

BEAST OF THE



The 2,000-foot South Basin Headwall featuring the *Cilley-Barber Route* (IV WI 4), first climbed by Henry Barber and Dick Cilley during the winter of 1973. This classic route follows the obvious line near the center of the photo. PHOTO BY MARTY MOLITORIS

BY BRIAN IRWIN

EAST

Remote, unknown and protected by a scarcity of information, Maine's Mount Katahdin, with 4,000 feet of elevation gain, arctic weather and big, bold alpine and rock routes, may be the Northeast's best-kept secret.

"I got summer teeth. Some are here, some are there." Lincoln McNulty laughed, the dried blood on his face cracking up his cheeks as he smiled. The cone of light from my headlamp cut through my breath's vapor and cast shadows across his face. Clear cerebrospinal fluid sparkled as it leaked from his nose and bludgeoned ear.

Six of us from two separate rescue teams teetered high on the face, leaning into the wind for balance. We'd been paged out six hours earlier, at 9 p.m., after hikers had reported the distant screams of Lincoln's girlfriend.

Lincoln was becoming confused now. He and Marta Boyd had topped out on *The Armadillo* (IV, 5.7), Mount Katahdin's showpiece alpine rock climb. McNulty had rappelled off to retrieve a stuck piece of protection, but out of exhaustion failed to thread his rope properly through the anchor. He fell, taking the rope with him as he tumbled 150 feet onto a brushy ledge. With no way to rappel, Boyd had downclimbed to McNulty, where they tried to descend to the base of the cliff together, despite McNulty's injuries. Unfortunately they used up most of their gear, their rope became stuck, was abandoned, and the two resigned themselves to hunkering down on an exposed ledge with 600 feet of technical terrain above them and a thousand more below.

Fat raindrops percussed the top of my helmet, slow-

ly becoming finer and more persistent as I worked on Lincoln's injuries. Gusts of wind blew sharp precipitation into my eyes and face. Most of the rescuers had driven for hours to get here and were exhausted. As we worked in a tangled mess of rope and loose rock, the rhythmic sound of helicopter blades grew louder as the Black Hawk glided into the cirque.

The chopper floated up, then down a few times in an attempt to find us as we sat patiently in the gray light on cold, wet slabs. The giant machine drifted slowly closer to the huge alpine face, feathering its pitch to ease the blades into the shallow depression between the Armadillo and Flatiron buttresses. Gusts of wind pushed the helicopter toward the wall. Raindrops fell from above, met the Black Hawk's rotor wash, and accelerated like pellets onto our bare hands. Lincoln lay immobilized in the litter, wind whistling through his missing front teeth, inflating his cheeks. His Mylar blanket exploded into shreds under the power of the wind.

A National Guard medic lowered, swinging with the wind until he touched down next to us. One clip of the fat cable, and he and Lincoln zipped off the ledge. As the helicopter slid out of the valley, the rain stopped and the sun rose, throwing hazy pink light over the dense green forest of northern Maine and onto the granite ridge above us.

TOP TO BOTTOM:

Peet Danen climbs through the snow amphitheater leading to the Black Gulches—a good choice for moving fast on -20-degree days like this one. PHOTO BY JAMIE CUNNINGHAM

The northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, the summit of Katahdin, 5,267 feet. PHOTO BY PETER COLE

Kelly Rossiter and Kevin Shasgreen simul-climbing the approach to the Black Gulches with Pamola Peak in the background. PHOTO BY JAMIE CUNNINGHAM



The second time I climbed on Katahdin was more relaxing. A pleasant romp up *The Diamonds* (II 5.6) followed by some scrambling to the top of Maine's highest peak. At 5,267 feet, Katahdin is the crown jewel of Baxter State Park and the northern terminus of the 2,175-mile-long Appalachian Trail. It's also the most remote alpine climbing arena east of the Rockies. The sharp fin of rock punches 4,000 feet skyward from Maine's flat conifer carpet, its sides falling away into glacially eroded basins. The granite is mostly solid and the cracks generated by the harsh freeze-thaw cycles have left great lines and even better protection. While word-of-mouth has popularized a few stellar moderates like *The Armadillo* (IV 5.7), a substantial amount of the technical terrain on this mountain is either unclimbed, undocumented or both. Only here can a 1,000-foot face like the *Taber Wall* hide from development, its clean, steep, well-protected routes going years between ascents.

Katahdin is tightly regulated. To prevent accidents such as McNulty's in such a remote arena, the Baxter Park Authority has instituted a strict set of rules for climbers. To access the park in the winter you must submit climbing résumés and jump through hoops that range from mandatory gear checks to adherence to a unique weather rating scale devised by Baxter itself.

While Baxter's restrictions are notorious and detested by most climbers, they shouldn't be despised without understanding their cultural background. Northern Maine is remote, rich with culture, wildlife and wilderness. It's untamed land, and Percival Baxter, former Maine Governor who established the park in 1931, loved it for that reason. Those who strive to protect his vision of preservation and his hope that the land would "be used to the fullest extent, but in the right, unspoiled way" have grown up fishing, hunting and hiking—but not climbing—here.

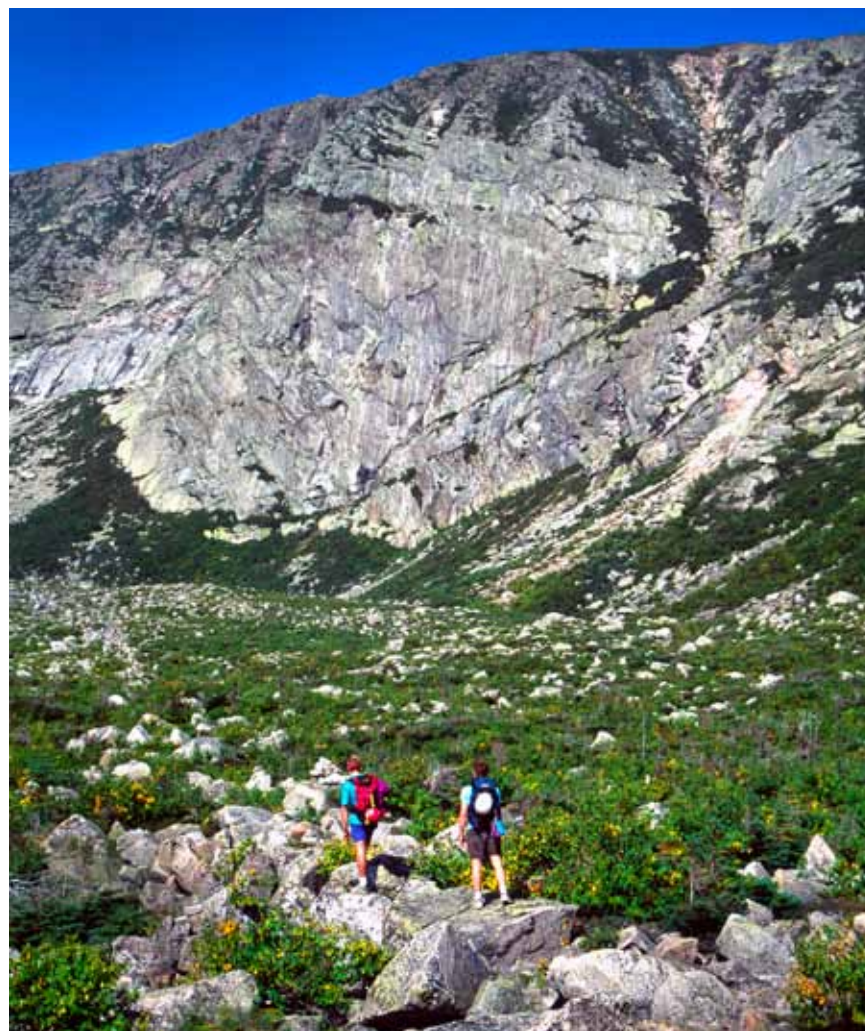
Another reason Katahdin has remained under climbing's radar is its north-woods ethic and strict political regulation. It's an old-school area. No bolts. No pins. No tat. No fixed anything, and no dedicated guidebook. The only consistent source of beta is a collection of handwritten descriptions by the first ascensionists, its thin, yellowing pages carefully filed in a decaying binder in the desk of the Chimney Pond Alpine Ranger. His drafty backcountry cabin sits in the giant South Basin, Katahdin's most frequented climbing area. The East's longest ridge climb, the 2,000-foot *Pamola IV* (III 5.5, variations up to 5.8) darts from the pond to meet the Knife Edge, the wild narrow arete that makes up the skyline. Dripping down from this sharp spine are the



2,000-foot *Waterfall Buttress* (IV 5.5), *The Flatiron* (III 5.9) and, in winter, dozens of long ice climbs. The *Cilley-Barber Route* (IV W14+) was one of the boldest ascents in the country when climbed in 1973. Even today this route is incredibly committing, taking two days of skiing even to reach its base.

While the classic climbs are prominent, a plethora of other rock lines ranging from 5.2 to 5.12 stripe the cirque. But you won't find any beta on them. For example, almost all of the dozen or so routes (many at least 5.10) that ascend *The Cathedrals*, a set of free-standing pillars on the north side of the cirque, remain documented only in the minds or journals of active local first ascensionists like Ben Townsend, who is a former Chimney Pond alpine ranger, and Bob Baribeau.

Baribeau is elusive, a tall, thin man with a quiet voice and a bushy beard. One of the East's strongest and most unassuming climbers, he's witty and confident. Baribeau could easily write a guidebook to the peak or share information about his routes on the Internet, but he won't. When asked how many first ascents he's climbed on the mountain, he says, "There are a lot of people who would answer that question, but I'm not one of them."





ABOVE: Maine Bound employee Kate Hassett descends Mount Katahdin's Saddle Trail on a staff training trip in Baxter State Park. PHOTO BY MATTHEW SWARTZ

FACING PAGE TOP: Tyler Stableford leading *Resolution* (5.8+) on the Taber Wall, North Basin. PHOTO BY PETER COLE

FACING PAGE BOTTOM: Stableford and Kevin Hand head into the North Basin to the Taber Wall. PHOTO BY PETER COLE

Baribeau is one of many who have been climbing here for years—quietly, humbly and for all his own reasons. “Katahdin is a wilderness area where climbing is adventure,” he says, when I ask him why there’s no published guide to the peak. “Keeping it that way is part of what keeps the place so special.”

Some of his generation want to preserve the spirit of adventure at Katahdin. Others keep quiet because they don’t want their land abused or overused. Most of them are simply modest climbers with nothing to prove. Baribeau is one of many who live by the Katahdin code of ethics: Keep your mouth shut.

Katahdin’s South Basin is huge, but is swallowed in scale by the neighboring North Basin. Likely the most alpine setting in the East, this enormous cirque seems transplanted from the Canadian Rockies. Giant crumbling ridges encase alpine tarns; lichen clings to the rocks; gnarled dwarf pines poke from the deep caves between the carefully balanced boulders. To the east a carpet of green

stretches to the horizon, devoid of roads, only interrupted by the occasional flash of reflection off a distant pond. A four-and-a-half-mile hike and an hour of bush-whacking from the trailhead, the basin’s impressive Taber Wall is flanked by scores of slabs, ridges and gullies. While the beta binder at Chimney Pond holds accounts of five routes on this monolith, Baribeau confirms there are many more. “There are over 20 routes, with half of them more difficult than 5.10,” he says. “As far as the names and the location of them, I’m not ready to share any of that.”

There actually may not be much to share. While the North Basin sports scores of routes and the South Basin holds even more, the actual first-ascent histories of many have been either lost in time or poorly documented via five-sentence descriptions in 1940s and 50s issues of *Appalachia*, the country’s longest-running mountain journal.

“It’s remarkable,” says former ranger Townsend. “You’re six pitches up what you think is a new line and you come

across an old iron pin or ring in the most unlikely place.” A few years ago Townsend found an anchor of sun-bleached, antiquated manila slings. Baribeau once discovered a circa 1940 wooden wedge jammed in a crux crack.

Not everyone keeps Katahdin secrets. Peter Lataille, an old-fashioned climber who’s been one of the mountain’s most active developers, records his routes in the Chimney Pond book. Lataille is an amusing man who chuckles as he recounts his old climbs while shaping surfboards in the shed out back of his home in Hampden, Maine. A publication-worthy topo of his and Townsend’s 2005 route *Magdalana* (IV 5.9+) is the binder’s most recent addition. This eight-pitch line climbs straight up the Taber Wall to join his other recent contributions like *Los Nevos Videntes* (IV 5.11+) and *Little Bear* (IV 5.10+). But even Lataille isn’t sure if these are actually new routes. “On Katahdin the best way to tell if it’s a new route or not is the rock. If there’s no loose rock, chances are Baribeau has already done it.”

The Northwest Basin is a thousand-foot-deep cirque that holds multiple steep buttresses and was first climbed by Arnold Wexler and partners, probably in the 1940s, although no formal documentation of the ascents exists. Wexler was an early climber who was very active on Katahdin through that era. Also a brilliant engineer at the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Gaithersburg, Maryland, Wexler is considered to be the creator of the dynamic belay, which he tested extensively at the National Bureau of Standards and Technology. Wexler climbed all over the world, ticking achievements that range from the second ascent of Mount Sir Sanford (which came 32 years after its first ascent), British Columbia, to putting up over 50 routes from Seneca Rocks to the Kashmir.

As a Maryland native, I had met Wexler when I was a boy. I wasn’t a climber then, rather a nerd who presented a jelly-bean and coathanger model of DNA at the National Bureau for my science club. Wexler was one of the judges. I’m sorry now that I didn’t take the opportunity to interview him. As with many of his other accomplishments, details of Wexler’s Katahdin climbs lie buried in history books, or in the grave. He died in 1997. According to Rick Wilcox, founder and director of the Mountain Rescue Service (MRS), based in North Conway, Wexler was one of the only climbers to thoroughly explore the Northwest Basin. While others may have taken stealth trips into the remote area, Wilcox says, “There’s been virtually no real climbing activity in that basin in decades.”

Wilcox is somewhat of a Northeast climbing historian. He’s a fit, short man with a graying mustache who otherwise

looks almost the same as he did 30 years ago. Every day this 56-year-old walking history book can be found dispensing advice as he works the sales floor of International Mountain Equipment, North Conway, New Hampshire’s climbing retail epicenter and local hangout, which he’s owned and operated for over 20 years. Wilcox co-authored New England’s only comprehensive ice-climbing guide, *Selected Climbs in the Northeast*, and has compiled more route information and historical data about Katahdin’s ice climbing history than anyone. He’s pasted together route descriptions of almost 50 ice climbs in the South Basin and nine more in the North Basin. A small handful of these he lists as mixed climbs, as they follow summer rock routes, like the improbable *Hanta Yo*, which weaves through the intimidating grade IV Taber Wall at 5.7. For this reason Wilcox’s ice guide is the closest thing Katahdin has to a rock climbing guidebook.

Wilcox is perhaps best known for his climbs of 8,000-meter peaks like Makalu, Cho Oyu and Everest, as well as first ascents of many New Hampshire testpiece ice climbs. He was also involved with the first technical rescue on Katahdin, back in the winter of 1972. Wilcox recalls: “We got the call in North Conway at noon. In a matter of hours we were in a Cessna and by that night we were at Chimney Pond. Early the next morning we climbed up and located the frozen body of Tom Keddy. His partner, Paul Dibello, who later lost his legs to severe frostbite from the epic, stayed with him, while team leader Bob Proudman and the other members of their party went for help. Conditions were awful: minus-20 temperatures with hundred-mile-an-hour winds that didn’t die down for a week.” The accident occurred on a route referred to as *Pamola’s Fury* (III WI3+). It later got its second ascent, and first complete ascent, by Wilcox and John Bouchard.

IN 1931, FORMER Maine Governor Percival Baxter entrusted the land that comprises Baxter State Park and Mount Katahdin with a very strict set of bylaws. He had a specific vision for this land, and the current land-use policy remains in place to protect his vision. Initially the park was set aside only for the use of Maine residents, a policy that was later discarded. Regardless, the park authority still holds the vision statement sacred. Open recreation, especially the kind that can be dangerous, doesn’t fit into the current or past administration’s interpretation of the park’s purpose. In Baxter, climbing is still considered a “fringe” activity, one that can only cause trouble, just like it did in 1972.

However, the park’s attitude toward climbing seems to be evolving. Thirty

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Marmot FOR LIFE

Photo: Ace Kvale

years ago a party could only access Katahdin in winter if the members presented a certified letter from a bonded rescue team that vowed to bail them out if need be, as well as letters of medical clearance from each climber's physician. While that regulation has changed, change takes time, and time can seem to stand still in northern Maine.

"This isn't a climbers' park," says Rob Tice, current Chimney Pond alpine ranger. "It's managed the way it was meant to be, the way Percival wanted it to be." A climber himself, Tice would know. He spends each wind-whipped winter in the frigid basin, enforcing the rules that he knows make climbing Katahdin more than a physical challenge.

Tice has been proactive in loosening Baxter's stranglehold on the East's most protected alpine climbing area. He has successfully lobbied against ridiculous policies like the recently overturned regulation that winter climbers had to climb in parties of no fewer than four at any time on any given route. For years such misguided rules have forced larger climbing parties to break up and stack in ice chutes like the *Cilley-Barber* (IV WI4+), subjecting lower parties to icefall.

Percival Baxter stressed proper land management and preservation. Arguably, though, his vision has been misunderstood. The park spends an enormous number of man-hours enforcing its winter-registration process, yet this exhausting winter-permit system lacks a mandatory lecture on minimal-impact land use or any visitor education regarding leave-no-trace ethics, which seems odd considering the park is closed for four months out of the year to allow the land to recover. Even on Denali, which does not require a gear check or minimum party of four members, climbers are issued registered garbage bags and fined if they are not returned full.

This isn't to say Katahdin looks like a litter box. It's pristine and perfectly preserved, making for an amazing alpine experience. That is, if you can get in. On most summer days the Chimney Pond lot is full and its gate closed by 7 a.m. There are strict cut-off times for embarking on a hike or climb. Summer camping in the Northwest Basin is limited to one night, which, given the eight-hour approach each way, obviously stifles any climbing. In winter, camping is prohibited in the Northwest Basin altogether. The North Basin itself is also off-limits to camping

year-round, making a trip into the cirque a huge day.

While these policies may have helped protect the land, they are resented by many climbers. Brad White, director of the International Mountain Climbing School in North Conway, describes Baxter's policies as "disappointing."

"It seems as if [Baxter Park Authority] is deliberately trying to discourage climbing on the mountain, especially in winter," he says. "These rules aren't necessary. Such overregulation keeps some of the most high-end climbers from enjoying that amazing mountain."

Among the most detested policies are the camping regulations, including a ban on planned bivies.

"Bandit camping has been going on for years up here," the lanky Townsend, now a lawyer in Augusta, Maine, says as he recalls his time as alpine ranger. "Many of the bold routes couldn't have been done without a bivy, at least not by the parties that climbed them." That said, the park's limits on camping don't make ascents there impossible—it just makes them burly. Townsend has proven this by climbing some of the most committing lines on the mountain without rogue camping.

Bending Katahdin's rules has led to important route development, though. In 1982 Peter Cole and Marc Chauvin established a stunning ice climb that follows a plumb line from Chimney Pond directly to the summit. While they didn't directly disobey the orders of the ranger, they left at 10 a.m. in marginal conditions, an act that would be grounds for ejection from the park if they were caught. They swiftly climbed the *Chauvin-Cole Route* (III WI3+ M2) and were back by dark. This route is now considered a classic.

Every day the Chimney Pond ranger evaluates the weather forecast. The day is posted as Class 1 through 4 in summer or green, yellow or red in winter. Higher numbers or warmer colors indicate high winds, precipitation or other factors that lead to dangerous conditions and potentially restricted use. Sleet, for example, is justification for a red rating, which may mean the mountain is closed to all use. While possibly helpful for hikers, this system has serious flaws. In winter, the ranger at Chimney Pond is rarely a climber with any training in snowpack stability. I once saw a calm bluebird day after a long storm that left 30 inches of snow on the steep, avalanche-prone couloirs posted as a green day, which means "favorable conditions."

The current restrictions on Katahdin are frustrating to accept as a climber. Current equipment and training allow safe mountain travel that wouldn't have been possible decades ago. Even the essentially unregulated ravines of Mount Washington, which see literally hundreds of times more visitors than Katahdin, are just as clean and preserved and they see dramatically fewer accidents per visitor than Katahdin. So are the regulations helping?

Katahdin is, and hopefully will always be, a place where self-reliance is first priority. This isn't an area where people learn to climb, or even a place to go cragging. Katahdin is big and its climbs are committing. While some of the best alpinists have cut their teeth on Katahdin, others, like McNulty (who ultimately recovered), have lost theirs. This is adventure climbing. On Katahdin, if you want beta, climb up and get it.

Brian Irwin has been told he has trouble keeping his mouth shut. He's a physician from North Conway, NH.

LOGISTICS

WHERE Baxter State Park, near Millinocket, Maine.

RESERVATIONS Call 207.723.5140 or check out www.baxterstateparkauthority.com.

REGULATIONS Complicated rules restrict camping in the South Basin during spring and fall, so plan well in advance. If you're planning a day trip in the summer, be at the gate by 4 a.m. When the parking lot at Roaring Brook is full, remaining cars are turned away. For winter trips you'll need at least four days, four people in your team and a lot of patience for red tape. Check out the website for a complete overview of the regulations.

GEAR Double ropes and an alpine rack will suffice on most of the moderate routes. Plan for foul weather; it can snow any season on Katahdin.