



BRIAN IRWIN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Child's trek to peak experience

By Brian Irwin

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WELD, Maine — It's a long hike to Tumbledown Pond. That is, if you weigh 50 pounds, have a short stride, and are shouldering an overnight pack one-third your weight and half your height. It's slightly easier if you weigh more than twice that, but the 1.8-mile approach is still a workout, given that the trail gains almost one-third of a vertical mile in elevation. But at the top of your ascent sits an alpine tarn in a nest of cliffs, with swirling birds and sheets of conifers. It's the perfect place to start a life-long love affair with backpacking. And the perfect place to inspire the imaginations of four young kids.

I've probably hiked Tumbledown Mountain 10 times. I used to ramble up its rock and cast my fly line to its wild population of brook trout before I became a father. It's a magical place, without hyperbole, one where first-time hikers dig deep, fueled by trail mix and energy bars, to reach the water's edge, where they stretch their legs and odometers to greater objectives.

Packing for a family adventure in the backcountry is not without effort. A lot of hard work separates the launching point from the pinnacle. From journals to headlamps, from water filters to lightweight stoves, all things must fit in the sack on your back. And while mine was hefty, it paled in comparison to the ones our children carried. Their packs held every personal item they'd need, right down to sleeping mats.

The Brook Trail is the most direct route to Tumbledown Pond. The path goes up the south side of the mountain at a gentle grade for around a mile, just long enough to warm up. Wide and comfortable, it crosses rivulets and passes glacial erratic as it eases up the hillside. The second half of the trail is steeper. The children chirped on

If you go ...

No permits are required to camp on Tumbledown or at the pond. There are no designated sites, but try to find one that's established to minimize impact on this heavily visited area. Despite the day traffic, if you camp, you're likely to have the place to yourself. No fires are permitted. Consult the Appalachian Mountain Club's Maine Mountain Guide for topographical maps. Find directions to the trailhead at www.summitpost.org.

The author's children trek beside Tumbledown Pond in Maine.

occasion about sore shoulders or tired legs, but in all, the effort was concerted, impressive, and largely pleasant.

It took just 2½ hours to reach the pond. The wind was up, so we donned jackets, and my wife, Lori, served a platter of sausage and cheese with pita. The sun was high and the sky blue, bringing day hikers to the pond in throngs. But the crowds dissipate with the sunset, leaving you a stunning backdrop and all the solitude of the Maine's great north woods.

Tumbledown Pond is a beautiful patch of water, framed on one side by thick forest and on the other by a series of giant, scalloped granite benches. The gravel patches between the huge stone ledges make idyllic campsites; however, with the brisk wind we opted to pitch our camp behind a windbreak of trees at the base of a towering buttress of rock. The kids snuggled into their sleeping bags in one tent, Lori and I in another. The squeals and giggles of four well-exercised kids oozed out of their tent as they played cards and awaited dinner and cookies.

Temps dipped into the 30s that night, providing a welcome

repite from the black flies that shared our camp. With full stomachs, the kids' drifted off into a well-earned slumber, only to rise with the sun to continue to revel in the grandeur that they worked so hard to witness.

Tumbledown Mountain's wild atmosphere wasn't always secure. The peak and surrounding land were owned by private companies, including a paper manufacturer as recently as the 1980s. A broad cohort of not-for-profits formed the Tumbledown Conservation Alliance in 2000. The organization's president, Conrad Heesch, stated that "[Tumbledown] has easy access and is quite spectacular. It has to be one of the most popular hikes in [Maine]. It needed protection from development."

Eventually the land on and around Tumbledown, as well as some land bordering the nearby Mount Blue State Park, was sold to the state. Today Tumbledown sits within a 26,000-acre tract of protected land, interspersed with 12,000 acres of conservation easements, which Heesch states were "put in place to ensure public access." For Tumbledown and its visitors, the future looks bright.

When the sun poked its face over Little Jackson Mountain, the kids roused themselves. The fresh food was gone, leaving them to nibble on freeze-dried eggs, bacon, and hash browns. The offering went over better than expected, and despite comments like "this tastes good but weird," the protein requirement of the day was met — which was good because getting down the mountain is almost as taxing as getting up.

After enjoying a relaxing morning, we packed up. Careful downclimbing brought us safely back to the car, where a series of high-fives proved that Ella, 12, Andy, 10, Morgan, 9, and Reid, 8, had earned a prize no money can buy.

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