



SUCH GREAT HEIGHTS

For hikers, climbing a list of New Hampshire mountains means entry into a rarefied club. Upon summiting the final peak, **HARRISON HILL** reflects on why such collections have inspired our explorations for millennia.

MOUNT JACKSON is one of the least impressive peaks along New Hampshire's otherwise terrifically impressive Presidential Mountain Range. The summit announces itself not with timpani but with finger cymbals. You reach the top and think, with an air of willed enthusiasm, *Oh! Okay!* Neighboring mountains soar above the tree line, but Jackson doesn't bother. Its apex is a lazy rise of granite scattered with pines that sprout haphazardly, as if planted by some drunk, delinquent gardener.

I ventured up Jackson for the first time in August 2017. I was alone, at the end of a weeklong hiking trip that had included journeys up flashier peaks. Still, I smiled widely as I took off my backpack and looked out at the ripple of greenery below. This was it.

My arrival marked the end of a journey three decades in the making: I'd finally climbed all of the Four Thousand Footers, a group of 48 New Hampshire mountains, every one of them 4,000 feet in elevation or higher. Hike the whole lot and you earn membership in the Four Thousand Footer Club, an association that honors finishers at an annual awards ceremony. My parents had carried me into New Hampshire's White Mountain National Forest when I was nine months old. I climbed my first Four Thousand Footer when I was six. With my trip to Jackson, just a few weeks shy of my 30th birthday, I'd rounded out the set.

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Dartmouth librarian Nathaniel Goodrich first proposed the Four Thousand Footers list in 1931. “It seemed a harmless folly,” he wrote in *Appalachia*, a literary magazine about the outdoors. “The motive behind it is not on a plane of high spiritual detachment perhaps—but what would you? It appears to drive men up mountains they would otherwise neglect.”

There are few impulses so primal as the instinct to inventory. We like lists because they project order onto the world, distilling its vastness into a few decisive bullet points. How else to explain the appeal of travel to-dos through the ages, from the sublime (the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World) to the mundane (Florida’s 12 Must-See Bowling Alleys)? They provide a scaffolding for experience, and make the unknown seem approachable.

Then there’s the tantalizing promise of completion. No one could ever hope to “finish” something so wide and varied as, say, a New Hampshire wilderness area. What would that even mean? But 48 sets of coordinates—or any other clearly articulated goal—is another matter entirely. The human urge to explore the whole of the earth is ultimately impossible to satisfy, but tick off a visit to every ocean or national park and suddenly you’re a completist.

I began making real progress on the Four Thousand Footers at a boys’ summer camp in New Hampshire, first as a camper and later as a counselor. There I learned to love the taste of stream water purified by iodine, to pop sap blisters on fir trees, to salivate at the hiss of a WhisperLite stove. In those days I wasn’t hiking toward membership in the Four Thousand Footer Club. I was just doing my job.

In my mid-twenties, I discovered I was further along the list than I’d realized. The awareness made me hungry to finish. Soon I started taking trips to New Hampshire with the express purpose of earning a spot in the club. Sometimes friends or family members came along, but most of the time I was alone. The woods were company enough.

Would I have taken these trips if not for the club? Surely not: the promise of membership was my guiding star. But it wasn’t my only motivation.

I wanted to hike because I wanted to do the list, and I wanted to do the list because I wanted to hike—twin desires, inseparable and mutually reinforcing. Over the course of the club’s history, some people have argued for its abolition, claiming it has injected a note of careerism into the woods. But to me, the list didn’t obscure the profundity of the trail—it enhanced it.

Finishing became more important as I edged toward 30. I’d had interesting jobs over the course of my twenties, but had realized few of the ambitions that had brought me to New York City at 18. I had a good life—a great life—but under the looming shadow of 30 it was starting to seem rather paltry. I understood that accomplishment wasn’t the same thing as worth, that the value of my life was not tied to a catalogue of things I’d done. But I knew that clear, unambiguous achievement meant something, too. It wasn’t just about having a “successful” face to show the world. It was about knowing, in some quiet and private way, that I had really lived. So it was with a particular relish that I ventured out on my last trip north.

On the fifth and final morning of my expedition—the day that would conclude on Jackson—I entered the green tumult of the woods around 7 a.m. Within an hour I’d crossed above the tree line. Where before there had hung a scrim of branches, there was now blue, everywhere blue. I whooped with pleasure.

I also registered a note of sadness. Reaching the summit would mean saying goodbye to a project that had long consumed me. Still, I understood this farewell was part of what gave the Four Thousand Footers their meaning. In a world defined by muddle, what relief there was in the assurance, clear and unambiguous as the sun on my cheeks, that I had finished something, fully and decisively. Here, then, was the deepest consolation of this or any list: to indicate change, progress, movement. We need these lists because we all want to know that we have been somewhere, that we’re going somewhere still. To remind us that our days have added up to something. Or so it seemed to me, standing there on the wooded flank of the mountain. I tightened my backpack and followed the trail onward. 🌲