

Vanderwhacker

Great trail climbs to glorious view from restored Adirondack fire tower

Words & pictures by Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, September 16, 2005

MINERVA TWP. — One of the truly great hikes of the Adirondacks starts at the end of a 2.6-mile dirt road that meanders through the woods of Minerva township in southern Essex County.

The destination of this 2.7-mile hike (one way) is the beautifully restored fire tower atop Vanderwhacker Mountain, one of the three best southern vantage points from which to view the famous High Peaks. (The other two are the fire towers on Goodnow Mountain and Mount Adams, both in neighboring Newcomb township.)

Until recently, the Vanderwhacker fire tower was in rough shape — so rough, in fact, that it was closed to the public.

The trail needed work, too. One of its 2.7 miles is quite steep, gaining about 1,000 feet in elevation. Combined with the wet conditions in the area, erosion was a real problem.

Thanks to a \$10,000 Environmental Protection Fund grant for fire tower restoration to the state Department of Environmental Conservation — and the ongoing efforts of the Friends of Vanderwhacker Fire Tower — a major trail and tower restoration project was undertaken last year.

The steel framework of the



87-year-old fire tower was completely repainted. “Iffy” steps on the wooden staircase climbing to the cab were replaced.

The cab’s floor was also replaced with new timbers; in the process, the old pipe-mounted, circular map table was removed, giving visitors much more space for moving around the tiny

tower-top cabin.

The disintegrating wooden frames of the cab’s casement windows, long since deprived of their glass panes by stone-throwing vandals, were removed altogether, thus sidestepping the question of how to keep the replacements from likewise being broken out by vandals.

Today a clean, sturdy fire tower arises from the woods that surround the bare rock summit of Vanderwhacker Mountain, just as Verplanck Colvin’s wooden Adirondack survey tower rose from the same spot 125 years ago.

Getting there

There is no direct route between Lake Placid and the turnoff to the Vanderwhacker Mountain trailhead in Minerva township. Standing directly between the two are the massed High Peaks of the Adirondacks — which means that, to get from Placid to Vanderwhacker, you’ve got to go all the way around.

Both routes are about 75 miles one way, and each route takes about 2 hours.

The eastern route runs through Wilmington, Jay, Keene and Keene Valley to the Northway, then south to the next exit (North Hudson). From there, you go west on the Boreas Road

(aka the Blue Ridge Road) until it T's into Route 28N. Turn left toward Minerva. When you've gone 5 miles, start watching for the Moose Pond Club Road on the right, just before the bridge that crosses the Boreas River (both have signs).

The western route will take you through Saranac Lake and Tupper Lake to Long Lake, where you'll turn eastward onto Route 28N. Go through Newcomb hamlet. When you get to the sign pointing left to

Tahawus, stay on 28N and start counting your 5 miles, as in the directions above.

If you pass Aiden Lair, a ramshackle, boarded up hotel on the left (it has a historic marker in front; you won't miss it), you've gone too far.

After you turn right (west) off Route 28N onto the Moose Pond Club Road, take it easy — you've got about 2.6 miles to travel on a sometimes rocky, always narrow, but mostly well-maintained dirt road before you

reach the marked trailhead parking area, on your right.

(Note: Those who know say that this is *not* a road for winter travel, though they do recommend skiing in cross country and switching to snowshoes for the toughest part of the ascent.)

Hiking to the cabins

The first half of your 2.7-mile hike is nearly level, skirting three beaver meadows before gently rising into the wooded hills.

Right at the foot of Vanderwhacker Mountain, about 1.4 miles along on the trail, you'll find the clearing where the state fire service built the cabins that housed the men (and sometimes women) who staffed the fire tower from late spring to early autumn each year.

The cabin where the fire observers lived appears to be in very good shape, in major part because the door is locked and the windows are shuttered tight, just as they were at the end of each fire season.

A second building in the clearing, apparently used for storage, was not so soundly built and is in poor shape; the front porch has collapsed, and its roof is falling in.

Just above the two cabins stands what may have been the most important building on the site: a 3-by-3 one-seater, its door fallen off its hinges and leaning against the frame.

Every morning during fire season, the observer would leave this clearing and climb the 1.4 miles to the summit of Vanderwhacker, where he (or



One of the trail staircases that eases the climb up Vanderwhacker Mountain.

she) would stand guard over the Adirondack forest until night approached — and then he would climb back down.

Degree of difficulty

Jack Freeman wrote the book on fire-tower trails, called “Views from on High,” which was published 4 years ago by the Adirondack Mountain Club. One section at the back of the book grades the trails into four categories: easy (1), moderate (2), strenuous (3) and difficult (4).

For the most part, I agree with Jack’s evaluations.

Mount Adams, in Newcomb township, deserves a 4. Adams is, indeed, one of the toughest trails I’ve ever climbed: mostly vertical, and mostly up a rocky stream bed.

Hurricane Mountain, in Keene township, gets a 3 from Freeman. Again, I think he’s pegged that right — as long as you’re not talking about a winter climb that takes you through a few miles of deep, fresh snowdrifts and up extended stretches of iced-over rock before you reach the summit.

Poke-O-Moonshine also gets a 3 from Freeman. “Not enough!” most exhausted climbers would say — until they take into account that the Poke-O trail is a mere 1.2 miles long. Yes, that’s a mostly vertical 1.2 miles, and every bit as wet and rocky as the Mount Adams trail — but it is, after all, just 1.2 measly miles, for crying out loud.

When it comes to Vanderwhacker, however, I’m going to have to differ from Mr.



The Vanderwhacker fire observer’s cabin.

Freeman. Jack grades this trail at Level 3, along with Hurricane and Poke-O-Moonshine — which may have been appropriate to the trail’s condition before the 2004 renovation, but probably isn’t now.

Today, the climb up Vanderwhacker Mountain — even the steepest part, from the observer’s cabins to the fire tower — warrants no more than a 2.5. It’s still a steep climb, but the trail engineering is so good — especially the numerous log staircases — that one’s footing is assured for virtually every step of the way.

It’s a pretty climb, too, much more akin to a vigorous, extended walk through a wild garden than a deep forest bushwhack.

And then, there’s the destination: the restored Vanderwhacker fire tower, its tiny cabin sitting atop its 35-foot, steel-girdered framework, looking out over the forest canopy, all the way

around, at some of the most glorious wilderland the eastern U.S. has to offer.

This may be one of the best hikes in the Adirondacks — in part, because the trailhead is so remote that it cuts down on the number of hikers. The trail up Vanderwhacker has all the ingredients — pretty country, well-maintained trail, the serenity afforded by isolation, the romance of Adirondack history, and a fabulous summit view — to make for a really nice day in the mountains.

Friends of Vanderwhacker

For more information, or to find out how you can help, contact: Friends of Vanderwhacker Fire Tower
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