

Shari Aber

I've always pushed the limits.

That's who I am.

That's why I was working for my black belt in karate when I was 50 – gave it up after I tore my meniscus and had to undergo the first of 3 arthroscopic knee surgeries.

It's why I decided to learn to roll a kayak when I was 60.

Pushing the Limits: Hiking Off-Trail in the Catskills



I hiked some when I was young. I remember a poorly prepared for backpack trip into the Whites with packs way too heavy, way too many miles, planned by a way-too-eager backpacker friend. Before we had kids, my husband Joe and I hiked a section of the Long Trail in Vermont, and then there was the memorable Labor Day Weekend when we hiked somewhere near the Delaware Water Gap with our dog, Cory, who at dusk decided to chase a porcupine. He got so many quills in his chin and inside his mouth that first thing the next morning we had to hike out to a road, hitch a ride back to our car and rush

him to the New York Animal Medical Center where they removed close to a hundred barbs.

I stopped hiking after we had kids and pretty much forgot about it—until I retired. I started hiking with some local hiking clubs—regularly with the Hudson Valley chapter of the Adirondack Mountain Club and occasionally with a couple of Mohonk Preserve-based groups. After two or three years of local hikes, I started going on hiking vacations—in the Whites and then abroad—in Provence, the Dolomites, Scotland.

Meanwhile Joe retired and soon became my main hiking partner. After

Previous page: On trail after a winter bushwhack. View of Devil's Path from Wittenberg Mountain.

Below: Berry bushes are a major obstacle. Here I use my poles to push aside pricklers. (Photos: Joe Ferri)



a second knee injury, we were forced to cancel a week of hiking hut-to-hut in the Whites that we had planned to coincide with his birthday. I just couldn't handle day after day the challenging terrain and elevations that the White Mountains offer. I came up with an alternative—a birthday hike in the Catskills.

So on June 11, 2013, we hiked to an impressive beaver dam, then past an old bluestone quarry where over the years whimsical folks had built chairs, tables, even thrones out of the remaining stone. And then onto Devil's Path and a scramble to the summit of Twin. The day was magical, and from that day on the Catskills became our passion.

Joe started researching the Catskills and soon discovered the Catskill 3500 Club, which offers a challenge: climb all 35 peaks over 3,500 feet, repeat 4 of them during winter, and earn a patch. He was motivated, psyched, hooked, and I went along for the ride.

While the Catskills are small peaks by most standards, with only Slide and Hunter topping 4,000 feet, they offer some unique challenges, foremost the fact that many of them are bushwhacks. A couple of them can be reached via unmaintained trails and some via herd paths. But

several require clothing that can resist pricklers, brambles, branches, and balsam needles; eye protection; compass and/or GPS and, most important, strong navigational skills.

Our first bushwhacks, Rusk and Halcott, we did with the 3500 Club. A competent leader, using a compass and experience, easily took us to the tops where we, along with eleven other aspirants—their term for those working on their 35 peaks—all signed the canister recording our accomplishments. I can't remember the exact reason we decided to hike our next trailless peak by ourselves—perhaps because we had started hiking

in the middle of the week and not just on weekends, perhaps because I like hiking *my* pace, not being pushed to go faster or having to wait for those struggling, perhaps to enjoy the silence and peace. In any case three months after our initial hike to Twin, after hours of planning at home, poring over maps and reading trail reports we found online, we followed a trail to Big Indian. There we left the trail and using my handheld Garmin and a route we'd planned at home, we headed to Fir and our first off-trail adventure.



Right: Dense balsams grow on most of the highest Catskill peaks. Wearing eye protection, I negotiate the region between Lone and Rocky. (Photo: Joe Ferri)



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a compass was that one arrow always pointed north. Joe, however, had been a Boy Scout and he dug around and unearthed an old and yellowed manual on orienteering. I figured if a ten-year-old kid could learn navigation, how hard could it be?

Well, I struggled with that little book, learning the new vocabulary—and new concepts, but on some level, I got it. I wasn't sure if I was ready to use my new compass and new knowledge to get us up our next mountain. But I was ready to try. So for our next bushwhack, Joe armed with compass and I with GPS as backup summited Doubletop and, both more difficult and more important, made it back to the trailhead. Two days later and only a week after our success on Fir, we switched our devices and both expanded our expertise. Joe, learning the GPS, and I, learning the compass, bushwhacked over both North Dome and Sherrill, completing over 2,500 feet of elevation in just under 8 miles.

Above: We rest on top of Southwest Hunter. Our dog Cairo, in booties to protect her paws, completed 35 of 39 peaks required to earn a patch before she became too sick to hike any more. (Photo: Joe Ferri)

Right: Although winter navigation is easier and finding the way back to the car is almost never a problem—just follow your tracks—breaking trail can be rough. (Photo: Joe Ferri)

Right below: Cairo. (Photo: Roberta Forest)

Our extensive planning along with our reliance on my GPS worked. It got us to Fir and back to the trail closer to the trailhead. We were exuberant with our success, but the more I thought about the risks of relying on the technology and the more stories I heard of lost satellite signals, faulty batteries and defective devices, the more I realized that our method, though modern, was clunky and laden with risks.

I decided we'd navigate the next bushwhack using a compass. The hitch was that the only thing I knew about



We went on to complete the 35, earning our summer patches—with all the bushwhacks negotiated with our newfound skills. Right now we’re working on the Catskill 100, the peaks between 3,000 feet and 3,500 feet, the vast majority with no trails, not even herd paths. We’ve done over 50 of the 67 so far, 35 of them bushwhacks. Looking back, the most impressive—one short November day in the beautiful western Catskills in Sullivan County, we strung together

five peaks, three of them bushwhacks in a perfectly executed 16-mile hike. I think back to those first trailless peaks done almost three years ago. I remember how at first they were my least favorite hikes—getting scratched by prickier bushes, smacked by branches, tripping over roots, stumbling into holes. Yet looking back, I am overwhelmed by yet another limit I pushed and by what I have learned. All this as I close in on my 70th birthday.



Cairo, cherished hiking partner, enriched my life with years of faithful companionship on the trail
