

A Navigational Adventure in the Northern Catskills

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The Catskills off-trail regime requires the ability to problem-solve while managing cognitive load, especially when technology fails.

The other day I was out bagging peaks in the Northern Catskills. After 4 miles on the Long Path, I reached the shoulder of Richmond Mountain (3,227 feet), which was one of my objectives.

The Long Path does not cross Richmond's summit, but rather contours around the mountain's flank. To bag this peak, I would need to step off the trail and bushwhack through the forest. I wasn't expecting a difficult operation – the off-trail movement was roughly one-quarter mile long, entailing a climb of a couple hundred feet. At least this is what I recalled from a cursory glance at the map before setting out.

Still, one doesn't leave the trail casually. Not in the Catskills, where the vegetation is so thick it's hard to see much past the foliage in your face. Moreover, the Northern Catskills see little traffic. I'd been out this way the weekend before and seen only a single person. Today, not a soul. Putting aside safety considerations, there were still several miles to go to reach my evening destination, and I didn't want to waste time wandering in the woods. To keep things safe and simple, I pulled my phone from my trousers pocket to consult the AllTrails app, which is popular navigational tool with a digital map.

I tapped in the PIN, but the screen did not unlock.

I tapped the four digits again. Nothing registered on the screen. Feeling slightly exasperated, I tapped harder. Nothing.

I put the phone back in my pocket and considered options. If the device had truly malfunctioned, then practically speaking, my hike was over. There was an intersection ahead where I

would leave the Long Path and head onto an alternate trail. But I hadn't studied the map carefully enough to remember where it was. Without consulting the phone, I wouldn't know which way to go.

What a shame. I'd been hoping to bag several peaks this weekend.

Richmond's summit lay somewhere above me, cloaked in a mottle of sunlit forest and shadow. The slope was covered in grass and ferns. Farther up there was a band of waist-high hobblebush, and then a crowd of beech saplings. The bushwhack to the top was a pretty simple operation, but without the phone to check my location, the risks had just ratcheted up a notch. If I were to get disoriented, I might not be able to find my way back to the trail. That would not be a good outcome.

I pulled the phone out of my trousers pocket and tried again. And again. And then a third time. Nothing registered as I rapped away. Until strangely the phone started beeping at me. As if the device thought I was trying to dial an emergency phone number. Then the display began to flicker around the edges. Which did not inspire confidence. Feeling a mix of contempt and disgust, I shoved the device back in my pocket.

Glancing at my GPS watch, I got an idea. The display read 4.3 miles, which was the distance I'd walked already. Now I decided to give myself another 0.2 miles to reach the summit, meaning once the display read 4.5 miles, that was it – adventure over, return to trail. This plan would give me the chance to bag at least this peak, before ending my weekend early, while limiting the risk.

Then I remembered the compass tucked into a pocket of my pack. I pulled it out and saw the black arrow pointing north toward the summit. Although the sun was hanging over the



summit, too, which didn't make sense because typically around noontime the sun would be in the south. Later I remembered that the black arrow points south. Talk about a rookie error. Honestly, my mind was preoccupied with the question how I'd log on to work Monday morning without a functioning phone to conduct the required multi-factor authentication – and would I have time to replace it before then?

The climb was steep. I switched back and forth, hunting for lines that offered level footing. Passed through a glade of ferns. Then a band of hobblebush. Soon I was ducking through clusters of young beech trees with long wavy branches hanging at chest height.

After a couple of minutes of work, I found myself cresting the ridge. To my right, the ground continued rising. Now my watch displayed 4.45 miles – leaving 0.05 miles to go before I'd reach my self-appointed limit. I turned to the right and made my way through thick forest, stepping over a short sandstone ledge about a foot tall and then across a fallen trunk. Further ahead, the ground dropped off, suggesting I'd reached the top, but in

the thick foliage I couldn't be sure. Perhaps the true summit lay in that direction a little farther off. Should I keep going?

After a moment's thought, I decided to stick to plan. If this was not the summit, I'd return to bag Richmond some other time. Probably with a new phone. Part of my mind was trying to remember where was the closest store.

On a whim, I decided to give the phone a final try. I pulled it out of my pocket and tapped in the PIN, and it came to life. The GPS-enabled AllTrails map showed that I was standing right on Richmond's summit.

Well, this was good news. I could continue my hike. Although it would be important to pay attention to that tricky intersection up ahead, where I'd leave the Long Path for a different trail – in case the phone died again.

Phone back in pocket, I retraced my steps. First there was the 0.05-mile stroll along the crest. Then I turned to the left and headed down the steep slope. Weaved through young beech with long thin branches. Passed through a patch of hobblebush. High-stepped through some ferns. This seemed like familiar terrain, although to be honest, most of the Catskills looks like this.

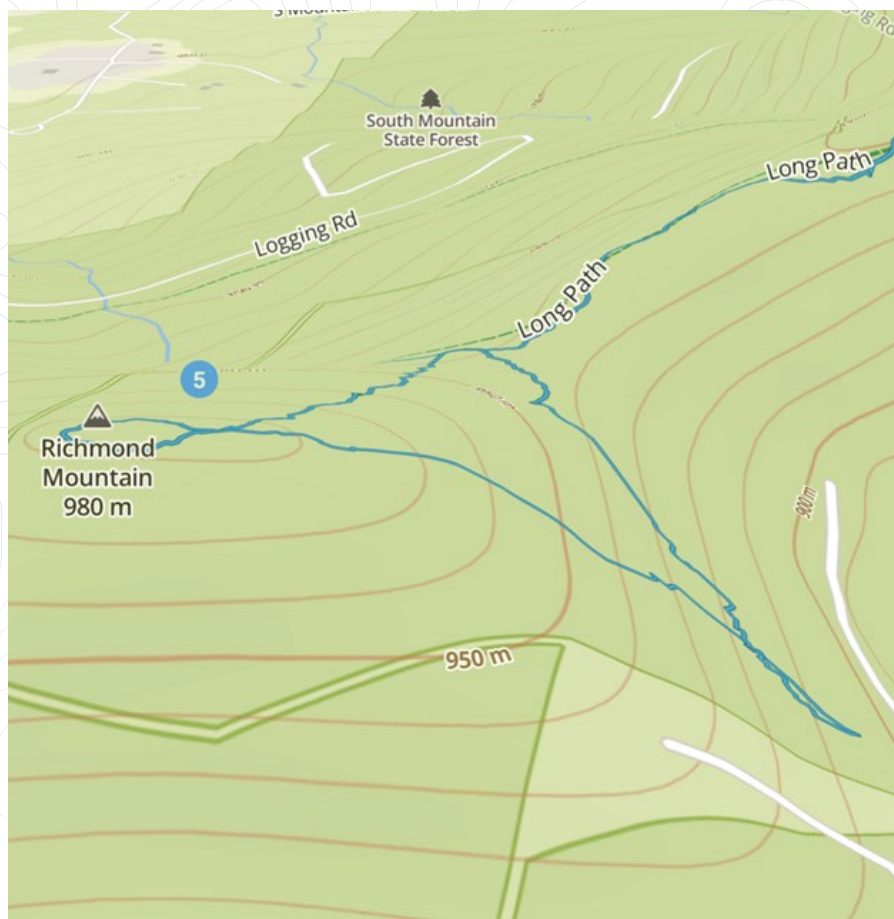
I felt like maybe I was drifting to the left. So I steered a little to the right, sensing that the trail lay that way.

After another minute or two, I saw 4.70 miles on the read-out. Which meant I should be standing on the trail. Or within a step or two. But there was no sign of it.

Navigating off-trail in the Catskills is never a casual affair. Over the years, I've never had a safety issue, although I've made plenty of mistakes. Mistakes can be quite aggravating. They can waste a lot of time.

Now I thought ahead to the lean-to where I planned to spend the night, and how I'd like to get there before bad weather moved in. I pulled out the phone to check the map, typed in the PIN, and saw, to my surprise and consternation, that I had gone down the wrong side of the mountain. Almost exactly the wrong way, meaning further away from the trail, instead of back towards it.

This wasn't a disaster, merely 0.2 miles in the wrong direction, meaning there was now



AllTrails navigational app display, showing the author's track down the wrong side of Richmond Mountain



View from the lean-to on Huntersfield Mountain. Photo: Ken Posner

0.4 miles between me and the trail. Call it 2,000 feet. Six or seven football fields worth of thick forest. But a quick glance at the steep slope I'd just descended elicited a groan of dismay. I really didn't want to climb back up again.

And then I couldn't help but wonder — what would have happened if the phone had not come back to life? Or if it had died again?

In those scenarios, there would have been little choice but to head downhill until I hit a road.* Then I would have had to beg a ride from someone who might not be eager to pick up a dirty barefoot hiker. And it would be hard to tell them which way to take me, since I would have no idea where I'd emerged and also didn't remember the name of the road I'd parked on.

In any case, I made it back to the trail, checking the phone frequently, and then I made it out to the lean-to, arriving as a cold wind barreled in from the north, beating the rain there by ten minutes.

The next day, I retraced my steps from the lean-to. As I neared Richmond, this time coming from the other direction, I decided to bag it once again. Once I'd scrambled up the ridge, I recognized the summit from the short sandstone ledge and the fallen trunk. Well, now here was my opportunity to learn from the mistake the day before. Here was my chance to show that I could find my way back to the trail without veering off down the wrong side of the mountain. I stowed phone in trouser pocket and walked a short distance down the ridge, glancing at my watch until it had clicked off 0.05 miles. So far, so good. Then I turned to the left and headed straight down.

There was only 0.15 miles to go, but I wasn't in a mood to waste time; after a short distance, I checked my phone again. To my dismay, I saw that I'd made exactly the same mistake as the day before. Once again, I was headed down the wrong side. Feeling angry and stupid, I banked hard left and marched down the hill with phone clutched in hand checking my location with every other step.

The moral of this story is that navigating off-trail in the Catskills is a complex operation which can create significant cognitive load, even when you are utilizing multiple navigational devices. The errors I made are also a reminder of the considerable difference between navigating uphill in the mountains and down. Moving uphill is usually straightforward, as your feet naturally prefer going straight up, rather than moving at a slant, and uphill must eventually lead to some kind of summit. Going down, your feet will also tend to follow the easiest and most level path,

but depending on the mountain's shape, that could take you in any direction. Which is what I think happened to me. On a positive note, since this adventure my phone's been working fine.

*My watch has a display option showing a track of my route. If the phone had malfunctioned again, either at the top of Richmond or as I was descending the wrong way, I could have used this display option to follow my tracks backwards to the summit and thence the trail. Hopefully, in that scenario, I would have thought of this option.



Kenneth Posner is a lifetime Catskills 3500 Club member. His new book *Chasing the Grid: An Ultrarunner's Physical and Spiritual Journey in Pursuit of the Ultimate Mountain Challenge* chronicles his completion of the Catskills Grid. Connect with Ken at www.barefootken.com