

Hurricane!

On his third attempt, a reporter finally summits Hurricane Mountain — and makes up his mind about whether a fire tower there should survive

Words and pictures by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, May 13, 2005

I made it!

It took me three tries — two last winter, one this week — to summit Hurricane Mountain, between Keene and Elizabethtown, but I finally reached the top this Monday afternoon.

And, boy, was it ever worth it!

The stunning view from the rocky summit gave me perspective, not only on the beauty of the surrounding Adirondack Mountains but on the question of whether the old fire tower standing there should survive or not.

That question is what led me to try climbing the mountain in the first place, so it is eminently germane to this story.

How it all started

Last December, the Residents Committee to Protect the Adirondacks issued a “report” — really just a statement of opinion — on the future of fire towers in the Adirondacks. The group supported leaving towers on those peaks that would otherwise have no view, but advocated the removal of towers on two summits whose scenic values need no such enhancement: those atop St. Regis and Hurricane mountains.

The following month, Elizabethtown native Gretna Longware, 73, initiated a petition

campaign seeking to persuade the state to save the tower on Hurricane. The campaign proved enormously popular, winning the support of the Essex County Board of Supervisors and garnering hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of signatures.

That’s when I decided to climb Hurricane Mountain. Initially, all I wanted was to see the fire tower for myself, thinking that I might get a better perspective on the controversy if I got a look at the tower with my own two eyes.

I had another motive, though,

for trying to climb Hurricane: My wife had given me a pair of snowshoes for Christmas, and I wanted to try them out.

Attempt No. 1: Snowshoe virgin

The Adirondack Mountain Club trail guide describes several possible routes up Hurricane Mountain. The shortest (2.6 miles one way) and most popular of these starts at a trailhead on Route 9N between Elizabethtown and Route 73, but ADK calls this “a strenuous climb with steep sections for a fairly long distance.”

The route I picked for my first attempt to climb Hurricane was actually the longest (3 miles), but its grades are considered “moderate throughout,” according to ADK.

Let me tell you something: If the grades on the North Trail up Hurricane Mountain are “moderate throughout,” then the trail starting on Route 9N must be nearly vertical.

I picked a late January day to start my first climb toward Hurricane’s summit, beginning at



Abandoned fire tower atop Hurricane Mountain.

around 1 p.m. The day was overcast, and the woods seemed grim without the winter sun, but the first mile passed quickly and with relative ease on a nearly level path leading from the Crow Clearing trailhead to a lean-to at a fork in the path.

The second mile was a little more tough, partly because of the increasing grade, but mostly because of the challenge of climbing a mountain with a pair of webbed clown shoes strapped to my boots. Rather than risk climbing down in the dark, I called it quits and turned around at 3:30 p.m.

Attempt No. 2: Breaking trail

It was about two weeks later, on Feb. 15, when I made my second attempt to climb Hurricane. Unlike

the conditions on my first climb, that day was an extraordinarily beautiful one. Deep white snow was piled high on the green pine boughs lining the trail, with an utterly clear, blue sky overhead.

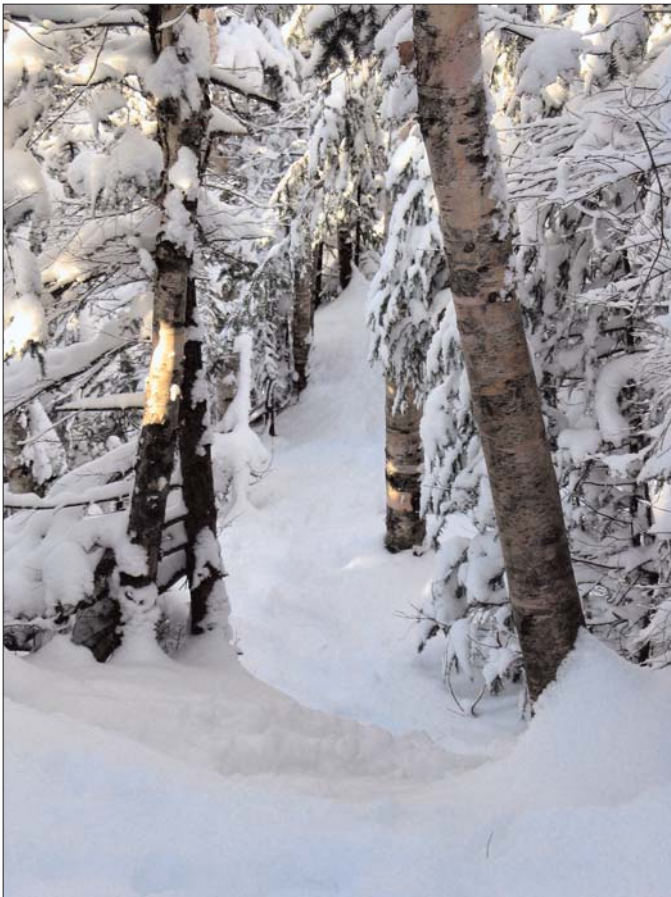
Much of the trail ran alongside brooks covered in ice and snow. I could hear them babbling away beneath their sheltering layers, almost like a subconscious undercurrent of the forest.

The woods that day were utterly still. Besides the occasional muffled gurgling of the iced-over stream, the only sound I heard for quite a ways was that of a woodpecker digging into a tree, hunting out its lunch.

At one point, the voices of a couple of female hikers traveling with their dog sounded very loudly

through the woods, overwhelming the silence. It was a relief to part from them at the lean-to and take the road less traveled — nay, the road *un-traveled* — toward Hurricane, where the only noise on the path was the drag of my snowshoes trailing behind my boots.

I got a little bit of a scare, there, crossing Willow Brook by the lean-to at the spot where I knew the upward trail picked up, and finding nothing but deep, virgin snow and no ready indication at all of where the trail actually lay beneath it all. The idea of breaking trail through the drifts up that mountain, of being the only climber to pass that way for many a day, was exciting, but a little puzzling, too. I wondered, why had no one else come that way for so long? What did more experi-



This shot, looking back down the North Trail, is the point where our reporter had to give up his second attempt to summit Hurricane. At left is how it looked in February; at right, in May.

enced winter hikers know about that trail that I did not?

Climbing through the untouched, unpacked snow at times felt a little like climbing through a 4- or 5-inch blanket of molasses or tar. The snow was so powdery and light, and my snowshoes so big, that the shoes sank in maybe half a foot with each step — and that half foot of snow closed in again atop that boot, making it necessary to pull my snowshoe up through the heavy, almost viscous powder before taking my next step.

Hidden branches lying under the surface of the snow sometimes caught at my snowshoes, too, making it feel like the earth itself was reaching up to keep me from moving forward, like in a zombie movie when the undead reach up from the ground in a cemetery to capture their next victim.

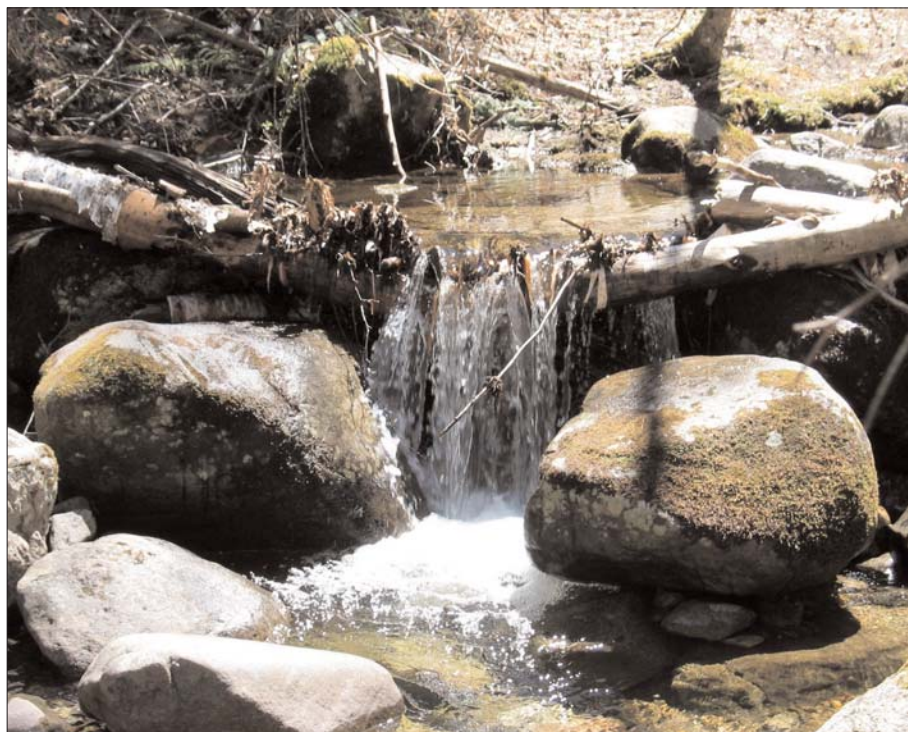
Despite the challenges, I slogged forward, more pleased than not with the lonely trail I was

breaking through the snow.

In the past, when I've walked some of the more heavily traveled trails through the Adirondacks, I have sometimes whined to myself about how tame a "wilderness" this is, with its well-marked, heavily engineered paths.

But there on the Hurricane trail, with the only visible sign of human passage being the path packed down behind me by my own snowshoes, I got a distinct sense of what it's like to travel where the road is decidedly *not* tame.

"There's a trail underneath here," I thought to myself. "The underbrush has been cleared out, and the snow lies down in contours that can be seen and interpreted as those of a trail — but there hasn't been anyone else up here in a couple of weeks. I am the only one who has thought to come this way for many days — and I like that."



Water flowing down one of the brooks that run beside much of the North Trail to Hurricane Mountain's summit.

Time to turn back

By the time the clock struck 4, however, the last quarter-mile I'd been traveling had become very steep and difficult to climb. The most treacherous spots had been just barely covered with snow; the steel teeth on the undersides of my snowshoes had only just caught on the thick ice beneath the snow in the nick of time to keep me from sliding feet-first down the mountain, face down.

I knew from my GPS receiver that I was getting close to the summit, but I couldn't be sure just how close the summit actually was by trail. The only thing I knew for sure was that sun sets early in mid-February, and that I needed to turn myself around if I was going to make it down the steepest part of the descent before completely losing the light.

Just as I began climbing down, I heard voices coming up the trail toward me. In a minute, I saw three college-aged guys come strolling up the mountain in the path made by my snowshoes, dressed in light winter coats, blue jeans and sneakers. No caps. No gloves. No snowshoes of their own. No water. No map or compass. No nothing. They continued past me up the hill while I went down.

By the time I reached the lean-to, at 5:20, I still hadn't seen them come back. I started to worry, thinking that the trail I had broken might have led those stupid, ill-prepared kids to a frigid doom somewhere farther up the mountain than I had dared go. I was mighty glad when I heard them approaching from the rear as I started onto the final leg of the trek back to my truck.

There is no such thing as an "unsuccessful" science experiment, only one that does not prove the

hypothesis you've set out to test — and that, in itself, is a valuable result.

Similarly, there is no such thing as an unsuccessful hike, even one that doesn't bring you to the summit you've chosen as your target, as long as you have enjoyed the path you've taken and you have learned something along the way.

My second attempt on Hurricane Mountain was like that. It was a beautiful day; I saw some amazing things; and I learned more about the trail and how to better approach it the next time.

Third time's the charm

After my Feb. 15 attempt to climb Hurricane, there were several times when I considered trying another winter ascent. Each time, however, I thought about how the trail had become progressively more difficult the farther up I'd climbed. If I was likely to encounter even more ice higher up on the trail, which seemed probable, I just wasn't willing to risk it.

Instead I waited until the snows melted, and the ice sloughed off the mountain rocks, and the steep trails drained. Even so, I ran into many marshy stretches of trail, making me grateful for good, waterproof boots. Higher up, I even encountered a large sheet of fossil snow draped across a granite outcropping, and several ribbons of ice running up the middle of shaded bits of trail.

Like so many places in the Adirondacks, the North Trail up Hurricane Mountain seems like an altogether different place after the snow is gone. When the path really starts climbing, it *climbs* — and not up a soft-soiled trail, either, but hopping from rock to boulder to protruding root of tree. Though the snow brought its own challenges to



The summit of Hurricane Mountain.

the task of climbing Hurricane, it was certainly a great leveler of the path's surface. Looking down on Monday after topping some particularly difficult stretches, I wondered more than once how I had ever climbed *that* in clown shoes!

Finally, I reached a trail marker indicating that the summit was just a few hundred feet farther up the path. I was going to make it!

Then, after scrambling up a last rocky channel, I was there, out in the open on the bare stone peak of Hurricane Mountain. Over me was a clear, blue sky, and surrounding me was 360 degrees of Adirondack splendor.

Hurricane Mountain stands almost 3,700 feet above sea level. Nothing nearby comes even close, and so it rises in relative solitude, a kind of tower in its own right, Lake Champlain lying to the east with the Green Mountains beyond, the High Peaks shouldering up against one another to the southwest, Whiteface to the northwest, and various nameless ridges ringing it

round in a deep, wide, mountainous bowl.

Below, one sees the ribbons of the many modern roads traversing Essex County and the several settlements dotting the forestscape, some of them dating back more than two centuries. Folks might call this "wilderness," but it's pretty clear from the perspective of Hurricane's summit that it is a peopled wilderness — and isn't that an oxymoron?

At last, the tower

Walking up the last few hundred feet across the open rock to Hurricane's summit, it's impossible to see the old fire tower until you're nearly upon it. At one point, the cab appears to be playing peek-a-boo, the roof just barely rising above the next ridge of granite — but then, there it is, all 35 feet of it, rising bravely toward the sky.

Despite remarks made in December's report from the RCPA about the fire tower's dire need of repairs, it stands quite solidly; the

only things it appears to need are a new set of wooden stairs to replace the old, gray, spongy planks first set there in 1919, and a fresh coat of paint on its sheet-metal cab.

The tower does not keep anyone from drinking in the extraordinary scenery surrounding it, unhindered by its steel legs. All one must do is take a few steps' walk around the tower's perimeter — there's plenty of room — rather than standing in one place and complaining about how the tower block's one's view.

Before my ascent on Monday, I had been of two minds about saving the Hurricane tower — or, rather, of no mind. I could see the cases on both sides and thought they both made good points, though one did not seem to outweigh the other.

As I had hoped in January, climbing Hurricane Mountain and seeing the summit and tower for myself let me come to a conclusion of my own, which is this: I can't see any good reason to take the tower down, but I know of several good reasons to leave it standing.

To hikers, the Hurricane tower is a solitary sentinel, an emblem, a memorial to the continuing human presence in these vast, beautiful, lonely woods.

And to locals, the tower is a landmark of their mountain heritage, visible from most nearby communities, as it has been for nearly a century. One of Gretna Longware's neighbors, an 80-plus year old Elizabethtown resident, summed that point up nicely during last winter's debates.

"That is my Statue of Liberty," she said. "When I see it, I know I am home."

