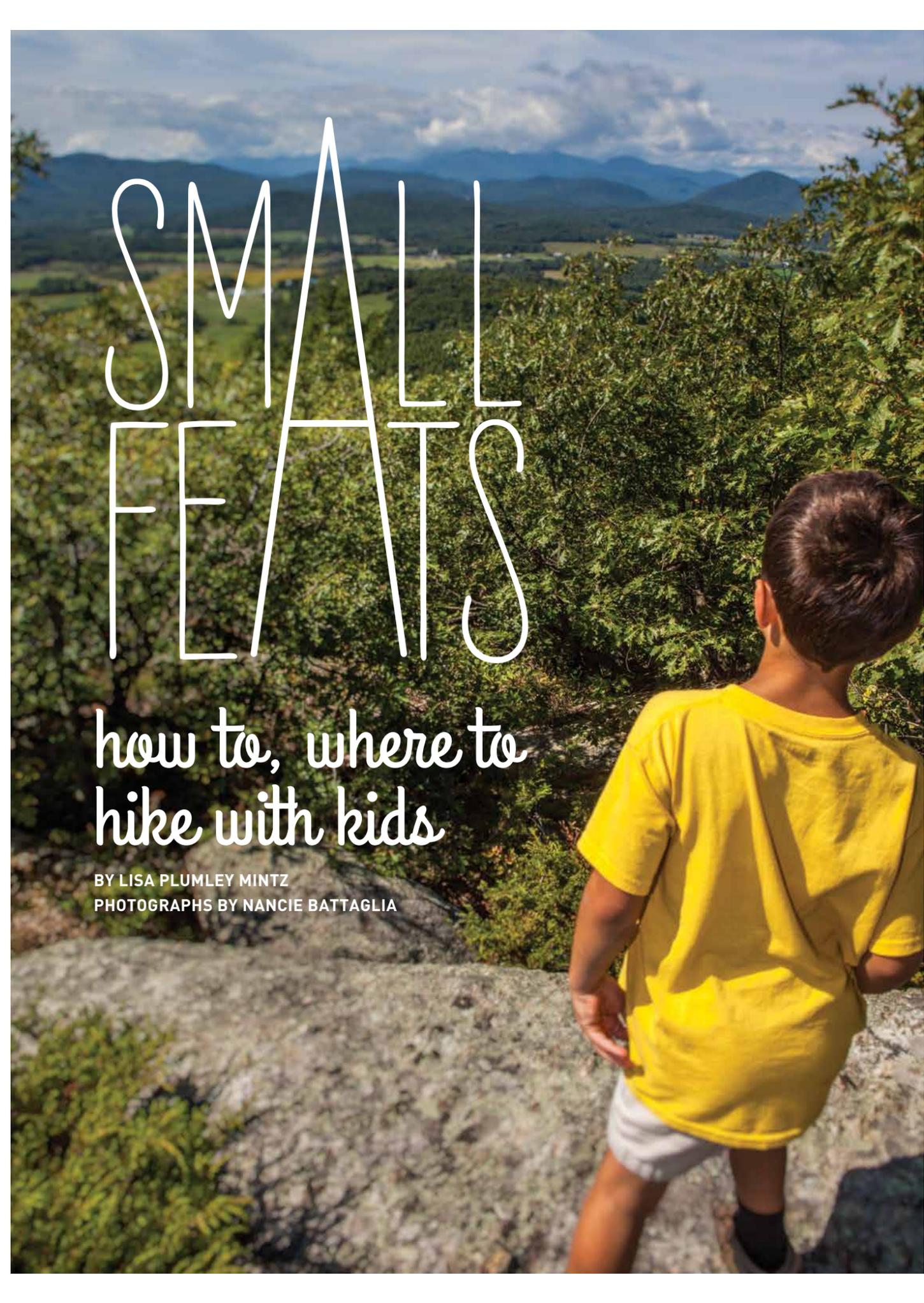




Cobble Hill, in Lake Placid. Facing Page: Coon Mountain, in Westport.



SMALL FEATS

how to, where to hike with kids

BY LISA PLUMLEY MINTZ
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

I AM NOT

one of those people who can gaze at the Adirondack mountain summits and know them by name. I can't boast of climbing the 46 High Peaks, let alone identify them all. I own a backpack and a pair of hiking

boots—both of which I purchased when I was still listening to cassette tapes—but trekking poles and gaiters are beyond me. I can, however, spot the toad camouflaged in the leaves and the snake disguised as a tree root. I can find rocks shaped like hearts and dinosaurs in the clouds. I can pick out an adequate hiking stick and a fallen tree perfect for use as a balance beam. I can do these things because I frequently hike with kids. They taught me.

I moved to the Adirondacks in 2004. I had spent some time on Cranberry Lake growing up—my grandfather attended, taught at and directed the Ranger School in Wanakena—and my dad's family still owns a couple of homes on the lake. Wanting to escape post-9/11 Washington DC, my boyfriend and I decided to move to where the mountains play with the lakes and rivers. We spent the first night in our new home watching a lightning storm over the mountains and we vowed to never take the beauty of the area for granted.

Fast forward five years: the boy and I got married and had two children. Suddenly I was busy with a three-year-old and an infant, and I realized we very nearly forgot about the vow. That wasn't the worst of it—if we weren't careful, our children would take for granted hearing frogs at night instead of cars, seeing tall mountains instead of buildings and feeling the cool river water instead of hot pavement under their feet. Things needed to change.

We started getting to know some families with young children. The parents of these kids had hiked the Appalachian Trail, knew the best routes to climb crazy rock faces, and took week-long kayak trips with only a paddle, a book of matches and aluminum foil. These were the families who would get us on the right track, or in this case, trail. But I was intimidated: I didn't know where to start and I didn't want to admit my ignorance.

In the fall of 2009, a friend invited my children and me to hike the Silver Lake Bog trail. She discovered the hike in the book *Kids on the Trail! Hiking with Children in the Adirondacks* by Rose Rivezzi and David Trithart. The hike was a success—and it was so simple! It involved gathering like-minded people and their kids to frolic in places they already appreciated. The experience inspired me to start a family hiking group the following year. The *Kids on the Trail* book guided us in the begin-

Family Trailopy

The northeastern section of the Adirondacks hosts scores of trails perfect for exploring with younger kids. Listed below are some of our favorites.

BLUEBERRY HILL TRAIL SYSTEM

Lord Road, Elizabethtown

(There are also trailheads along Bronson Way.) With 30 1-mile-or-less trails, this system is diverse enough to please everyone. There are two summits, one with a lean-to, and plenty of opportunities to patch together your group's desired distance. Find a printable map and trail descriptions at www.champlainareatrails.com.

STAG BROOK FALLS TRAIL

Route 86, Wilmington

This trail is short, just steep enough for little legs, and travels along waterfalls and ponds. It's about an hour's walk if you don't stop to splash around, but we wear bathing suits under our clothes and take plenty of time exploring the crisp, cascading water. The trailhead is at the base of Whiteface Mountain Ski Center, which means plenty of parking, bathrooms and the potential for a gondola ride.

MOUNT GILLIGAN

Scriver Road, New Russia

This trip offers nice rock scrambles and beautiful views, particularly in autumn. After about a mile, there's a clearing for folks who are tired and ready for lunch, but the trail continues a bit farther if you're not ready for the trip to end. The Boquet River lies adjacent to the parking area, providing a perfect place to cool feet after the hike.

COON MOUNTAIN

Halds Road, Westport

This one-mile path is part of Champlain Area Trails (www.champlainareatrails.com). Here, the forest just feels old—more than once my girls have imagined fairies popping out of holes the creatures fashioned in trees. It's just that kind of place.

HENRY'S WOODS

Bear Cub Road, Lake Placid

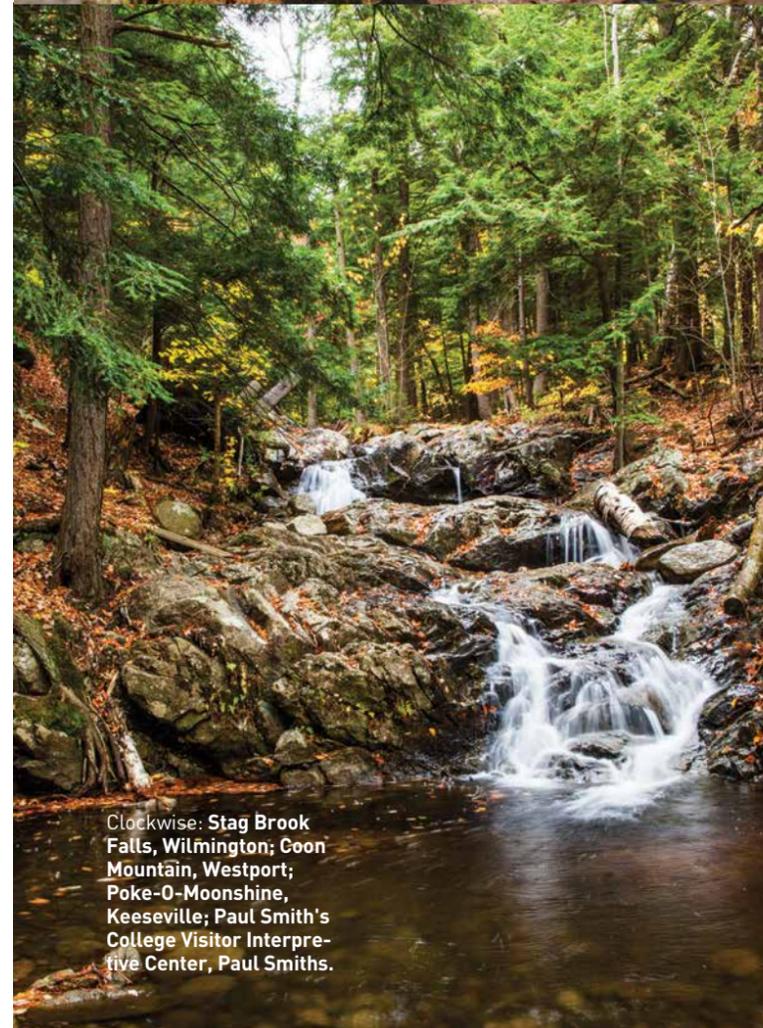
This relatively new system offers a variety of trails—ranging from .3 to 2 miles—perfect for families to explore and play. There are a few nice vistas scattered throughout the network, and several of the trails would be good for a toddler's first hike off Mom or Dad's back.

PAUL SMITH'S COLLEGE VISITOR INTERPRETIVE CENTER

Route 30, Paul Smiths

www.adirondackvic.org

This place has a bit of everything: a trail system providing a variety of 1- to 9-mile hikes with diverse landscape, lookout platforms, a bog walk, interpretive signage, guided talks and walks, and a butterfly house that rarely disappoints, especially on a sunny, warm day. A playground and picnic tables are perfect for post-hike shenanigans.



Clockwise: Stag Brook Falls, Wilmington; Coon Mountain, Westport; Poke-O-Moonshine, Keeseville; Paul Smith's College Visitor Interpretive Center, Paul Smiths.

Tips for the Trail

When selecting a hike, **have a destination in mind**, be it a lean-to, body of water or summit. Plan on reaching your destination, but take it in stride if you don't. Consider distance, elevation change and difficulty, but also think about the weather: Are the trails going to be wet? Is it hot? Will it be overcast? Save those big, bold summits for bluebird days.

Be aware of **hiking group size restrictions**—in the High Peaks, no more than 15 people can day-hike together—and practice Leave No Trace.

Have a bag you always leave packed containing a simple **first-aid kit**—including decorated band-aids, perfect for those boo-boos only your kid can see—light emergency gear, bug dope, sunscreen, tissues and some **field guides** on animal tracks, trees or mushrooms. On hiking day just add **snacks**—a lot of snacks—**water**, a camera and a trash bag. **Magnifying glasses and binoculars** can live in kids' backpacks if they want to bring them.

Allow children to **travel at their own pace**. Speedy kids can hike with adults in the front of the line, while other adults can hang behind with kids needing extra time to meander.

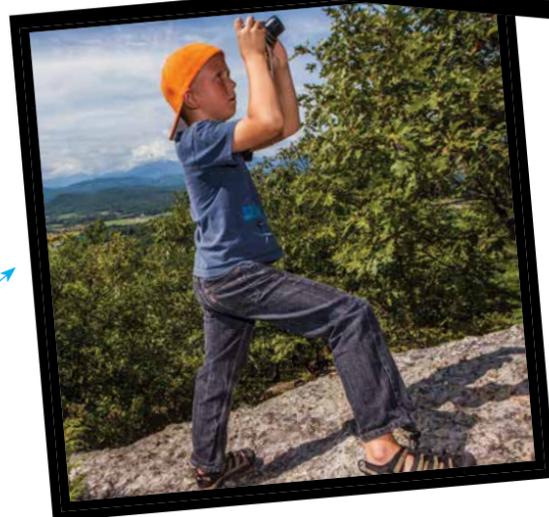
If your children are collectors, take **photographs** of your kids with items in the woods instead of pocketing them. Have them pose holding the scads of acorns and the rock shaped like a heart so there is no need to take them home.

Investigate the toad in the leaves and the snail crossing the trail, but remind children the forest is their home and they don't want to be held or poked.

When arriving at the destination, **allow time for kids to explore**. Be flexible and open to the idea of lingering or getting on your way. Remember that not everyone in a group has to do everything together.

Let your kids point the **camera** sometimes. You'd be surprised what draws their attention.

Consider a **gratitude ritual**—it doesn't need to be over-the-top, just a simple act to remind everyone how fortunate they are to have such a place to explore.



Lofty Goals

I have never really set any hiking challenges for my kids—I feel like just being outside and exploring is enough—but I understand why people do. It can provide a wonderful impetus to get both adults and kids excited about the adventure. The following are a few goal-oriented programs for gentle hiking:

The Saranac Lake 6ers involves hiking the six peaks (McKenzie, Ampersand, Scarface, St. Regis, Haystack and Baker) surrounding Saranac Lake. Some of these mountains could be difficult for little legs, but the challenge certainly provides something to strive for.

The authors of *Kids on the Trail! Hiking with Children in the Adirondacks* teamed up with the Laurentian Chapter of the Adirondack Mountain Club to provide an incentive to get on the trail. They'll send a nifty patch to a child who hikes two trails from each of the eight sections of the book, totaling 16 hikes. This program is perfect for kids of all ages and experience, as the list of trails is diverse.

A new program starting to gain ground is **The 29er Challenge**. Created for people not wanting or able to tackle the Adirondacks' 46 highest summits but still interested in a similar goal, this is an ambitious feat for little ones. It could, however, be perfect for those families ready for the next level of hiking. Find the list of parkwide peaks—ranging from around 2,000 feet to just under 4,600—on the Adirondack 29er Challenge Facebook page.

ning, and members of the group helped expand our repertoire. Five years later, hikes have led us all over the northeastern Adirondacks, from Saranac to Keene Valley, Paul Smiths to Whallonsburg.

Our group hikes once a week—on a weekday to avoid crowds—usually starting in late May and going through the fall, until the weather gets too blustery (or, really, until we get burned out). In early May I send an email to ask what day and time works best for everyone and if there are specific trails people want to tackle in the upcoming season. I pick one day as our “hike day” and try to stick to it—consistency seems to be appreciated. Then I email the group on Sundays, indicating the hike for the week, and the day and time. I provide trailhead directions and try to give a short description of the trek, or at least provide a link with the information. If it seems like the weather may not cooperate, I'll set up possible alternative days.

When I started the group, I invited friends I knew would be interested in forming a hiking community. In some cases I assumed these folks were already exploring with their families, because they were, for the most part, well-seasoned hikers. In actuality, they knew the High Peaks encompassing their neighborhood, but not the gentle hikes available for their broods. Like me, they weren't quite sure where to start. Our small informal group discovered trails and developed strategies together. We found searching for the next trail marker or different types of mushrooms, and even picking up litter, to be great incentives in getting kids up the trail. Songs, airplane arms, train chains and follow-the-leader also advanced the pack. I can't say we were so quiet that other hikers didn't know we were coming, but we did ensure bears were nowhere near. For the most part, hikers we encountered were happy to see children using the trail and impressed at the parents dedicated enough to hoist them on their backs.

I value everything hiking with other families has given me over the years—more than I could have ever anticipated. Perhaps most importantly, it has on more than one occasion pushed us out the door. Sometimes life gets in the way of good intentions, but when we made the commitment to explore trails with other folks, we had to follow through. When my daughter was in her pajamas and whining about leaving the house (OK, there may have been a few times it was me whining in my pajamas), I would say, “Ava is counting on you! Let's go!” A little accountability goes a long way.

Our group outings have allowed us to explore the distinct landscapes of the northeastern Adirondacks. I don't think it occurred to me just how diverse the area really is: the High Peaks, certainly, but also the Champlain Valley, the Tri-Lakes region and around Black Brook. All of these provide amazing hiking opportunities, and with an ever-growing list of trails to discover, we will never be bored. 🌿

