

The Seymour Mountain Hike, January 2008
John B. Egger
Newcomb, NY

I'd been at the camp for over a week, and had done little outdoor physical activity. On Saturday, January 12, 2008 this frustration — and some postings on the Adirondack High Peaks Forum — prodded me to action. I made a lunch and packed my daypack (tightly) for a day of hiking in the High Peaks, with the goal of the trailless peak Seymour Mountain.

Sunday morning, I arose about 4:30 AM and decided to use my backpack instead, for its greater comfort and more space. Repacking and other morning tasks took two hours, and I left the camp at 6:32 AM. An hour and three minutes later I reached Corey's Road (51 miles), and in another 3 miles passed the last large hiker parking area before the (open) "road closed" gate. It was the trailhead for Stony Creek, Raquette Falls, and Shattuck Clearing trails, and I learned later it's also called the "winter" parking area. There were a couple of cars parked there, but the road ahead looked no different from that I'd just driven, so I decided to drive farther — a fateful error, it later turned out. I had not yet read the Forum posts about the ice on Corey's Road. I had also not loaded my two forty-pound bags of sand (purchased to provide better traction) into the truck, or learned how to install the tire chains I'd been carrying around for years.

In another 3 miles, at 8:02 AM, I reached the Seward Trailhead ("summer") Parking Area; it was glare ice and I couldn't drive in forward, but discovered that I could back up the slight grade to a reasonable parking spot. It had taken 1½ hours from camp to reach this point. I donned the pack and left the truck at 8:20 AM.

Driving to this point was a serious blunder, but my next mistake might lead one to think I'd never hiked an Adirondack trail. It never occurred to me to look for a trail register and bulletin board, even though I vaguely remember glancing at them, up the hill behind my truck, when I was donning my pack. I'd read about the Seymour herd path, but paid no attention to descriptions of the red-marked foot trail that would get me to it. At the lot, a standard NYSDEC sign read "Ward Brook Leanto 4.8 mi." My map showed three "trails" leaving a common trailhead: the red-marked foot trail that I wanted, a horse trail roughly paralleling it, and a gated road marked "Private." Since I saw only the private road, I assumed it was the red trail, or that the red trail branched off the road soon. Eager to get moving, I headed off east on the private road.

The road was beautiful and it had been plowed, easy walking in my heavy leather hiking boots. I came to a few cabins, and greatly enjoyed the wonderful fir woods. It was great to be walking in the winter Adirondack forest, and euphoric with my smooth, comfortable physical activity in this beautiful setting, I let out with a few "whoop"s. It was a little disconcerting to have seen no red markers, but I rationalized that this was a road so perhaps DEC decided markers were unnecessary.

When I'd been walking on the road for an hour and ten minutes (9:30 AM), I came to a small dam in a healthy-looking stream, and a good-sized road or trail heading off to the southeast. This was a puzzle, for nothing like this was shown on the map of the red trail; I learned later that this was Ward Brook, and that the road joined the red trail between the Cranberry and Ward Brook Leantos. I was also puzzled to see a primitive wooden sign, an arrow pointing back to my right to "Blueberry Pond," for if I were on the red trail headed east Blueberry Pond would be on my left.

In another 25 minutes, at 9:55 AM, I came to a large, beautiful lake with private camps and docks. It was clear I'd gone wrong, and a check of the map showed I'd taken the private road all the way to Ampersand Lake. Well, it had been a beautiful walk, but I envisioned backtracking all the way



Pleasant walking on the private road

to my truck, unaware until later that the wide path near the dam cut southeast to the red trail. With some despair that there was now no way I could have time to do Seymour, I began the walk back, and at 10:07 was back at the dam. But a couple of minutes later, thinking it was still early in the day and the weather was good, I decided to follow the cut through the trees to which the “Blueberry Pond” sign pointed. That pond was very close to the red trail, I knew, and the woods were relatively open so I thought a bushwhack around the pond would not be difficult. If this shortcut didn’t bring me to the red trail in one hour, I promised myself, I’d follow my tracks back to the private road.

Although the wide cleared cut through the trees petered out in about 15 minutes, I decided to stay on a southerly course. The only mishap was punching through a snow crust into a pool of water, but I got my foot out before it could get very wet. At 10:30 AM, I came to a broken-down cabin, complete with a white enamel appliance of some kind. I still hadn’t seen the fairly large Blueberry Pond.

At 10:35 AM, about 25 minutes after leaving the private road, I noticed bootprints in the snow, looked around, and immediately saw a red DEC trail marker! Somehow, without ever seeing Blueberry Pond, I had reached the red trail! I believe that in choosing a southern compass bearing I passed to the east of the pond, and it was a thrill finally to be on the trail I’d intended to hike way back at the truck. Three young men, cordial and strong backpackers, soon passed, heading west. At 11:25 AM, fifty minutes east on the trail, I reached the Blueberry Leanto, and ten minutes later encountered a large signboard which identified a private road heading off to the left. (I later learned that this is the road to the private road’s dam on Ward Brook.) Taking the trail right (it’s actually called the Ward Brook Trail now, I think; the red trail prior to this point was the “Blueberry Trail”), I reached the Ward Brook Leanto at 11:50 AM, depacked, and had half of my packed lunch (one sandwich, an apple, a banana, and some Gorp) and most of my first liter of water.



Finally...the red-marked foot trail

About 12:20 PM a pleasant woman came in from the east. I told her my goal was Seymour, and she said she’d just come down from it: 2½ hours up and back, with spectacular views. When I mentioned my trail error, she reported one of her own: taking the horse trail instead of the foot trail, which she said added an hour to her time. She’d parked in the first lot, just before the road-closed gate, and had skied the road that I’d driven, to the Seward trailhead. I learned from her register entry that her name is Laura.



Lunch at Ward Brook Leanto



Laura's tracks were easy to follow

Two and a half hours... if I was willing to hike some of the red trail back in the dark, I could just about make it. I hurriedly packed, donned my Stabilicers, and (at 12:37 PM) headed for the herd path, encountered three minutes later. It was easy to follow the print of Laura’s small snowshoes.

The trail rose gradually at first. My only mishap occurred half an hour along the herd path. On the right bank of a stream, I stepped on snow and punched through, the right edge of my left foot sliding off an icy root and into a deep hole. I tumbled over, landing in the stream. I was uninjured, but one of the pins of my watch band snapped out, and I got wet and muddy on my left side.

The trail steepened sharply, but I plugged away, following the snowshoe tracks up steep snow-

covered sections and, occasionally, across relatively open steep sections. These I did not like, for the slope was now quite uniformly steep and only small firs would break a slide. I found myself stopping often to allow my heart rate to return to something reasonable. At one point my left leg punched through a miniature “spruce trap,” snow covering a small fallen fir, and I went in to my hip. (Full traps swallow whole hikers and their packs.) Pulling my foot out, I found I’d lost my left Stabilicer. Convinced it was down in that hole, I lay on my side in the snow, trying to reach the depth to which my foot had gone. The only results of this effort were fir twigs, scraped hands, wet clothes, and frustration.

I was up pretty high at this point, but going on with only one Stabilicer wasn’t appealing. It occurred to me later that crampons would have felt great on that steep trail, but my Grivels were in a box back at the camp. I continued for a while, but when my watch (now among the several items in my right pants pocket) showed it was about 2:30 PM, I decided to turn around. My GPS reading at this point was N44°09’42.9” W74°10’08.7” elevation 3563’, while the summit was at the same degrees and minutes but N28.9” and W21.1” with elevation 4090. Probably everyone who turns back feels that the summit was just beyond the next rise, but the GPS readings may suggest differently. In any case, I looked at the steep snowy climb ahead, at my Stabilicer-less boot, and the time, and considered the fatigue in my legs... and turned back.



The spruce trap

The descent was tough. Laura’s little snowshoes had some bite, much more than my Stabilicers. I slid once, then began cutting steps with the side of my boot. At the head of a particularly steep and open slope, I donned my snowshoes. But using the forward teeth put too much strain on my shins, on that steep downhill grade, and if I leaned back my long tail caused them to lose bite and to take off like sleds. This happened once; then I removed the snowshoes. Just below the spruce-trap incident, I found my missing Stabilicer; it wasn’t in that hole at all. I had lost it perhaps 30 feet earlier, snagged on something. Delighted, I snapped it on and enjoyed a little more security on the way down. The steep portion was very tough on the quadriceps, and it was nice to reach the gradual descent to the Ward Brook Trail. I got back to the trail at 3:45 PM, and the leanto five minutes later.



Upper Saranac, a bit down from my turnaround

After some water and restrapping the snowshoes to my pack, I left the leanto at 4:05 PM, heading west for the truck, reaching the big trail sign (“Coreys 11.3 mi”) and the private road up to the Ward Brook dam twenty minutes later. At 5:10 PM, when I was still barely able to travel without my headlamp, I decided I must be near the point at which I had come in from “Blueberry Pond” about 6½ hours earlier. I never did see my tracks, or the broken-down cabin, though I’m not sure that would be visible from the red trail anyway.

About 5:25 PM I had to turn on my Petzl Tikka Plus, using its lowest setting to conserve battery power. I had never been on this section of the red trail before. Much of it was wet, a virtual stream in places, and bootprints indicated where others had tried to avoid the water and mud. Along one bank, then another, ducking around saplings... it was a little tiring. The worst sections involved large flooded areas, but the Tikka allowed me to locate others’ circuitous paths through these areas. By now the temperature was in the mid-20s, and the still water was forming a crust of ice. I was wearing simply a Duofold T-shirt and my EMS ventilation shirt, with earmuffs and polarguard mittens, and was not cold. Still, it was a little worrisome to realize that I was out here strictly alone — I’d seen no one since Laura at 12:30 PM — in the dark, sub-freezing temperatures, on a trail new to me.

Nonetheless, I felt good and strong, and moved along, picking up a little water in my boots

somewhere. (The new Smartwool socks seemed to keep my feet warm nonetheless.) Let's see... 4.8 miles, was it? I could do that in about 1½ hours on paved streets... maybe 2 hours? That would make it 6:05 to the truck! Having the watch deep in my pocket discouraged checking the time, so I just kept plugging along, welcoming the rising dry sections. The Tikka performed like a champ.

Finally, at 6:08 PM, I encountered a trail sign; it said "Seward Chain Trailhead 1.2 mi," and, back the way I'd come, "Ward Brook Leanto 4.2 mi." Hmm... OK... it should be nearly 7:00 PM when I reached the truck. Moving along smartly in the dark, I reached more trail signs — just "Trail" with arrows — about 6:30 PM. One pointed back the way I'd come, the other to my left. That puzzled me, for the main foot traffic was on a trail to the right. I decided to follow the traffic, but the fact that it went north and lacked any trail signs led, about 6:45 PM, to doubts, and I backtracked about 10 minutes to the signs. (Remember, I hadn't come in this way.) Maybe, I thought, the trail to the trailhead took a little jag to the south before continuing on west. But when it was still going south after perhaps three minutes, I visualized the vast wilderness to the south and backtracked again to the signs. A closer look at the southbound trail sign showed the head of a horse, and I actually saw Laura's snowshoe prints. This was the junction of the foot and horse trails.

I was rather at a loss as to what to do. Alone in the sub-freezing dark, with the kind of mistake I'd made earlier potentially leading to an unprepared night out, I was convinced by my map that the red trail went west and all the way to the trailhead. Yet there was no trail heading west, and the one I'd been on was unmarked and went north. Finally, I chose to follow it again for three reasons: Obviously others had walked it, the two "Trail" signs were angled to be seen by someone coming down this trail, and even if it wasn't the correct trail, if it went north it would intersect the private road I'd walked on about 9 hours earlier. But about 7:15 PM I came to the trailhead, with its register and bulletin board, and a quick tilt back of my head flashed the Tikka on my truck's rear reflectors. At 7:17 PM I had the heater fired up and had stowed the pack in the rear, and drove away at 7:25 PM. It had been a tough and long, strenuous, and ultimately excellent day of hiking... but unfortunately the adventures did not end here.

The 2-wheel-drive Toyota pickup had a little trouble on some of the icy hills, but a combination of a running start and gentle creeping in low gear succeeded. About 7:45 PM, though, with the odometer showing 3 miles from the parking area (81,915 mi), I encountered a long, steep, icy hill that I just could not climb. Whether my bags of sand or tire chains would have succeeded I do not know, but I didn't have the sand and didn't know how to put the chains on. I backed down for a second attempt, but again lost traction near the top. As the truck began to slide backwards down the hill, picking up speed, I instinctively applied the brakes. The front wheels locked and the front end swung to the left, embedding the rear end in a two-foot-high snowbank on the right. The truck was at about a 30 degree angle to the road, with its front end uphill.

This was bad business. My ham radio handheld 2-meter transceiver couldn't reach any repeater: not Saranac, not Tupper, nothing. It was worthless. (Maybe my more powerful mobile transceiver would have raised someone, but I had chosen not to bring it.) There were two courses of action: Dig the truck out, or leave it and walk out to Route 3. I wasn't ready to admit defeat yet, so I started digging and inserting a pair of rigid plastic traction strips. I had to go backwards, down the hill, for there was no way I could get the traction necessary to overcome gravity, but that meant carving out enough of the ice-crusting two-foot snowbank to allow the front end to swing to the right and the rear end to come out. In and out of the cab, Park and Reverse... which tire is spinning, and why? The snow had an icy crust on it — several of them, in fact — and I had only the small shovel always kept in the truck. The traction strips and encounters with under-truck metal produced many scrapes and gouges on my hands; the snow was bloody. Finally I got the front end over far enough that I could straighten the front wheels; the truck was now at such an angle that if it went straight back, it would be free. About 10:30

PM, after nearly 3 hours of strenuous work in subfreezing cold, I engaged reverse and pushed back on the door jamb with both hands, standing outside the truck. It began to move, and popped out of the drift.

Thrilled with my success, I jumped into the cab. But again it was moving backwards, too fast... and I applied the brakes again. The front wheels locked and swung to the right, and the rear end was now embedded in a snowbank on the left side of the road, probably only ten feet from where I'd freed it.

This was a most discouraging development, but I started to dig again. If I did it once, I could do it again... but the truck's angle was greater this time, so I'd have to go farther into the bank, and a bit of digging reached dirt: This bank was not just snow, but was only a thin coating of snow over earth. I knew then that the jig was up. Grabbing my truck key and a down vest, I activated the blinkers and left the truck at 11:00 PM.

Strangely enough, it felt good to be walking again after all of that difficult digging. Road walking was easy, and I still had my Stabilicers on. Still, it was cold and dark — the Tikka was still doing fine — and a few snow flakes appeared. I marched along, following Laura's ski tracks until I reached her Stony Creek parking lot. Beyond a snowplow turnaround area, a few houses appeared, and a couple had Christmas lights. But it was nearly midnight, there were no other lights, and such decorations didn't necessarily mean anyone was at home, so I kept walking. Route 3 is a major route, and I had no doubt that dozens of cars would pass and that one of them would take me to Saranac. There, I would locate a 24-hour towing service, get the truck, and be on my way home.

When I reached Route 3 at 12:20 AM, though, after walking perhaps 4½ miles of Corey's Road, it was pitch black and as empty as could be. Where was this stream of traffic I'd envisioned? Well, I might as well start walking, so I headed east toward Saranac Lake. (I didn't learn until later that it was 12 miles.) After I'd walked perhaps half a mile, a car appeared. I waved my arms and set the Tikka to flashing, and the car slowed. As I approached it, though, it speeded off. Although I was very disappointed, I think a young woman was driving and I can understand her reluctance to pick up a midnight hitchhiker who looked like me. I kept walking, maybe up to a mile now, when another eastbound vehicle appeared. This one stopped, and when I explained my situation the driver — a young man — invited me in. When I suggested that he could drop me off at Stewart's, he said they closed at midnight; he was the manager of the Stewart's in Tupper Lake. He dropped me off at the only 24-hour place he knew of in Saranac: a Citgo gas station and convenience store. It was about 1:15 AM.

I hobbled into the store, barely able to walk after my strenuous day and perhaps 20 minutes of sitting in the warm SUV, and convinced the young night personnel to let me use a cell phone (after the usual "no public phone, only business phone..."). I called Helen immediately; she had called rangers just 5 minutes earlier, and after our brief conversation called them back. (They said they'd send someone out to see if my truck was still in the parking area.) I then called a AAA towing service in Saranac, but the owner (who actually answered, at 1:20 AM!) was reluctant to send someone out to that icy road in the dark so we agreed that we'd take care of it first thing in the morning. Several motels did not answer, or said their offices were closed, but an actual human answered at the Sara-Placid Motor Inn. Steve, the owner, said there'd be no problem with the fact that I'd left my wallet in the truck, and — when I explained that I'd have to walk over — drove over to pick me up at the Citgo. About 1:45 AM, I had lodging in Room 5 of the Sara-Placid on Lake Flower Avenue (Route 86).

I got out of my dirty and stiff clothes, drank several glasses of ice water, and ate my Gorp; I'd stashed it in my pants pocket, and couldn't buy any snacks at the Citgo because I didn't have my wallet. This was my only food since my half-lunch at Ward Brook; I'd left the other half-lunch in the truck too. I was too stiff and sore for good sleep, and was concerned about the truck blocking the road, but finally slept from about 2:30 until about 4:45 AM. I arose, finished the Gorp, brewed some decaf,

took a shower (the water on my abraded hands was painful), and watched a bit of television. Shortly before 8:00 AM I called Madden's Garage again, and the owner (Mike) said he'd send someone over.

His employee Paul arrived in a tow truck about 8:20 AM, and we headed for Corey's Road. At the Pickerel Pond parking area, he put chains on (using the car hauler as an automatic jack; it lifts the rear wheels a couple of inches) and proceeded down Corey's Road in reverse. My truck wasn't very far beyond this parking area. When I said I'd left the blinkers on, Paul said the battery would be dead... but they were still blinking, and the truck started (though somewhat weakly) when I reached it about 9:15 AM. ("Good battery!", he said.) We picked up my traction strips, chains, ski pole, and other scattered items, and Paul — some distance up the hill, with the car hauler device solidly dug into the road — hooked a long cable to the Toyota's right front tie-down point. I put it in neutral... and, at 9:27 AM, the cable slowly pulled it out. I straightened the wheels at Paul's direction, and he put the car hauler device away and slowly drove ahead. I steered the Toyota up the hill, and we stopped at the top. He asked if I thought I could make it the rest of the way, and I asked him to keep an eye on his rear-view mirrors. Sure enough, on another hill I spun near the top. Sliding backwards, I nearly pulled the same sideways trick by applying the brakes, but released them in time. Paul hooked up the cable again and got me up that one. We settled up at the gate (the "winter" parking lot), and I followed him out to the properly plowed section of Corey's Road.

I drove over to Saranac Lake, settled up with Steve at the Sara-Placid, and picked up some coffee and breakfast pastries at the Citgo. I left Saranac Lake at 10:48 AM and stopped for gas at the Tupper Lake Stewart's. I was sorry to learn that my Route 3 benefactor was not in the store, but asked the nice lady at the counter to mention me to him. At 12:21 PM, with 81,997 miles on the truck (a trip of 142 miles), I parked at our camp. This adventure, apart from the various aches and pains, was over.



Looking downhill toward the truck, 9:20 AM. My three hours of digging is on the left.