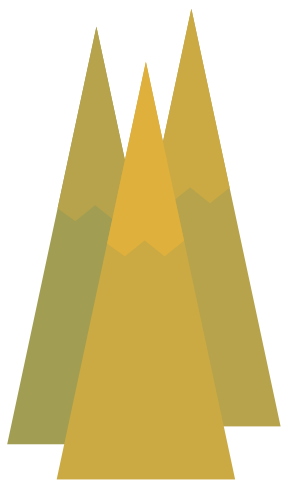




# PAUSING AT NUMBER

BY // PIPPA BIDDLE

What leads us to attempt ambitious feats, such as hiking all of New York's 46ers? And what makes us hesitate at the finish line?

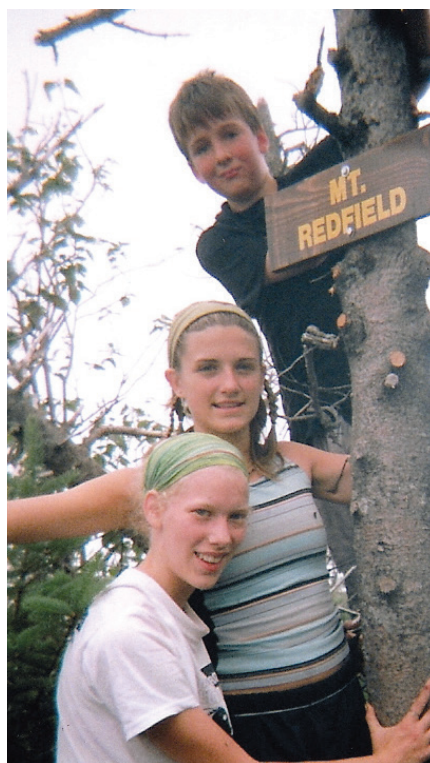


**I've long been haunted by the dream of a girl who could shrink mountains down to the size of her palm, slip them into her pockets, and carry them with her wherever she went.**

It's a fantastical idea, the kind a child conjures up while lying on her back, looking up at a star-packed sky. The kind that smells like late August and feels like bare feet on crisp pine needles. I clung to it for years, **but as I got older, I saw holes in the fabric of her plan.**

If she shrunk the mountains, where would she stop? Eventually, wouldn't she find herself with only the patch of earth on which she stood? In frustration, would she miniaturize each blade of grass, one by one, until all that was left to shrink was herself?

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I landed in the Adirondacks because that's where my childhood summer camp was, but it was the mountains' sheer beauty that pulled me toward their summits. When I hiked my first "46er"—the nickname given to Adirondack Park's collective high peaks, similar to New Hampshire's 48—I was three weeks shy of turning 9. I was also a few weeks into my first of six summers at Treetops, a sleepaway camp in Lake Placid, N.Y., that rejects candy and electronics in favor of bells that tell you when it's time to weed potatoes or collect chicken eggs. The 2001 Camp Treetops trip log identifies my first mountain as Colvin and the date as July 13.

I don't remember hiking Colvin or my next 46er, Wright, but I do remember my third, Cascade, because it rained; I was miserable; and we turned around due to lightning. It was normal for trips to change on the fly. Some would get curtailed due to weather. Other adventures would be extended if we had a few extra hours and another peak, or peaks, in view. These adjustments were rarely noted in the logs. Over time, the intended itineraries lost a contest to recorded memory, however slippery.

The logs do note that I was present when Taylor Harris finished his 46ers on Saddleback and Basin that same summer.



I'd finally turned 9, and he—a camp counselor—was somewhere between 18 and old. He popped a bottle of Martinelli's sparkling cider, an illicit substance for kids on a low-sugar, homegrown diet, and toasted to Hedgie and Hoggy, the hedgehog stuffed animals he always carried in his pack.

My mom didn't know about the logs, but she kept her own record, based on the letters that my counselors and I sent home. A needlepointer, she stitched each completed 46er onto a canvas with my name emblazoned across the top. Between logs and letters, needlepoint and memories, we piece the past together. There are nine peaks listed under 2001, thirteen under 2002. But before long, the names stop.

**T**he Adirondack's highest mountains are composed of rock formed around 1.2 billion years ago. The mountains themselves are young, though, having started to rise skyward approximately 100 million years ago. This presents a contradiction: After many kilometers of erosion, some of the youngest peaks in North America reveal, at their tops, some of the oldest rocks. Glaciers shaped the strong, metamorphized anorthosite into kettle holes, cirques, and eskers, balancing dramatic erratics on the edges of summits and in the hearts of valleys, carving out the landscape we see today.

For centuries, the Adirondacks provided food for the Algonquin and Mohawk peoples. Then the mountains were seized and exploited for lumber (mostly pine) and ore (mostly iron) by the Dutch and the English, continuing into the 19th century. But when a surge of post-Civil War resort-goers joined passionate





Far left: The author (middle) fell in love with the 46ers as a summer camper in the early 2000s.

Above: In September 2018, she returned to the Adirondacks to wrap up unfinished business.

(THIS SPREAD) COURTESY OF PIPPA BIDDLE

outdoorspeople in calling out for the protection of the region, for the first time in a long time, someone listened.

New York State established the Adirondack Forest Preserve in 1885 then wrapped it in an extra layer of safety by creating the surrounding Adirondack Park in 1892. In 1894, the state legislature wrote Adirondack protection into the New York State Constitution. Today the park is as big as the entire neighboring state of Vermont.

People have always felt a pull toward the mountains. This was undoubtedly true for brothers Robert and George Marshall and their friend Herbert Clark. The trio climbed their first of 46 Adirondack peaks with an elevation of at least 4,000 feet—as surveyed by the author and topographical engineer Verplanck Colvin between 1872 and 1875—when they summited Whiteface on August 1, 1918. Only a handful of the mountains had trails back then, but the friends' quest sparked a fire in the public imagination. Adirondack 46ers, a nonprofit membership club, has registered more than 10,000 official 46ers since Robert, George, and Herbert finished on Emmons in 1925. The club continues to support aspiring 46ers, provides a community for avid hikers, and spearheads trailhead education, helping keep hikers safe in an area that catches even experienced trekkers off-guard.



## 46ER CHECKLIST

There are 42 Adirondack peaks higher than 4,000 feet in elevation and four that initially were mis-measured but haven't been kicked off the list. The United States Geological Survey now recognizes another peak, MacNaughton, as having an elevation of 4,000 feet, but it has not been added to the Adirondack 46ers list.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1. Marcy: 5,344 ft.             | <input type="checkbox"/> 24. Seward: 4,361 ft.         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Algonquin: 5,114 ft.         | <input type="checkbox"/> 25. Marshall: 4,360 ft.       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Haystack: 4,960 ft.          | <input type="checkbox"/> 26. Allen: 4,340 ft.          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Skylight: 4,926 ft.          | <input type="checkbox"/> 27. Big Slide: 4,240 ft.      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5. Whiteface: 4,867 ft.         | <input type="checkbox"/> 28. Esther: 4,240 ft.         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6. Dix: 4,857 ft.               | <input type="checkbox"/> 29. Upper Wolf Jaw: 4,185 ft. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 7. Gray: 4,840 ft.              | <input type="checkbox"/> 30. Lower Wolf Jaw: 4,175 ft. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 8. Iroquois: 4,840 ft.          | <input type="checkbox"/> 31. Street: 4,166 ft.         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 9. Basin: 4,827 ft.             | <input type="checkbox"/> 32. Phelps: 4,161 ft.         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10. Gothics: 4,736 ft.          | <input type="checkbox"/> 33. Donaldson: 4,140 ft.      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 11. Colden: 4,714 ft.           | <input type="checkbox"/> 34. Seymour: 4,120 ft.        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 12. Giant: 4,627 ft.            | <input type="checkbox"/> 35. Sawteeth: 4,100 ft.       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 13. Nippletop: 4,620 ft.        | <input type="checkbox"/> 36. Cascade: 4,098 ft.        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 14. Santanoni: 4,607 ft.        | <input type="checkbox"/> 37. South Dix: 4,060 ft.      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 15. Redfield: 4,606 ft.         | <input type="checkbox"/> 38. Porter: 4,059 ft.         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 16. Wright: 4,580 ft.           | <input type="checkbox"/> 39. Colvin: 4,057 ft.         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 17. Saddleback: 4,515 ft.       | <input type="checkbox"/> 40. Emmons: 4,040 ft.         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 18. Panther: 4,442 ft.          | <input type="checkbox"/> 41. Dial: 4,020 ft.           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 19. Tabletop: 4,427 ft.         | <input type="checkbox"/> 42. Grace: 4,012 ft.          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 20. Rocky Peak Ridge: 4,420 ft. | <input type="checkbox"/> 43. Blake: 3,960 ft.          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 21. Macomb: 4,405 ft.           | <input type="checkbox"/> 44. Cliff: 3,960 ft.          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 22. Armstrong: 4,400 ft.        | <input type="checkbox"/> 45. Nye: 3,895 ft.            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 23. Hough: 4,400 ft.            | <input type="checkbox"/> 46. Couchsachraga: 3,820 ft.  |

# 5 TIPS

FROM ADIRONDACK  
EXPERTS

## 1. START EARLY

Bill Localio has planned thousands of hiking trips for Camp Treetops. He says an early departure is crucial, especially during the busy summer season, when strict parking restrictions help protect overhiked trails. Arrive predawn to snag a coveted parking spot, and you'll also save yourself from having to walk extra miles to the trailhead.

## 2. PROTECT YOURSELF

John Swanson, a licensed New York State Guide and 46er number 2618W (the "W" means he completed them in winter), reminds hikers that many of the mountains don't have maintained trails. "This requires some protection from the elements," he says. "Gloves to protect the hands. Glasses to protect the eyes. Long sleeves to protect the arms. A ball cap with a brim to protect the face...and when the clothes get torn, which inevitably happens, the best option for repair is dental floss. Carry a pre-threaded embroidery needle and a roll of floss."

## 3. REST & BREATHE

Chuck Schwerin, editor of *Adirondack PEEKS*, the biannual magazine of the Adirondack 46ers, emphasizes the not-for-the-faint-of-heart choices trail cutters made when they prioritized direct approaches over gradual switchback ascents. He recommends taking a moment to reflect when you stop to catch your breath. "Even as a child," Schwerin remembers, "I was struck by the profound feeling that I had trod upon a spiritual place in the middle of nowhere."

## 4. SKIP THE SWARMS

The High Peaks are impressive, but with record numbers of hikers flocking, experts recommend broadening your itinerary, especially for beginners or those traveling with young kids. According to Schwerin, "Most newcomers to the Adirondacks typically research which mountain is the highest and head directly for Marcy." For smaller crowds, he points people to the ridge trail on Giant, to Big Slide over the Brothers from the Garden trailhead, or to the backside of Porter from the Marcy field trailhead.

For experienced hikers, Jim Pugh, 46er number 320, suggests Grace Peak from Route 73. It's not a short hike, but "the view of the Dix Range cirque is unforgettable." Make sure to bring a map and a compass and to take the trail to the right of the slide leading to the summit.

Dave Mong, a backpacking trip leader for AMC's New York-North Jersey Chapter, suggests Wakely Mountain, a classic fire tower hike. His other top picks include Jay, Hurricane, and Noonmark.

## 5. SOAK IT UP

Whatever route you take, Evan Williams of Pure Adirondacks recommends keeping your eyes open. "In the springtime, the painted trillium is always fun to find along the side of the trails," he says. "There are some moose in the Adirondacks. While your chances of seeing one are slim, there's still a chance you'll be able to locate some moose tracks in your outings in the woods."

## LEARN MORE

Meet AMC's New York-North Jersey Chapter at [amc-ny.org](http://amc-ny.org), find an Adirondack hike to join at [outdoors.org/activities](http://outdoors.org/activities), and read about the Adirondack 46ers at [adk46er.org](http://adk46er.org). Are you more of a New Hampshire hiker? Learn about AMC's Four Thousand Footer Club at [amc4000footer.org](http://amc4000footer.org) and see photos of folks who summited all 48 New Hampshire high peaks at [outdoors.org/whyihikedthe4000footers](http://outdoors.org/whyihikedthe4000footers).

As the summers passed, I kept hiking. I continued to record peaks summited in the letters I sent home and by checking off boxes next to each mountain's name on a T-shirt my dad had bought me at The Mountaineer in Keene Valley, N.Y. I had a harder time keeping track of whether Panther was taller than Gothics and which mountains made up the Great Range. My friends could recite their conquests by elevation, but that kind of trivia slid off of my brain like rain skimming along the trash bag I wore when hiking Gray, in 2002, after forgetting my raincoat—an Adirondack sin.

Feeling self-conscious about not being able to memorize a list is objectively silly, but I only see that now that time has cleared my adolescent haze. Back then, I tried to distract myself with the intoxicating feeling of my legs pushing up a hill before turning to jelly on the descent, the sprint toward the summit, and the sting on my calves as a counselor half-jokingly batted at me with a striped maple branch as we raced the sun to the parking lot.

But I was uncomfortable. The friction of haphazardly adjusted pack straps rubbed my hips raw as I tried to make sense of how I could want something—the 46ers—so badly but couldn't remember the names of the peaks I sought to summit. I became convinced I was a faker and a fraud, or worse: a peakbagger, someone driven solely by the desire to conquer mountains, purpose obscured by the greed of pursuit.

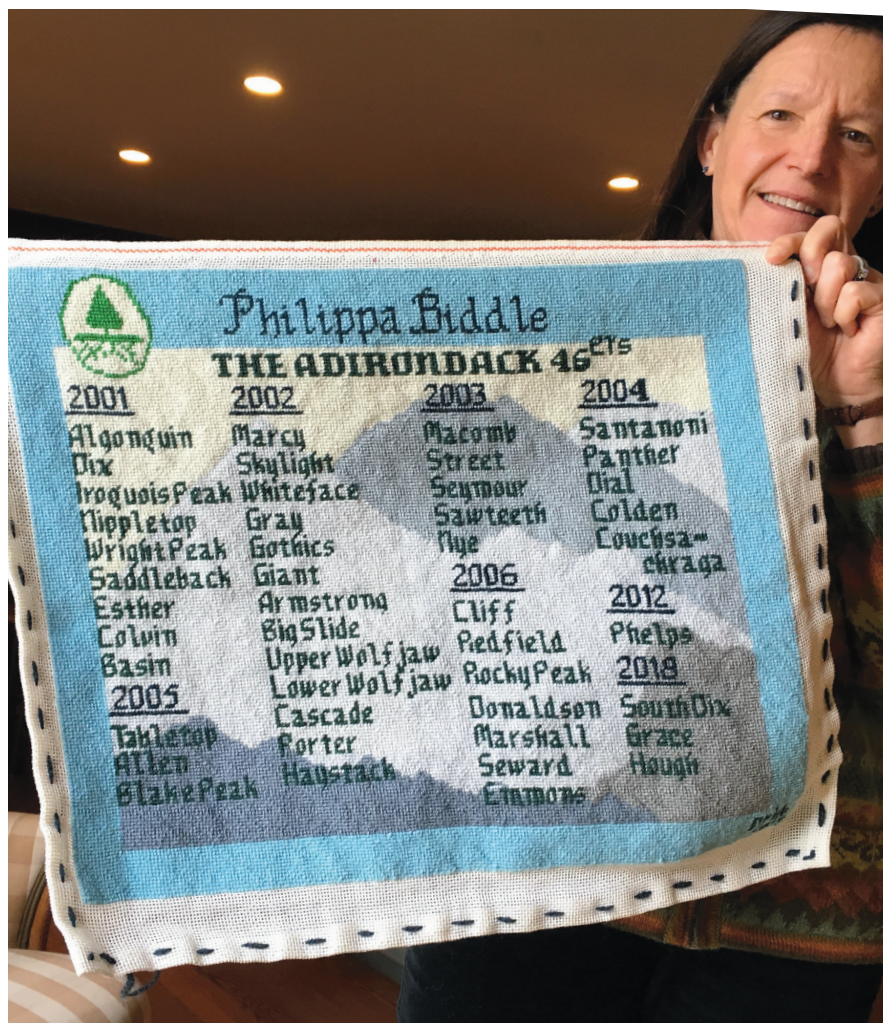
As finishing the 46ers went from a distant possibility to an impending inevitability, the mountains I had pocketed started to pull me downward. I let myself stall. That's a thing with me and goals, especially long-sought ones. The closer I get, the longer I find myself wanting to extend that blissful place between passionate quest and crossing the finish line. To accomplish the goal would complicate things. It often seems easier to stay put.

I wrapped up my last summer at Treetops at age 14, as a 42er. It was 2006. In 2012, I reluctantly climbed Phelps for my dad's 50th birthday, making me a 43er.

In the meantime, I hiked New Hampshire's White Mountains, Wyoming's Wind Rivers, the Pacific Northwestern Cascades, the Pyrenean border between France and Spain, and South Dakota's bone-dry Badlands. Still, three peaks in my home state remained sacred and untouched: Hough, South Dix, and East Dix.

I kept them there in the distance so I could look toward them longingly, aspiring to climb them with my 8-year-old brain and legs and attitude. Time stretched out long enough that the mountains themselves shifted. New trails were built, and some old ones were rerouted. Colden Trap Dike, the iconic mountaineering route I'd scrambled up in 2004, was reshaped by Tropical Storm Irene. Even the names of





some of the peaks evolved. In 2014, East Dix was rechristened Grace Peak in honor of Grace Hudowalski, the first female 46er, and the process of changing South Dix to Carson Peak, in honor of Russell M.L. Carson, author of *Peaks and People of the Adirondacks*, continues.

Maybe it was these small changes—threatening to make the mountains I love foreign to me—that finally pushed me to finish. Maybe it was my mom pulling the needlepoint canvas out of the attic and demanding I put an end to her nearly two-decade-long craft project. Maybe it was a boy who had watched me leave on camp hiking trips and congratulated me when I got back, who held my hand on a tent overnight when we were 11, who had come back into my life and had asked me to marry him, and who had no interest in hiking but wanted to see me finish what I had started back when I was little and brave.

Maybe it was all of these things. But, no matter why, in September 2018, I returned to the mountains.

**The author finishing the 46ers means her mother has been able to complete a long-term project of her own (still in progress, above).**

**W**e park at Elk Lake Trailhead, in late afternoon.

It rained earlier, but the ground is dry by the time we hike 2.3 miles to the Slide Brooke lean-to and campsite. My fiancé, Ben, makes a cup of tea. I have hot cocoa. We zip ourselves inside our tent before sunset.

In the morning, we eat oatmeal with cinnamon and fresh apples, our bowls periodically illuminated by the headlamps of earlier risers. And then we set off. One of us will carry a day pack with 5 liters of water, a first-aid kit, dry wool socks, extra layers, food,

and water treatment tablets. The other, a camera bag. We'll switch off as needed.

Hikers can access the Dix Range via a herd-path loop that starts and ends at Slide Brook. I'd already climbed Dix, so we begin with Macomb, an unavoidable repeat. We'll continue to South Dix (Carson), take the out-and-back to Grace (East Dix), and launch a gasping-for-air run up Hough. From there, we'll backtrack to Lillian Brook herd path, a steep, wooded, and less-trod route that will let us skip Dix and replenish our water before returning—about 15 miles after setting out—to Slide Brook and the parking lot.

The crux of the hike comes at the beginning. The Macomb slide, a cascading scar of debris clinging to a steep slope, embodies much of what makes hiking in the Adirondacks “dynamic”: a word my father leans on when describing something with the potential to be unpleasant. It's rugged, unexpected, lung-busting, visually stunning, and requires an acute attentiveness to footwork. Of course, we hike up it.

The act of approaching a frontier is basically the same, no matter your age. You need to plan and prepare, ration and delegate. You need to take a map—or make one, if it doesn't exist—and to consider your future in a place you haven't yet been. When Taylor Harris finished his 46ers in 2001, I was the youngest, the smallest, and the only girl on the trip. Watching him made me want to do what he'd done so I could feel how he seemed to be feeling. I didn't know then that the wanting would become what I valued the most.

We reach the top of Hough at 2:26 p.m. on September 17: 18 years, 2 months, and a few days since I summited my first 46er. As I look across the forests and lakes that stretch seemingly unbroken to the horizon, I wonder what that mountain is in the distance and whether I can hike it. 🏔️

*Pippa Biddle is a writer based in the Hudson Valley. She has been published by The Atlantic, BBC Travel, and previously by this magazine.*

**SUMMER 2019**