



Gothics, Armstrong Mountain, Upper Wolf Jaw Mountain & Lower Wolf Jaw Mountain

(The Debbie Hike)

Gothics: 8th Peak Hiked, Order #10, Elevation 4736'

Armstrong: 9th Peak Hiked, Order #22, Elevation 4400'

Upper Wolf Jaw: 10th Peak Hiked, Order #29, Elevation 4185'

Lower Wolf Jaw: 11th Peak Hiked, Order #30, Elevation 4175'

Duration: 14.5 Hours

Distance: 19+ Miles

July 26, 2003

I originally wanted to start with a relatively short hike on a different range, but decided to take advantage of the weather and here's how the story goes!

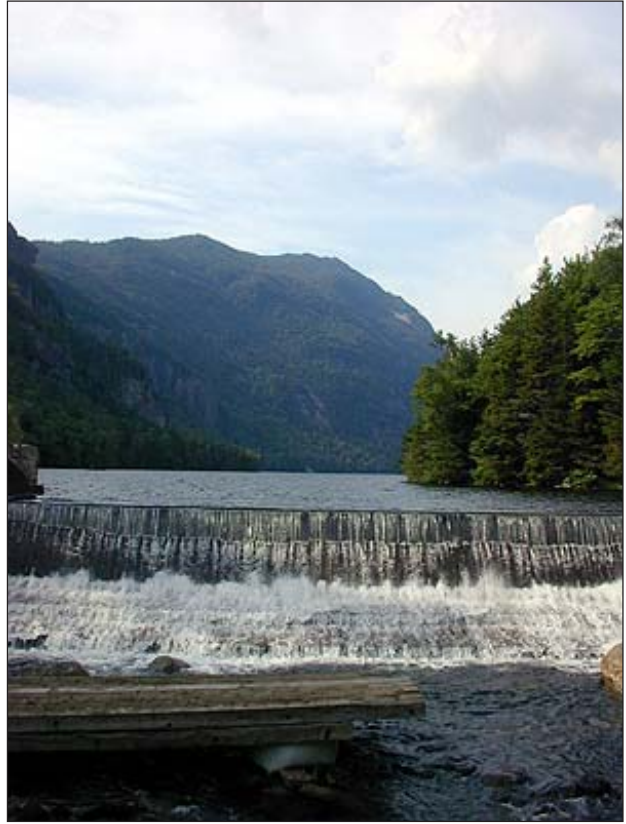
7:45 I met my hiking partner, Deb Taylor-James, in Keene at the Elm Tree Inn and we parked her car near Rooster Comb to save space if the smaller lots near the Ausable Club were filled. They were not and I decided to park halfway up the dirt road leading in a loop through the golf course. I even enjoyed this part of the walk since I'd never visited the area before outside of a car. Upon reaching the top of the hill, I noticed the serene setting, elegance of the main building and the beautiful view of Giant Mountain from the golf course. Sawteeth loomed opposite of Giant, behind us.

We walked down the Lake Road to the trailhead sign-in book and began the three-mile journey leading to the trails. On this day, a sign saying that the trail was slightly rerouted greeted us. I wondered what this meant during the ensuing hour. My original intent was to hike Gothics, Armstrong and Upper Wolf Jaw.



THE LOWER GREAT RANGE FROM NOONMARK. IN ORDER FROM LEFT TO RIGHT...GOTHICS, ARMSTRONG, UPPER WOLF JAW AND LOWER WOLF JAW.

The Lake Road was very beautiful and a nice way to warm up for the steeper climb. I felt like I was stepping back in time as I passed through the rustic wooden gates of the club. My GPS, however, didn't like the area and refused contact with the satellites for three miles. As I approached the trailhead, I looked for the trails on the GPS, which were



THE SIGN TO OUR DESTINATION WAS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWED BY A WALK ACROSS THE AUSABLE RIVER WITH THE ABOVE VIEW TO THE SOUTH.

normally on the topographic display, and couldn't find them. Later, I realized this was because I hadn't zoomed close enough.

My first pictures of the day were taken at the runoff area from the Lower Ausable Lake. We crossed the wooden bridge and quickly traversed via the trail to Gothics and Sawteeth. The trail almost immediately broke right and headed upward after the side trail to Rainbow Falls. The top of the falls marked our first brief break. There was a thin sheet of water running off the top, which gently fell into the chasm below.

From Rainbow Falls, it was all uphill, but at a comfortable grade...for a while. I pondered my past hikes and thought that this is not as rough as many of the previous trails. About 2/3 of the way to the upper Sawteeth junction, we stopped and I ate a sandwich. A father and son briefly stopped with us and asked where we were in relation to the summit of Gothics. I showed them on the GPS. We met them again at the junction to Gothics and continued hiking together up the steep grades and occasional rock faces that led to the summit of Pyramid.



THE TOP OF RAINBOW FALLS.



Pyramid marked the first major vantage point and the first view from over 4000 feet. The views from Pyramid were some of the most magnificent I had ever seen. The scene created by Gothics, Saddleback and Haystack was awe-inspiring. Ancient weather- blasted slides riddled the area and exposed the mountains, which created an atmosphere that could humble even the mightiest of men. If Pyramid were separated vertically from Gothics by 300 or more, it



THE SHARP PEAK OF PYRAMID FROM GOTHICS.

would actually be its own peak, but it falls short by about 100 feet. Stiff wind gusts and temperatures near fifty degrees accompanied the view. This was a great change from the hot sweaty conditions on the trail. I took the time to hang my sweat soaked shirt on a tree as we discussed whether this was the summit of Gothics. Pictures from a book



CONIFERS ON THE SUMMIT.

affirmed my stance that it was not. The sky was hazy and overcast. This was a blessing on the trail, not on the peak. I ate another snack and we began the 200-foot descent and then ascent to Gothics. This was traversed comfortably in about ½ hour. We had to be careful of our footing on the descent, as there were slippery rock faces and steep muddy grades. As I climbed Gothics, I understood where Pyramid derived its name. It seemed a wonder we didn't fall off the sharp edge of the peak.



SURVEY BOLT ON GOTHICS.

Gothics was a beautiful place to ponder the eastern views of Haystack, Saddleback and Basin. Basin was especially dramatic with its amphitheater of slides. This was an ideal example of an alpine peak: bare, rugged and surrounded by endless wilderness that whispered of eons passed. A large area of rock greeted us with views on at least three sides. We took a much-needed break along with at least a dozen others including a watercolor artist. I sought and found Colvin's survey bolt and snapped a picture along with several of the surrounding views.



ARMSTRONG LOOKED UNIMPRESSIVE FROM THE TRAIL DOWN GOTHICS. THIS LADDER AIDED IN THE DESCENT ON THE NORTH SIDE OF ARMSTRONG.

I convinced the father and son that it was easier to go back by way of Armstrong and Upper Wolf Jaw than the way they came. I later found this to be a mistake, but the route across the peaks basically paralleled the road. On a map it looked rational. In reality, I failed to take the added vertical distance and extremely rugged terrain into account.

Again, we made the over 300-foot descent from Gothics and approached Armstrong. This traverse took about an hour. Along the trail, I glimpsed the summit rocks of Armstrong, which had a beautiful view of the Gothics, but was not nearly as expansive. Gothics loomed like some gigantic granite beast from Armstrong's perspective. The view was one sided. The summit was composed of a large rock accommodating enough for ten people or so.

We moved on again, this time to Upper Wolf Jaw. The most interesting part of the trail was the descent down a fifty foot ledge via a wooden ladder. It was not much more than an hour to the summit, which was less than spectacular. A rock in the middle of some conifers was the summit. A side path led over to another vantage point with a one sided view over the small trees. We relaxed for at least twenty minutes. I ate and relaxed on my back for its duration as did Deb. By this point of the traverse, we were all very tired, especially the eleven-year old.

VIEW OF GOTHICS' EAST SIDE FROM THE TRAIL TO ARMSTRONG.



We descended and found our way to a junction, which lead in three directions. One led to John's Brook, one to Lower Wolf Jaw and one to St. Huberts (and our cars), which was



UPPER AND LOWER WOLF JAW. A DEEP COL SEPARATES UPPER WOLF JAW'S FALSE SUMMIT FROM LOWER WOLF JAW.

a hike of about four miles. The father asked if we would be out by 5:30 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. I said, "Probably." Again, I was just guessing, but it sounded reasonable based on my assumptions. I figured I was at least close.

I'd been contemplating a new trail option for a short time...the one to the next peak. I knew that to leave without hiking Lower Wolf Jaw meant another day hike from St. Huberts. It was only ½ mile away, so I asked everyone, explained our choices and we opted for the path over to the fourth peak (since we were already there). I explained that it was only another half mile (although it was in an upward direction and actually ended up being one mile longer than the path to St. Huberts). Our decision was a mistake. I was tired even with summit fever. I knew Deb would attempt whatever was placed before her.



THE SOUTH SIDE OF LOWER WOLF JAW WAS AS STEEP AS IT LOOKS.

Halfway up the mountain, the boy was delirious with exhaustion and very upset. The father just wanted to get him out. Deb was also getting tired, but stayed determined. She promised the boy ice cream money just to keep him moving and focused on something different. Lower Wolf Jaw turned out to be a very steep climb up mainly rock ledges and steep paths. The summit was not very exciting when we finally arrived. I took a couple pictures in an exhausted state and realized we really needed to move to get out by dark. I had reached my hiking limit and just wanted to get back as well.

The father didn't go to the summit rock, but instead stood waiting next to a sign that said, "St. Huberts 4.5 miles." He said, "I hope that's wrong". I swallowed hard and said, "No, I don't think so". He did not look happy. It was 5:00 p.m. I knew we were in much deeper than I anticipated while on Gothics. The descent began very steeply. One area was basically a muddy, rocky forty five degree descent for a couple hundred feet. There were enough trees to provide support and safety. It was here that I realized Deb's knee was causing her more pain than I originally thought. She basically needed to step off every



SUMMIT AND TRAIL SIGNS POINTED IN SEVERAL DIRECTIONS

small ledge with her left knee locked. It reminded me of myself on Algonquin and Wright. She said to go on ahead and give the money to the boy for ice cream.

I caught up to the father and son who were making good time. They just wanted out before dark. I handed the money over and told them to please go on ahead and how to progress to the Ausable Club. We departed with the normal pleasantries. I waited for Deb to catch up. I needed the break and the pace she set with her injured knee helped me keep my energy and not get too run down. If I'd have moved faster I would have been sick. It was nearing 7:00 p.m. My grandparents entered my mind at this point, but they had church at 5:30 p.m. and a concert at 6:30. I knew they'd be focusing on me if not for the distractions. I also knew this worked to my benefit. I thought I'd be out by dark and if not, I had my parents cell phone (haha-it might as well have been a tin can on a string).

I started using the cell phone about 7:30 p.m. It couldn't locate a signal. My stress level immediately rose. I was not used to being in the woods in the dark, but we had two flashlights. We'd been rationing water for the prior three hours, though, and no streams were on the topo map. We did find one, but it was almost stagnant, so I opted not to filter it. We ran into a couple guys on the way up to the Wolf Jaws. They were looking for water also.

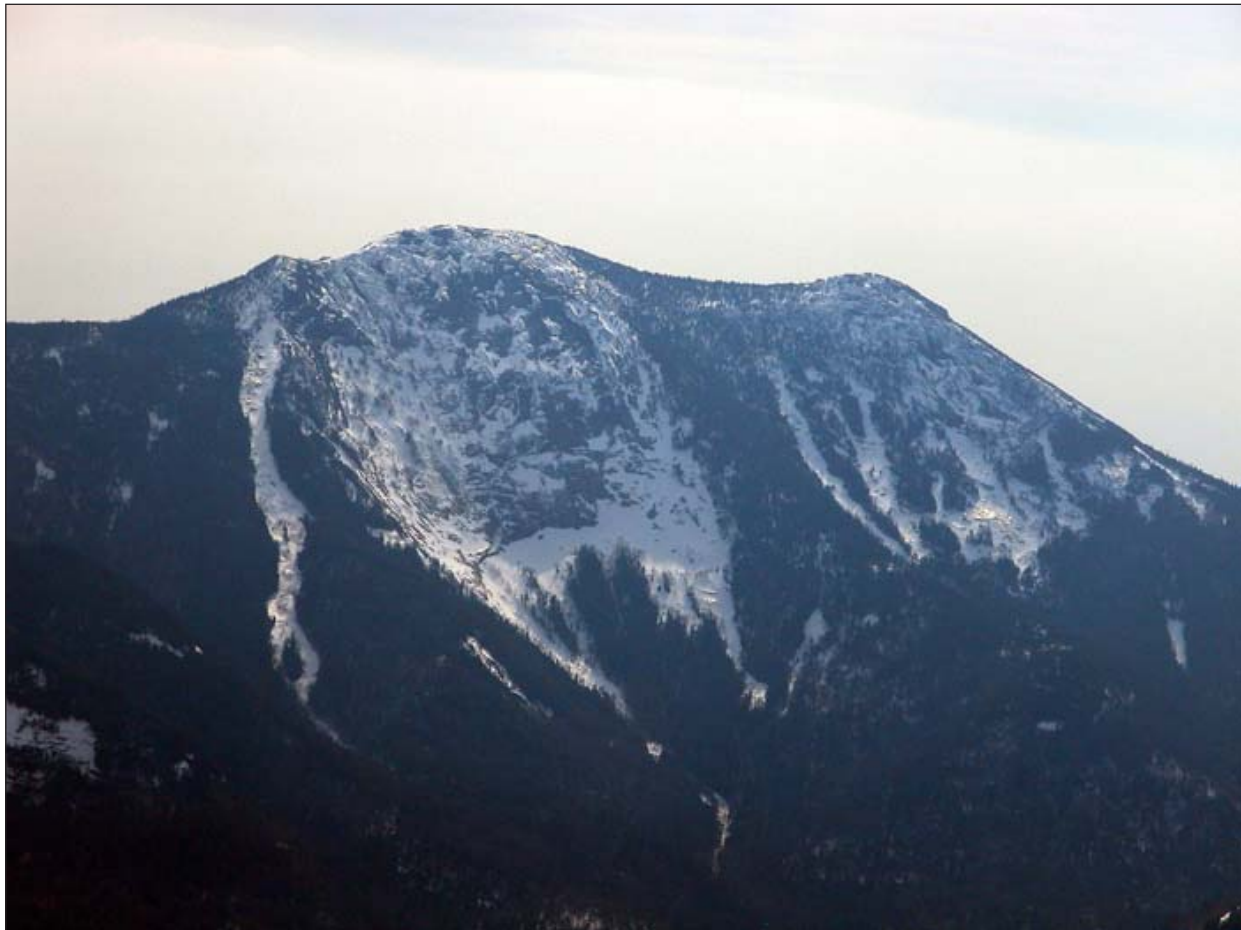
At about 8:30 p.m., with darkness creeping in, the two gentlemen previously mentioned passed us on their descent. We accepted a swig of water and asked them to phone my grandparents since they were heading out. They said they would when they reached the Ausable Club. My stress level receded: I knew my grandparents wouldn't have to call the police and get a search party ready. I told Deb they would do this...that's how they react. I don't think she really believed me since it sounded a bit extreme.

It was just passed 9:00 p.m. and we were still at least one or two miles away from civilization. The miles passed slowly due to Deb's injury and the darkness, which got worse every step. I offered to carry her. She refused. At times, the trail seemed elusive in the darkness, which exacerbated my concerns of finding two turnoff trails, one of which was a logging road. I was exhausted from a much longer hike than I anticipated and helping Deb down the grade with one hand as support and one on the trail with the flashlight.



After finding the logging road turnoff, I saw lights ahead and, lo and behold, we ran into the two men who promised to call my grandparents. They decided to camp and were still looking for water. I was happy to see people, but annoyed that they didn't call. At that point, I told Deb to get on my back. I feel it necessary to say that she was not happy about this and really didn't need me to carry her, but my anxiety had peaked and I needed to make time and get out of the woods...after finding water. I knew the Ausable was a half-mile away. We left our walking sticks and I trotted down the trail with her on my back wearing my pack. By the time we reached the Ausable, I was thoroughly exhausted and thirsty. I broke out the filter and rushed down to the river to fill my half gallon container. We revitalized and needed only to walk back to the car. I picked up a few small stones in case there was any truth to the "Beware of Dog" sign ahead of us as we crossed near someone's property to get to a side road and then Route 73. We reached the car about 10:15 p.m.

I drove straight for the trailer hitting sixty m.p.h. in a fifty five m.p.h. zone once, but slowed after I realized this. I saw flashing lights pull out behind me just north of St. Huberts. The lights then shut off and a policeman rode my tail for about a mile until he put the lights back on and pulled me over just south of the parking lot to Rooster Comb. I couldn't believe my luck. All I wanted was to call my grandparents. The gentleman came up and,



THE WEST SIDE OF GOTHICS FROM THE DESCENT OF BIG SLIDE TO JOHN'S BROOK LODGE AREA.



ANOTHER VIEW OF THE LOWER GREAT RANGE FROM BIG SLIDE.

to my surprise and dismay, asked me if I was hiking and got lost. Apparently, my grandparents did call the police and subsequently the DEC to arrange a search party. He escorted me to the nearest payphone and called my family to let them know I was OK.

Deb and I explained her injury (she was hit by a car a week prior). Both he and the DEC officer were amiable and we talked for about forty five minutes. I told him that I told my grandmother I'd be home twenty minutes ago and if he got another call from her tonight, to please ignore it.

In retrospect, this day was filled with mixed emotions as to my conditioning. My initial hike up the road in the first three miles actually tired me and made me question my ability for a long hike. Once I got warmed up, I was ok. The view on Gothics was worth any walk as well as the walk down the ridge. Summitting four peaks in one day gave me a great sense of accomplishment. I just wish it wasn't at the expense of my hiking partners, however unintentional. The final leg back in the dark was unsettling for me with the added stress of others' worrying (my grandparents) in addition to exhaustion, thirst and my first experience hiking after dark. Overall, it was a wonderful hike and an unforgettable experience.

Addendum 2/10/04: I have to add some thoughts to this account. I look back on the Gothics hike with warm regard. It was the first hike with someone who would, a few months later, become pivotal in my life. Deb would become my fiancée and this would be but a step along the real journey. Little did I know just how much this hike would mean to me in future days. It was her presence that made it so joyful, special and happily memorable.

Deb's knee was even worse than I thought during the hike. I knew it was bad near the end, but not that it was so excruciating and unstable from about one mile prior to the summit of Pyramid-the first of five 4000 foot mountains. Had I realized the seriousness of her injury, it would have been a short day indeed-we would have gone back. My respect for Deb during this hike grew and grew (it was already quite high). In retrospect,



it's grown exponentially ever since then. Had she not had a bad knee, I would have been struggling to keep up with her, I believe. She can also be thanked for all the pictures taken of me during the trip. Unfortunately, and much to my dismay, I didn't return the favor. I would give much for pics of her during that little trek...to mark this step in time.

This hike evolved into more of an expedition and grew a life of its own, which I still feel bad about. It has not yet been a year, but I've gained a lot of experience in estimating what a particular hike entails and what I did wrong on this one. In addition, I now live in the North Country, so time isn't as pressing as it once was.

Call of the Mountain Spirit

Massive remnants of ages passed,
carved by ice and forged of fire,
reach for heaven from the mother.
Inspirational and spiritual,
the granite spine of the earth
supports the life that covers it
and absorbs the lives
that lay themselves to rest within it's range.
Once one's blood mixes with the earth of the ancients,
they become brothers.
Though one's travels may be vast,
the draw of the mountains pulls like a magnet.
Whispers of their embrace caress the soul.
Northern winds blow
and my spirit within rages to the mountains' call...
I am brother to the highlands
by blood and upbringing.
I yearn to reunite:
to feel evergreen tranquility,
to hear poplars dance,
to see the white face of the familiar mountains
to hear brooks babble and the Ausable rush through chasms of time,
to see glassy pools of liquid peace harbored within a river's torrents,
to hear ice groan in frozen harmony,
to hear the hum of a million pine needles in conversation
as the last remnants of day succumb to night,
to smell the aromatic diversity of the land,
to witness the birth and rebirth of a thousand animals,
to live amongst the majesty and power of nature's extremes.
These are the echoes of my past:
the echoes of a primeval tongue
created by the hand of God.
This ancient tongue is a symphony
that resonates in unison with my soul.



THE EAST AND WEST SIDES AND SLIDES OF GOTHICS.





ON THE SUMMITS OF
GOTHICS, ARMSTRONG,
UPPER AND LOWER WOLF
JAWS RESPECTIVELY AND,
YES, MY FIRST HIKE
WITHOUT HAIR.



VIEW FROM THE BROTHERS LOOKING SOUTH ALONG THE ENTIRE GREAT RANGE.