

A Serene Thread of Paradise

Hiking the MMM Trail from Long Island Sound to Mt Monadnock

Somewhere around five years after completing AMC's New Hampshire 4000 Footer Club, sporting a beer belly, and approaching the age of 60, the call of the trail once again beckoned to me. Indeed, *IT WAS SCREAMING AT ME!* Living in central Connecticut and dealing with a hectic lifestyle, the obvious choice was the CFPA's Blue-Blazed trail system. Having completed the Mattatuck and a number of shorter local trail systems, I had set my sights on the lovely Mattabesett Trail when the Obama Administration announced federal funding for the New England National Scenic Trail, stringing together the Mattabesett and Metacomet trails of Connecticut, and the Metacomet-Monadnock trail of Massachusetts and New Hampshire (well, it turns out, not quite New Hampshire). Diminutively coined the "Triple-M" Trail, this fantastic thread



of paradise wends its way from the Connecticut River in Middletown, Connecticut, south to Guilford where it makes something of a U-turn before heading north, following the long trap rock ridges of the Connecticut River valley well into central Massachusetts where it swings northeasterly toward its northern terminus at the summit of Mt. Monadnock in southern New Hampshire, covering in all over 250 miles. On Saturday, June 27, 2009, I set out from the River Road

trailhead in Middletown, Connecticut, the very beginning of the Mattabesett Trail. My destination was Mt. Monadnock in New Hampshire, a good year later.

Perhaps the most salient feature of hiking this trail system is the simple fact that every single section affords the hiker a treat, be it a lovely waterfall, a breathtaking cliff, an historic stone marker, a babbling brook, a blueberry patch, a snowy grove of Mountain-laurel or a scenic overlook, not to mention the wildlife. The Triple-M Trail is peaceful hiking, yet never dull. Serene for sure, yet full of surprises.

My hiking plan involved strictly day-hikes, section by section, usually using a bicycle to spot my car at destinations. Completion of the entire Triple-M system involves roughly 55 section hikes, all of which are within the single-day range of medium experience hikers. None of the sections requires an overnight campout to complete, good news considering the paucity of legal campsites on this system.

The first half of the Mattabesett runs southwesterly through gentle rolling hills and meadows. Look for the Selectman's Stones and other points of historic interest en route. Upon entering the Guilford Land Trust at the Mattabesett's southern extremity, it starts to get rather rocky in spots (notably the interesting maze of the Broomstick Ledges), prepping the hiker for the coming trap rock ledges.

No sooner did I start my hiking quest than the CFPA trailmasters cut a new extension, the lovely 11-mile long Menunkatuk Trail, from just east of the Broomsticks down to the Guilford Land Trust's exquisite East River Preserve. From this point, a four mile pavement walk is necessary to complete the route to Long Island Sound. Although it isn't in the woods, the four mile walk from Guilford Harbor to the present southern terminus of the Menunkatuk is well worth the walk, strolling through Guilford's lovely historic district and town green. This, of course, inspires the irresistible hiking challenge of going all the way from Long Island Sound to Mt. Monadnock, New Hampshire!



The addition of the Menunkatuk Trail to the MMM Trail system would imply that we now diminutively call it the MMMM Trail (perhaps "Quad-M" Trail?), but this appellation has yet to take hold.

The second half of the Mattabesett is not for the faint of heart. We're immediately treated to the dramatic precipice of Bluff Head as the trail now swings northward out of Guilford. Up and over lovely Totoket



Mountain, the trail now faithfully follows some of the best of the Connecticut River Valley's dramatic ridgelines. When the Mattabesett Trail meets up with the Metacomet Trail in the town of Berlin, the hiker hardly notices any change, as the scenic traprock ridgeline walking just keeps coming. The crown jewel of these ridgelines is the breathtaking Hanging Hills of Meriden and Castle Craig, a stone lookout tower that marks the highest elevation anywhere on the United States' eastern seaboard within 50 miles of the coast. Not too much further along, the trail crosses over thrilling Ragged Mountain, a mecca for serious rock climbers.

As the trail reaches into the Farmington area, historic sites abound: just off the trail near Rattlesnake Mountain is Hospital Rock, the site of a tragic 18th century smallpox quarantine, where many young patients inscribed their names in bedrock. The trail cuts right through Will Warren's Den, a rock-and-boulder cave where a 17th Century local free spirit fled after attempting to burn down the town after being flogged for not going to church. Passing through the Hill-Stead property in Farmington, I had my first bear encounter. More afraid of humans than we are of them, the hundred-pound yearling wouldn't stick around long enough for me to take her picture.

Further north on Talcott Mountain, incredible views of central Connecticut abound. Topping it all off is the majestic Heublein Tower with its six-story-high observation room, affording spectacular multi-state views. It is said that Dwight Eisenhower was persuaded to run for President while visiting the tower in 1950. The Triple-M continues about ten miles more over lovely rolling hills to East Granby's Peak Mountain where it passes directly above the Old Newgate Prison, an



18th Century penitentiary of His Majesty's Connecticut Colony. Two more moderate section hikes remain before the New England National Scenic Trail is handed off to our Massachusetts partners, the Berkshire Chapter of the Appalachian Mountain Club.

About this time I checked in with my Doctor for my annual checkup and got a big pat on the back for losing 15 pounds since last year! Was it my diet? Or perhaps all that great gorp?

Soon on my way into Massachusetts, the trail, known here as the Metacomet-Monadnock, or "M&M" Trail, crosses a series of fine bog bridges through a beautiful wetlands area, and then starts up Provin Mountain. About six miles north of the state line, the trail crosses the Westfield River, which can be forded in warm weather in times of low

water. Having neither, I hiked this section as a round trip, starting the next section on the other side a week later.

More rolling hills, and I am finally on to Easthampton's abrupt Mt. Tom,



now in the throes of late winter. You can still spot the Heublein Tower in the south from this summit, and Mt. Greylock and the Berkshire Hills are visible to the west. With a foot of well-packed snow under foot, I was easily up and over, never even donning my snowshoes. Immediately east of Mt. Tom, on the other side of the Connecticut River, the Holyoke Range beckons.

With the sole exception of Mt. Monadnock itself, the Holyoke Range is the most heavily traveled corridor of the entire MMM Trail system. Especially here, expect lots of new friends in high places! But hikers beware: never underestimate the Holyoke Range. Although none of this terrain rises above about 1100 feet, there is a relentless succession of hilltops, The Seven Sisters, which can really wear a hiker down. At the summit of Mt. Holyoke sits the famous Summit House built in 1851. This venue was frequented and immortalized in the 19th Century by painters of the Hudson School, most notably Thomas Cole. Other famous visitors included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Dickens, Jenny Lind, as well as several U.S. presidents.



The next several sections were perhaps the most challenging part of my journey owing to landowner issues. The AMC Berkshire Chapter is in the process of relocating the trail, however, a temporary and rather unusual agreement is in place. The landowners have agreed to allow the temporary use of the land for hiking so long as the trail is not blazed. If the hiker has good orienteering skills, good maps, a GPS, and above all else, the time to "do the homework" ahead of time, it is still possible to navigate these lands. I found that although unmarked, in most places the trail is still obvious. Where it isn't, you simply resort to GPS waypoint navigation (using waypoints that were nailed the night before using topographical maps). In all of these "problem" sections, the trailheads

and road intersections are well marked.



It is anticipated that major trail relocations (close to the Quabbin Reservoir) will be accomplished in the near future.

From the Wendell State Forest section on, the M&M is very well blazed. The trail passes through the ruins of an old piano factory on the river in Farley, then on to Northfield and Hermit Mountains, where you can visit the rocky ruins of "Erving Castle", a 19th Century hermit's

homestead. Towards the end of this section, we summit Crag Mountain from which we get our first view of Mt. Monadnock, some 25 miles distant as the crow flies.

Passing on through the lovely Mt. Grace State Reservation (and more great views of Grand Monadnock), we draw ever closer to the New Hampshire state line (actually briefly crossing into New Hampshire near Mayo Hill). Scenic and majestic Royalston Falls beckons on the final section in Massachusetts and just a half-



mile north we cross into New Hampshire. Technically, the M&M Trail is not a part of the new National Scenic Trail designation after it leaves Massachusetts, as New Hampshire has not yet opted in.

On the second section in New Hampshire, I am up on top of Little Monadnock Mountain, up to now the high point of my journey at 1883 feet. Soon after passing the wooded summit, the trail crosses over a network of open ledges that afford spectacular views of nearby Grand Monadnock, now some ten miles distant. Before long, the trail comes out of the forest and meanders through the little town of Troy, New Hampshire, passing by its lovely town green, reminiscent of the one we passed some months back in Guilford, Connecticut. Yet one more section remains to be covered before we arrive at the destination, Grand Monadnock. This five mile section over Gap Mountain takes me through some of the most awesome blueberry patches I have ever seen! Stopping constantly to munch on the berries, my pace is slowed dramatically.



August 14, 2010 brings a crystal-clear day and I'm off to make the final pitch up 3165-foot Grand Monadnock. As is completely normal for this place, the mountain is mobbed with smiling, sweaty faces. Mt. Monadnock is said to be the second most heavily visited mountain in the world (after Mt. Fuji in Japan). The draw here is nothing new: both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David

Thoreau frequented it and wrote fondly of it. There may be a huge crowd on the summit, but it is all smiling faces! The view from the summit is unparalleled: the Hancock and Prudential Towers of Boston are seen 60 miles away in the southeast, Mt. Greylock and the Berkshires stand out in the west, Mt. Tom and the Holyoke range are easily spotted in the south, and if you know right where to look, you can actually see Mt. Washington, some 110 miles distant, in the north!

As is the case with most major trail systems in the United States, the stewardship of this trail system is a collaboration of several groups. In Connecticut, the MMM Trail is maintained by the Connecticut Forest and Park Association, and in Massachusetts and New Hampshire by the AMC's Berkshire Chapter, both of which are to be endlessly commended for their excellent efforts. Now that federal recognition and support have come, this New England gem will forever be protected as not just a link to the past, but as a healthy recreational bridge to the future.



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