

# The CATSKILL CANISTER

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# 1000 BAREFOOT PEAKS

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The 19th-century English art critic John Ruskin saw in mountains a story of endurance and decay. All we can know about a peak is that “it was once greater than it is now, and it only gathers vastness, and still gathers, as it fades into the abyss of the unknown.”

And so it is with people – we endure as long as we can, hoping to leave something behind.

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**L**ast December, on a bleak dank evening, I was sitting by the fireplace, gazing at the dying embers, contemplating my future. Hungering for something meaningful. Something big. I opened my training log, which resides in an excel spreadsheet with sixteen tabs stored in the cloud, and did some figuring. Found that since I'd picked up the barefoot practice ten years ago, I'd climbed 395 mountains without shoes. Most of these were Catskills peaks bagged during summer months when I was working on the Grid, but the tally also included the high peaks in the Daks, New Hampshire, and Maine, and also Mt. Whitney, which I'd climbed barefoot from Guitar Lake while thru-hiking the John Muir Trail.

From somewhere deep in the abyss, an idea bubbled up into my mind – to set a lifetime goal of 1,000 barefoot peaks. The rationale being that if I completed this project, it might convince people that barefoot hiking is accessible to them, too, and maybe a few more would give it a try.

No sooner had I made the commitment, the new project took over my life, and with New York winters not conducive to my practice, I decided to visit Phoenix for the holidays. There I climbed Camelback Mountain, Piestewa Peak, and South Mountain without mishap. Spent New Years' even running in a 24-hour race and achieved my mileage goal, although the back of my left knee felt a little tight afterward and there was a faint ache along the knee's inner edge, which I attributed to a stair master session back in December.

After taking a few days off to recover from the race, I headed out to Superstition Peak 5057, where I patiently followed a steep and rocky trail as it weaved between saguaro and cholla cacti and through groves of yucca with weird 20-foot flower stalks. Small cacti lined the trail, and once I stepped on one,



*Loosing your balance is not a good idea when barefooting on pointy rocks – oops.  
Author stumbling about on Piestewa Peak, Phoenix, AZ*

got a hairlike spine in my heel, which was irritating, until it worked its way out a few steps later. On this terrain it took all day to reach the summit, so I put on shoes to make the descent a little faster, and that's when I slipped on a patch of gravel and jammed the sore knee.

The descent turned into an ordeal. It took all afternoon, and still I wasn't back when the sun began to set. Was **1,000** mountains a realistic goal for someone of my age? The year before I'd made **36** barefoot ascents. At this rate, the project would take me until I was **80** years old.

I made it half-way down the mountain, saw a family standing on the trail who asked me to take their picture. Through the aperture I noticed an orange glow spreading across the western sky behind them.

I limped along through piles of chunky gravel. The light faded. The cloudy sky turned brilliant orange and then darkened into vermilion flames, which cooled to shades of chartreuse and



*As I limped down from the summit of Superstition Peak 5057 outside Phoenix, AZ, knee throbbing in the first of my 2024 meniscus injuries, the sunset sky convinced me to keep on moving and not stop climbing, and not to give up hope.*

cherry, while strings of diamonds glistened on the black velvet valley floor.

When I finally made it home, my sports doctor explained the meniscus in my left knee was "irritated." He handed me a prescription for a week's worth of Voltaren, a potent anti-inflammatory.

"Do I really need to take these?" Since the pandemic, I've become hesitant about modern interventions.

"I would," he replied, pointing to the X-ray, "there's some edema on the bone."

He told me to come back and see him in a month, but I didn't – because the knee was already feeling better. After spending January doing nothing more than 1-mile walks, in February I returned to running cautiously, and in April I was back up in the mountains. My friend Steve Aaron's daughter Alison, and her hiking partner Alice, were climbing their final peak to qualify for the Catskill 3500 Club, which I wouldn't have missed for anything. We popped out of the boreal thickets, and with each step towards Wittenberg's summit ledge, the southern views unfolded with astonishing grandeur under a watery blue sky laced with milky streamers.

With the knee back in shape, I had a busy summer, exploring



*View of Van Wyck Mountain from a vantage point on Table – Steve Aaron Photography*

more peaks in the Catskills, including a long bushwhack up Van Wyck Mountain with Steve, as well as visiting Vermont and the Southern Taconics, and even bagging a couple of 14ers in Colorado.

On October 1, 2024, I was pulling on a pair of boots, which I wear when splitting firewood, when I felt a sharp tearing sensation on the inner side of the knee. It was the meniscus again. But this time the pain was searing. If previously the cartilage was "irritated," this time it was *enraged*.

It hurt so bad I couldn't sleep.

The next day I tried walking one mile at a slow pace and could barely finish it.

Two days later, I was searching around for a different form of exercise, when I remembered the wood which still needed to be split. I grabbed the maul and started tapping gingerly on a wedge, careful not to jar the knee. After a minute or two,



*Can you climb Mt. Elbert (14,440 feet), the tallest peak in Colorado without shoes? To my surprise, I met another barefoot hiker on the mountain – so I guess the answer is “yes.”*

something didn't feel right with my lower back. I staggered inside. Lowered myself onto the carpet and stretched. Rose shakily to my feet. Sunk into my favorite recliner. Struggled to get back up. Forget 1-mile walks, now I could barely make it to the kitchen.

Mercifully, the back recovered in a couple of days.

Reasoning that everything heals faster when in motion, I resumed the 1-mile walks. Typically, the knee would feel OK for the first ¼ mile, but by the half-way point it was stinging, and after ¾'s of a mile, I was limping along with fists clenched. During the night, the angry meniscus continued to disturb my rest, unhappy with whichever position I was lying in.

October was a grim month – no running, no races, no hiking, no mountains. Just slow painful 1-mile walks. I called my doctor's office, but they told me he was booked until mid-November. I've been through injury cycles before, so now I steeled myself against the twin perils of optimism and despair. At night I lay in bed and focused my breathing on the meniscus, trying to stimulate the healing process (a Karate practice I'd learned nearly 50 years ago). Visualized the piece of cartilage sandwiched between two bones. The pain radiated across the knee's inner edge, but the injury itself was inside the joint – a scratch on the cartilage's outer surface? A tear in the center?

I mentioned the sore knee to a young barista at a favorite coffee joint -- she'd had meniscus surgery in both knees. A friend of mine had the surgery at age 60 (I recall him trundling around in boot and scooter). His wife had opted for an injection – but not cortisone, she'd gotten a “biologic” from a specialist in rheumatoid arthritis, which helped. But she doesn't do mountains. She sticks to walking on flat surfaces.

On October 24, I was down in Dallas for business. Went for a slow barefoot walk on the smooth paved trails of a local park. It was a lovely afternoon and such a delight to feel the sun-warmed pavement underfoot. I reached 1 mile, without the

knee feeling like it was on fire, and kept going for another 1/4.

Flew to Denver for a business conference. At one point I was working feverishly on my laptop, hunched over in an unfamiliar chair, and when I stood I found I'd strained my back again. Went limping off to a meeting. Told my colleagues I was ready for the scrapheap, to which a friend replied that I could have a tablet of Naproxen from the jar he carries with him everywhere (his calf goes out like clockwork every 3 months). Another colleague told the story of her Achilles tendon injury – it was 8 weeks in the boot – she'd strained it while hiking then jumped into a lake and ruptured it. Our CEO skipped a meeting – rumor was he'd hurt himself on his morning run, flown back to Texas, and was now himself in the boot.

Once again, my back recovered quickly, and meanwhile I gradually extended the distance of my walks. On November 1, I was back in Dallas, padding along on the smooth sun-warmed trails. I walked **3 miles** in the morning and **3 miles** in the evening.

What a joy to be moving again!

I was already planning as I packed for the return flight to New York. The Catskills would have to wait, however, as the next morning I headed south for the modest mountains of Ringwood, New Jersey. For extra support, I brought trekking poles, which I rarely use, but these helped as the trails were shrouded in fallen oak leaves, which are slippery in bare feet.

After the long drought of October, the Ringwood hike was empowering. To feel the sun on my cheek on an unseasonably warm fall day – to find a weird pink forest full of burning bush



*A US flag stands on the summit of Ringwood's 1,024-foot peak, Windbeam Mountain, and you can see it flapping from the road below*

– to stand on Board Mountain and survey the sparkling blue waters of the Wanaque Reservoir and through a gap in the hills glimpse NYC's alien insectoid towers – to pass across the top of Bear Mountain through a grove of white pine and tread upon their needles long as fingers – to stand at the summit of Windbeam Mountain beneath a US flag on a pole and later to

see that flag flapping cheerfully from the road below – to pad along back to my car on smooth black asphalt, such a joyful feeling underfoot after contending for hours with slippery leaves and hidden rocks.

The next weekend I spent all day in Harriman State Park, covering 12 miles and bagging 7 more humble peaks, barely 1,000 feet tall. Nonetheless, for me all mountains are sacred -- they count towards my quest, which is both a burden and source of wild energy and exhilaration.



*Gentle summit of Hogencamp Mountain (1,335 feet) in Harriman State Park on a cool quiet fall day.*

John Ruskin believed that true art expresses sympathy, and even his landscape descriptions seem sensitive. For example, he wrote of one mountain – possibly a favorite in the Alps – that it was “shedding its flakes of granite, on all sides of it, as a fading rose lets fall its leaves.” Clearly, the peak once stood much taller – indeed, its distinctive shape reflects the gaps left by rock-fall, the cutting power of streams, “the subtle wedges of frost.” Like people, mountains are “destructible and frail.” They “wither.” They show “the untraceable decay in their own substance.”

Left knee notwithstanding, during 2024, I climbed **73** peaks without shoes, bringing the count to **464**, leaving **536** still to do. Once again I'm sitting by the fireplace on a dank winter evening, planning more routes, wishing the flames would cast more heat, while the spreadsheet rows multiply as if by their own accord.

*Photos courtesy of Ken Posner #2573 W1108. Van Wyck photo courtesy of Steve Aaron #3199*

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