, I continued on to Stockbridge Shelter – less than two miles, and just over an hour's walk up the trail. By then, gale force winds were fingering their way even into the deep hollows so that the ascent up Stockbridge Mountain became more trying with the increasing exposure.

As I finished my lunch in the Stockbridge Shelter, a sullen Valerie trudged up the trail. "I'm done," she simply said. "I'm done hiking the Long Path." Then she looked back down the trail from whence we had come and added, "Harriman has so many scenic trails, why the Long Path comes through this desolate part is stupid. I've been walking for miles, for hours, and there is nothing here."

"It is stupid." I agreed.

Valerie paused briefly and continued, "My feet hurt with these boots; I'm cold; I'm tired. I'm not in shape to do the Long Path. I'm going home."

After a moment of silence and reflection, I simply said, "You are in shape; we can get different boots; let's have lunch, then we can talk about it."

Valerie sat quietly, despondently during lunch.

I don't exactly remember what we talked about after lunch – mostly about our joys and achievements of the past four days. But I do remember what we did: we walked the rest of the way together. I'm not sure how I earned it, but as we exited the woods from that day's hike, Valerie said to me, "Thanks, Sweet Pea." And that evening, after a good meal, and a good sleep, she decided to give it one more day.

Photos of the Day



Tiorati Workshop



Cohasset shelter



Long Path – Appalachian Trail junction signpost



Stockbridge shelter

Mount Ivy To Long Mountain Parkway (Route 6)

