

Barefooting the Northeast 111

A hiker discovers the intensity of pinpricks, grit, and mud

Kenneth A. Posner



IF YOU'D TOLD ME TEN YEARS AGO THAT I WOULD BECOME A BAREFOOT flower child, I would've been surprised because the rationale was entirely athletic, not spiritual.

In his 2009 bestseller *Born to Run* (Knopf, 2009), Chris McDougall blamed shoes for predisposing contemporary runners to injuries. His theory was that shoes distort the natural biomechanics of movement because they introduce cushion, support, and protection. To relearn natural form, McDougall suggested running barefoot. In 2015, when I read the book, I was struggling with multiple running injuries, including a groin strain incurred during a 100-mile race. It seemed McDougall's idea might be worth an experiment, although I modified my approach. Instead of trying to run barefoot, which sounded difficult, I'd hike barefoot. One day while on vacation in the Italian Dolomites, I mustered my nerve, removed my sandals, and headed up the grassy slope of a ski slope near our hotel. The cows seemed amused in any case, or maybe I was feeling self-conscious, but the results of this experiment were inconclusive—it was hard to tell if I'd learned anything about natural form.

The experience was interesting in this regard: It made me feel like a kid again, admittedly a strange reaction for someone who never went around barefoot as a child. Once I was back home, I decided to attempt a barefoot hike in New York's Catskills. On Saturday, September 6, 2015, I pulled into the trailhead for Peekamoose Mountain (3,819 feet), a southern sentinel of the Catskills. Again I mustered my nerve, removed my sandals, and headed out, only this time the trail was littered with sharp-edged sandstone fragments and the experience was rather painful. I tiptoed through the debris, then noticed leaf litter alongside the treadway, which made for somewhat easier progress, but compared with the ski slope, this was slow, awkward work. I moved along, head down, scanning for rocks, roots, cones, and sticks, aiming my soft feet toward safe landing spots between the obstacles. After creeping along for a couple hours, I reached the boreal zone, where the surface was thick black dirt sprinkled with needles and dotted with mud puddles—a soothing reward for my scratched-up soles. At the top, I kicked back for a few minutes and enjoyed the bright blue sky, warm breeze, and southern views; then I donned my sandals for the descent.

The author stands on the summit of Killington Peak in Vermont on June 29, 2024, having just climbed all the peaks on the Northeast 111 list without shoes. COURTESY OF

KENNETH A. POSNER

Afterward, I reflected on the climb. Although it had been more intense than expected, the sensations from my feet added an extra dimension to the experience. I felt more a part of the forest, less like I was merely passing through.

The next weekend, I went back for Hunter Mountain (4,039 feet). This was my first barefoot 4,000-footer, and thus the first mountain in what would turn out to be my quest to complete the Northeast 111, although at the time I had not heard of this peakbagging challenge. The Northeast 111 represents the list of all 4,000-foot mountains in New York, New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont, as determined by the Northeast 111 Club under the auspices of the Appalachian Mountain Club. Those who climb and descend each peak under their own power are eligible to join the club and receive a certificate of recognition. Actually, today the list comprises 115 peaks, because of updated geological data that identified four 4,000-footers not previously included.

During the climb up Hunter, the painful pinpricks from walking on grit, gravel, and rock fragments irritated me. But the reward of reaching smooth surfaces—grass, moss, dirt, mud, and smooth slabs—was extraordinary. The contrast between rough and soft made barefoot hiking *intense*. And addictive. I set a goal of finishing the 35 Catskill high peaks without shoes. (The closing of trails on two Catskills peaks led to the list changing to 33 peaks in 2021.) By December, I'd completed 19 Catskills peaks barefoot. I was hooked.

After each hike, I'd wake up the next morning with feet tingling. They wanted *more*. After 50 years swaddled in protective footwear, my soles were hungry for sensations.

I learned so much during these early barefoot hikes. My first bushwhack ascent was Rusk Mountain (3,680 feet), and what a surprise after struggling along a gravelly horse trail, to turn into the woods and find the forest floor covered in beech leaves, which were papery, crinkly, and slick. The leaves were so much *easier* than the trail. Gravel is the bane of barefooters. I found the worst gravel on Bearpen Mountain (3,619 feet), which I'm convinced was trucked in from a quarry. This material is called *shot rock* or *rip rap*. A mile in, however, the trail smoothed out, and I found myself stepping on tufts of grass and leaves and crashing through frozen puddles with childlike glee—until my feet started turning numb (it was a late October evening, and the car thermometer read 27 degrees Fahrenheit). I survived Bearpen without damaging myself, but a week later, determined to make further progress on the Catskills 35, I raced halfway up Fir Mountain (3,627 feet) until the snow was 3 to 4 inches deep—at which point, the cold sting was too much. I gave up, put on shoes, and ran back down the mountain.



The author learned that hiking off trail on leaf-covered ground was much easier than hardened trails. KENNETH A. POSNER

I finished my quest to barefoot the 35 Catskill high peaks the following spring, on a bushwack up Sherrill Mountain (3,550 feet), padding quietly through club moss and ferns, admiring the delicate white and purple flowers of spring beauties, the drooping yellow petals of trout lilies and *Clintonia borealis*, and a small white flower shaped like pantaloons, which is called Dutchman's breeches.

On these early Catskill hikes, I learned patience. As a runner used to a steady rhythmic pace, I sometimes got frustrated while hiking barefoot, especially bushwhacking on rough terrain. Picture me trying to navigate steep slopes, stepping on piles of slippery tilting rocks shrouded in leaves and moss, deflecting beech and hobblebush branches that were constantly in my face. Sometimes I'd lose my cool and grumble or even shout with frustration. But I learned that frustration was simply part of the intensity. Which I craved, and which I wasn't getting from running at that time because I was struggling with tendinitis in the posterior tibial tendon among other challenges. The English art critic John Ruskin advised, "Endurance is nobler than strength, and patience than beauty." I agree, but it is a hard lesson for some of us.

IN AUGUST 2017, MY FRIEND DAVID TOGUT INVITED ME TO JOIN HIM FOR a week in the Adirondacks. Arriving a few days early, I decided to try Giant Mountain (4,627 feet) without shoes. Halfway there, as I passed across the

summit of Rocky Peak (4,420 feet), a woman saw me and shouted, “Warrior!” Part of the fun of going barefoot is the reactions you get from others. Most of the time, people are positive. I get a steady stream of compliments that include such words as *respect*, *hardcore*, *badass*, or *next level*. However, sometimes people get triggered. They’ve been told all their lives that sturdy boots or supportive shoes are nonnegotiable—and then they see someone like me. I recall a gentleman struggling up Algonquin Peak (5,114 feet) who gave me a weary look and said, “Please tell me you have shoes in your pack.” I didn’t think my load-out was his business, although I assured him I’d selected my kit with care. And then passed him on the way to the summit, where incidentally I found a red eft in a small puddle near the geodetic survey marker. I feel an affinity for these delicate creatures, whose soft feet are in constant contact with unforgiving rocks. Later that fall, I saw another newt on the summit of Mount Marcy (5,344 feet). I wonder how far it had traveled to reach the mountaintop.

I fell in love with the Adirondacks. I remember so vividly the rugged white peaks and narrow valleys. The blue-green summer vistas, which turn golden in the fall. The sprays of mountain ash berries. The beds of red peat moss. The delicate pixie cup lichens sprouting on rotten logs. A purple mushroom.

The region’s bedrock is anorthosite, which is an intrusive igneous rock, formed when magma rises from deep in the planet to the surface over a very long period. Such rock is thought to make up the ancient crust of the moon. Anorthosite works well for barefooting because the slabs are generally round, smooth, and gritty on the surface, providing excellent traction for skin. I had so much fun charging up the exposed summits. I recall hauling myself along the cables to the top of Gothics Mountain (4,736 feet) and passing boot-shod hikers. That’s the runner in me, always loving to pass people. It is true that shod hikers have the advantage when descending because they can leap from rock to rock—which is difficult in bare feet. Typically I lag behind everyone on the descents, even grandparents and small children.

As much as I love going fast, part of the attraction of going barefoot was the thought that as I aged it might make sense to move more slowly, at least some of the time. And I liked the idea that with this new practice, I’d have a chance to gradually improve my pace, which I no longer was doing in shoes.

On July 15, 2018, I made the five-hour drive to Crawford Notch in New Hampshire, which was an uncomfortable trip incidentally due to an aching butt (inflamed piriformis) from too many jump squats the day before. My goal—to complete the Presidential Traverse without shoes, as a training

exercise for a late-summer visit to the Grand Canyon. The next morning, I headed out, eager to move quickly, as there was rough weather in the forecast. Reaching the Appalachian Mountain Club's Mizpah Spring Hut, I saw the latest forecast pinned to the board, now calling for thunderstorms with maximum windspeeds of 100 miles per hour. I turned to the hut leader for guidance. But he'd sent his crew down the mountain for resupplies and seemed unfazed. He looked at me and shrugged. Thunder pealed softly in the distance as I exited the hut. I moved along a smooth dirt trail scattered with pieces of orange-gray granite and gleaming quartz. Flushed a spruce grouse. Made it to the knob overlooking Lakes of the Clouds, where Mount Washington (6,288 feet) loomed in the distance, with sheets of mist tearing through the summit buildings and antennae. That night, as I lay in my bunk at the AMC hut, the wind boomed, and rain hurtled against the windows. The next morning was clear, but cold and still quite windy. I bundled up in wool, fleece, and Gore-Tex, with only face, hands, and feet exposed. Made my way across the boulder field, stepping on big blocks of granite with wavy ridges that pressed sharply into my soles. Reached the summit of Mount Washington, where I paused to take a selfie as the wind whipped at my layers, and then moved out along the Gulfside Trail toward Mount Clay.

As the sun rose higher, the day warmed, and I gradually stripped off layers. It was slow going on a trail that felt to me like a tumble of rocks. The day dragged on. My concentration faltered. I began to bang my toes against the endless blocks. With each new nick, I forced myself to stop. Breathe. Count to ten. Check the map. Drink some water. By midafternoon I'd completed most of the traverse, bagging all the peaks along the way except for Mount Madison (5,367 feet), but when I arrived at the col beneath the summit I realized that I'd run out of time (a car was scheduled to pick me up at the trailhead). I pulled shoes out of my pack (yes, I always carry footwear as backup) and ran down the mountain, reaching the parking lot with five minutes to spare.

As my nicked-up toes could attest, barefoot requires paying attention. To. Every. Single. Step. I call it the original human mindfulness. Skin toughens, but it never gets as hard as rocks, and if you slam your foot, you can break a toe or bruise your sole. But there's a payoff to the work—stronger feet and better balance. A physical therapist told me that slips and falls are one of the leading causes of emergency room visits. Perhaps a moderate dose of barefoot hiking would help people relearn some agility and foot-eye coordination. Today, with more practice under the belt, stubbing toes is a rare occurrence

for me. During the many barefoot ascents I've completed over the last ten years, I've never had an injury more serious than a scratch. (Once I stepped on a thorn, but that was during a trail race in Texas.)

I had a great time at the Grand Canyon, but once back home I was determined to fit in one last trip to the Adirondacks before the snow, as completing the 46 high peaks had by this point become a raging obsession. In early October I embarked on a 15.5-mile circuit of the Santanoni Range. The trek started out on a beautifully renovated trail of dirt and sand. This lasted a quarter-mile, after which the trail turned onto an ancient "corduroy" road, consisting of logs laid crosswise. Wet, rotting, slimy, slippery logs. After that it was all mud. And sometimes deep pits of the stuff with thin saplings floating on the top, which I had to tiptoe across with care, lest I slip off and sink into the mud to my knees. At least with bare feet I didn't have to worry about socks and boots getting caked with soggy crud. But I did have to watch for sharp sticks and rocks lurking at the bottom of those pits.

I finished the Adirondacks on October 2, 2019, with an 18-mile round trip to Allen Mountain (4,340 feet). It was a long flat soft trail on the way in, and then the trail climbed up to the summit alongside a rushing stream.

At this point I still hadn't heard of the Northeast III challenge, but now that I had a handful of New Hampshire peaks complete, it was impossible not to want more. It did, however, take some time to finish the New Hampshire list. Not only was my pace slow and the drives long to get there, but also I took on a new job with a lot of travel. On July 4, 2023, I returned to the Appalachia trailhead, sprinted up to Madison Spring Hut, and clambered triumphantly across big lichen-crusting granite blocks to the summit. Then I scurried back, making it down moments before a ferocious storm let loose. With this climb, I thought I'd finished New Hampshire. But there was a small problem. The month before, I'd climbed Cannon Mountain (4,180 feet), only to arrive at the observation tower to sheets of rain. On a whim, I decided to take the gondola down—for the novelty—and a chance to see the rainy views. At this point, I was finally aware of the NEIII, having heard about it from some hiking friends. But I'd neglected to read the rules. To my dismay, I discovered later that you're supposed to descend under your own power, as well as climb. Which meant I'd have to do Cannon again.

Regardless, the momentum to complete the NEIII felt unstoppable, although the seven-hour drive to Baxter State Park in Maine was taxing (inflamed piriformis once again). At 6 A.M. on August 21, 2023, I was startled awake by knuckles rapping on the window of my Jeep. The ranger took my

cash and issued me a permit to climb Katahdin, although I had to wait until 7:30 A.M. to proceed.

There are easier ways up Katahdin, but after seeing the Knife Edge in all its sinister glory from the top of North Brother (4,151 feet), I couldn't resist the adventurous appeal of adding the narrow toothy ridge to my list of barefoot exploits. Once I got there, though, I found the path consisted of rough tumbled boulders with sharp points and edges. I couldn't leap from rock to rock without shoes. Instead, I did a lot of crab-walking and butt-sliding. It took a long time to reach Katahdin's high point, Baxter Peak (5,268 feet). In 1846, Henry David Thoreau climbed Katahdin. At the summit, he experienced an epiphany. Later, in his account of that climb in *The Maine Woods*, he recalled the scene—"It was Matter, vast, terrific . . . rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! The actual world! The common sense! Contact! Contact!" He seemed awestruck by the primeval rocky chaos, as well as by the mystery of his own body. As a barefoot hiker, whose skin comes in contact with the rocks on every step, I think I understand his point.

It was a totally different scene on Saddleback Mountain (4,120 feet). On the way up, I admired the grassland species growing on the ski slope—goldenrod, daisies, dark green bulrush, timothy grass, spotted Joe-Pye weed, and a solitary lupine. Higher up, it was familiar mountain woodland species—meadowsweet, woodland asters, orange hawk eye, and creeping dogwood, whose clusters of bright red berries I munched on frequently. On the top, the wind-scoured ridgeline was barren—not even the stunted krummholz could hold on. On this day, the breeze was washing over the crest from the south. I looked around at the wide-open spaces. The mountains were so big and round. The valleys were so wide and sweeping. Such ancient country, the mountains merely modest remnants of the granitic intrusions that took place during the Acadian orogeny, nearly 400 million years ago.

The Maine trip was fun for another reason. I made a point to go barefoot everywhere—to restaurants, coffee shops, grocery stores, gas stations. Over the years I've heard people mention such terms as *earthing* or *grounding* as a source of mental health benefits, and I do believe there's something to the idea. For me, barefoot produces a sense of calm. It may be the need to pay attention to where I'm placing my unprotected soles, or my response to the interesting textures underfoot. My mind stays focused on the here-and-now, instead of fretting about everything else in life. I think you can get the benefits of grounding from walking on dirt or grass—or even the sidewalk or the marble floors of a museum. You don't necessarily have to climb mountains.

Old-timers tell me that those ubiquitous signs, “No shoes, no shirt, no service,” started appearing in the 1960s in reaction to the hippie movement, as a way for conventional-minded people to strike back against free spirits. For me, barefoot has become part of a philosophy of mindfulness. Regarding technology, I say let’s use only what we need, which is the key to sustainability. In the way that Earl Schaffer, first person to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail, advised, “Carry as little as possible, but choose that little with care.”

After Maine, it was time to wrap up this project with a visit to Vermont. First, I stopped by Cannon to do it properly. On both trips here, Lonesome Lake was draped in fog. The time before, I’d marveled at the stunning purple flowers of rhodora. Today it was the white petals of bog Labrador tea that caught my eye. I made it up the steep rock slide on the mountain’s northern slope—which upon reflection, may have been part of the reason that the gondola ride was so appealing—and descended it, too.

In Vermont I placed my feet on a new kind of rock: metamorphic schist full of mica and quartzite, shimmering with swirls of green, silver, and bronze, and pleasingly smooth to the touch. On the climb up Mount Mansfield (4,393 feet), there was another surprise—the song of Bicknell’s thrush, a bird that’s considered quite rare, especially in the Catskills, but here in Vermont’s alpine zone it was thriving.

My final climb for the NEIII was Mount Killington (4,241 feet). Once again, I faced a discouraging forecast—100 percent probability of rain with an estimated 1-inch accumulation. Also, after vigorous climbs in each of the last two days, I was feeling tired. While



In Vermont, metamorphic schist felt smooth to the feet. COURTESY OF KENNETH POSNER

walking on the sidewalk in Montpelier, my soles started complaining about the prickly feel of sun-warmed pavement. I weighed my options. I could hang out in town for another day or two, but that seemed distinctly unappealing, so instead I set my alarm for 4:30 A.M., hoping to get in and out before the worst of the storm. The next morning, upon reaching the trailhead, I headed out in cautious spirits. I stepped gingerly on a trail full of painful rocks hidden underneath a thin layer of fallen leaves. I made the unremittingly steep 2,000-foot climb to a shelter near the top. Crawled from there up a rock slide for another couple hundred feet. Emerged to howling winds and sheets of mist flying across the summit. With the quest complete, all I had to do now was make it down alive.

As it turned out, the return trip was pleasant. The slope was the perfect grade to stride down. The hidden rocks no longer hurt my soles. The sun peeked out momentarily from behind the clouds. I rolled along, appreciating the textures underfoot, the dense green forest, and the birdsong. Maybe this was just a shift in mindset, namely the difference between heading out into the unknown and returning from a successful mission. Or maybe I'd rediscovered some of that natural gait that McDougall wrote about in *Born to Run*, and this is how you feel when you walk the way we're supposed to. There is such a simple joy to moving fluidly through the forest.

Last winter, as I sat by the fire contemplating my future, I went back through my training log and found that with the Northeast III and everything else I've done, I had accumulated a long list of mountains climbed without shoes. I decided to set a lifetime goal of climbing 1,000 mountains barefoot. As of today, my count stands at 485, and I have 515 left to do.

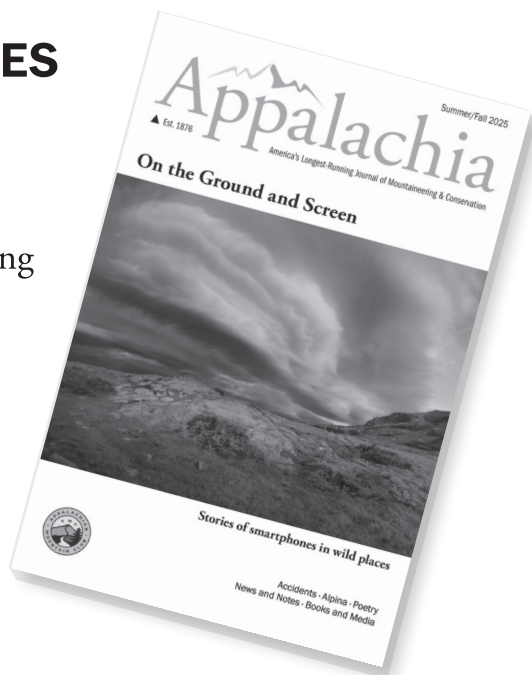
In addition to completing the NEIII, KENNETH POSNER's barefoot experience includes thru-hiking the John Muir Trail and extensive racing at distances from 5 kilometers to 50 miles. In shoes, he's completed the Catskills Grid, thru-run New York's 350-mile Long Path, and set the record for the 294-mile Badwater Double, which consists of a round-trip trek from the Badwater Basin in Death Valley to the summit of Mount Whitney. Visit him at barefootken.com.

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