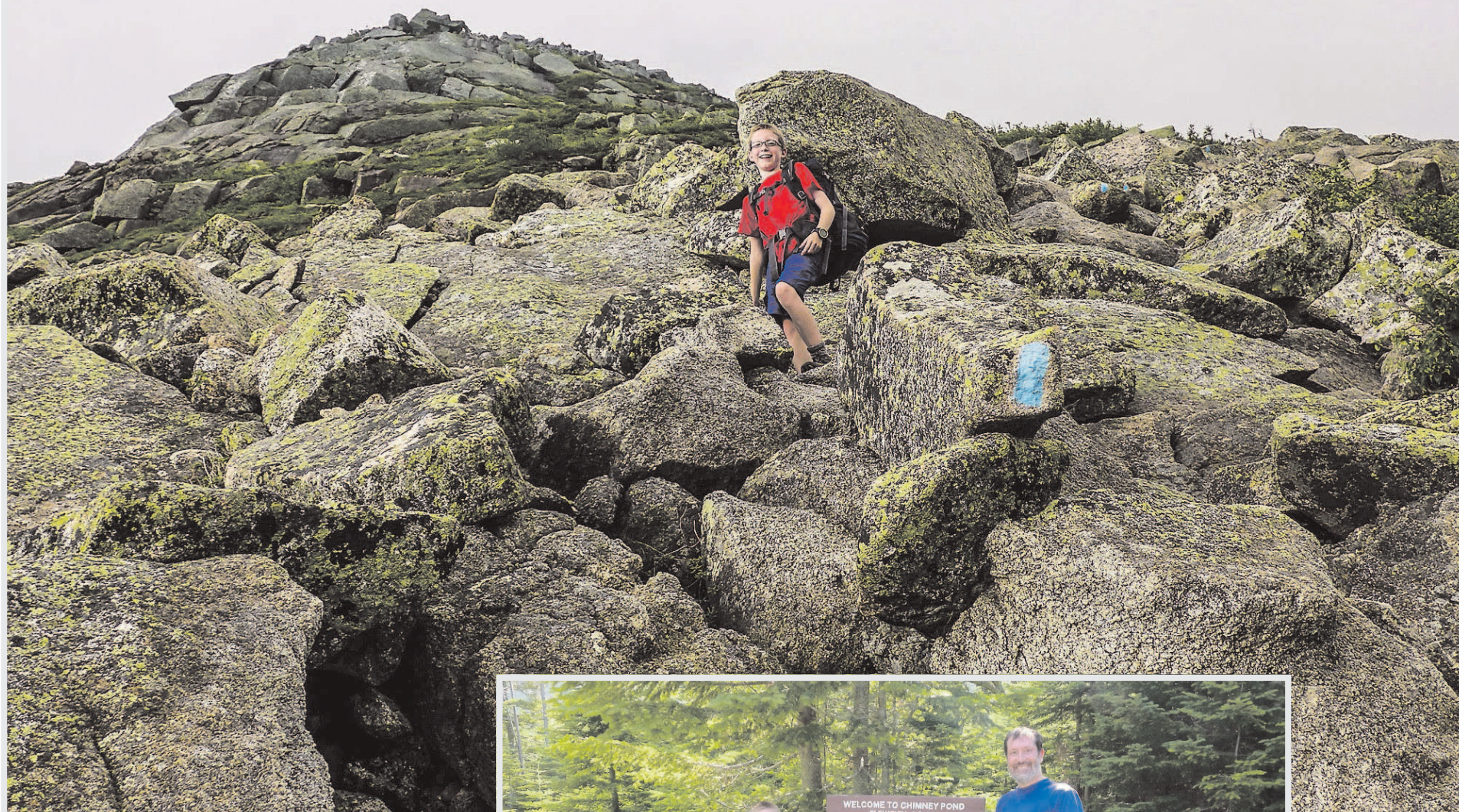


Hike father, hike son



Brian and Andy Irwin tackle Baxter's mighty Mount Katahdin together.

By BRIAN IRWIN

Mount Katahdin punches skyward from a dense canopy of verdant conifers. It's a mountaineer's dream, with steep buttresses, deep gullies and crumbling cliff bands.

Roughly a mile high, Katahdin's summit is not only the terminus of the Appalachian trail but a formidable challenge for young and old hikers alike. This is the perfect place to take a child for a spectacular adventure, and that is exactly what I did this summer with my son, Andy, who was 11 at the time.

Picking a proper hike can make the difference between instilling a love for mountain climbing and scaring a child off of it for a lifetime.

Andy's a strong boy, so we chose to ascend the Cathedral Trail, a steep ridgeline of rock-scrambling that ascends to the summit from the idyllic Chimney Pond. One proven approach when attempting a big peak is to break it into reasonable bites. So, we elected to backpack to Chimney and spend the night, allowing us a full, unfettered day to climb to the summit and back to Chimney, where we'd spend another night before hiking out.

The hike to Chimney was pleasant and reasonable.



Photo by Brian Irwin
Above: Andy Irwin scrambles up the steep boulders of Cathedral Trail.

Left: Andy and his dad, Brian Irwin, at Chimney Pond.

Photo courtesy of Brian Irwin

Only 3.3 miles in length, the trail gently climbs up 1,500 vertical feet on its way to the pond. There, we'd stay in a bunkhouse, one we'd reserved three months prior to avoid having to carry a tent.

Stoking the fire of excitement in the boy was easy, given the stunning scenery. A rich diet of delectable sweet treats and a meal of chicken, rice and cheese burritos maintained his energy. (Andy and I packed for the trip as a team and he was keen on the meal we'd prepared.)

As he settled in for the night, excitement was rife within him. He scribbled furiously in his journal in his bunk, lamenting the stunning beauty of the South Basin that holds Chimney Pond. We played cards, visited with the other guests in the bunkhouse and rested well to ensure an early start in the morning. As we drifted into a peaceful slumber, the wind snapped at the trees and the windows in our building, reminding us that Mount

Katahdin was not going to be a simple challenge.

We left at six in the morning and struck up the Cathedral route. Almost immediately the pitch steepened, forcing us to scramble with our hands and feet. I'd brought a short rope and harnesses in case fear took over Andy's motivated mind, but these devices were never needed, as he bounded almost effortlessly up the rock.

The views into the South Basin were breathtaking as we climbed higher. However, we could see that the cloud ceiling was at around 4,000 feet, shrouding the summit in a milky fog.

Up we clambered, making swift work of the 2,000-foot buttress and its eponymous rock towers, the Cathedrals. Andy flinched little, even when crossing keyhole notches in the ridgeline that hovered over 1,000-foot cliffs.

TIPS FOR HIKING WITH KIDS

■ **START SMALL.** Mount Katahdin wasn't our first parent-child hiking trip, and it probably shouldn't be yours either. We worked up to the challenge by first backpacking on smaller mountains. This builds confidence and allows your little ones to realize that they can do this, if they set their mind to it.

■ **EAT BIG.** Kids are notoriously picky, so pack foods they love. Pita holds up better than bread, and tortillas can wrap up fresh rice and reconstituted chicken for a great dinner. For the latter, I use a company called Harmony House, which makes freeze-dried veggies and meat, allowing you to build your own ultra-light meal, by just adding water. Pack plenty of sweets, if that's your thing.

■ **LET KIDS HELP.** If you present the trip as something you're personally going to provide, it defeats the purpose. Engage the kids when packing and show them maps ahead of time with the proposed itinerary. If you do this carefully, they will be so excited to complete the challenge and will feel better about themselves when it's over.

■ **PACK SMART.** Kids have a higher ratio of body surface to body mass than adults do, making them more sensitive to heat and cold. Bring layers for them, as well as sturdy hiking boots, headlamps and rainwear that is of the same caliber as your own. It's expensive to buy them Gore-Tex that they may outgrow, but if it's your fabric of choice, then provide them the same courtesy and poise them for success.

■ **HAVE A BACKUP PLAN.** Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, the weather or kids' legs don't cooperate. Plan on a shorter, easier option – one that can still get them into the woods and out in nature. A simple overnight at Chimney Pond is a great contingency prize, if summiting Katahdin just isn't in the cards.

KATAHDIN

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We hydrated well, sipping our shared four liters of water in an attempt to stay fresh. As the Cathedral trail eased up, we found ourselves high on the summit plateau, a section of the mountain known as the Tablelands.

The trail eases up more terrain, eventually coming to an apex at the initiation of the Knife Edge, a narrow fin of rock that drops precipitously off either side. We elected to defer on hiking this section, as the trail that connects the Knife Edge to Chimney was closed.

We ambled up broken rock, wind whistling in our ears, with low visibility in the dense cover. Eventually, we scrambled to the top where a sandwich board and placard marked the true summit of Maine's highest peak. After a few snapshots, a half-dozen bites of firm pepperoni and a series of high-fives, we headed down to the Saddle trail, our chosen descent route, a more reasonable way down than climbing the Cathedrals in reverse.

Back at camp, only five hours after starting, we rested in the bunkhouse, brewing soup for guests who would arrive much later in the day. Andy beamed with pride, knowing that he had just successfully climbed what is arguably New England's hardest trail.

As we filtered more drinking water from Chimney Pond, clouds drifted into the South Basin and up toward the summit.

"We did it today, Dad," Andy reflected. I looked up at the Cathedrals as they floated in and out of the clouds.

"You sure did, Andrew," I replied. "You not only made it up to the top, but did one more thing. You kissed the sky."

Brian Irwin is a family physician and freelance journalist from Madison, New Hampshire.



Photo by Brian Irwin

The confluence of trails approaching the Tablelands, Katahdin's broad summit plateau.



Photos by brian Irwin

Andy Irwin writes in his journal in the bunkhouse at Chimney Pond. Below: Andy stands on a rock at the top of the Saddle Trail, the most direct descent route back to Chimney Pond from the summit.

Success on peak has young hiker feeling ‘on top of the world’

By ANDREW IRWIN

Living in New Hampshire gives me great opportunities as an 11-year-old who wants to explore the world, but it has nothing quite like Maine’s Baxter Peak. The mountain makes you want to try your best.

Baxter Peak is not visible from the road, so at first you don’t know what you’re dealing with. As my dad and I drove along the dirt road, a feeling of anxiety rushed through me.

After checking in with the rangers, we parked at Roaring Brook Campground and unloaded our backpacks from the trunk. Since we were staying at a pond called Chimney Pond for two nights, our packs were pretty heavy. As soon as I put mine on, I could tell it was going to be a long hike.

After hiking 3.3 miles in two hours to Chimney Pond, we went to the bunkhouse and started setting up our bunks. My dad and I both got top bunks, because everyone else had already chosen the lower ones.

One of the nice things about staying in a bunkhouse is that you get to meet new people. All the folks were nice and welcoming. We met three fathers and their teenage sons from Massachusetts. The boys taught me how to play a card game.

After a good night’s sleep, we awoke at 6 a.m. for the big day, ate a quick breakfast of bagels and cream cheese and headed out for the long climb. The sun had barely risen, but it was already warm.

I was nervous about going up the hardest trail in New England, but I knew deep down that my dad would never take me up something that I couldn’t do. So at that moment, I gathered up enough energy and courage to start the Cathedral Trail. I knew I wouldn’t give up.

The Cathedral Trail is a third-class, rock-scrambling, exposed mountaineering route. At some points, it’s a long drop on either side, making me nervous, although I knew my dad had his hand on my pack during the steep parts.

When we arrived at the summit, 5,267 feet above sea level, it was foggy and about 50 degrees, and the brisk wind scared me a little. It was about 10 a.m. We sat down and talked for a short time before heading down.

It is exhilarating to feel like you’re on top of the world.

Andrew Irwin is a sixth-grader who aspires to be an author. He enjoys writing, photography, hiking and almost any sport.





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