

Kaatskill Life

Highs and Lows on the Way to the Top

Catskill Peak Experiences

Mountaineering Tales of Endurance, Survival, Exploration & Adventure from the 3500 Club

edited by Carol White

paper, 6 x 9, 256 pages, illustrated with maps and photos

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Review by Steve Hoare

Membership in the Catskill 3500 Club is reserved for hikers who climb to the peak of all 35 mountains in the Catskills that are over 3,500 feet in elevation. As if that were not enough of a challenge, four of the peaks must be summited in winter. (There is a special, separate membership badge awarded to those who summit *all* 35 peaks in winter.) Adding to the challenge is the fact that thirteen of the peaks are trailless and require bushwhacking through wilderness.

Despite these obstacles, the Catskill 3500 Club has over 1,700 members, and membership continues to climb steeply each year—if you’ll pardon the bad pun. It should not be surprising that many of these seekers after this hikers’ Holy Grail come out of the wilderness with tales to tell. Some of these tales of success and failure, misery and exultation, rejuvenation and near-death, make their way into the club’s quarterly newsletter, the *Catskill Canister* (named for the canisters the club has placed on the trailless peaks to pinpoint the summits, and in which aspirants for club membership record their achievement of the goal). Carol White, a Catskill 3500 Club member (summer and winter) and accomplished writer and editor of hiking guidebooks, sifted through 45 years of *Canister* issues and came up with over 100 tales that run the full gamut from exhilaration to sheer terror.

One hiker was on his last climb to qualify for club membership when he slipped on ice at Giant Ledge. “I fell backwards and headfirst down the crack between the outer rock and the main cliff. A hiking buddy saw this, leaped to catch me, missed, and ended up spread-eagled on the outer rock looking over the edge. I, on the other hand, was wedged upside down between the outer rock and the main cliff, looking down two hundred feet to treetops and up at the bottom of that outer rock. . . . My partner couldn’t reach me; I was too far away and the rock was too icy. No ropes, no other people on the trail, no help.”

Imagine bushwhacking through thick evergreens towards a trailless peak and coming upon this: “In the thickest balsams on the southwest slope, a patch of sunlight in which I emerged turned out to be a bear’s den! With a shudder, my darting eyes and stunned brain put together the signs: a fresh scat pile, a bright yellow pee hole, something that looked like a bird’s nest on a mammoth

scale, ringed by oddly human-looking footprints with long claws on the toes. Yikes! This looked recently occupied—the only thing missing was a teapot puffing away on a stove.”

Or imagine yourself in this scenario: you are alone in the mountains in winter, trying to work your way down a steep hillside covered with snow when, “suddenly, while resting at a small ledge, I heard some crashing from up above me. . . . Rocks, logs, leaves and debris were falling toward me. I didn’t have time to even think of what could be causing this before I saw it: this huge black bear, probably 400 pounds, was rolling, sliding, tumbling and falling right toward me! . . . He kept coming, and slid past me maybe eight feet away, down the notch and out of sight! I don’t think he even knew I was there.”

Not all of the stories are harrowing, however. Yes, there are many tales of getting caught in raging thunderstorms and blizzards, getting lost or delayed and having to bivouac in sub-zero weather, tales of breaking bones and (almost) broken spirits, but there are also many stories of the soul-satisfying self-renewal that comes from close communion with wild nature. There are scenes described that are so heartbreakingly beautiful that one can’t help but mourn how much of real life we give up when we choose to live in towns and spend our lives sitting in front of our computers. And there are many testaments to the human spirit that leave one with a lingering sense of awe at what a human being can accomplish with enough determination, proving, if proof were needed, that one can overcome all obstacles—pain, fatigue, bitter cold, scorching heat, mind-numbing fear—and scale all heights in unflagging pursuit of an unwavering goal.

If one commits oneself to honing the mind and body to peak condition, one might even—as one remarkable 3500 Club member did—scale all 35 Catskill peaks over 3,500 feet in just two days, fifteen hours, and twenty-four minutes, hiking 135 miles with 37,000 feet of elevation gain. Now *that’s* a peak experience.