



View from meadow on south side of West Cave. Photo by Alan Via #429 W174

THE DIOGENES CHALLENGE

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As Catskill 3500 members are well aware, “The Nine” consists of a 20-plus miles route which summits nine of the Catskill High Peaks: Slide, Cornell, Wittenberg, Friday, Balsam Cap, Rocky, Lone, Table, and Peekamoose. What makes the route challenging is that five of the peaks have no trails. Even with map, compass, and GPS, bushwhacking along this ridge is no simple task, for the terrain is steep and rocky, and the forests thick and tangled, which renders “the eye of little service,” as Catskills author John Burroughs once wryly noted.



Over the years, I’d had the chance to complete “The Nine,” or parts thereof, on several occasions: once trying to run it for speed, once at night, once in the winter, and once as part of an unsuccessful attempt to thru-run all 35 peaks.

Over time, my practice of running and hiking began to evolve in a minimalist direction. Inspired by Chris MacDougall’s bestseller, *Born to Run*, I started experimenting with barefoot hiking. I decided to take on “the Nine” without shoes, but only lasted through six of the peaks before my feet had enough.

I was also developing an interest in “natural navigation,” the art of moving through the forest without technology — meaning no map, no compass, no GPS. This was great fun, especially with friends (even if we didn’t always reach the intended destination) because the exercise forced us to pay close attention to the lay of the land.

Another minimalist direction for me: I began to incorporate intermittent fasting into my dietary and training plans. The goal was to break my dependence on sugary snacks and teach my body to burn fat, the way people did before power bars.

One day these themes coalesced in my mind, and I came up with a grand plan: to complete “the Nine” not only barefoot, but navigating naturally, and without carrying food or water. I would call this the Diogenes Challenge, after [the ancient Greek philosopher](#) who advocated for simplicity and self-discipline.

Upon reflection, however, the Diogenes Challenge seemed like a little too much, even for an arch-minimalist like me. I quietly let it slide and focused on other things.

Until one day, to my surprise, my friend Kal Ghosh asked, when were we going to do it?

* * *

You may have seen an image of Diogenes (412- 323 BC), one of the founders of the Cynic school of philosophy, holding a lantern aloft in daylight, searching for an honest man (he never found one). Diogenes lived outdoors with only three possessions, a cloak, satchel, and staff. At first Kal and I thought we'd leave behind sleeping bags and lights, since Diogenes didn't have them. But after considering differences in climate between New York and ancient Greece, as well as the need for us to start a little late, we relaxed those standards. We would complete "the Nine" barefoot, navigating naturally, without carrying food, and drinking only from springs.

Our operation kicked off at the Denning parking area at 7 p.m. on Friday, June 12. We ambled off into the cool evening air at an easy pace, with Kal in the lead. The two of us have a lot in common: corporate workers, barefoot runners, past participants in the Escarpment Trail Run. We're also different in many ways, and there was plenty to talk about as we sauntered along: history, current events, personal stories, athletic goals, not to mention the different surfaces we were treading on.

The trail toward Slide Mountain is full of large, tilting, "ankle-busting" rocks that make walking difficult no matter what you're wearing. Kal and I kept up a slow but steady pace, availing ourselves of dirt and grass along the trail's edge, or aiming for flat rocks to step on and avoiding the sharp ones.

Turning onto the Curtis-Ormsbee Trail, we found a more pleasant surface, for this path was covered in dirt, leaves, and fir needles. The trail curled up along a ridge and snaked through gaps in sandstone ledges — steep enough in places to leave me short of breath.

Meanwhile, the light was dimming. We reached a vantage point near 3500 feet, but it was nearly dark now, and little to see — just a faint glow along the horizon. With Diogenes in mind, we persevered without lights a little longer — I could see the white of my feet and light-gray sandstone rocks, but the path itself had become so dark it looked like water. I was surprised each time I placed a foot upon the ground and it stayed dry.



Walking barefoot in the dark is a magical exercise: it teaches you to step slowly and carefully, requires good posture and balance, and seems to activate circuits in the mind we rarely use, judging from how even the faintest bit of light was enough for us to place our feet subconsciously, it seemed, in just the right places. But walking barefoot in the dark is slow. Eventually we could no longer see the trail. At this point we clicked on our lights.

Nearing Slide's summit, the surface changed again. Now the ground was littered with the rough conglomerate of the "Slide Mountain Formation," and the path was covered in fine gray sand, which was pleasing to the soles, and gray pebbles and knobby rocks, which were not so much. I asked Kal what he thought — "Well, it's interesting," he replied. The constant change in surface conditions is part of what makes barefooting an adventure.

We paused on Slide's summit, pleased to have completed the first peak of "the Nine." It was pitch black now. In the distance, a few lights glowed from the city of Kingston or its environs. Overhead, the sky was clear and full of stars. It was getting cold. My breath was steaming in my headlamp.

After stopping for some water at the spring, then descending Slide's steep backside, we pulled up around midnight at a primitive campsite, where we spent a cold night. My sleeping bag is rated to 32 °F, but that's a survival rating, not a comfort rating, and I spent much of the night shivering, while Kal, who'd brought a synthetic blanket, was so cold he got barely any sleep at all.

Nonetheless, with eight mountains still to climb, the next morning we were up at first light, packed, and on the trail a little after 5 a.m., with Kal once again in the lead, while I lagged behind, feeling cold and sleepy. Without its customary breakfast and

cappuccino, my stomach was growling, but after a little while, it was fine. The sun flared gold and red against the clouds, and then a few minutes later we were treated to a misty morning scene from Wittenberg.



Dawn over Cornell



Misty morning view from Cornell

With these two peaks bagged, now it was time to enter the forest and put our natural navigation skills to the test. We backtracked to Cornell, where Kal and I probed the wood line for the best point of entry. Then we stepped off the trail and into a welter of spindly fir trees. To reach Friday, the plan was to orient ourselves to the south by keeping the early morning sun on our left; then we'd aim to hug the mountain's steep eastern edge, which would be hard to miss.

"At least we're off the trails," Kal commented. For barefoot hikers in the Catskills, the trails are much rockier than the forest floor, which is covered in a springy mix of club moss, fallen leaves, and fir needles — although in the fir forest there are lots of scratchy sticks and fallen branches with sharp points. Even with these kinds of hazards, I've come to prefer barefoot to shod hiking, because I find that I can fit my foot into just the right spots on the uneven forest floor, and the sense of touch helps me keep my balance.

As we made our way through the forest, a faint path began to appear where other bushwhackers had passed this way. It was sometimes visible from a faint compression on the ground and sometimes a scuff mark on a fallen log, but mostly from the absence of protruding branches which would otherwise have scratched and poked. These kinds of "social" or "herd" paths are the best way to move through dense forest, because they follow logical routes, and weave around the worst obstacles, and because they concentrate human impact in one place leaving the rest of the forest unscathed. There's an art to following these trails — it's called paying attention. And we did, in due course, reaching the canister on Friday's eastern edge.



Ken and Kal on Wittenberg



Cornell and Wittenberg, view from Friday

Now we could relax, as the trail to Balsam Cap was familiar. In fact I'd been here just two weeks prior in the company of legendary Catskill hiker Ralph Ryndak. Now as Kal and I descended from the summit, we stopped for a moment on "Ralph's Ramp," where I filtered some water from a seep running down the cliff. A few minutes later we found ourselves standing beneath the canister on Balsam Cap, the excellent social trail having wafted us to the top in seemingly no time at all.

Now we faced the single most critical point in our journey, for there is no social trail from Balsam Cap to Rocky (or if there is, I've never found it). To start with, we would first need to turn from south to west, otherwise we'd plunge into the depths of Peekamoose Valley on one side, or the Neversink Valley on the other. Now that it was a little later in the morning, the sun ought to be in the southeast, or so I judged, and turned until the shadow of my head was to the right and slightly behind me,

and then we headed off.

We dropped down a steep slope, under thick canopy, totally blind to our surroundings. The slope leveled out for a little while, then it began to drop again. Finally, through a gap in the canopy just a few leaves wide, a glimpse of a fir-clad ridge — that had to be Rocky! And then it was gone. We kept pushing forward through hobble-bush and birch and beech until we reached the base of a band of cliffs.

Going uphill is a simpler exercise while navigating in the mountains, because if you keep climbing, sooner or later you must reach a top. After scrambling up a few more ledges and back into fir-spruce forest, we spotted the bright orange canister on Rocky's summit.

Six down, three to go. From Rocky to Lone would be the last real bushwhack, I commented to Kal, because there's a very good social trail from Lone to Table, after which we'd be on the trails again. "So let's stay focused," I said, "and not screw up!"

We pushed off down Rocky's backside, still orienting west, the sun still hanging in the sky on our left, our shadows still on the right, although I cautioned Kal that the sun moves rapidly overhead at noon.

We fought our way through dense stands of fir and spruce. I hadn't been through here in at least two years, and now the forest seemed unfamiliar. I began to feel uncomfortable. Kal was lagging behind, the effects of his sleepless night catching up, but he thought we were a little below the ridge crest, so I edged uphill — when suddenly through a break in the forest, there was Lone Mountain, looming above us and to the front.



What a relief to spot Lone Mountain, from the shoulder of Rocky

It was a steep climb up Lone, but once on top, our navigational challenges were over — or at least they should have been. We marched off along the social trail to Table, which is well-used and easy to follow — and somehow lost it. I'd spotted an easy way down through a gap in the rocks, figured the trail went that way, but it must not have, as no further signs were evident. However, the northern corner of Table mountain was visible in the distance. So, we decided to plunge straight down the mountain in that direction. Bad call!

Now the forest thickened, and Table disappeared. I climbed a few feet up into a twisted birch tree but couldn't see a thing — although open views to the right meant that Table was hiding somewhere else. We must have gone too far right, and now we tried to contour back left, but the terrain was steeply slanted, as if the Neversink Valley were determined to suck us down into the depths.

From behind me, Kal kept insisting: "Push further left!"

I was growing exasperated, for what was supposed to be easy had turned into a problem.

Then Kal spotted light through the trees above us and suggested we head uphill.

"What, climb back up Lone Mountain," I protested, "are you out of your mind?"

I was about ready to call it quits and pull the GPS out of my pack.

"But look at the sun," Kal said. It was in front of us. I stood there perplexed (wasn't it supposed to be on our left?) — until finally I realized that it was late enough in the day for it to have swung over into the west.

Then I became even more confused. On the one hand, I was convinced we had gotten turned around. But on the other hand, if we were heading west, then we should be climbing Table. I stood there, perplexed, until looking behind me, there was a big mountain visible through the trees, and it didn't look like Table. To my astonishment, a few steps later we stumbled onto that sneaky social trail, and it took us straight up to the top of Table.

The natural navigation was done, this time for good. From here, five miles along the official blazed trail would take us to Peekamoose and back to Table, and then down into the Neversink Valley and to our cars.



View from Peekamoose: approximate route from Friday (upper left) to Balsam Cap (center) to Rocky (lower left)

You'd think this would be the easy part, but the trail down Table was steep and full of rocks, and by this point, soles, ankles, knees were getting tired. To keep from poking feet and jarring joints, each step required total concentration and perfect balance. We marched down the hill in silence. It took a long time to reach the cars.

At 7 p.m., 24 hours after we'd first started, we arrived back at the Denning parking area, congratulated ourselves for the successful completion of the Diogenes Challenge, and said goodbye. I don't know how Kal spent Sunday, but I relaxed, put my feet up, and enjoyed a beautiful day at home.

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You may be wondering, what exactly was the point of the Diogenes Challenge?

We all rely on technology to such a large extent in modern life, and generally it does the job — but the risk is that we become dependent on this stuff and lose some of our natural strengths and capabilities.

- Going barefoot teaches balance, agility, a light step, and patience
- Going without food teaches the body to burn fat efficiently, helping to break dependence on sugary snacks which may well be the biggest health threat in modern life
- Navigating naturally teaches you to understand the lay of the land and pay attention

You are welcome to design your own version of the Diogenes Challenge, which doesn't have to be in exactly the same format as what Kal and I did. If you do so, at a minimum, the experience should help clarify for you both the benefits and costs of various types of gear.

Maybe you'll, feel the thrill of self-reliance, which comes from discovering you can get by with less. And maybe, just possibly, you'll find that moving naturally, the way our distant ancestors did, is actually a lot of fun...

Good luck!

Author's note: this is a version of a trip report originally published on Ken Posner's blog, www.thelongbrownpath.com, and specially revised for *The Canister*. Before attempting anything similar to the Diogenes Challenge, please recognize that barefoot hiking, intermittent fasting, and natural navigation are not necessarily suitable for beginners without adequate training. Please make sure you have a thorough safety plan for every hike including navigational gear and other emergency supplies.

Kenneth Posner is a lifetime Catskill 3500 Club member, board member and volunteer with the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, and race director for the SRT Run. He has completed the Catskills Grid and the ADK 46 and has set fastest-known time records thru-running the Long Path and the Badwater Double. You can follow him on Twitter @Long_Brown_Path and on his blog at www.thelongbrownpath.com