

## MSGT, September 2024

My dad and I set off in the early morning grayness, moving slowly up the wide, stony path that ascended at a gradual angle. We were taking the first steps of a roughly 55 mile trek that would take us through the hilly terrain of Western New Hampshire, turning out to be a far more challenging undertaking than expected. This was the Monadnock Sunapee Greenway (MSGT), a trail that connected the summits of Mount Monadnock in the south to Mount Sunapee in the north. The Greenway is a little used trail that flies under the radar of many hikers despite its scenic nature and accessibility. As it travels between the two summits it crosses several major roads and even through two small towns, making it easy to bail from and resupply on. My dad had been interested in doing this hike for several years as a family trip, but it had never worked out. This year however, my schedule as a State Park employee gave me the time off to do it with him. I had graduated high school earlier that summer and was taking a gap year. This had given me the freedom to spend a lot of time in the mountains and put me in pretty great shape. I pushed hard all summer undertaking some difficult and dangerous objectives in NH's White Mountains. Though I had enjoyed this fast paced and aggressive summer, I saw the Greenway as an opportunity to take it easy. This would be my chance to have a nice, relaxing backpacking trip without any threat of lethal weather, rush to maintain a fast pace, or potential for a significant disaster.

We planned to complete this thru hike over the course of five days, spending the nights at the three sided lean-tos that are spaced out along the trail. We were dropped off early in the morning at the trailhead of the White Dot trail on Mt. Monadnock. This trail is the shortest, but also steepest way to the summit where the Greenway officially began. Mt. Monadnock is often claimed to be the second most hiked mountain in the world after Japan's Mt. Fuji, as such its

trails are all large and well maintained. Despite its difficulty the White Dot trail was no exception; its lower portions were wide and easy to follow. We made fairly good time moving at Dad's pace, burdened as we were by our heavy packs. Shortly after passing a spring that flowed from a pipe in the mountainside, the trail began to travel more steeply over granite slabs. After several more ledges we emerged into the bald alpine zone that covers the upper reaches of the mountain. Mt. Monadnock stands at a mere 3,165' which is far below the elevation that treeline naturally occurs at. Despite this, its summit area resembles the summits of much higher peaks with exposed stone and alpine vegetation. This unique habitat was caused by a series of fires in the early nineteenth century that were allegedly started by the local farmers to burn out wolves that were inhabiting the thick blowdowns on the mountain.



*(Dad nearing the bald summit of Monadnock.)*

We eventually made it to the windswept summit and were able to enjoy sweeping views across much of Western New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Vermont. This hike was off to a good start for me, it was a gorgeous early fall day with clear blue skies and no threat of inclement weather. I was feeling strong and enjoying the mellow pace that my dad was setting. We began to make our way down the northern slopes of Monadnock, officially beginning the Greenway. As we made our way down the mountain our pace started to slow somewhat and we began to be a little concerned about water. This was a foreshadow of the rest of the trip as finding water would continue to be a major issue since it had been an unusually dry summer. Eventually we reached the trailhead at the base of Monadnock and began to start down the long green tunnel of trails and rural, dirt roads that would typify much of the hike. Despite the length and less traveled nature of the trail it was remarkably easy to follow. Rectangular white blazes are spaced along the entire length of the Greenway helping to guide thru hikers along the trails and roads. These blazes made it easy to stay on course and I never lost the trail over the entire duration of the hike.





*(A long way till the end.)*

We eventually found a small muddy puddle in the trail that upon closer inspection turned out to be a cold freshwater spring. We happily filled our bottles and purified the water as we watched a long, white worm that was nosing around the bottom of the spring. After this brief stop we continued on crossing a major road and eventually reached the Spiltoir Shelter, our destination for the night. These shelters were all in great shape, fairly new, were sized to accommodate about six people, and each had a composting toilet. The shelters made it easy to travel light and were great places to spend our evenings.

Dad and I were both somewhat concerned about the difficulty that he was experiencing, though this was our shortest day, only about 8 miles, it also included the largest climb. I was still optimistic in regards to his chances of making it to Sunapee, but we also determined a plan for me to carry on alone should he have to bail. We relaxed for the evening, ate a dinner of freeze

dried food, and eventually settled into our sleeping bags for the night. It turned out to be a rather chilly night, but we both slept well, waking up to a crisp, clear morning. After eating a breakfast of instant oatmeal and single serving SPAM we started to make our way north. We planned to put in 12 miles that day that would take us over some mellower sections of the trail, mostly on dirt roads and passing through the small town of Nelson. Our first major stop was the Eliza Adams Gorge that we reached shortly after leaving the shelter. A top flow dam towered over the head of the gorge allowing warm water from Howe Reservoir to spill down into the small stream. This water was full of a thick, orange algae, but we needed water, so we stopped. The UV light that I was using to purify water ran out of battery at this spot and the algae gummed up the filter in Dad's Katadyn BeFree. This was a less than optimal turn of events, but it wasn't going to stop us. We continued throughout the morning passing by several more ponds and reservoirs where we filled our bottles, often in public boat launches as the sandy bottoms here helped to keep sediment out of the filter.





*(A small herd of cattle that grazed in a pasture next to the Greenway added to the bucolic atmosphere of this section of trail.)*



*(A nice view of Monadnock looming behind us on our second day.)*

We stopped for a quick lunch break around noon in a large field shortly before reaching Nelson. This was a nice opportunity to sit down in the soft grass and enjoy the cool breeze while refueling on packets of tuna. This was one of the highpoints of the trip for me as it was exactly the type of relaxation and enjoyment that I had been looking for. Lying down in the soft grass, watching puffy white clouds drift through the blue sky above us as a cool breeze rippled across the vegetation was fantastic. We continued on after eating and passed through the tiny town of Nelson, filling up our water from a hose spigot on the side of the town hall. We then began to climb up steep dirt roads and ATV trails to ascend a large hill. I began to be concerned about dad's chances of completing the trail as he was struggling at this point and it was only going to get harder from here. Sure enough, when we reached Route 9 about nine miles into our day and



still three from the night's shelter, Dad said that he had hit his limit and was going to call for a pickup from my grandparents.



*(The hiker underpass through a box culvert that Dad bailed from. The other thru hiker I ran into later in the hike said that he stashed water bottles in this culvert before beginning his hike, highlighting the multiple benefits of these road crossings to Greenway users.)*

I knew that this was the right call as he had clearly given it his all this day and we were starting to run out of daylight. I was disappointed that I wouldn't be able to enjoy this with him, but I was still determined to complete the thru hike. I decided that without him I could cut a day's worth of hiking out by doing a 23 mile day followed by a 14 mile day. In preparation for my faster pace I left all superfluous gear I was carrying with Dad and then set off towards Crider shelter three miles away. I motored up the steep, rocky, and heavily eroded ATV trail that climbed over Melville Hill and then descended towards Center Pond. I did enjoy the opportunity



to cut loose and move fast again, though much of the fun was now gone from the hike. I was now just determined to complete an objective, the destination was now more important than the journey at this point.

Within an hour I had reached the shelter and started to get myself situated. There was no one around and no cell service, so I was left to just check out the composting toilet, eat my dinner, and wait for it to get dark. I went to sleep after planning out the next two days and familiarizing myself with the trail through the map and guidebook that I had brought along. After a good night's sleep I woke up early, quickly packed, and set off at a rapid pace. I had lots of ground to cover and though I had shed some weight with dad, my pack was still fairly heavy. I cruised past Center Pond on dirt roads before climbing Parker Hill and heading into the Andorra Forest on single track trails again. I enjoyed this section of the trail as it passed through old apple orchards, thick forest, and rolled over hills.

By mid morning I had reached the trailhead for Pitcher Mountain. This would be the first of four significant climbs that I had planned for the day. Though the fire tower on the summit was under construction and the trail up was technically closed, I decided that I could probably beat the workers to the summit and cruise by unnoticed. Sure enough I quickly reached the summit of the hill, stopping briefly to enjoy the views south towards Monadnock and to send an update to my parents. I began to head down along the neat ridgeline towards Hubbard Hill and the halfway point on the Greenway. This ridge was a fun mix of spruce forest and open blueberry fields. The blueberry bushes blazed a bright crimson under the midday sun as their leaves changed color in preparation for winter.



*(Halfway there on one of the best parts of the trail.)*

This was one of my favorite parts of the trail and possibly the prettiest other than Monadnock. Unfortunately I was running out of water as sources were severely limited; this was a major issue as I was pushing a fast pace in the hot sun and I was starting to feel the effects of dehydration. I finally found a shallow mud puddle in the trail on the descent towards Fox Brook Tent Sites which rested between Hubbard and Jackson hills. From this puddle I was able to carefully scoop out enough water to fill up sufficiently to get by. I then made a quick climb to Jackson Hill, eating a small wild apple that had fallen from a tree that hung over the trail on the way up. This was a welcome change from the freeze dried and packaged food that I had been eating the previous days and it gave me a morale boost.



*(My starting point on Monadnock roughly 30 miles away viewed from Jackson Hill.)*

I was making good time and cruised down into a large ravine before climbing up the other side and onto a dirt road that would take me towards the town of Washington. I was certainly feeling the strain of the miles building up, but my summer of intense hiking had prepped me both physically and mentally to push through the fatigue and continue towards my goal. After passing the first Seventh Day Adventist's church to be built I made the short climb up Oak Hill and descended rapidly to Washington. In Washington there was a small convenience store where I ate a BLT and drank a much appreciated soda. This quick break and refuel gave me the energy I needed to make the roughly 1000' climb up to Lovewell Mt. before descending to the Max Israel Shelter that sat on its northern flanks. This climb was brutal and tested the mental fortitude that I had developed over my years of hiking. The trail climbed through spruce forests that were reminiscent of the high elevation forests of the NH White Mountains on a track that



was similarly steep and rough. After stopping briefly at the summit, I made the descent to the shelter, reaching it with plenty of time to spare before sunset. After taking a few minutes to sit and rest after my long day, I settled in and ate my dinner. I was fortunate enough to share the campsite with another thru hiker that Dad and I had run into three days prior on Monadnock. The company and conversation was a nice break after the hours of complete solitude I had experienced along the rest of the Greenway. As evening faded the other hiker settled into his tent that he had erected nearby and I crashed in the shelter. I felt pretty wrecked from the last three days, but I was bolstered by the prospect of being on the last leg of this journey.

A quick departure in the morning got me on the trails in the early dawn light. I was a little stiff, but my motivation to finish was strong enough to push me at a fast pace up Kitteridge Hill and along the gradual ridgeline of Mount Sunapee. Water became a major issue as I pushed as hard as I could on the warmest day yet. I was able to fill up in a stream a little under a mile from the shelter, but my next fill up wasn't until Lake Solitude, nearly ten miles away. This dehydration added to my fatigue, making this part of the trail go by in a haze of discomfort as I continued to maintain my 2.5 mph pace that I set the previous day.



*(Finally nearing the end, one of the white blazes that mark the entire length of the trail is visible beneath the sign.)*

The trail through this area was quite cool, especially as I neared Lake Solitude. It passed through more spruce forest and crossed some fun, slabby ledges that offered nice views of the surrounding region. The highlight of this leg of the hike was when five ruffed grouse flushed from the thick cover next to the trail as I passed by. I finally reached the lake where I drank as much as I could before topping off my water bottle for the last time. It was a quick push up White Ledges and to the summit, bringing me to the official end of the MSGT.



*(Gorgeous views from White Ledges with Lake Solitude in the foreground. At this point I began to encounter day hikers again after having seen next to no one on the rest of the Greenway.)*

At the summit I felt a sense of accomplishment, but I still had a two mile descent off the mountain ahead of me before I could fully rest. I was so ready for it to be over that I mustered the last bits of energy I had in me and set off down the trail at a fast jog, quickly reaching the trailhead where my dad was waiting to pick me up. As I took my backpack off and sat down in his car the relief and feeling of accomplishment fully settled in. I had successfully completed this thru hike and though it hadn't gone quite how I had planned it was still an enjoyable experience. It went from a mellow backpacking trip to an epic push that tested my physical and mental endurance. In hindsight I am almost glad that I had to work so hard to complete the objective as the struggle made the accomplishment all the more satisfying.