



Facing Failure

Did the wilderness have anything left for me?

BY SAM NORTON

Photo caption goes here and here.

I unfolded my orange sleeping pad over a dusty clearing littered with pine needles. Twigs snapped under my back as I reclined, using a small rock as my headrest. A vista stretched before me: Lake Colden’s surface shone in the early-afternoon sun, as shifting light danced on the small ripples.

I reached into my pack and pulled out a copy of Stieg Larson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and flipped it open, but then I glanced up.

From where I sat, two pines perfectly framed Colden as it stretched into the forest. I was awestruck by the lush green mountainsides plunging sharply to its banks, streaked by rocky landslide scars. At the end, Cliff Mountain and Mount Marshall sloped gently into a U-shaped pass, drawing my eye in between the ridges and toward the distant horizon.

I lay there for a moment, pondering the idyllic scene as the wind rustles overhead. It was mid-August 2024, and I’d done some intense hiking that summer, including the past few days.

In July, I set out to thru-hike the 500-mile Colorado Trail (CT). It was a long-time goal of mine, but I only made it 175 miles before a freak ankle twist forced me to quit. I was devastated. I questioned my love for the outdoors after feeling let down by my intense, 18-mile days and hardcore camping in the Rockies. Nature has always given me peace, but I felt like a failure after bailing on the CT. I’d been worn down mentally and physically in Colorado, and I questioned whether the outdoors was truly my home.

To fight these feelings of disillusionment, I embarked on one final backpacking trip that summer. I wanted to see if the wilderness had anything left for me, and if the Adirondack Mountains could help me rediscover that love.

I arrived at the Adirondack Mountain Club’s High Peak Information Center, in Lake Placid, by mid-afternoon. I rented a bear canister and signed my name in the registry before shouldering my pack and stepping into the dim forest. The trail steadily climbed through a mix of deciduous and conifer stands as I wound my way toward Marcy Dam. The late-afternoon sun continued to fall as I walked across the dam’s wooden bridge, and I quickened my pace for the next three miles to Avalanche Lake.

The sky was cloudy, but I was delighted by the sheer granite cliffs that plummeted into this thin ravine. I was not so delighted by the rickety wooden ledges that skirt its western edge, or the boulders I had to climb. My full pack nearly sent me careening to the ground several times, and I was flustered when I reached the lake’s end. But the sky only grew darker, and I pushed on toward Lake Colden.

Knowing how crowded Colden can get, I decided to camp at an inconspicuous clearing a half mile from the lake. I was hungry, aching, and didn’t have a lake view to lull me to sleep. As I lay in my tent, I questioned whether I made

the right decision coming out here.

The next morning, I forced myself onward toward Lake Colden. I’d decided that, rather than backpacking the whole time, I would set off from the same basecamp each day. All the campsites at its northern end were full, but halfway down the east shore, I found an empty lean-to in a small forest clearing.

I shed half my gear into the corner of the well-kept structure and readjust-

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ed my much lighter backpack. Turning right from the lean-to trail, I followed Lake Colden’s rocky and overgrown shore until I reached the weathered trailhead pointing toward Algonquin Peak. This trail is not unlike other northeast hikes: rocky, brushy and straight up the side of the mountain. I knew what to expect, but I still found myself cursing the original trail blazer.

My calves burned as I exited the treeline hours later and scrambled to the peak. I pushed through until I saw the cairn signaling I’d reached the summit, and realized I’d barely stopped to catch my breath. A cloudy sky blanketed the undulating mountains, and I looked east toward Mount Marcy, its rocky summit prominent from my viewpoint. I didn’t stay long and continued north toward Wright Peak.

It was here that I finally stopped for lunch: summer sausage and crackers with dried mango. Sitting on a rocky ledge, I suddenly realized how exhausted I was. Sure, my legs hurt, but I was exhausted mentally and emotionally. I had forced myself to race to the next landmark, never stopping to appreciate the moment.

My plan for the day was a long trek

that would also hit Mount Colden. But as I bit down on a sweet mango slice, I realized something equally profound and simple: I didn’t have to.

I didn’t have to push through until I injured myself. I didn’t have to reach my physical limit every day in the outdoors. I didn’t have to ignore nature’s peaceful stillness to log more miles.

I sat at Wright Peak for an hour, slowly finishing my lunch. I watched hikers come and go, and birds hop around next to me. I let the clouds roll by without needing to race them to the next peak.

After the longest lunch break I’d had in a while, I decided to turn back the way I came and forgo my original 13-mile day. I returned to the lean-to and relaxed the rest of the afternoon. I took my time making dinner on Lake Colden’s shore and let the peace that the High Peaks bestows wash over me as a pink sunset streaked across the sky.

The next morning, I trudged up the rugged Mount Marcy trail, slower and easier than my journey the previous day. I pondered the simple beauty of Lake Tear of the Clouds before pushing for the summit. I knew I was going to take my time on New York’s highest peak, and the brilliant blue sky that greeted me reflected my newfound exuberance: I was OK with taking it slow.

I wedged myself between two rocky ledges out of sight from the hikers milling about on the summit. Changing my plan and choosing shorter days on the trail were no longer failures. They were simply choices made after learning some tough lessons.

The Adirondack High Peaks, through their rugged trails and natural tranquility, had been exactly what I needed. Sitting atop Mount Marcy, mangoes in hand once again, I beamed at my rekindled joy for the outdoors. All it took was a few summits and a serene lake.

I decided my only other task that day was to summit Mount Starlight, once again forgoing the longer loop I’d originally planned. I felt light as I made my way back to camp a few hours later. By early afternoon, I was stretched out on my orange sleeping pad, staring across a brilliant view of Lake Colden. ▲

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR