

Appalachian Trail Backpack Adventure – Part 1

Kittatinny Mountain Scout Reservation to Yards Creek Scout Reservation, NJ

November 15-16, 2008

This hike was supposed to be a 22-mile, 2-day, 1-night trip originating at Kittatinny Mountain Scout Reservation and ending at Yards Creek Scout Reservation. It turned into much more.

We got a late start on the 6:30am target from Ringwood due to an overslept SPL who delayed the departure until 7:00am. Then problematic mapping logistics caused another 1 hour delay while we dropped off a car at a midway trail point for an early Sunday departure by a valued member of our crew. We finally arrived at Kittatinny Mountain Scout Reservation about 10am, a full 2-hours later than desired. More importantly, it was raining cats and dogs.

It was not without some degree of trepidation that our band of 9-scouts and 5-adults hoisted our packs, ponchos, and dreams and departed from the cars. I'll never forget as we walked past the camp commissary's large front porch, the looks on the faces of 25 scouts from other troops huddled under the roofline trying to stay dry and not look bored. Here

comes Troop 76 all decked out for what at this point must have looked something like a forced march. To me this juxtaposition of perspectives was nothing short of hysterical. I couldn't help but chuckle to myself. Good or bad, we all knew this trip was going to be nothing less than memorable. After a quick picture to document the auspicious occasion, we were truly off.

We found the relevant Red Maple trail and made the @ 4 mile / 700 vertical foot ascent up the ridge to the AT white trail. As is usual, the hike's first part was tough as we got equipment adjusted. But after much huffing and puffing, we made it to the white AT trail and turned south. We planned 11.2 miles on day 1 and by 11am the rain had largely abated with temps in the low 60's and misty conditions.

For the next several hours, we were treated to a beautiful rolling terrain with some nice scenic vistas to both the east and west. The trail was well marked and had mostly dry rocky or dirt footing. On several occasions we got open meadow type openings and one setting reminded me of the English Moors with the light mist. Visibility was actually not bad and we could see an estimated 5



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miles.

Lunch was quite good; bagels, salami, and honey mustard. Nearly all of us had GORP or some snack to share. The food in general was well planned and lasted all weekend. We used both the Steripen and water filters to purify rainwater runoff from various ground sources throughout the day. Cliff bars were very much appreciated on the trail as was jerky and dried fruit.

The scouts in general did an excellent job of backpacking. We had 2-11 year olds, 2-12 year olds and the other 5 Green Bar. The only issue was wet hiking jeans on one scout. I used a single hiking pole and noticed my triceps hurt after a while. Otherwise we did well equipment-wise. The adults on the other hand tended to lag behind the rest of the group. Eli and Lou in particular were a bit slow up the hills. It wasn't until night time we realized the source of their sluggishness. Eli had packed the entire Trader Joe's spice catalog plus the



kitchen sink. In addition to real Romano cheese (which was great) he had salami, dried food, the whole adult food ration I gave him and the largest backpacking stove I have ever seen. Lou on the other hand, having experience as a national park service fire fighter, had a 50-60 lb pack complete with 2 gallons or more of water. Apparently old habits die harder than the legs and this pack in particular was impressive even by scouting standards. Where's the fire Lou?

We passed another small group of local scouts on a day hike heading north and stopped for a good chat with them along the way. They were just out for a day hike from a local troop but were glad to see some fellow scouts out and about in the



weather. The brotherhood of scouting indeed reaches far and wide, even here on a stormy day in a remote location along the Appalachian Trail.

About 3:00pm we were all together at a resting spot. Realizing we had about 4-5 miles to go in about 90 minutes of remaining daylight, the plan was to use radios to stay in touch and try to push to the final destination south of Crater Lake. The lead group was Green Bar, the mid-group was myself, Mr. Byram, and remaining scouts, with the rest of the pokey patrol

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bringing up the rear. This is where things got interesting.

During the next 90 minutes, the three groups did two important things including separating front to back by about 2 miles and becoming Pokey patrol A and B when Eli missed a white marker (admittedly hard to see, I made the same mistake) and went down a rabbit trail. At a 4:00pm radio check we realized the situation but were still pushing for the 11.2 mile mark. By 4:30pm it had become abruptly dark and it began to rain again. My radio was now on the fritz and transmitting only so we switched to cell phones. By mistake I hit the last number dialed in an attempt to call Eli and found myself on the phone with Mrs. Coniglio.

“How things going?” she asked. This was the same Mrs. C. to whom from summer camp I had described a 16-stitch thumb wound on her son as a fairly typical, garden variety, pocket



knife injury. Who knew? Digging deep into my Christian belief system and confident in our overall scout instincts, I didn't miss a beat. “Everything's fine Mrs. C., John's right here with me and we're all fine. Gotta run, we're thinking about dinner right now.” No need to mention we were more concerned about becoming dinner than having dinner after a recent game commission warning about bear activity on the AT caused us to pack our bear spray. Admit that, and our proverbial goose would have been cooked. No, instead speaking in faith, I was confident one way or another we were going to be ok. Oh the joys of leadership.

At this point it was dark, rainy and everyone was hungry, tired and wet. After adorning flashlights we headed for Crater Lake where hopefully we would have a reliable water source (ironic isn't it) off the ridge to bed down. Thunderstorms were in the forecast and I had reviewed my weather training the night before at home. I was hopeful that Mr. Leo would catch up since he had my tent space strapped to his back. But just in case he didn't, we had already figured out the new sleeping arrangements so all had a tent space if needed. There was a real chance at this point that we would have to sleep in 3 or 4 separate groups.

Everyone knew now to head to Crater Lake via cell phone messages. I tried to leave the white trail via orange to go to lakeside level. After about 200 yards, we realized it was too dark to follow the minor trail and we needed to go back to white. Just then my cell phone rings and LJ Barthelemy says “Mr. Bedard, shine your lights over the lake. We think we can see you.” So we all held our lights up and we could hear the Green Bar yelling across the lake.

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Rendezvous. We told them to backtrack up white where we met 10 minutes later – success #1.

The Seniors relayed there was a steep descent/cliff ahead which was impassible for young scouts in the rain. (We later agreed in the daylight). So moving forward was not an option despite the lack of a [ground] water source. Walking another 200 yards revealed a clearing with tall grass on the trail's west side. While it was not perfect due to a slight grade, it was indeed soft and the only ground not too rocky to take a tent stake we had seen all day. My concerns were lightning, wind, and water source. As if to punctuate the moment, a big lightning strike clapped overhead and the skies opened up with a full downpour.

Conferring with the SPL, we made the decision to pitch tents about 50 feet off the top of the ridge as far down as the clearing would allow with tent doors facing downhill. Despite much consternation from scouts and a phone call from a nervous scout to his dad, this proved to be exactly the correct decision. Per our rain contingency planning, Mr. Byram had a 10x12 tarp. I told the scouts to work as teams to have 4 scouts hold the corners while tent mates setup tents under dry cover. The scouts had never seen this done and were reluctant to get started. You could feel the tension and apprehension as the rain, wind, lightning, darkness, hunger and fatigue took their tolls. Mr. Byram jumped on

the idea and went right to work sparking others to accept the notion. As he dropped his pack, I smiled at an 11-year old scout and reassured him. “Son, you do this and in 1-hour you will be dry, warm, and working on dinner preparation.” It ultimately took 90 minutes, but in the end it all went according to plan.

However, I will not soon forget the discourse when one scout pair got under the tarp to setup their tent and we could hear “it’s a new tent, I’ve never set it up before.” So here we are holding the tarp with one hand trying to setup the tent with the other and rain pouring down the plastic into our pants and boots. Matt and I knew in 10 years this would be funny. And the tents were going up dry.

I’m halfway through helping with the second tent when as I hammer I look over and see Eli from the Pokey B patrol laying 5 feet away on his back in a pouring rain too exhausted to move. “Glad you could join us Mr. Cruz,” I quipped. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” came the reply through sheets of rain. So the whole gang had arrived – success #2.

After setting tents, the rain stopped completely and the stars actually came out



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long enough for dinner. No kidding, I can't make this stuff up. We found a large flat boulder nearby which served as a great preparation table. The older boys scrambled down to the lake to get water in collapsible water jugs and bring it back. Scouts worked in pairs to cook meals on backpack stoves and we had a feast. There were 8-9 different meals from spaghetti with sauce and real Romano cheese to lasagna and chili bean meals. Everyone ate well and we had a great time doing it. Best spaghetti I've ever had.

We also made a small campfire (we are scouts after all) and had a chance to warm up and dry some clothes. Eli revealed the rest of his



backpack contents with pudding dessert and all kinds of campfire delectables. "E" stands for eats in my book and he earned the new title Grubmaster on this one. I personally had the best darned cup of peach tea I've ever had. We made a bench to sit on and in general had a hoot of a time reveling in the day's events for the next 2 hours while roasting wet clothes on the fire. E's second nickname became "turtle" for his exhausted recline in the rain with full pack. "Did you bring enough water" became the quip for Lou and his 2 gallons. Everyone was safe, warm, and fed and we were living the outdoor adventure. This was true Scouting fellowship; unscripted, authentic, satisfying. This is why we are Scouts.



By about 11pm I headed for my tent, a two sided entry Kelty with dual vestibules from Mr. Leo – a veritable Holiday Inn by camping standards. I spread my mat and bag expectantly only to find when I reclined a huge rock squarely in my back. "My side was fine" Tom would say the next morning. So I packed clothes around it and laid on my stomach with the rock in my sternum. This position had the added benefit that I didn't slide downhill in the sleeping bag and I was too exhausted to argue over sides. Good enough I said to myself. Not 15 minutes later, it began to rain hard with wind all night. Everyone went to sleep. Mr. Leo snores with a regular rhythm instead of that choppy "please God, let him breath" staccato. Mr. Cruz on the other hand was gratefully several tents away.



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First light revealed we had made some great decisions. The campsite was nearly ideal and most stayed completely dry save one tent rainproofing malfunction. About 50 yards away was a beautiful overlook of Crater Lake and I lingered with the morning trowel. As expected, everyone's spirits improved after a night's sleep and breakfast which included hot oatmeal, dried fruit and coffee. After that, breaking camp was uneventful. We had hiked 9.2 miles the first day. Given the situation, the Green Bar made the [reasonable] decision to hike about 5 miles to our plan B pickup site at Camp NoBeBosco and stop there. So we set out in good spirits at a leisurely pace about 10am in mostly clear skies and moderate temperatures.

We noted the trail south of Crater Lake was less rocky and easier going. It made for quite a pleasant morning of hiking with good conversation and pleasant banter. Arriving at the NoBeBosco power cut about noon, we had to descend a 600 foot vertical drop on the blue trail on what was basically a large boulder scramble. Eli says he and a rock are on a personal basis now as he left something from his backside on the hillside. It was a very steep descent with packs. Forty-five minutes later we arrived in the camp wilderness survival merit badge teaching area and walked around the lake to the dining hall area for lunch. We



had arrived after >14 miles and inclement weather. We celebrated with the best tuna bagel I have ever had as we awaited pickup by Mr. Reilley.

It took quite a while to retrieve the vehicles and we had time to share in the car as we drove to the starting point. By 4pm we were departing NoBeBosco for home. Everyone was safe, sound, and tired. We could have perhaps pushed for the Yard's Creek extraction point, but in the end it worked out well with a memorable second hike in December for the 22 mile patch. And remember, we'll do just about anything to earn the patch. ■



Tom Bedard is an Assistant Scoutmaster for Troop 76 in Ringwood, NJ where he resides with his wife and three children. His son, Gabe, also participated on this adventure.