



Stewart Mountain Via Winch and Marsh Ponds (Bushwhacking the Rim of Hell)

Date: July 10, 2005

Hiking Partner: Cripple Brush

Start Time: 11:00 a.m. (too late)

End Time: 7:00 p.m. (too late also)



TOP: WINCH POND LOOKING NORTH.

BOTTOM: CEDAR GROWING FROM A LEDGE TOP.

I decided to take a break from working on house renovations and went a few miles away to explore the flume in Wilmington, NY. It was so beautiful that I said the heck with work, let's go for a short hike. Five or six miles is now short to me. I wanted a fairly gentle hike just to get out of the house of no more than about 4 or so hours. Keep that in mind during the following account...

I opted for a hike I've been contemplating for quite a while. You see, I live on the

opposite side of Stewart Mountain from Whiteface and was looking for a nice walk from the Copperas Pond area to my back door. I sought a route to memorize and walk every now and again...I wanted to explore my "backyard".

I hurriedly threw a pack together and I asked Meda, my old friend and neighbor, to drop me off at the path to Copperas. This occurred at 11:00 a.m. (a late hour to start unless you're anticipating a cakewalk of a hike...1st lesson). The path led to the intersection to Winch Pond, where I'd never been before. After studying the topo map, I decided this was the way for me. The well-worn path immediately became narrow and overgrown after the intersection. About 15 minutes later, it opened to the edge of Winch Pond. A frog, newt and the bright sun greeted me in addition to beautiful views north. The pond wasn't deep and the marshy edges were beautifully green. After taking several





pictures, I again consulted the map to find the best way to the Marsh Ponds which were over the small hill to the east.

I decided to circumvent the pond via the north end. Within several steps along the edge, I found thousands of sundews, a carnivorous plant species. They were much larger than I'd ever seen, about 3 inches in diameter. I meandered from edge to herd paths in the woods and soon found the north end, into which, flowed a clear, gentle stream. I crossed via dead trees as make-shift bridges and enjoyed the beautiful area. I stepped into the shade (literary foreshadowing) and the bushwhack began through waist high, non-coniferous (more foreshadowing) trees. They pulled at me and I soon met with the first of many ledges that I had to find my way around (and even more foreshadowing!). A large cedar grew horizontally off the edge of the cliff and then stretched up toward the sun. This was the first of many that grew in such a contorted fashion...some of which would, in the near, future help me to ascend ledges up Stewart.

I reached the top of the hill, praying that the Marsh Ponds would be at a higher elevation than Winch Pond...no such luck, and had to navigate down small



TOP: NORTH END OF WINCH POND AND MY "BRIDGES."

BOTTOM: LEDGE AFTER WINCH POND ON THE WAY TO MARSH.



BROOK FLOWING FROM STEWART.

cliffs on the other side. A small birch grew at the edge of a 6 foot ledge. I sat on the rock and jumped for the tree. Lesson #2: Don't jump for a tree without accounting for the weight of a backpack and reflecting on the heavy rains the prior day which can render a tree trunk slippery. I got down from the ledge...just not on my feet. Once I was down (and stood back up), I almost immediately walked out at the north edge of the southern most pond into the boggy area that separates the two. Lazy, clear streams riddled the placid area and created a striking view. This was enunciated by lush green grass and yellow flowers. It was 12:30 and time for lunch and a call to Deb. Somewhere in this paradise, I developed a headache that would only grow worse in the coming hours. This was accompanied by nausea.

I was going to strike for the base of Stewart, which looked down from the distance, by way of crossing



MARSH POND VIEWS.





a large beaver dam at the south end of the lake. This was quite a trek, but I didn't know if the bog would support me. It did, luckily. After crossing a few streams by way of dead trees and testing the soil, I sat down in the middle of the area and ate some cheese and turkey and looked at the map again to find my exact location in relation to Stewart and identify the small hills before it. I reasoned that I'd have to hike up and away from a stream that came down off the hills to actually find the shoulder of Stewart.

I actually located the clear running brook rather quickly and explored the area in search of an animal path to get me through the dense underbrush. I found some that were ill-defined and eventually cleared the brush and entered the spruce zone as I ascended. The grade was tiring and the heat of the day, in the 80's, was only counteracted by the breeze. I was very tired by now and the ascent was sharp. This was approximately the area where my sense of direction began to lose touch with reality. I wandered a little too far south naturally drawn to the brook. Due east just didn't feel right (though it was). After some time of pushing through the brush and mild blow down, I reached the top of the hill and sharply descended about 100 feet back to the same brook. I was going to cross over, and head up again, but wisely checked the GPS and topo map. I would have walked due south not east. I realized, at this point, just how disoriented I was. I also realized that I had to re-climb the steep hill. I did this via a small rubble slide and climbed up the last 5 feet on a sheer rock ledge using a cedar tree as an aid. In retrospect, this is where I entered the rim of hell, exhausted and withered.

The grade increased as well as the blow-down. Over or under, that was the question. I balanced on a dead tree about 4 feet above the ground to bridge another...oops. Lesson #3: Old dead trees that look slippery really are. My hands were grasping small trees, but that didn't help as my feet greeted the sky, my back the ground and my arm something very sharp between the two. I gave myself a 5 inch reminder which bled in combination with the sweat.

A note on blow-down while bushwhacking: Blow-down on a trail or "maintained" herdpeth is usually fairly fresh, though not always. In recent years, the trail has probably been maintained, even negligibly. Anyway, it generally supports weight. I weigh about 150 lbs. and crashed through more than a few large trees that were basically soil deceptively shaped into the form of a horizontal tree trunk. Nature's joke on me.

Soon after initiating my latest blood flow, I came across a huge glacial erratic on Stewart's flank measuring about 20 feet tall and about 15 feet in girth. On the far side was a 4 foot hole dug underneath. Needless to say, it was not a skunk and I didn't shine a flashlight in to double check. I did, however, follow the fresh path away and east up the mountain. It was a very well defined path, with decent sized trees crushed underfoot and all the small branches broken off the close spruce trees to a height of about 3 feet. I tried to veer from the bear's trail several times, only to be met by impenetrable groves of spruce, walls of blow-down or boulders. I gave up and followed the trail realizing the bear knew the area and was smarter than me in this instance. Lesson #4: Follow the animal paths, they know the terrain.



COPPERAS POND FROM THE SHOULDER OF STEWART.

I don't remember whether it was, on the hill prior to Stewart or Stewart, but there was a beautiful view of Copperas pond in the distance. I yearned to be back there. This disappeared quickly as I continued ever upward heading for home, but feeling increasingly farther away from it. I normally hike around 2.5 m.p.h. As I got ever closer to the summit, I ground down to about .1/4 m.p.h. in the dense cripple brush. My legs were exhausted and worked like slinkies. My arms were starting to develop small cuts from wearing a short sleeve shirt in the sharp spruce branches. I didn't expect this. Lesson #5: Expect the unexpected, at least to some degree. My body was exhausted and the GPS seemed to say .5 miles to the summit indefinitely. Every time I would climb up one of the many small ledges (between 5 and 20 feet tall), I was greeted by more cripple brush hugging the ledge at the top. I was flanking the summit on the south and decided to forego trying for the true

summit so very close to the north. I couldn't push through any more. It was too dense, painful and I was beginning to feel trapped and hopeless. I even considered spots to spend the night if darkness came upon me. It was 4:30 and I was making little progress.

I decided to descend to the south and flank the mountain from a lower altitude where the cripple brush was, hopefully, less dense. This involved climbing down cliffs. I reached a 20 foot section and shimmied down a pine tree to descend. I then tried to track more southeasterly, but couldn't put the sun at my back since it wouldn't shine through the dense forest. I lost track of direction and re-climbed nearly parallel and 300 feet vertical back to within about 40 feet of where I started the descent. I realized this while studying the GPS track at about midnight after the hike. I had been using the compass to find the right direction and then used the sun to keep on track. That worked much of the time, but not always. It was my consistent helper non-the-less. My GPS track looked like that of a drunken sailor, at times, as I fell into disorientation (or delirium). After all it was about 85 degrees and humid.

I finally gave up and headed due east no matter what was in the way. Many times, I had to stop to find the least dense patch of trees. None were wide enough to get my shoulders



through as I used trekking poles to push them aside and swim through them. Each step brought searing pain to my forearms which were beginning to feel raw from the hundreds of tiny cuts and larger scratches. I finally ignored them. On the positive side, the spruce traps and sod holes that I intermittently fell into, briefly took my mind off my arms. I found a small clearing, called Deb and told her I'd be out no time soon. I tried not to let on that I was so disconcerted, but she read the tone of my voice correctly and worried in Michigan.

Somewhere in the middle of the cripple brush mess I had a flashback to a conversation Rico and I had about making T-Shirts advertising the 46r naked bushwhacking team. Looking at the scratches all over my arms, I surmised what other parts might look/feel like in a similar condition. Guess we'll ditch that idea as a reality....as if we ever had any doubts.

After hanging up, I pushed back into the brush, moved to the right and yelled out as a stick poked my ear drum. That was a completely new type of pain. As a matter of fact, if you were in the state of NY and outside at approximately 5:00 p.m., the distance yell was probably me. I'd at least reached level ground as the sun began to wane slightly. I was very dejected and could only put one foot in front of another. The endless spruce traps, blow-down and clawing trees made me nearly delirious. The GPS distance to my house ticked ever so slowly by. I briefly thought of taking a photo of the cripple brush, but immediately thought of the effort required and feared revisiting the images would induce post traumatic stress.

I did finally descend and the cripple-brush became only slightly more intermittent with larger trees. I then met my silent concerns as I found the top of cliffs I feared might exist. I decided to try my tree shimmying trick to no avail off a 50 foot cliff. It was too dangerous to try. I backtracked back up and found other ways to scale the various ledges. Some led to more dead ends. This frustrating maze went on for about 30 minutes.

It did let up after that, but only slightly, as I found well used deer trails that wound east. My legs just wouldn't cooperate by this point and I was still over two miles from home stumbling across the dozens of rivulets spawned by the mountain. I fell several times in uneventful and ungraceful little tumbles from my poor footing and fawn-wobbly legs.

After some time, with considerably less sun, I found my way to Lewis Brook and readjusted my orientation. I'd hiked through more cripple brush down to the brook. It flowed slightly more southerly than I wanted to go. The steep banks of spruce made an exit treacherous. I finally made it up, but my instincts and the herd paths kept bringing me back to the water. I made an overcorrection just to keep away. The paths finally led to a beautiful flume/waterfall series some 1.83 miles from my house. I did not stop to admire, but marked it in my GPS. I wandered a little farther east and picked up a 4 wheeler path which brought me directly to my house.

I was battered and bruised when I arrived home at 7:00 pm after my "quick relaxing hike." I spent the entire day alone, even on the maintained path to Winch Pond. Seeing another human after that, would have been blind luck. Overall lesson: Research the area before



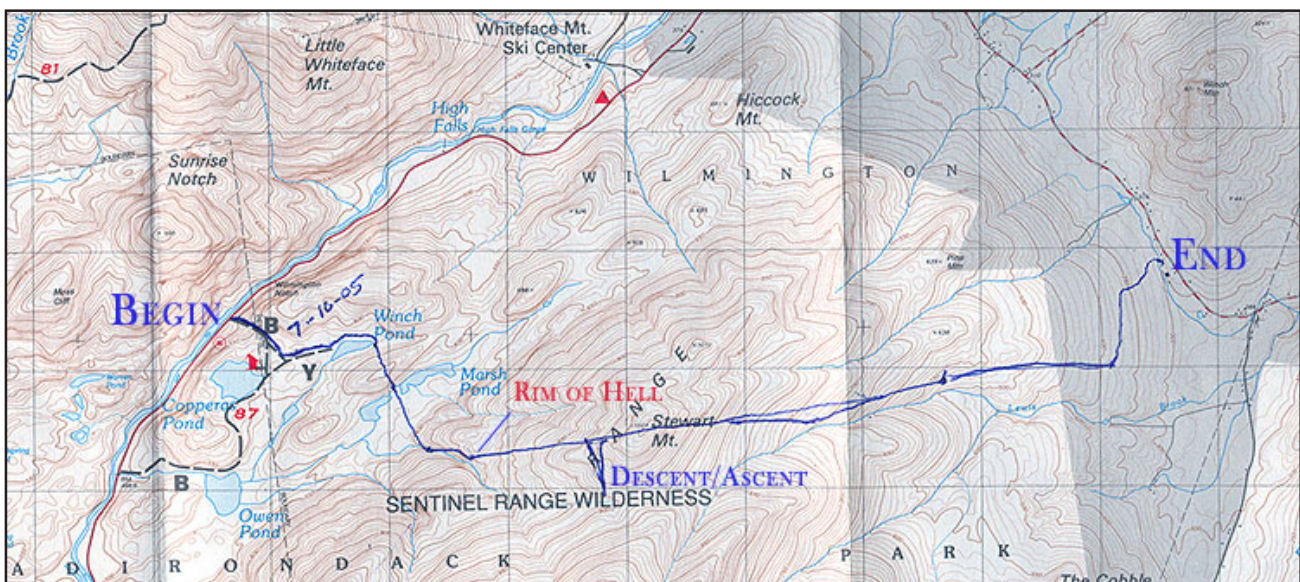
*TOP: OUTSIDE THE HOUSE WITH THE REMAINS OF MY SHIRT AND A SCRAPE.
BOTTOM: CLOSE-UP OF MY ARM WITH CRIPPLE BRUSH BATTLE SCARS.*





wandering into the center of the wilderness. I did, however, learn that I can employ several of the skills I've acquired in the last several years and keep a level head in an overwhelming situation.

I can honestly say that this was the least enjoyable hike that I've ever taken. I was no less tired than after the 16 hour Seward range hike and twice as battered. The hike to the far side of the Marsh Ponds was heaven. The rest was hell.



TOP: RECOVERING AFTER THE HIKE.

BOTTOM: TOPOGRAPHIC MAP OF THE DAY.