

Colleen is a Trailhead Steward Program co-chair (see her bio in Trail Mix). Jeff is a recently retired middle school math teacher. He is an aspirant, Catskill 3500 Club Trailhead Steward and Trail Maintainer. Both [Colleen](#) and [Jeff](#) can be reached by email.



Rolling Hills of the Western Catskills. Photo by David Turan

Feeling the Catskills, One Step at a Time

Text and Photos by: Kenneth A. Posner #2573 W1108

On October 26, 2019, Steve Aaron and I stood on a vantage point near the summit of Balsam Mountain and celebrated his completion of the 35. We stared across the valley at pumpkin-colored ridges and frothy marshmallow-mist swirling beneath cerulean sky, while overhead the clouds spread out into a celestial ribcage (the scientific term is *cirrus vertebratus*) and I thought, how strange that the sky would celebrate Steve's accomplishment and then, wouldn't it be even stranger if this was all coincidence.



Moments earlier we'd been standing in the saddle between Balsam and Eagle, when a tall broad-shouldered man and a tiny child came striding toward us. The man introduced himself as Jason. His daughter was Luna. How old was she? Luna hugged her father's leg and silently raised four fingers. For a moment three generations of Catskill hikers stood and stared. I wondered what to say to someone so young, to offer encouragement without coming across as overbearing.

Upon hearing of Steve's accomplishment, Jason explained that Luna was working on the 35. We talked about mountains and people and various projects, and that's when Jason mentioned the All Trails Challenge.

I'd heard of the challenge, which is [administered by the Catskill Mountain Club](#) – it entails covering every mile of official hiking trail in the Catskill Park, of which there are 349.4. In early 2017 I'd downloaded the spreadsheet with all the trails and ticked off those I'd completed. My total was 140 miles, or 40% complete. And then I promptly forgot about the

Challenge. Until the chance meeting with Jason and Luna.

So now I gave this project some extra thought. It would be an alternative to more peak-bagging. A mellow activity compared to racing. And of course, another reason to visit the Catskills and explore. But for the next six months I did nothing — not with the mountains covered in snow and ice — since I'd decided to complete the Challenge barefoot.

My friend Kal Ghosh, who is a hard-core minimalist and among other things, an experienced barefoot runner, agreed to join me in May of 2020 for a barefoot hike from Alder Lake to Balsam Lake Mountain. At Beaver Pond we stood next to the lean-to and listened to a chorus of spring peepers, and I thought wouldn't it be nice to come back here and camp out with these frogs. And then, as we marched farther along the trail, the forest floor sparkled with a million points of light — spring beauties and trilliums and violets in yellow, blue, and white. On the descent from BLM, the trail was unbelievably rocky (I think I heard Kal groan with exasperation).

And suddenly 40% was 41%. Which seemed incredibly exciting.

Previously, I'd focused on the 3500 footers, which I'd climbed over and over again. The Challenge took me out to other places besides the high peaks. A new theme to my wanderings was *water*. After Beaver Pond I squelched around Mud Pond. Stared in fascination at Russell Brook Falls, where the water snakes through a gothic structure of sandstone strata, graced with cryptic hemlocks. Spent the night at Long Pond in a recently restored lean-to and next morning studied the play of sunlight on mist. Dragged myself to Kaaterskill Falls (dreading throngs of tourists) and was astonished.

I've read that the Native Americans of California believe spiritual power forms on mountain peaks, radiates outwards in concentric circles, and collects in water courses. Springs and ponds are thought to be guarded by water babies — unfriendly spirits that delight in tricking people and drowning them. I've generally stayed out of Catskill water bodies, and haven't encountered water babies, which is probably a good thing.



Russell Brook Falls



Vernooy Kill Falls

By the end of 2020, my status was 225 miles complete, or 64%.

Once again I had to wait for snow to melt, but this time I was impatient. In late April, Steve and his young pup Lily met me in the Western Catskills on the Touch-Me-Not Trail. To my dismay, we found the steep path snow-covered. My feet stung, but I acted nonchalant, not wanting Steve or Lily to see me grimace, and soon the thin layer had melted and evaporated.

At this point in the Challenge, a patch of snow was the least of my problems. There were so many short trails that I'd previously ignored. The kind that take you to a vantage point, like Poet's Ledge or Sunset Rock. The problem being that typically it's 5 or 6 miles to reach the junction, which meant it often took me 12 or 13 miles (which is a full day's work at a slow barefoot pace) to bag one quarter mile. Soon 64% had rocketed to 64.1%.

Discovering new trails was great fun, although when barefoot, a pebble or acorn cap can sometimes be annoying, and so can sticks, beech husks, and conglomerate with embedded pebbles (like you find at the top of Slide or on the way to Eagle). But eventually you get a rhythm going and roll along. A day of this requires unremitting concentration, but it's immensely satisfying. In exactly the way that sitting at home and looking at pictures is not.

Why barefoot? In the words of [Thea Gavin](#), a self-professed barefoot running grandma and poet, who's crossed the Grand Canyon barefoot several times – “it's more fun.” Not that every single step is more fun. But when you've been struggling with rock fragments and then reach cool black boreal mud, the contrast is amazing. After scattered gravel, a smooth sandstone slab feels polished underfoot. A bed of moss seems as luxurious as Persian carpet.

In September 2021 I was honored to join Jason, Luna, and friends for the final mile of Luna's All Trails Challenge. We celebrated at Huckleberry Point on a beautiful fall afternoon.



View from Huckleberry Point

2021 ended with 96% of my Challenge complete, and now I was in a rush to finish. In early April I raced out to Fox Hollow only to find Panther dappled in snow. This situation posed a dilemma – on the one hand, I still had a couple miles and 1,000+ feet of elevation gain, and cold-weather injuries are wicked painful and take forever to heal – but on the other hand, if I gave up and put on shoes, this hike wouldn't count toward my barefoot challenge, and I'd have to do it over. Common sense dictated the prudent choice, so I scrambled up an icy ledge and stepped through deepening accumulation using breathing techniques borrowed from Tibetan monks to direct warmth to my tingling toes – and when these techniques had no effect, I started shouting with fear and frustration. After an eternity of struggling and slipping, I stumbled onto the summit, flung my pack to the ground, yanked out my shoes, and stuffed nearly numb feet back into them and hoped, as I clumped all the way back down, that I hadn't done any damage.

I spent most of Spring 2022 stuck at 96%, because as I went back through my training log, I kept finding trail parts which I'd marked as complete, but later realized were done in shoes, so they had to be redone. Which meant yet another trip to the Catskills. Which was not a bad thing.

There's one thing I can absolutely guarantee – go barefoot, and *you will feel*. I'm thinking in particular of those rocky washed-out trails, which even the most rabid Catskill enthusiast would admit are in terrible condition, like Harding Road coming down from North-South Lake or the descent from Overlook – these are rock piles! Or how about Tremper Mountain Trail. By the time Kal and I reached the bottom, all I could say was – “Well, that was f***ing tedious.”

The trick to walking barefoot on rocks? Don't rush. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Leave this military hurry and adopt the pace of nature – her secret is patience.”

Barefoot is a great way to experience the wilderness. By feeling the ground as well as seeing it, you become a part of the forest, instead of merely passing through. And at a slower pace, you have more opportunity to observe. It's the perfect antidote for modern life, which is full of hyper-energized activity and distraction. Modern life is work. Barefoot in the mountains is play.

To complete the challenge, my final hike would be an 0.8-mile sliver of the Phoenicia East Branch Trail lying between the base of the Wittenberg-Cornell-Slide Trail and the Curtis-Ormsbee Trail. I was delighted that Jason, Luna, Steve, and a couple of other friends could join me. Upon arriving, we found Jim Bouton acting as volunteer trailhead steward. Once I

couple of other friends could join me. Upon arriving, we found Jim Bouton acting as volunteer trailhead steward. Once I ran into Jim on the unmarked path to Southwest Hunter, and I remember how he held up a finger and counseled, “there’s no rush.” And how later I opened the canister on Rocky and discovered that he had just finished grid number three.

Once I’d taken my final official step, Luna presented me with a certificate of completion, and then our small group tramped up the Curtis-Ormsbee trail to the summit of Slide Mountain. For Steve’s 35 completion, the Catskill spirits had arranged a strange celestial display. For me, waiting on the summit of Slide was a cloud of biting flies. The group let Luna have a snack and then fled, leaving the single barefooter lagging far behind. So I accelerated – yes, you can run barefoot on rocky Catskill trails if you place your feet with care – and caught up. And decided that one-quarter mile was enough barefoot running for today. Steve kept me company on the remaining descent, as he doesn’t mind a leisurely pace (gives him a chance to look around and make pictures). The two of us picked our way downhill, trying to avoid the ankle-busters, which look so stable – until you trust your weight to them. I can recall doing battle with this trail on many an occasion, and it never seemed to matter what I wore or didn’t.

By the time we reached the trailhead, I think Steve and I were equally happy to put those rocks behind us. And go back home and deal with other tasks. Like staring at the calendar and coming up with reasons to return for more. More Catskills. More wildness. More experiences and feelings.

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.

Author’s note: this is a version of a post originally published on Ken Posner’s [blog](#), and specially revised for *The Canister*.



Ashokan High Point from Little Ashokan. Photo by Tony Versandi #1488 W637