

Giant Mountain on Snowshoes, January 11, 2010
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The temperature was in the mid-teens when I pulled away from our Newcomb camp at 5:05 AM. An hour and twenty minutes later (47 miles), I reached the parking area for the Ridge Trail approach to Giant Mountain, across from Chapel Pond on Route 73 and, using a Tikka headlamp (it was an hour before sunrise) registered at 6:40 AM. I wore Sorel felt-pac boots with Smartwool white liner socks and heavy blue Thorlo hiking socks, with my 25" Tubbs Venture snowshoes.

The trail, so well packed that the 'shoes were required only for traction, climbed steeply from Route 73. In places, water had flowed over the trail and frozen. Even this early in the hike I was grabbing trailside trees, roots, and shrubs to pull myself up, and wondered how in the world I was ever going to get down those sections. Using the traction of the snowshoes' front claws required ascending steep sections on the balls of one's feet, working quadriceps and stretching Achilles tendons. Not yet trusting the heel claws, I climbed rapidly, almost jogging.

At 7:10 AM I was able to turn off the Tikka, and about 7:30 snapped a photo (#1 here) from the first clear overlook of Chapel Pond and Route 73. (The truck, just visible in return trip's afternoon sun, is behind trees at the left of the visible road.) The rising sun gave a bright orange tint to some of the clouds; the sky over the Great Range, mixing orange with bright blue, white, and gray, was spectacular. After a short descent and another steep rise, we (the trail and I) descended to the pleasant pond known as Giant's Washbowl. To my left a trail passed its south shore to connect with the Roaring Brook Trail, but I headed right, crossing its outlet to continue on the Ridge Trail. The signs reported that, in fifty minutes, I'd come 0.7 miles and, to the summit, had 2.2 miles to go.

Continuing to rise, steep short ascents mixed with moderately level and pleasant sections. We reached the trail to Giant's Nubble at about 7:50 AM, and again began to climb steeply. Shortly after 8:00 I managed to clamber up a sizable ice flow, using a few inches of a projecting root and then some slender balsam shrubs to pull myself up, again wondering if I would need crampons to descend. At 8:30 AM I took two photos at an overlook above Giant's Washbowl; the self-photo was blurred, and the same photo snapped on the descent has better light so it's included (#2) here. Shortly after 9:00 AM I crossed open rock faces with cairns marking the trail, and ten minutes later reached the small knob in the trail known as "the bump," choosing the path around (to the left) rather than over it. Snow had drifted across parts of this bypass, though the trail itself was still well packed. I found the trail's mild ascent through snow-laden firs so pleasant that I tried to capture the feeling in a photograph (#3). But as the ascent brought more cold and wind, and steep and icy sections reappeared, I frequently paused to catch my breath and allow my heart rate to drop. Tired and huffing and puffing from what I thought was necessary climbing technique — swiftly charging up narrow, snowy sections of trail on the balls of my feet, with no pauses for rest — I wondered when the climbing would ever end. That was the last photo before the summit.

Enjoying the occasional short level sections, I met the sign for the Roaring Brook Trail at 9:30: It's 2.9 miles to Route 73 that way, 2.2 miles by my Ridge Trail. Thinking about the worrisome icy descents that would face me on Ridge, I considered returning by Roaring Brook. Continuing to rise steeply, with some level areas, I reached the trail to Rocky Peak Ridge, heading off to the right (east), at 10:20 AM. "Forget it!" say my audio notes; besides



1: Chapel Pond and Route 73, about sunrise



2: Giant's Washbowl and a sliver of Chapel Pond

my being exhausted and cold, that trail had not been broken. The sign said “Giant 0.2 mi” to the left; I wasn’t sure how long 0.2 miles would take, but moved along.

The open rock ledge that is Giant’s summit arrived, to my surprise, after only about five minutes. Proceeding across it, I found a red trail marker signifying the end of the Roaring Brook ascent, and snapped a couple of photos of my pack and poles against it. The wind was fierce and cold, and the gray overcast sky offered no views, so I didn’t linger directly on the summit. I took a couple of photos, including one of myself crouching on my snowshoes as close to the ledge as I dared to dart after setting the timer, then retreated into the lee to spread my foam pad and have some lunch. Although I’d brought my GPS receiver and had programmed Giant’s coordinates, I forgot to take a reading.

Food and water, to keep them from freezing, were carried in a small fanny pack in front and under my NorthFace shirt. The Clif and Powerbars I’d cut into small pieces were barely chewable, but the water was merely cool. (To take a longer-range photo of my lunch stop I left that water bag, for a minute or two, on the snowshoe; in that time it formed ice crystals.) Another Platypus water bag, filled at 4:00 AM with near-boiling water and wrapped in closed-cell foam inside the backpack, was still a bit warm. It was nice to have the snowshoes off briefly, and the Sorel boots seemed to be doing all right by my toes. The high-tech outer shirt, dampened by perspiration on the arduous ascent, quickly became stiff and crinkly. From the pack my blue Sears windbreaker added protection.

I usually hang around summer summits for one hour, writing in a notebook and identifying views, but there was no view here and it was far too cold for writing. I pulled out after half an hour, at about 11:00 AM. Devising safe ways down those icy sections might, I feared, make my descent even longer than the trip up — four hours, maybe? I wasn’t even sure I could walk down the many steep sections that I had essentially jogged up: Would my shins allow me to walk down those long, steep sections on the balls of my feet, as I would have to for the front claws to grip? If not, how would I get down them? Placing weight on the snowshoe tails turns them into sleds. But I left the summit a happy man: Not only had I accomplished the day’s principal goal, but had enjoyed hours of physical exertion and winter solitude in the beautiful Adirondack forest, like walking through a fine Christmas card.

The trail often wound through thick balsams, whose branches heavily laden with soft white snow or frozen with a wind-swept coating of white ice offered many opportunities for attractive photos. Knowing that I’d achieved my goal and was starting back, I relaxed a bit and took more photographs, moving the little camera to my shirt pocket for convenience. One, just a few minutes into my descent and barely off the summit, is #6 here. A few minutes later I reached the junction with the unbroken trail to Rocky Peak Ridge; that sign is #7.



3: The trail ahead, 9:20 AM, north of “the bump”



4: Summit of Giant, 10:25 AM, in a stiff cold wind



5: Lunch, about twenty feet east, out of the wind

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It was gratifying to discover that I could walk down most of the narrow snowy channels that constituted the packed trail, and modest descents were downright easy, like walking in the park. My shins did get a workout, but not the strain I remember from Seymour Mountain last winter. (I had only 36" shoes then, not these 25's, and less experience.) When sections arrived that seemed too steep to walk, I "crab-walked" them, like slide climbers, sitting down and leaning back with mittened hands and snowshoes in contact with the trail. Trailside roots, rocks, and scrub balsam were also employed, and I often had to jump down a couple of feet, landing on one snowshoe.

The drop with which I had the most trouble is shown as Photo #8, looking back up after I'd descended it. On it, I found myself stretched out lying on my right side with my right hand tenuously gripping a nub of a root (the narrow uppermost dark object at the left side of the ice) and my left mittened hand uselessly pressed on the snow-covered ice about half-way down the flow. The small rock, midway down on the left, was rounded and icy, and I dared not jump my relatively secure right hand from the root down to it. Although I stretched as far as I could, I could find nothing solid for either snowshoe, and thought it was too steep to try to dig their claws into the ice. Finally I simply released the root and slid down the last few feet to a relatively level landing.

Shortly before noon I came to one of the open rock faces marked with cairns, and took two photos showing ponds to the south. I think they are the two Ausable Lakes. The photo looking down the trail, southwest toward the Great Range over Giant's Nubble with the bodies of water at the upper left, is Photo #9.

A few minutes later, shortly after noon and an hour down from the summit, I was surprised to meet the first person I'd seen all day: a pleasant, tall and slender young man ascending the trail. We chatted for a few minutes about hiking and the Adirondacks. He'd gone to St. Lawrence University, and lives in or near Albany. Half an hour later, after I'd negotiated a difficult icy section with a final short jump to level trail, I was startled to see a black Labrador retriever a few feet away, with its owner, a short moustached man bundled up in a hooded parka, just behind it. Neither said a word.

The remainder of the return trip went relatively smoothly, with only a few awkward icy portions to manipulate with shrubbery and short jumps. Much of it was simply comfortable downhill snowshoe walking, though everything that was steep on the way up was steep on the way down. At 12:39 PM I snapped a photo of Giant's Washbowl (#2 here), and at 1:05 PM reached the intersection with the trail to the Nubble. The Ridge Trail

dropped steeply and then leveled out as we reached the Washbowl, at 1:18 PM. A few minutes later I reached the Chapel Pond overlook at which I had snapped Photo #1 six hours earlier; in the early afternoon sun I could discern



6: The Christmas-card trail as my descent began



7: Right to Rocky Peak, left to Giant (0.2 miles)

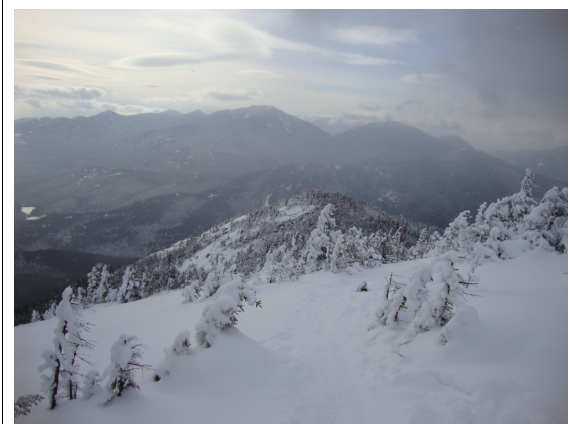


8: A difficult icy section, with the root and rock (dark objects at the left) proving helpful

the hood of my truck. At 1:48 PM I was back at the register. It had taken me 3:45 to ascend and 2:51 to descend, with 0:32 spent at the summit.

It took a few minutes to change into my moccasins and stow the gear. I drove off at 2:01 PM, headed for gas and coffee at the Keene Stewart's. On the way back I stopped briefly at a hardware store in Keene Valley, then picked up I-87 South. I was pleased to find the Blue Ridge Road merely wet, with none of the snow I'd seen in the 5:30 AM dark, though the six-mile road from Newcomb back to our camp was snow-covered. I arrived home at 3:53 PM, with stiff and occasionally cramping quads but satisfaction at the completion of a difficult but successful winter hike.

THE END



9: About noon, looking down the trail toward the Great Range over Giant's Nubble