

THREE DAYS IN THE SANTANONIS

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A FATHER BRINGS HIS BOYS ON
ONE OF THE TOUGHEST TREKS IN THE HIGH PEAKS

BY BRIAN CASTNER

MY THREE YOUNG SONS ARE TOUGH and feral boys. Over the long winter, hockey players and wrestlers, puppies in a pile when shut in at home. With the spring thaw, though, I hear the mountains calling, and together we vent that pent up energy at the hiking trail.

But there was a moment last summer—the 26th of August, too late in the afternoon, 50 feet below the summit of Panther Peak, in the remote Santanoni Range—when, tough or not, I feared I had pushed my boys too far.

We had been hiking for 10 hours, and we had just bagged our third High Peak of the day. But instead of celebrating, my youngest son was full of exhausted tears, and so the four of us scampered off Panther's scraggly crest as fast as we could. Sunset was only two hours away. Weather

was coming in, the clouds thickening and wind howling as we crossed an open rock face. My boys were all ahead of me on the descent, bundled in fleeces and knit hats, and covered in mud nearly to their armpits.

My two oldest boys are Martin and Sam, 12 and nine years old. Seeking the comparative cover of the dwarf pine trees below us, they billy-goat hopped from outcropping to outcropping until they hit a sheer ledge. Years of footfalls had worn the dirt herd path to soup, and they had to choose between slick boots on slick rock or the knee-deep mud that framed the crag. The boys picked the mud, sliding on their seats.

The author with his sons, Sam, Martin and Eli, at the start of their wilderness adventure. Pages 50–51: The Santanoni Range.



SANTANONI RANGE PHOTOGRAPH BY CARL HEILMAN II



ILLUSTRATION BY MARK WILSON: SANTANONI RANGE HIKING PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR (3)

Eli, their youngest brother, tried to follow, running on ahead of me on his short legs. But once he hit the edge, he hesitated.

A gale wind scoured the mountain. In the tableau behind my son, I saw dark gray clouds tumbling, and a wall of rain crossing the valley toward us.

Eli saw it too, and he turned toward me in fear, the watery signs of his frustration streaming down his face. That was the moment I knew I had pushed us too far. I had brought this on myself.

“What are we even doing here?” my six-year-old son begged from me in a wail.

Good question.

YOU DON'T END UP on 4,442-foot Panther Peak by accident. Well off the standard tourist route, nearly every hiker there is pursuing the same goal: summitting all 46 Adirondack mountains over 4,000 feet. My boys and I live on Grand Island, an utterly flat clay plug in the Niagara

SAM AND ELI WERE INCONSOLABLE, JUST WANTED TO SIT AND CRY, AS IF SANTANONI MIGHT HEAR THEM AND GRANT MERCY. THEY WERE DONE WITH THE MOUNTAIN, BUT UNFORTUNATELY IT WASN'T DONE WITH US.

River north of Buffalo, on the far edge of 46er Fever. I have contracted it, though, and have convinced my boys that we should do the 46 together, before they are all grown and out of the nest for good.

The deadline will come fast; I blinked my eyes and suddenly Martin, my baby, had the shoulders and frame of a young man. So we started as soon as possible—Eli went up Giant Mountain at five—but, thus far, had managed only four relatively easy climbs.

Last summer we tried a more ambitious excursion, multiple summits we could easily hit from a central base camp, with this caveat: as a general rule of thumb, I try not to make my kids hike more miles a day than their numerical age.

Checking the maps, the best option seemed to be a range in the High Peaks' southwest corner, an isolated area we had never explored before, about 10 miles north of Route 28N. Three peaks clustered tightly together: Santanoni, Panther and Couchsachraga. At the foot of the main massif, and only about four (Continued on page 102)



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miles from the trailhead, sits Bradley Pond, a natural campsite with guaranteed water. We could hike to our base camp the first day, do all three peaks the second, and walk out the third. According to the online trail guide, our longest day would be 8.5 miles. More than Eli's age, but only barely, right? How hard could it be?

I didn't know at the time that Couchsachraga is Algonquin for "dismal wilderness." We would learn why later.

The initial twinge of self-doubt arrived early, at the washed-out bridge we encountered two hours into our trek. Not the first washed-out bridge, mind you, but the second one, with the canted "Dangerous Bridge Ahead" sign and the tumbling logs and rapids beneath and half-rotted staircase leading off the opposite bank.

"Dad, I thought you said this was still an official trail," said Martin. "And the herd path is later on?"

True, I thought. How much worse does it get? We all dropped our packs, and Martin made his way via several large boulders, while I tucked Sam and Eli under each arm like duffel bags and carried them across, making a second trip for our gear.

The unease was reinforced an hour later, when we met our very first fellow hiker, an older man coming down the trail toward us. He had a walking stick and battered shoes and a mesh-backed 46er hat.

"Where are you going? This guy looks ready to go up Everest," said the old 46er, and pointed at Martin, who then grinned in spite of himself. For the first time, Martin was using my wife's backpack; the overstuffed rig was towering over his head, and was nearly as heavy as mine.

I told the man we wanted to be 46ers too, but had just started our quest. He shook his head.

"Getting the nasty ones out of the way early, huh?" he said, and then pressed on.

"What does he mean, Dad?" asked Eli.

"Don't worry about it," I said, but inwardly I wondered whether the Santanonis had a reputation of which

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we were unaware. My answer would come over the next three days: at the height of summer, we would see less than a dozen other hikers.

The path started wide as two pickup trucks, and at first we made good time. Martin was at that age when he seemed taller each morning, and every pair of pants showed his ankles. He set his own pace, a rambling side-to-side shuffle that quickly outdistanced the short labored steps of his youngest brother. Sam, middle child and eager to please, stayed with me and smiled. Eli trudged on, and asked when he would grow too.

But then the trail narrowed to ankle-twisting single track as we climbed parallel to the flume of Santanonis Brook. We slowed with the footing, but then the track deteriorated further. Beavers had created a wetland at the top of the ridge, and before long, the path was not so much wet as submerged, stagnant water occasionally bridged by rotting pine corduroy. The online guide had warned of mud, but this went beyond any I had experienced in the Adirondacks.

The boys were grumbling about dinner when we finally found the sign for the trail to Times Square, the central hub to the three peaks' spokes. We took the branch and almost immediately hit a mucky swamp, clusters of drowned pines blocking our view. Unsure, we followed the path to the right, which, if possible, then got even wetter, became one with a stream feeding the quagmire. We skirted the banks and our pace slowed to a crawl, the boys said again they were hungry, daylight started failing.

We're on the wrong path, I thought. And then I heard a massive sucking sound behind me, like a giant took a slurp on a huge straw.

I turned around, and there was Eli up to his crotch in mud. All four of us were frozen in shock, and we looked at each other a moment, before Eli's eyes switched from surprise to intense need. "Get me outta here!" he yelled. When I lifted him up, his boots were suctioned off to the bottom of the bog, and I had to

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lie on my belly to fish them out. We needed to camp. Anywhere. Immediately.

Can you believe that just then, around the next bend, we found the perfect campsite? High flat ground and dry grass and soft moss beds and toadstools, like something out of a fairy tale. While Sam and Martin set up the tent, Eli changed pants, and I washed them in the stream and hung them from a bare tree limb to dry. After a dinner of rehydrated pasta primavera, the boys crawled in their sleeping bags and played cards, and I slung our food bag over a tipped pine. Moonlight played on the trickle of a creek running by the camp, and when I went to sleep I listened for bears and raccoons getting into our food, but instead heard only bugs and burbles and the breeze through birch leaves. No more doubts. We were the only humans in a hundred square miles of wilderness.

The next morning we made an alpine start, on the trail at dawn. We retraced our steps, discovered our wrong turn from the night before, and after crossing a beaver dam, eventually found the way up the ridge. But our detour added a mile onto our longest day, and cost us an hour of daylight. We would miss it by the end.

The trail rose, the ground dried, the trees thinned, and Bradley Pond appeared in the distance to our left, grand as the satellite photos promised. But then we crossed the cascade of Panther Brook, and the path shot straight up like a bottle rocket. To call the trail shin-breaking is kind; before long I was lifting Eli from boulder to boulder. The mile-and-a-half ascent to Times Square took a glacial three hours, a quarter of our normal pace.

Times Square is a patch of dirt sheltered by several large boulders and knobby trees, a few logs to sit on, the remains of a fire pit. To keep kids happy on the trail, I've learned to feed them chocolate every so often. There is a precedent—Shackleton did the same thing in Antarctica, after all. So we had a quick Hershey's snack, I cached a few water bottles, and then we pressed on.

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My plan went like this: bag the farthest peak first, and save the easiest for the end. Do them in the reverse order, I figured, and the kids would struggle to psych themselves up to finish out the string. Couchsachraga was a mile and a half away, Santanoni a mile, and Panther only a half-mile round trip. Five and a half miles of hiking from Times Square, plus the trip down. All in the eight hours before sunset? We can still do this, I thought.

Ominously, though, the trail to Couchsachraga started with a descent. It dropped and dropped, and my heart with it. Couchsachraga is only 3,820 feet, classified as one of the 46 because of a historical survey mistake. This weighed on me all the way to the bottom of the saddle, where we discovered a primordial swamp, with dinosaur-age red mosses and pitcher plants and leaning fences of tombstone trunks. I had never seen a swamp on top of a mountain before; the Algonquin were right. The boys fanned out and found a soggy way through, and shortly after noon we arrived at the summit, a tree-encased bump barely large enough for all of us to sit and eat peanut butter bagel sandwiches. We met two women there, one wearing a bandanna like she had lost her hair in cancer treatment. She looked at my six-year-old and declared, "How old are you? You're an inspiration."

As we trudged back, retracing root staircases, I checked my watch more frequently, as if time might slow if carefully tracked. If we can leave for Santanoni by 2:45, I bargained with myself, we can still make all three peaks. We missed our mark, fell a little farther behind, pressed on anyway. At 4,607 feet, Santanoni is the highest Adirondack peak west of the Hudson. Three false summits tease you on the way up, but the route was dry and we enjoyed our best view of the day.

Still, always this thought: We're running out of time.

It was 5 p.m. when we entered Times Square for the third time, and nerves were frayed. After 10 hours, Eli said

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that while he wasn't tired, his feet were, and they didn't want to walk anymore. Sam had been silent for hours, but now he dropped to a rock and burst into tears. A strong wind blew in clouds that hid the sun, and our spirits fell with the temperature.

I have learned this about being the father of sons in the wilderness: bind all the scrapes, cuddle every fuss, and, under no circumstances, never ever admit to being tired, wet, cold or unsure of yourself. A young child's resiliency is based, in large part, on the confidence of the parent.

And anyway, this moment of truth was the whole reason we took on the challenge of the 46 in the first place. "Panther is right there, only a 15-minute walk away," I said. "We'll all regret it if we don't do it now, and have to come back up here another time. It may suck for the next few hours, but tomorrow you'll be happy we did it." Life rarely presents a parental teaching moment with such clarity and immediate payoff.

Martin was strong and ready to go, but young Eli and Sam remained unconvinced. So I took off everyone's boots and bandaged toes and ankles to prevent blisters. I succeeded partially; Sam's big toenail went black for a few months after our trip. Once everyone had their feet checked, tears dried and tummies filled with chocolate, I pushed the boys to complete our quest.

Which is how we found ourselves exhausted and disillusioned coming down off Panther Peak, miles from dinner and shelter and—most importantly—any chance we might learn a positive lesson about determination and resiliency.

Two hours from sunset, in a driving storm, we finally descended the muddy and near-vertical ridge. Martin was old enough to recognize the potentially dangerous combination of darkness and rain, but Sam and Eli were inconsolable, just wanted to sit and cry, as if Santanoni might hear them and grant mercy. They were done with the mountain, but unfortunately, it wasn't done with us. I took turns carrying them

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down. Like a chimpanzee, belly to belly, for greater stability.

Night caught us at Bradley Pond, but by then the worst was done. I held Eli the whole way, but at the end Sam said he wanted to finish on his own. To cross the small stream next to our tent, he resorted to crawling on his hands and knees. "Do you want me to help, Sammy?" I asked. "No, I want to do it," he said. I can respect that, I thought. And then, with relief: Maybe I haven't inadvertently taught the wrong lesson after all.

Eli, my biggest eater, skipped dinner and went straight to bed. Too tired to do any real cooking, I heated up a few beef stew ration packets left over from my days in the military. We gobbled them up by the light of my head lamp, three small shivering figures huddled around a small glow, and then made for our sleeping bags, barely pausing to remove our muddy pants.

I didn't think about moonlight or rain or critters scavenging our food. I thought about my pulsating feet, and completely satisfied, I fell asleep in a moment.

The boys had to be rousted from their beds in the morning. We broke camp, stuffed tired toes into boots, and descended the rocky trail. After the trials of the previous two days, the path looked smooth and straight, the two bridgeless river crossings a trifle. Eli sang songs, Sam munched on dried fruit, and by the time we made it to the parking lot, the sun was even shining.

"Where are we hiking next time, Dad?" Sam asked.

"You're ready for more?" I said, and pride swelled in me.

"It wasn't so bad," Sam said. "And it's August, so at least there were no bugs." 🐛

Brian Castner is a former explosive ordnance disposal officer and veteran of the Iraq War. He's the author of *All the Ways We Kill and Die* (Arcade, 2016) and the war memoir *The Long Walk* (Doubleday, 2012). His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Wired*, *Outside* and on *National Public Radio*.

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