

Rocking the Long Trail

By Dale Christie

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If you are thinking this story will be about music, think again. This is nothing about songs by Bruce Springsteen, or Aerosmith, or The Dave Matthews Band. In fact, I see no place at all for those white little ear buds on the LT, with the only exception of being stowed away for late night meditation in one of the trail's many shelters. It is not a place for music driven into one's ears. The LT is about solitude, listening to the nature all around us, and being one with your surroundings. Music cranked up in one's ears only muffles the experience of hiking the LT.

But I digress; this is a story about my hiking up and back down Vermont's highest point, at Mount Mansfield. The significance of the title is to describe the overwhelming theme of my experience. Your understanding will soon be self-explanatory.

I have skipped my share of rocks in my day, always looking for the flattest of rocks, and always trying for that perfect throw that seems to just skim along the surface of the water until it just about disappears from view. But on this day, I embraced rocks in a different manner. I used them as a lifeboat, a red carpet, and simply an escape from the mud and water that made their best effort to ruin my day.

In case you don't recall the days before my voyage, it rained heavily throughout Vermont as many large thunderstorms ripped through as they so often do in the peak of summer. This led to localized flooding in Barre and other communities throughout Vermont. But this day was almost guaranteed by meteorologists to be a true reprieve from the rain and one without the humidity that makes you suffer in your clothes. I had been recently in the southwestern part of the country and being home again created the urge to return to the trail. So I planned to take advantage of this opportunity to explore another wonderful segment of our beloved trail.



As my trek began I was quickly reminded how I had run a 5K race two nights before. Mind over body prevailed as I trudged on and limbered up some. I knew from experience that it would be wet and to expect some slick areas. I knew that it would depend on how well maintained the section was with water-bars and good drainage. I have a feeling I must have ignored the little voice in my head that quietly told me that it was too wet to hike. I had wanted to do this for about 2 weeks and I finally got my opportunity so I wasn't going to pass it up.

As many hikers do when the conditions get muddy, I took to the high road. The high road was NOT the toll road up the mountain that others chose to take, but the many rocks in the trail. The rocks were often wet, or had running water across them, but provided high ground for the benefit of my dry feet. Sure I had a pair of extra dry socks, but I had no intention of using them so early. I

wanted to keep those for an emergency and label them "in case of emergency" just like the fire hose in the wall.

It was not long before I had reflections back to grade school. My careful navigation across the tops of the rocks reminded me of seeing girls playing hopscotch on the playground. I never played myself for I preferred games such as kickball or soccer. But I recognized the skill that the girls would use to navigate the playing field just as I was doing now. It was not just rocks that I would guide myself onto, for there were other safe havens along the trail. They came in the form of fallen trees, strategically placed log and planks, and when it allowed, hearty tree roots. Trees were good friends to me as they also offered assistance while climbing steep sections. I was a tree hugger and proud of it. They were all welcome in my kingdom of mud and running water. Together we would come together and overcome the conditions for the rewarding views on top.

I was alone from human interaction, but I was certainly not alone. There was an orchestra of birds singing around me, efts scurrying past my footsteps, frogs leaping to shelter, and other small creatures watching as I walked by. The woods seemed to be also alive with scents. The recent rains seemed to amplify the smells of the woods. The streams were racing, but still very tranquil to my ears. It was indeed a great time to be in the woods. The only reminder of civilization was the sounds of large artillery guns in the distance. The firing range in Underhill was busy for sure. I found it interesting that I never remember hearing the guns from Camel's Hump. But it was all part of my surroundings and I cherished it all.



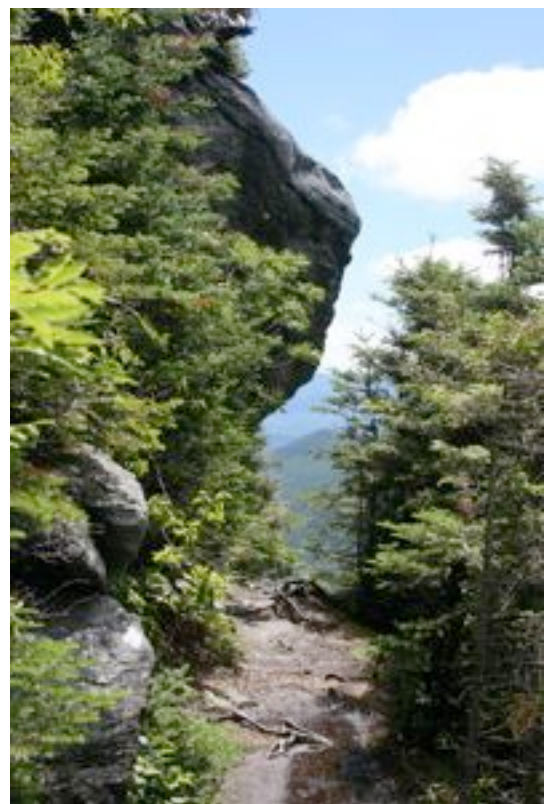
I continued my traveling hopscotch game as I continued my ascent. The trail continued to be often filled with running water across it or down it. I did not want to turn back. I then told myself that as long as I didn't see any brook trout passing by my feet, I would continue. So I set my limit a tad high, but I really felt good to be there and didn't want to go home just yet. So I made a pledge to myself to do my best to not lose a shoe in the mud. After all it had to be drier after making it through the Nebraska Notch and heading uphill, right? I knew the truth about that when I then stepped on a plank that sank into the water. It turned out that the plank was actually floating in the standing water! I hopped onto the next series of rocks and moved on.

The weather was perfect. It was cool in the woods and the partly cloudy skies kept me from regretting that I forgot my sunglasses in the car. I began to notice how much better I was getting at walking the rocks. I now realized I was not hiking the Long Trail, but rather I was rocking the Long Trail. I was becoming more confident and comfortable on the rocks. As a snowboarder in the winter I always thought I was pretty good on my feet and pretty agile. So I continued choosing the path of the rocks. I started choosing smaller and smaller rocks too. Often they would shift, slide and sometimes roll, but that didn't stop me. For I was committed to the trail of rocks, and rocking the Long Trail it was to be.

Soon later the hardwoods vanished and the trees began to get shorter. Then I was faced with a choice. The choice was to continue on rocking the Long Trail or to take a safer route offered as a severe weather bypass. I thought of my wife briefly, and then easily chose the trail I set out to complete. So I moved on.

My feet were offered new forms of transportation in the forms of ladders. There were at least 5 of them in fact. And there were other spots that could have used a ladder. I suppose they were built so others would not need to bring their spelunking gear. After all, hikers already carry enough gear on their backs and we all know how every ounce counts when it comes to reducing weight. The ladders were kind of exciting and a welcome relief to the severe cliffs I had to climb. Despite the presence of the ladders, I remember wondering once where the trail went and “how the heck was that the trail”? Despite the breeze that was now unrestricted from my face, my head was still sweating greatly as I reached the sign officially marking the Forehead of the mountain. Even up there it was still wet. I thought to myself how my head was not the only wet forehead around.

Reaching the Forehead was accomplishment enough for me to take a break. I drank heavily out of my first nalgene bottle. I had been nursing it a bit to conserve water, but now that I reached part of the summit I allowed myself to drink more freely. It was a grand view indeed. For the first time I could see part of the Hump. That has always been my compass as to where I am. It has always been a favorite of mine. As I noticed earlier, the humidity was down and the view was very clear. It truly was one of the better days for views. So often our summers are hazy as the humidity hangs in the air. I breathed in more of the clean air and moved on.



Minutes later I met the first people of the day. I was to meet many other people shortly after, but it allowed me to appreciate the duration of time I was alone. In front of me were what appeared to be a father and three sons. They were eating lunch in a clearing of the trail. After enjoying conversation of our hike so far, I quickly realized how hungry their bagels were making me feel. I wished them well and moved on.

Quickly I was reminded I was not in Kansas anymore as I reached the summit parking lot for the toll road. This is where I began to meet many "car hikers" as I chose to call them. There was a nice visitors center and information signs, but I only wanted to move on and return to the rocks. So without breaking stride, I found my way back to the trail surrounded by limited forest. After reaching the Forehead the trail became almost entirely rock. I had no choice at all but to walk on rock. I began to desire some soil under my feet to cushion the blow a little. But as I reached the parking lot and the pavement, I was quickly satisfied with the wet trail and rocks again. Once again I was rocking the Long Trail.

My thoughts soon after turned to that of my sandwich. The wonderful sandwich I made the night before for the summit of Mount Mansfield. I found a trail on my left called Northern Extension.

Normally I don't like to explore side trails. When I'm on the LT, I am focused to the long day ahead, the many more miles remaining and not looking to push the limits of my feet any further. It was that mentality that led me to realizing my trail name. "Direct Current" was born on this day. Being an electrical engineer by day, I liked the inclusion of that part of me in my trail name. After all you never completely leave your daily life behind even after days of hiking on the LT. Incidentally it also has the same initials as my real name. So with my new name, it certainly was an enlightening day.



I digress again. So after following the Northern Extension trail for longer than I felt it should have taken, I decided to return back to the beginning of this spur. After all, there was a great view there in a secluded spot that was perfect for my sandwich. This extra effort once again confirmed my trail name choice was right for me. My sandwich was as great as I had hoped and the view was a fine dessert. I could hear people walking by on the main trail, but not one person came down my way. It was their loss indeed. With my stomach happy and my eyes satisfied with the view, I moved on.

Once I reached the Chin I found huge gatherings of people. From what they had with them, I could tell many of them were "car hikers" or possibly "gondola hikers." I sympathized with those people who did not have the time to hike from the bottom or perhaps do not have the physical fitness to accomplish it. But I knew that the best way to experience the mountain was to hike it all the way up and all the way down. I looked forward to the seclusion in the woods again as I met more and more people. So with that wish, I moved on.

I hiked on across the rocky top. The elevation along with the wind made me become a bit cold. Because those meteorologists assured me it wouldn't rain, I didn't bring a jacket. I guess I should never have quit the cub scouts. Oh well, as long as I kept moving I was fine. It was now actually dry which was some relief. But it was still similar to the earlier part of the trail. I was still rocking the Long Trail, except the rocks were just bigger to hopscotch across. On my right I passed another severe weather bypass trail entitled the Profanity Trail. Not for a second did I consider taking this trail. After all I was in way too good of a mood to start swearing. I didn't even consider swearing after swallowing that bug a short time earlier. So thus began my descent into Smuggler's Notch.

It was slow going for a while. I would have welcomed a ladder in a couple spots, but having left my extension ladder at home, I chose to carefully lower myself downward. As expected it was no less wet on this side of the mountain than the other side. But with my experience rocking the Long Trail, I was confidently moving along. Before long I found myself back in the softwoods with streams surrounding me. I realized a similarity of my rocking ability to that of a game I used to play, Tetris. Both had an importance of strategy in positioning. As I was rocking the Long Trail I saw that I was actually playing a game. Where I chose to walk was in itself like a game. I was

recognizing more efficient paths to walk thus minimizing slippage and thankfully injury. So by choosing the best rocks to walk on, I was getting a better score in a sense because my knees were less sore and also using less energy. But don't get me wrong, for my knees were getting sore. Hiking down steep rocky trail can be very hard on the knees. I chose to reward myself for my "high score" with a large drink and a snack. With only a couple miles to my destination, I moved on.

The trail was nearing a crossroads as I began to hear car traffic. This was back to reality for sure. It was certainly a very rewarding hike for me. I had realized my trail name, thoroughly enjoyed the rare views, and found myself immersed in nature. There was not a regret in me as I completed my journey.

Now if this was a true story, I should be informed of how I should not have hiked in such wet conditions. I would be reminded of the trail erosion that takes place and how I should have chosen another day. I would then make an argument about how no trees were harmed in the making of this story. But that would not be a very compelling defense for me. After all that is why the Green Mountain Club recommends not hiking before Memorial Day. So lets pretend this wonderful day was all just a dream. After all it was too good of a day to be real, right? Perhaps telling this tale will be my form of community service. Wink... wink.... :)

So if you find yourself hiking in wet conditions, remember my tale, take to the high road, and enjoy rocking the Long Trail.

Your storyteller of "*fiction*",

"Direct Current"

